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LCOTC.ORG



*Come Lord Jesus*



**DEVOTIONS  
ADVENT 2019**

**Lutheran Church of the Cross**

# Christmas Events & Worship Schedule

## CHANCEL CHOIR MUSIC WEEKEND

December 8 & 9

- ◆ Saturday at 5pm at LW
- ◆ Sunday at 9 & 11am at LW

## CONGREGATIONAL CHRISTMAS DINNER

Saturday, December 21

- ◆ 6pm at LW (\$12 per person, RSVP/ticket required)

## CHRISTMAS CHORAL CONCERT

Sunday, December 22

- ◆ 3pm at LW

## CHRISTMAS EVE CANDLELIGHT WORSHIP

Monday, December 24

- ◆ 3pm at AV
- ◆ 4pm, 5:30pm, 7pm & 11pm at LW

## CHRISTMAS DAY

Tuesday, December 25

- ◆ 11am Worship with Holy Communion at LW





*We hope you will join us for one or all of the following activities we have planned during this Advent season:*

**Create Your Own Yule Log**

***Sunday, December 1<sup>st</sup>***

10am at Laguna Woods (LW) in the Social Hall

10:45am at Aliso Viejo (AV) on the front patio

**Make Your Own Nativity Banner** (and one for a homebound member!)

***Sunday, December 8<sup>th</sup>***

10am at LW in the Social Hall

10:45am at AV on the front patio

**Lunch after Church and Christmas Caroling to the Homebound**

***Sunday, December 15<sup>th</sup>***

12 noon at both the LW and AV campuses

**Make Your Own Holy Family Ornament**

***Sunday, December 22<sup>nd</sup>***

10am at LW in the Social Hall

10:45am at AV on the front patio

## *Come Lord Jesus*

### **Message From The Senior Pastor**

Growing up on a farm in Stanton, Iowa, our family would say this very common prayer before each meal; perhaps you've said this one, too: *"Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest. Let these gifts to us be blest, Amen."* Sometimes we said it as fast as possible because we were hungry!

We are entering into the season of Advent. The word "advent" comes from the Latin word, *"adventus,"* which literally means the "coming" or the "arrival" of someone or something. Advent reminds us that salvation doesn't depend on us going to Christ, but Christ comes to us. He comes, He came, and He will come again, *to us, for us.* He has chosen us and He chooses us again and again, God's mercy and forgiveness incarnate.

The purpose of this Advent devotional is for you to be reminded of the gift we have been given in Jesus Christ -- the great gift of salvation! I hope you will take some special time during the next 25 days leading up to Christmas to read these devotions written by members of our congregation. Jesus loves you and He is coming again. In fact, in the Book of Revelation, after John saw the vision of what is to come and how amazing it was, he ended the entire Bible with this prayer: "Come, Lord Jesus" (Revelation 22:20).

During this Advent season, let us all pray with certain hope and in full confidence, that God's will is clearly *for us:* "Come, Lord Jesus! Amen."

I wish you all a very meaningful Advent season and a Merry Christmas!

Pastor Leland Lantz

**Sunday, December 1, 2019**

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. John 1:1-3*

During advent we look with great anticipation to the celebration of the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

He is God the Son and was with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit before creation and during creation. Jesus lived before He was conceived by the Holy Spirit in Mary's womb. The word of God spoke all of creation into existence. How amazing that we are created by God, and nothing was created apart from Jesus. Through Jesus Christ, I am a child of God.

The word of God communicates God's will for us and reveals who God is to us. Jesus is the living word of God. Coming to us as a baby, fully man and fully God, human flesh and blood, feeling everything we feel, and relating to us as a man. I am in awe of such a wondrous thing-- baby Jesus came to save me from my sins and renew my relationship with God Almighty.

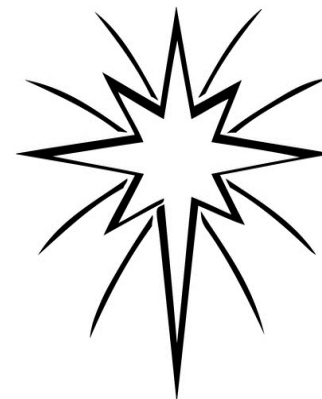
We have an opportunity to know him better through His word. We are privileged to have Bibles and opportunities to study His word openly here. Many Christians throughout the world are persecuted and martyred for studying the Bible. When His words are written on our hearts, they are there for us in times of trouble and times of celebration: the Holy Spirit brings them to mind just right when we need them!

This advent season may we have joy in knowing Jesus and that God loves us so much.

*Wendy McDonald*

**Questions to Ponder** -----

1. How has God's Word shaped your life?
2. Have you thought about how we are the product of God's creation?



## Wednesday, December 25, 2019

*While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them. Luke 2:6-7*

This passage is such a simple loving and intimate portrayal of motherhood. Mary gave birth and “wrapped him in cloths.” There is no pomp and circumstance for this King. There is simple humanity and instinct. Mary had no one to tell her what to do, and yet she knew exactly what to do to protect her newborn. Six years ago, I gave birth to my daughter, Grace. I remember the moment when they handed her to me and I felt her tiny innocent body. I remember thinking that this new human’s life was entirely dependent on me and my instincts. I worried if I could wrap the baby as well as the nurse, or if I would know what to do once it was just me, my husband, Eric, and our daughter. All I had was what God gave me – an instinct of protectiveness and an ineffable joy that I had never known before.

As the days and weeks went on, I figured out what worked and what didn’t. I learned from the wonderful women in my life. I learned to trust my instinct - the inner voice of God.

Isn’t it amazing that our survival is based entirely on the unconditional love of another. What could be a more perfect representation of God’s love for us? The manger represents the cold and often rough world that is not our final home, but a place that will hold us until it is time for the Father to wrap us into His heavenly arms and take us home.

*Chrissy Brothwell (with Bekah Bay and Grace Brothwell)*

### Questions to Ponder -----

1. Have you ever taken care of a baby? Is it an easy or a difficult job?
2. How can you tell when someone really loves you?

## Monday, December 2, 2019

*Now Jesus himself was about thirty years old when he began his ministry. He was the son, so it was thought, of Joseph, the son of Heli, the son of Matthat, the son of Levi, the son of Melki, the son of Jannai, the son of Joseph, the son of Mattathias, the son of Amos, ... the son of Mattatha, the son of Nathan, the son of David, Luke 3:23-31*

Now Jesus Himself was about thirty years old when He began His ministry. He was the son, so it was thought, of Joseph, and—skipping further down—the son of David. One small phrase at the start of this passage caught my eye: “so it was thought.” The people in Jesus’ time thought they knew Him; He was the son of the carpenter, Joseph, right? You see, what they thought they knew caused them to miss a critical point of scripture, they did not know of Mary’s divine conception.

How many of us miss critical understandings of the Bible and of our faith? Do we comprehend the difference between Law and Gospel? Do we understand concepts of sanctification, grace, and faith? How well do we know the scriptures? Are we ready to give an answer to anyone who asks?

May I encourage you today to begin reading a chapter of the Bible each day? Start in the New Testament with Matthew and read through until you finish the New Testament and then go to the Old Testament. Attend a Bible study. Don’t just “think” you know; read, learn, study and “know” what you believe!

The genealogy of Luke goes all the way back to Adam, son of God, so Theophilus, a Greek to whom Luke was writing, would know that Jesus came for Jew and Gentile, for you and for me. What a joy we have to dig into the scriptures: “... *so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.*” Luke 1:4b

*Bill and Pat Perry*

### Questions to Ponder -----

1. Do you know your genealogy for your own family?
2. The lineage of Jesus was made up of ordinary people like us; how do you feel about being ordinary?

**Tuesday, December 3, 2019**

*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.*

**John 1:14 & 18**

I once read of a soldier, before leaving his wife and infant son to depart with his unit, told his bride, *"I will be back."* As the boy grew, the young mother would occasionally show her son his dad's photo and say, *"See, that's your daddy. One day he's coming home."* One afternoon the young son said, *"Mommy, wouldn't it be great if Daddy could just step out of the picture frame and be with us?"*

In a sense, that is what God did over 2,000 years ago. As part of His eternal plan for all humanity, He stepped out of heaven and became a man so you and I could look at Jesus and say, *"Now I know what God looks like."* These verses are the climax of John's prologue as he *"completes his introduction of Jesus by proclaiming his humanity in the midst of his divinity."*

It is the only nativity reference in John's Gospel, but it captures the heart of the Christmas story. These verses contain the truth behind the story of the angels and shepherds that first Christmas morning. Without this verse, the rest of the story has no meaning. Jesus Christ became the visible expression of the invisible Father. These verses also reveal four great certainties: Jesus became human; Jesus lived (tabernacle) among us; Jesus revealed His glory; and Jesus came to reveal the final revelation of God's Plan of salvation for all nations. As the Word, Jesus is the message, and the final revelation of God.

In the Old Testament God spoke by means of Moses and the prophets. But nobody had ever seen God. He was revealed only partly. However, through Jesus, God came down to earth. The fact that God came in human form makes all the difference. Jesus came to reveal the Father, in a "language we all understand: through a relationship."

Our job this Advent is to share that relationship with all God places in our path. You are never too busy to share the love of Jesus with someone needing to hear the Good News that can change their life forever.

*Pastor Ron and Paula Michelson, LCC & Chosen People Ministry*

**Questions to Ponder** -----

1. How do you get to know your neighbor?
2. Are there people you could befriend in your school or workplace?

**Tuesday, December 24, 2019**

*So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.*

**Luke 2:4-5**

Have you ever had to take an unexpected trip? Maybe to the dentist? Or your boss tells you you're going on a business trip tomorrow? Or maybe a family member needs your help *now*? These types of trips never happen at convenient times and often come with much stress and worry. Imagine how Joseph and Mary must have felt when they heard they had to travel to Bethlehem. It was the worst of times; Mary was due to have her baby in a week or two. Why now?

Nazareth, according to Google maps, is 98 miles from Bethlehem. In a car, this trip would take a couple of hours, but Joseph and Mary would have to walk those miles. If they walk about 12 miles a day, it would take eight days to arrive there. They would also need to carry food and water, as well as blankets to keep warm at night. Have you ever wonder how they spent their time while walking? Did they sing songs as they walked? Did Joseph encourage Mary to keep on walking? Did they grumble about the unfairness of the decree? Or did they talk about Jesus and pray He would not be born before they reached Bethlehem? Did they talk about the visits they had from the angel?

Sometimes God moves us from our normal everyday life and makes us take an unexpected trip. We often are not excited about the trip, but trips often draw us closer to God. God is always with us wherever we go. He is our strength in our time of need. He never leaves us.

Heavenly Father,  
Thank You that You go before us and are with us at all times and places. Use these times to grow our faith in You. Amen.

*Janice Simpson*

**Questions to Ponder** -----

1. What were the circumstances of your own birth, if you know?
2. What can you choose to offer God, big or small, because you love Him?

**Monday, December 23, 2019**

*When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus. Matthew 1:24-25*

Then, all of a sudden, it's over. Matthew's account of the birth of our Lord. Joseph wakes up, follows the angel's commands, and Jesus is born. Loyal and obedient for our Lord.

That's it. Again, the absence of mangers and shepherds and angels may strike us as odd, even a tad confusing and at the very least rather anticlimactic. What, we may wonder to ask, is... is this it? Just one man's loyalty and obedience to the Lord?

Yes, one man's obedience to overcome his doubt, hurt, and fear in order to take the angel's word and Mary as his wife. But it is loyalty mainly, in this situation, that is so AMAZING! In the history of mankind, what could have been, or what could have happened, by one person's obedience and loyalty to the Lord? The obedience to take God's command to care for everyone? One person's loyalty to love thy neighbor as yourself? One person's obedience to regard all people as God's children? One person's loyalty to share the Good News of Jesus with everyone around him? One person's obedience to resist revenge, pray for their enemy, and turn the other cheek?

Throughout time, we have had great examples of obedience from men and women, alike. From Martin Luther nailing his 95 theses to the door, to Martin Luther King, Jr. fighting for equality; from Mother Teresa ministering to the poorest of the poor, to Mary surrendering herself to God. These individuals who obeyed the call of the Lord, have made an extreme impact on this world God loves so much.

These are dramatic examples, of course. But think for a moment about the individuals who have made a huge impact in your life. A teacher, coach, parent, pastor, sibling, neighbor, friend...who were simply obedient to the call of God to love all as God has loved all. Their loyalty never changed course.

Small gestures, perhaps, in the larger realm of things. But as history and our own experiences witness, when it comes to acts of love and obedience to God's call...there are no small gestures. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." (Mark 12:30)

Loyalty and Obedience.

*Dustin Mittelsteadt*

**Questions to Ponder** -----

1. Can something "go wrong" from a human point of view, and still be used in God's plans?
2. What are the similarities and differences between loyalty and obedience?

**Wednesday, December 4, 2019**

*All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").*

**Matthew 1:22-23**

The Gospel writer, Matthew, wrote his book about the Lord Jesus Christ to a primarily Jewish audience. Matthew provides undisputable and convincing evidence that Jesus, whose name means, "*The Lord saves,*" is the Jewish Messiah Savior-King, being both divine and human, born to fulfill God's plan of salvation intended for all people.

In the Advent reading for today, Matthew testifies that Jesus' birth fulfilled *God's words* spoken and written through Isaiah, who prophesied the virgin birth about 700 years before Jesus was born of the virgin Mary, who was legally engaged to Joseph the descendant of king David.

The virgin birth of Jesus is essential to His two-fold nature of being both human and divine – holy and sinless – in order to perfectly obey and completely fulfill God's law on our behalf (which we could not do on our own) and be the perfect sacrifice for human sin in our place (taking the punishment of death we deserved). Jesus alone saves us from being eternally separated from God!

Without Jesus' virgin birth, there would be no forgiveness, no salvation, no eternal life, no freedom, no joy, no peace and no hope. But thanks be to God, because of His power and grace, and because Jesus emptied Himself of divine glory and power to become human, conceived by the Holy Spirit, God's will and plan for humanity's redemption is fulfilled - all for *us* so that there *is* forgiveness, salvation, eternal life, freedom, joy, peace and hope!

Besides all of these spiritual blessings, which are ours now and for all eternity, Jesus is *Immanuel, God with us*, spiritually and intimately present with all believers in all places at all times. Jesus is *with you* as Lord of all circumstances of your life and as your loving, encouraging and faithful Friend!

*Pastor Steve Leinhos, Bethesda, Lutheran Communities*

**Questions to Ponder** -----

1. Do you feel God with you at all times?
2. How can you share the hope of Christ?

**Thursday, December 5, 2019**

*In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Luke 1:5a*

Have you ever found yourself realizing that Christmas is only a few days away – and you have NOT completed all of your Christmas shopping? Oftentimes that situation can lead to overspending and impulse buying . . . which leads to large credit card debt carried well into the next year . . . and echoes of Dave Ramsey scolding, “Christmas is NOT an emergency!”

The stress and hubbub of the season can cause most of us to “forget what day it is” during Advent . . . until it seems like December 25<sup>th</sup> sort of “sneaks up on us.” But the fact is that we CAN prepare for our celebration of the Lord’s birth. However, such was *not* the case in the days of Herod. In fact, we owe a debt of gratitude to Luke for including this key portion of scripture in his retelling of the Gospel narrative.

For the 400 or so years before Christ’s birth, God remained silent, having not spoken to His people since the final words of the Old Testament. But Luke provides us a vital reference point when he writes, “*There was, in the days of Herod, King of Judea . . .*” God is about to speak once again, unleashing His plan for the redemption of all mankind through the Angel Gabriel. Herod (Antipas) was the King of Judea and his hostility toward both Jesus, as well as His cousin John the Baptist, would play a crucial role in God’s salvation plan. Jesus would be born the Son of Mary and her husband Joseph who was from the line of Judah. So prophecy was about to be fulfilled, the plan would be set into motion, and this key verse would serve to remind us that every word of His story is important – even the small details.

As we prepare our hearts to celebrate the Lord’s birth – as well as anticipating His return – may we be ever mindful to the “signs of the times” all around us. These seasons of life are not merely coincidental. They are all part of God’s purpose and plan! Christmas and the Advent Season are not “an emergency.” They’re a reality – and our destiny as children of the King!

*Pastor Roger Marsh, LCC*

**Questions to Ponder** -----

1. What stresses you at Christmas time?
2. How can you focus your life on Christ and the true meaning of Christmas?

**Sunday, December 22, 2019**

*But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” Matthew 1:20b-21*

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

I can only imagine what was going through Joseph’s mind when he found out Mary was with child. He knew he could not be the father and he knew what had to have taken place for her to be with child. After all, he is only human with human emotions and human feelings. How hurt and betrayed he must have felt. Then an angel appeared to him in a dream and revealed what had taken place and God’s plan.

Many of us have been in situations where we have been betrayed. I know I certainly have. Someone did me wrong for whatever reason and I felt total betrayal by that person, and I thought, how could they have done that to me? The anger continually built up in me the more I thought about it.

Then I turned everything over to Jesus. I realized that it was part of God’s plan for me, and everything happens exactly the way God wants it to happen, precisely at the time God wants it to happen, because God has something better in store for me. When I put everything in God’s hands and trusted Him, it worked out for the best for me. What had happened to me, was exactly what God had planned to happen. It was God making a change to get me headed where he wanted me to be. Even though I could not see it at the time, trusting in God always turned out to be far better for me than I could have ever imagined.

I now do not look at anything as a setback, but rather a setup from God for something greater. And whenever something happens to me I do not understand, or I feel someone is doing me wrong, all I can say is: “Thank you Jesus, Thank you Jesus, I trust you Jesus.” I know it is God’s plan for me and it is far better for me in the long run.

*Todd Tunby*

**Questions to Ponder** -----

1. What would scare you about the life Joseph was facing if you were in his place?
2. Has anyone close to you ever betrayed you? How did it make you feel?



**Saturday, December 21, 2019**

*Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.*

**Matthew 1:19-20a**

Today we meet Joseph - God's chosen man to be the earthly father of His Son, Jesus. Scripture describes him as "faithful to the law," and "righteous," a man right with God. Joseph knew the law and did his best to obey it. When he found out that Mary was pregnant, he believed he had only two choices: to divorce her or have her stoned for she must have committed adultery. But God had another plan – to have Joseph marry his young bride and be Jesus' earthly father.

So God sent an angel to Joseph to explain God's gift of the Holy Spirit as the heavenly Father of Jesus. I believe God was setting up the family of Mary and Joseph to be the model of what He had planned for the healthy upbringing of His most special Son, Jesus. Here are two devoted servants of God, given the immense duty for raising, teaching and loving His most precious Son. Joseph, was devout, lived a life pleasing to God, with a valuable craft as a carpenter. God knew Joseph would live as the head of the Jewish family, teaching the children about their faith and history of God's actions to set them apart in this world and that Jesus would also learn a trade. Through Joseph, Jesus would learn to cherish women as Joseph did with his new pregnant wife. He would also learn to stand up to the bullies and nay-sayers that infected lives all over the region. Jesus would grow to have a strong sense of self and that He was the crown of God's creation, born with a huge job to take the sin of the world upon Himself and cleanse us from unrighteousness to grant us eternal life.

*Cindy Gaw*

**Questions to Ponder** -----

1. How can we be "right with God" in our spiritual journey?
2. When has God helped you make a tough decision, even when others did not support you?

**Friday, December 6, 2019**

*Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John.*

**Luke 1:11-13a**

Zechariah was in need of reassurance. The Hebrew meaning of reassurance is translated, "*The Lord is gracious.*" Through the angel, Gabriel, God reassured and comforted Zechariah.

Peter, one of Jesus' disciples, needed God's comforting presence as well. One night he and the other disciples were sailing across the Sea of Galilee, when a strong storm arose. All of a sudden, Jesus showed up walking on the water! Naturally this took the disciples by surprise. Jesus reassured them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid" (Matthew 14:27). Peter impulsively asked Jesus if he could join Him. Peter stepped out of the boat and walked toward Jesus. But Peter soon lost focus, became aware of the dangerous and humanly impossible circumstances he was in, and started sinking. Peter cried out, "Lord, save me!" and Jesus lovingly rescued him (verses 30-31).

Finally, we learned in this passage from Luke that Zechariah prayed to God and that his prayer was heard. Again, what a comforting and reassuring message for all of us during this Advent season and for any season - to know our Father hears our prayers. "*This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us-whatever we ask-we know that we have what we asked of Him.*" 1 John 5:14-5.

May we all humbly, yet confidently, move forward in prayer and without fear because our Lord is indeed gracious and continues to reassure and comfort us each and every day, even in the storms of life!

*Dave Shoemaker*

**Questions to Ponder** -----

1. How would you describe your prayer life?
2. Do you feel God hears your prayers?

**Saturday, December 7, 2019**

*Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." The angel said to him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time." Luke 1:18-20*

Like Zechariah, I often doubt the outcome of things. In the last few years my career, my reputation, and my livelihood have been in great danger. I was fortunate to find a brotherhood in Christians in Commerce, which sustained me and grew me in spirit and faith.

As I faced each challenge I knew the Lord could bring me through and make things right. But ... It didn't have to turn out right. Here on earth I have seen things go so sideways. For each step, which was needed for the next step, I could lose, hugely.

As I faced the issue of reputation, everyone told me that this would turn out. So many blessings happened, out of the blue, that it seemed like this was the direction the Lord was taking me. I knew He could do it, but would He? I had several profound experiences with the Holy Spirit, where I found myself in tears confessing how unworthy I was and am. I could not be sure of the outcome, but then He delivered me!

Now as I face the next challenge, the doubts are there ... again. I have seen what He can do, so I will proceed with patience and faith in His care for me. And I will bring my doubts and fears along with me in prayer. Amen.

*John Carter*

**Questions to Ponder** -----

1. Have you ever lost your trust in another person?
2. Do you find it difficult to trust the Lord and wait patiently on Him?

**Friday, December 20, 2019**

*This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Matthew 1:18*

When we first looked at this passage, we noticed how Mary's pregnancy was unexpected. We talked about how different people would have reacted to the news of her pregnancy. Joseph would have said, "I know the baby's not mine. It must be someone else's." The townsfolk would have said, "Ooh! Scandal! They're not married and they've already slept together." Mary would have said, "The people are busy spreading rumors, but I know the truth. I have not been with any man. The baby is from the Holy Spirit."

In the same way, we have situations today that are unexpected, and different people react to them in different ways. We explain them in different ways and we try to solve them in different ways. Some of us may tend to be more spiritual and emotional, while others may tend to be more analytical and practical.

Your husband or your wife or your family members probably look at situations differently than you do. Often, when we work together as a team, we can come up with a response that is more appropriate than one of us could have come up with by ourselves.

Of course, there are some in our church who don't have family members they are in close contact with. For them, and for all of us, the church serves as a loving and caring family. By working together with our brothers and sisters in the church, we can find solutions to our difficult situations that we may not find on our own. We may find solutions that are a balance of spiritual and emotional advice and practical action.

Today and always, let's think about and appreciate the members of our church family who are there for us when we need them.

*Paul and Penny Kratzer*

**Questions to Ponder** -----

1. When you have done something wrong, what part do you dislike most about being "found out?"
2. How has this church or a church member reached out to you when you had something unexpected happen?

**Thursday, December 19, 2019**

*When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy. Luke 1:57-58*

Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, isn't mentioned much in scripture until the Gospels. It is here that we begin to learn about the important role she fills in the salvation story. Elizabeth was a relative of Mary, the mother of Jesus. However, there was quite an age difference between them.

In Biblical times we are told that women that are childless often faced ridicule from others because God had not blessed their marriage with children. We would expect that Elizabeth and Zechariah would shout this news from the mountaintops sharing the excitement with family and friends. But the opposite is true. Zechariah doubted the news he was told, resulting in remaining mute for the duration of Elizabeth's pregnancy. Mary finds out that Elizabeth is expecting shortly before Elizabeth gives birth. So, why would this be the case?

Elizabeth's pregnancy was a gift of mercy and grace. They were too old for this miracle. By not shouting from the mountaintops the news that Elizabeth was expecting, God worked in the hearts of others to see the first glimpses of the mercy story for us all that would be fully realized through Christ's birth, death, and resurrection. The result? Friends saw God's mercy on Elizabeth and Zechariah and they joined in the Joy of the blessing. Being present in the moment of this great blessing outweighed the anticipation.

This Advent Season may our presence each day be a reminder of God's gracious mercy upon us through Christ and may we celebrate with great joy the salvation we receive through his death and resurrection.

*Meredith Arldt, Assistant Principal, Aliso Viejo Christian School*

**Questions to Ponder** -----

1. How has God shown you mercy? In what ways have you shown mercy to others?
2. Does it help you to realize that God holds your future as securely as He holds your present? Why or why not?

**Sunday, December 8, 2019**

*After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. "The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people." Luke 1:24-25*

Elizabeth's childlessness in her time and culture was cause for ridicule and shame. Imagine her wonderment upon God's revelation that her petitions had been heard. This Scripture captures her gratitude to the Lord and assuredly attributes her condition and blessing to His immense favor.

When we've waited upon the Lord, perhaps for many years; when we've cried out to Him for deliverance from our circumstances; when we've experienced injustices over that which we have no control, we too, are "Elizabeths." Luke 1:6 says that she was "... righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord." She was faithful and obedient.

Choosing faithfulness and obedience requires our acknowledgement that: 1. God alone is Sovereign (i.e. God is God and we are not); 2. That God is not bound by time; and 3. His plans, purposes, and promises will always prevail by His power. Elizabeth's seclusion must have been spent communing with God, giving Him much praise amid her awe and joy that her deepest longing had been fulfilled.

But her pregnancy was the culmination of many years of persevering --in trust and dependence upon God. Many of us may be living in this 'persevering' season. We wonder if He will ever grant us our deepest desires. We seek to align our will with His, but we're not there yet. Let's take inspiration from Elizabeth. Let's invest time to know Him through His Word every day. Let's meditate upon His attributes. Obedience is sometimes just adhering to His Word and Way for next hour (when we may not be strong enough to make it through a day), and making the next right choice when we falter. And we give praise for and seek His presence, power, and love.

*Geri Robinson*

**Questions to Ponder** -----

1. When you need God's comfort and strength, do you seek God's Word for answers?
2. How can you point others to look to God's Word?

**Monday, December 9, 2019**

*In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. Luke 1:26-27*

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

Growing up on a farm in Minnesota, one of our Christmas traditions was to have my paternal grandparents and my dad's brothers and sisters come to our house for Christmas Eve. We always read the nativity story from Luke after dinner, but before we opened our gifts.

The gifts were small but appreciated. It is a sweet memory of simpler times. Life seems to be going at a faster pace and it appears more difficult to center on what is really important today. A family gathered together - bound by our beliefs, is the foundation of our country.

Times have changed much...some for the better and others not so much. One thing that has changed for me is, now that I'm in California and not close to my brothers and sisters who still live in Minnesota, I've found ways to have a "surrogate" family, i.e. the church. Attending the holiday services at church makes me remember my family of old and warms my heart.

Another thing that has changed over the years is my understanding of Scripture. Learning to get the full meaning and the circumstances and the reason for Advent makes the celebration that much more fulfilling. I have a deep love for the Old Testament and how God's love has been expressed in so many ways through so many people and events to make Advent and the coming of the Messiah that much more real, and for me, more grateful to our loving Father!

*Constance Sorenson*

**Questions to Ponder** -----

1. What are the meaningful traditions you practice to celebrate Jesus' birth?
2. When you feel lonely or forgotten, what do you do to remind yourself that God is there for you?

**Wednesday, December 18, 2019**

*Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home. Luke 1:56*

Before traveling to visit her relative, the angel told Mary that Elizabeth had conceived and was in her sixth month (Luke 1:36). Why did Mary stay that long and leave, perhaps moments, before Elizabeth was to give birth? Why did she go at all? Without God, the women knew, it was impossible for either to be with child. Did they wonder, Why us? Why now?

Why?: It can be our most perplexing and troubling question. In times of abundance, we can find ourselves overjoyed and questioning why we've been so blessed. Upon Mary's arrival, Elizabeth, too, questioned, "But why am I so favored that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (Luke 1:43).

In situations of loss and pain, we may repeatedly ask "why," anxiously seeking an answer that will explain what is beyond our comprehension; the answer that will remedy our grief. Even Jesus, in the ninth hour, cried out to God, "Why?" (Matthew 27:46). Yet, we will not always learn why, that is, not in a way our humanness readily accepts.

The answer to "why" is, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding" (Proverbs 3:5). When we trust God, we can have peace. Our emotions may not yet feel it, or it may come and go. If we choose to believe His word, to think it, to speak it aloud, our feelings will follow - "And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:7).

Heavenly Father, when we question "why," help us to trust that only you need know why. Even if we never receive an earthly explanation, remind us that we can always know your gift of peace, even amidst the "whys" of life.

*Huelyn Betts*

**Questions to Ponder** -----

1. What things frighten you the most?
2. Was there ever a time you trusted in God, even when you were afraid to do so?

**Tuesday, December 17, 2019**

*He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. Luke 1:52-53*

In this verse, Mary had traveled to Judea to meet Elizabeth. These two verses are part of what is known as *the Magnificat* (Mary's song). Mary glorified God in song for what he was going to do for the world through her. In this part of the song, Mary sings of humbleness.

I think about my mom a lot this time of year. My sweet mom passed away when I was 13 years old. My mom came from working class, Italian parents, who came here to try and make a life in a new world. The Furcellas came with very little and worked for everything they had. In the first 13 years of life, I remember my Mom working at least two jobs: she was a hairdresser (working in our basement) and she worked as a store cashier. We lived in a modest home outside of Detroit and my dad worked a line job in the automotive industry. Mom, a devout Catholic, was very involved in our church. My memories include funny stories of Mom driving the nuns around in our car.

If you met my mom, the mother of three rambunctious boys, she was the richest person on the planet. She had everything; everything she needed and more. "If being humble is not to think less of oneself, but to think of oneself less," my mom was one of the most humble people I have ever known.

In verse 53 above, "He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty." Basketball coach Rick Pitino says, "Humility halts this arrogance and self-indulging trap. Humble people share the credit and wealth, remaining focused and hungry to continue the journey of success." And in James 4:10, "Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He shall lift you up."

Love you, Mom.

*Kevin Murphy, Director of Operations, LCC*

**Questions to Ponder** -----

1. What are some of the ways your parents influenced your faith and values?
2. How has God provided for you and your family in times of need?

**Tuesday, December 10, 2019**

*The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. Luke 1:28-29*

We know how Mary's story will unfold with the miraculous birth of Jesus Christ. This journey began with God's angel Gabriel sent to deliver Mary the Good News. I don't know about you, but can you just imagine what Mary must have seen and how she must have felt when Gabriel arrived? It's a humbling thought - the sheer awe of being approached by an angel, yet we read that Mary is troubled and unsure of the angel's greeting.

Mary is highly favored and God has made her accepted for what is to come. For Mary, words like "trust, courage, faith, willingness, honesty and love" all come to mind. Yet before she is to receive God's word, Mary is also apprehensive of what will be said.

We exist as humans in a world with the paradox of needing to be both vulnerable and courageous just like Mary. Through God's Word, we find comfort in the promise of everlasting life; and through the Holy Spirit, we are offered guidance and strength to face each day. We can celebrate the many blessings and also the perseverance it takes to make it through.

God's acceptance is for everyone. The abundant gift of Christ is meant to be shared, but it does take both vulnerability and courage to do so.

The imperfection of our life is made perfect through the sacrifice of Jesus' death and resurrection. While there can only be one Mary, we are all worthy of God's love and belonging. So next time an unknown or difficult situation presents itself, remember Mary's faithful assuredness and courageous determination to hear and to be open to God's will.

Blessings to you and your family this Christmas.

*Arlene Andresen*

**Questions to Ponder** -----

1. What are some ways you believe that God has blessed you?
2. How can you be a blessing and encouragement to someone else?

**Wednesday, December 11, 2019**

*But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."* **Luke 1:30-33**

I find myself strangely amazed that I've been given these verses to write a devotion!

I have been truly blessed with a wonderful living situation lately; but have felt cursed at my job situation. I work with a night crew of all men and I am the single female. I, like Jesus, am among a lot of non-believers who refuse to even consider that there is Someone who wants to see to it that their needs, if you believe in Him, will be met! It's amazing, but I have had several years where I have doubted, but when it came right down to it, all of my needs were met.

God found favor with Mary; that must have truly frightened her. And the fact that she was a virgin and had not been with her husband, Joseph, must have also really surprised her. However, the Angel came to Mary and let her know that she would be blessed with a Son, and He would be named "Jesus." And that God will bless Him with the throne of His Father.

God does that for us also. It might not exactly happen in all-out angelic announcements, but God will see to it that you are taken care of and protected. He's done that for me on many occasions. I'll share two such instances: First one was when I was driving to Santa Monica on the 405 freeway in a car that wasn't quite working right. Long story short, God got me off the freeway safely, let my car be towed safely, and then proceeded to introduce me to Godly people. Plus my mother came to my rescue that day... The second one was when I was driving to work on a Friday - my car was struck by two bunnies (yes, bunnies!) and it was at a time when I had just deposited a sufficient amount of funds to cover the damages done to the car. What a couple of blessings!

This is my account of how God has looked out for me even though I definitely am not deserving of His love.

*Sharyl Davis*

**Questions to Ponder** -----

1. How have you seen God working in your daily life?
2. What does it mean to you, to be close to Jesus?

**Monday, December 16, 2019**

*His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.* **Luke 1:50-51**

Long ago, the Israelites were deeply committed to glorifying God. As centuries unfolded, they abandoned their fear of the Lord and chased after the pagan gods within their promised land. Then, remembering they were the Chosen Ones, they also offered sacrifices to God. Despite this, God extended to them His mercy, imploring His people to return to Him. However, they had strayed so far they could no longer hear His voice. Weary of their disobedience, God brought them low in order to humble them. He removed his protective hand from their lives and allowed them to be scattered, oppressed, and exiled.

We must learn from this dark chapter in the history of the Israelites. They had allowed their hearts to be lured away from God and drawn into worldly pursuits. God was no longer first in their lives. Occasionally, they remembered God and paid Him homage, but then they resumed their worship of false idols. Their lives were no longer committed to glorifying God.

Man exists to glorify God. We must not allow worldly pursuits to topple Him from his rightful, preeminent position in our lives. In Isaiah 46: 9-10, God declares, "I am God and there is no other; I am God and there is none like me... My counsel shall stand and I will accomplish all my purpose." His purpose is this: the display of His great glory.

May we return God to his rightful position in our lives: first. May we clear our calendars of worldly pursuits which crowd out time to worship God as He has commanded us. May we hear His voice imploring us to return to Him. May we become a generation that fears the Lord and, in view of God's mercy, offer ourselves as living sacrifices to God, all for His glory.

*Linda Koyamatsu*

**Questions to Ponder** -----

1. Name some of the idols you have that keep you from a deeper relationship with God?
2. In what area(s) of your life do you tend to be proud or conceited?

**Sunday, December 15, 2019**

*And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name. Luke 1:46-47, 49*

Have you ever thought, "Why me, Lord? I think you have the wrong person. I am not capable or qualified to do this thing you are asking me to do?"

Throughout my life I have often thought myself ill-equipped for God's work. I'm nothing special. As I get older and spend more time with the Lord, I continue to learn about who I really am in Christ. Because I am His child and His Spirit lives within me, I can do all these things God has called me to do!

Mary was called. She was a young girl, a servant, nothing special. But she was a young girl who believed in God with all her heart and she was willing and obedient. Scared? Sure, of course she was; but she trusted God. And so she could boldly sing out this song, "My soul glorifies the Lord and my Spirit rejoices in God my Savior." I love this song at Christmastime and always, because it is a reminder to me of how BIG our God is and how with His Spirit living in us, He can do His work through 'little ol' me.' I just need to trust Him, obey Him and glorify His name. He has never let me down.

This Advent season, may we all be reminded of our faithful Lord and continue to trust Him with our lives. "The Mighty One has done great things for me- holy is His name."

*Kalyn Peterson, Principal, Aliso Viejo Christian School*

**Questions to Ponder** -----

1. What challenges are you facing right now? Have you given them to the Lord?
2. How can you focus more on Jesus and the great things He does for you?

**Thursday, December 12, 2019**

*"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail." Luke 1:34-37*

It often is said that good things come in small packages. This passage adds a twist to that theme. For the announcement of Jesus' birth shows that wonderful things come in surprising packages. God does not always do things the way we would do them.

After the angel told Mary about how God was going to use her through the conception and birth of Jesus, what His name would be and the plans He had for Him, Mary simply replied "How will this be since I am a virgin?" She did not respond with doubt or disbelief, just perplexed and in wonder by this sudden announcement. She did not ask for or seek this role in God's plans; God simply stepped into her life and brought her into His service. Her asset is that she is faithful and she should be honored for her model of faithfulness, humble adoration and openness to serve God.

The angel then went on to say she would conceive through the power of the Holy Spirit, and not of a man. Since Jesus was sinless, He could not be conceived through man. We too, have that same power of the Holy Spirit living in us because of Jesus' birth, life, death and resurrection when we believe in Him as our personal Lord and Savior. God does not leave her alone with big news! The angel notes the life that is stirring within the womb of an elderly woman, Elizabeth, Mary's relative. Thus John serves as a pointer to Jesus not only in His preaching, but also in His birth. The angel concludes "For no word from God will ever fail," or as my Bible translates, "*Nothing is impossible with God*".

As these verses show the faith of a young girl, the power of the Holy Spirit and God's unstoppable plan, will you open your heart for God's plan in your life and serve Him? Will you put your faith, no matter how small, in our BIG God? Will you let the Holy Spirit lead you into an intimate relationship with your Heavenly Father?

Wonderful things come in surprising packages, but they *can* come, because God has the power to deliver them.

*Sheila Miller*

**Questions to Ponder** -----

1. Is anything making you feel overwhelmed right now?
2. What do you do when someone surprises you?

**Friday, December 13, 2019**

*“I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled.” Then the angel left her. Luke 1:38*

Today is my husband’s birthday and I’ll do my best to make him feel special. To keep his birthday a separate celebration from Christmas, I adorned the house with birthday themed decorations. Even though it’s “his day,” I know that he’ll still ask me several times today what he can do for me, or how he can be a better husband. That is just his serving nature; he always puts others’ needs in front of his own – especially mine. I have a loving nickname for him – I call him, “The Giverest.”

Picture the angel Gabriel visiting the Virgin Mary and announcing she will give birth to the Son of God. At first, Mary asks how that is possible, but after Gabriel’s explanation, there is no further hesitation in her. She responds that she is the Lord’s servant and may His words be fulfilled, and then the angel leaves.

Mary was a giver, too, with a servant’s heart. After the angel left her, I’m certain that she knew that even though she was highly favored and chosen to be the blessed mother of Jesus, that there would still be difficult and uncertain times ahead of her. But her faith and willingness to serve God was more important than her own needs and concerns.

May we all be so ready and willing, like Mary, to serve our Lord when he calls upon us to do so, and to trust in Him that He will carry us along the way.

*Jeannie Palazzolo*

**Questions to Ponder** -----

1. Have you ever said, “yes,” even when you didn’t know the outcome?
2. When have you been God’s servant by being His ‘hands and feet’ to someone else?

**Saturday, December 14, 2019**

*When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Luke 1:41b-42, 44*

Glory to God in the highest! Peace and joy to God’s people. What a glorious gift of Jesus it is to experience God’s immediate presence around us and within us. When we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, we respond with exuberance expressed through eyes of wonder and squeals of delight. No longer is there distance between God and humanity. When we look at creation through Christmas lenses, we see the radiant light of the Lord’s love.

What a glorious gift it is to experience as Elizabeth did God’s presence around us and within us. When we see the world through Advent and Christmas eyes, we cannot help but respond with squeals of delight.

Laugh out loud. Sing out loud. In some small way, allow yourself to be used as the angel’s trumpet, letting the world know that Christ Jesus’s joy, loving presence leaps to life from within you.

As our Guiding Light, lead me to the bright awareness of Your life, Your love, Your joy, and Your peace, in my own heart. Lead others who are seeking You to find You in Your Word.

Glory to God in the highest! Love and peace come from the shining light of God’s grace, His glorious gift to you and me.

*Dottie Jefferies*

**Questions to Ponder** -----

1. How do you see Christ’s joy reflected in the world today?
2. What joy has God given you? (Take a moment to thank Him for it.)