

THE BIRTH OF JESUS, THE BIRTH OF...

2017 ADVENT DEVOTIONAL GUIDE



WILMORE FREE METHODIST CHURCH
A COMMUNITY THAT REFLECTS JESUS' VISION AND VALUES

LIKE US AND FOR US—IN EVERY WAY!

He too shared in (our) humanity so that by his death he might destroy death.... For this reason, he had to be made like (us) in every way... that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest... to make atonement.... Because he suffered (and) was tempted he helps those who are being tempted (Hebrews 2:14–18 adapted from the NIV).

What a mystery and glory the incarnation is in God's great plan of redemption, reconciliation, and transformation. For centuries, the Old Testament writers made it clear that our only hope was for that Word to become flesh and dwell among us (John 1:1–3). While God visited His people, not until Bethlehem would we understand fully the implications of the Father sending His only begotten Son to dwell among us and become like us. While very God, this Babe of Bethlehem would perfectly fulfill Messianic prophecy and become the Christ of Calvary, helping us understand that He understood our every and greatest need.

There is evidence in the Gospels that Jesus experienced, in some form, every joy, challenge, blessing, and burden that humanity experiences. He walked and worked among us. In those early years, tradition suggests that He apprenticed at Joseph's side as a master carpenter, fashioning wood and other earthly materials into works of art and instruments of fruitfulness. We who know the Babe who became the Christ, who experienced life in all its facets, have the assurance that wherever our paths take us, because of the incarnation, He has gone before us. So, fear not—for unto us is born the Savior—like us and for us in every way!

David J. Gyertson is Dean of the Beeson International Center and Professor of Leadership Formation at Asbury Theological Seminary. He has served as president of three Christian universities.

ADVENT: BUSY AND COMMITTED

"When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit," (Matthew 1:18 ESV).

When I was a pastor, Advent and the holiday season preceding it, was the busiest time of the year for me. For reasons I never figured out, people always died around Christmas; I always had one or more funerals. Also, the holidays were a stressful time for many church folk--all those gifts to buy and parties to attend, not to mention families who didn't like each other trying to get along over Christmas dinner. When the stress became overwhelming, they landed in my office. So when my youth pastor, Deborah, expressed her desire to preach, I figured our Christmas Eve Candlelight Service was the perfect time. It was one less worry for me.

Christmas Eve arrived. Three-hundred people crowded into the sanctuary. The Christmon tree was lit. The sacrament graced the altar. The hymns were beautiful and Scripture texts appropriate. Then Deborah stepped into the pulpit--and froze with fear, a huge panic attack. Some in the congregation fidgeted with discomfort; others stifled chuckles. After what seemed like a lifetime, Deborah blurted out, "Mary was so dedicated to God that God was able to use her to birth His Son." With that reference to the Virgin Birth, Deborah bolted from the sanctuary like an Olympic sprinter.

At first I felt annoyed; I'd turned my pulpit over to Deborah and she had blown it. But then I realized Deborah's short sermon had touched the core of the Advent message: Mary *was* so dedicated to God that God was able to use her to birth His Son. Are we so committed that God is able to use us for His holy purposes?

Rev. Dr. James A. Belcher retired as a United Methodist pastor after 41 years of service in the Alabama-West Florida Conference. He now resides in Wilmore.

JESUS' FREEDOM

And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14 NASB).

There was a time in my life when a specific person became hard for me to work with or even to spend personal time with. I know I communicated, through my actions and reactions, my distress and discomfort when we were together. I began to earnestly seek God in prayer, to ask the Father for His love to be poured into me and then through my life to this other person.

One day, as the weight of my need pressed down on me, Jesus opened His word to me in an unexpected way and showed me that I needed to face this relationship clearly and make a decision concerning how to interpret the relationship dynamics that existed between us.

I looked at my responses and realized that while we were absolutely level at the foot of the cross, there were profound differences between us. I saw several opposites in our strengths and weaknesses that clearly affected our time together. In my “seeing” and naming truthfully those differences as integral parts of who we each were, I found the freedom of acceptance for both the other person and myself. Through this part of my journey, Jesus birthed Truth in me that I had been blind to and gave me such a different perspective and framework of understanding.

I experienced not only the historical Jesus whose coming we celebrate at this season, but also the living Christ birthing in me the Truth I needed to experience His freedom and faithfulness.

Karen Koehn is married to Donavon and they have 3 adult children. She is retired from Asbury University, continuing to learn and grow, and committed to prayer.

FLESH-AND-BLOOD INSPIRATION

At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. Luke 1:39-40 (NIV).

My daughter Breanna and I are a lot alike. We have similar personalities, we react to situations in similar ways, we think alike. We “get” each other. We are both introverts, content to let others lead, but happy to help and be a part of the process. Lately Breanna has been asked to do several things at church and at school that are forcing her to go outside her natural “comfort zone.” And each time this happens, I ask her, is this really what you want to do? And surprisingly to me, each time she has responded with a ‘yes.’ And I know that when she says “yes,” it isn’t easy; there are fears and uncertainties wrapped up in that “yes,” along with a desire to grow and learn new things.

The courage and strength that I see God giving her is an inspiration to me. In fact, her example is a big reason that I am writing this devotional thought.

I’m thinking that Mary needed inspiration, too. I have to think that God did fortify her spirit with His Spirit, giving her courage and resilience to accept and embrace the challenges ahead of her. But He also gave her someone to inspire and encourage her, her cousin Elizabeth, whom she hurried to see.

I’m so thankful that God sends people into our lives that inspire and challenge us. While the Bible and all of the great wisdom that is contained within its pages inspire us each and every day, we also need flesh-and-blood inspiration. We need a touch, or a word, or an example. Just like Mary did.

Jessica Bowers is striving to be like Jesus, but it is hard; she needs all the inspiration she can get. Some of those who inspire her most are her husband Brian, daughter Breanna, and son Jake.

GOD’S UNCONDITIONAL POSITIVE REGARD

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14 ESV).

The Rogerian perspective in therapy is one of the most used approaches in the mental health world. In it, the importance of presence with your client is emphasized; how you are with your client is incredibly important to the client and therapist relationship. One of the unique aspects of presence with the client is extending unconditional positive regard: accepting and loving the person for who they are.

The birth of Jesus Christ into our world shows the birth of God’s perfect love extended to us. The ultimate unconditional positive regard. Through Jesus Christ’s birth, life, and passion, God surrendered His love to us, through no act of worthiness on our own.

In Carl Roger’s therapeutic perspective, he identifies a paradox in working toward change: that people must learn to allow themselves to be who they are in order to become something else. Similarly, we cannot do anything to become righteous, instead through the humble act of allowing God’s grace to transform us, we are redeemed.

Roger’s perspective is not overtly Christian, yet I am always amazed by the way in which many helping professional theories are haunted by Christ’s truth. Jesus not only came down to us and left the Holy Spirit, but His presence can be seen in a multitude of ways – not only through grace, but in things that are true. Thank you, Jesus, that You are still dwelling among us.

Andy Reynolds is the husband of Faith, father of Eli, and son of Burnie and Machel. He is currently a professor of Social Work at Asbury University.

UNLIKELY VISITORS

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?" (Matthew 2:1-2a RSV).

Few biblical characters are as mysterious as the wise men. There is much about them we do not know. For example, we do not know their number, nor their names.

Yet it is not so much what we do not know about them that makes them mysterious, but rather what we do know. We know that they were *magi*, that is members of the Babylonian royal court who were adept at magic, astrology (Matthew 2:2b), and the interpretation of dreams (Matthew 2:12). And we gather that they traveled two years to reach Jerusalem (compare Matthew 2:7 and 2:16). These considerations make them most unlikely worshippers of this "king of the Jews." Their great geographical distance was nothing compared to their cultural and religious distance from God's people Israel. The Bible generally considers Babylon to be the most wicked of all cities, and the Scriptures repeatedly condemn magic and astrology. Yet they came, sacrificing four years of their lives in travel, announcing the birth of the king of the Jews, while all Jerusalem was "troubled" at the news (Matthew 2:3).

The wise men's part of the Christmas story challenges our assumptions that certain types of people with certain backgrounds can never be drawn to Christ. It reminds us that God delights in these kinds of surprises, since above all at Christmas we learn that with God all things are possible (Luke 1:37).

David R. Bauer has been a Bible professor at Asbury Theological Seminary for 33 years and is an ordained elder in the Ohio Conference of the United Methodist church. He is the proud father of Chris.

HOLY RELICS OR HOLY CHILD

On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage (Matthew 2:11a NRSV).

In August, my wife and I celebrated our fiftieth wedding anniversary by taking a riverboat cruise down the Moselle and Rhine rivers. As they say, it was the trip of a lifetime. The accommodations, the food, and the service were first class. The local tour guides were both knowledgeable and entertaining. We saw crumbling castles and beautiful churches, hillside vineyards and quaint villages, canals and windmills.

On the ninth day we arrived at Cologne, Germany. There the tour guide took our group to the great cathedral, awesomely tall with its vaulted ceilings and spectacular stained glass windows. Started in 1248, this building is a marvel and a classic of Gothic architecture.

Within the cathedral is the Shrine of the Three Kings (Magi). In the well-known story, Helena, the mother of Constantine, recovers various artifacts including the bones of the Magi. After journeying to a church in Constantinople, they are moved to Milan and eventually to Cologne in 1164.

Thousands of pilgrims come to the cathedral every year to venerate these relics, but not to worship them. Even if the relics are not genuine, they serve as a physical reminder of something that happened in history 2,000 years ago. For believers, they are a means to respond to God's grace.

Do we need relics to connect with God? Probably not. Like the wise men, what we really need in this season of Advent is to find and worship the Holy Child of Bethlehem.

Jim Lee is a retired librarian. With his wife, Joan, he spends his summers in Kentucky and his winters in Florida.

HIS PEACE: PRICELESS, ETERNAL GIFT

For unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given: ... and His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6 NKJ).

The prophet Isaiah prophesied the birth of a Child who would be called by many glorious titles, among which was Prince of Peace. Centuries later, about 2,000 years ago, the temple shepherds were keeping watch over their flock by night. An angel of the Lord appeared telling them of the Savior's birth. Then suddenly a multitude of the heavenly host proclaimed, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men on whom His favor rests" (Luke 2:14 NIV). We believers in Jesus are the recipients of this gift of favor and peace in our hearts.

Pause and ponder for a moment. Jesus Himself said that His first coming was to divide and separate (Matthew 10:34). He came to bestow favor and peace on only those who would believe and receive Him as Savior—Redeemer—Lord. His second coming will confirm and accentuate this everlasting peace. Our world and our country reflect everything but peace. Yet within every soul there is a hunger and desire for peace. As Jesus is embraced and the Holy Spirit fills the heart, His peace becomes a priceless, eternal gift.

Very few were looking for His first coming. Are you and those dear to you ready and anxious for His second coming...or will you and your house settle for a secular Christmas celebration and the absence of real peace?

Maranatha, Lord Jesus! Hallelujah! Amen!

Larry Moore has been "painted" by the blood of Jesus, is husband of one (Sammie), Dad to eight, Papa to 17 and part of WFMC for over 35 years.

TREASURE & PONDER

But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart (Luke 2:19 NIV).

I was a few days past my due date on Christmas 1994 with our first son (after three daughters). Having a baby boy at Christmastime challenged me to think more about Mary and her situation. The journey to Bethlehem—either on foot or on a donkey while great with child—seems rather unpleasant. Yet Mary and Joseph made the trip obediently. Finding no room at the inn must have been disappointing and could have caused anxiety, but scripture does not tell us Mary and Joseph were upset. (Scripture does mention the Israelites’ wilderness grumbings.) Laying the newborn Christ child in a manger was certainly making the best of a situation (and repurposing). Then, the shepherds came!

Can you imagine the conversation Mary, Joseph and the shepherds may have had? I suppose they compared notes on how they feared the angel’s presence. Perhaps the shepherds described the great company suddenly appearing, praising God, and then returning to heaven. What a blessing and encouragement to an exhausted new mother!

After the shepherds left, Mary “treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.” “All these things” may have included: Gabriel’s visit, the Lord’s favor, marrying Joseph, the journey, the lodging, the virgin birth, the manger, the shepherds’ amazing recount, thoughts about raising Jesus, and the revelation of Immanuel!

There is a time to take action and a time to meditate. Take the time to “treasure and ponder” God’s work in your life.

Ann Toadvine has been happily married to Dr. Steve Toadvine for 35 years and is a homeschooling mother of six children. Ann holds bachelor’s and master’s degrees in music.

THE BIRTH OF JESUS; THE BIRTH OF RELATIONSHIP

He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (John 1:11-12 NIV).

Jesus came into a place that should have welcomed Him; it should have been a second home for Him. However, our failings led to His rejection. Every wrong action we take, every unholy thought we have, and every evil feeling we possess within us reinforces the separation brought about in the fall. But there is hope. His life on earth was crafted and lived out so that He could die and in His death, He could bring us life.

However, living longer or gaining a second life is not the ultimate goal. Rather, the life that He has given us enables us to love Him. He did not sacrifice everything so we could have a future with Him. No, He was executed so that we could be in relationship with Him NOW and in every second, day, year, and millennia to come.

The nature of relationship is cumulative. If we spend time in prayer every few days, then we may have only 100 encounters with God during a year. That can be enough to maintain an adequate friendship, but Jesus is calling us to a passionate, all-encompassing love of Him. This is not something that can be achieved without daily and hourly interaction. Jesus is calling you to love Him more deeply and fiercely than you love any other person in your life. Thus, by the birth of Jesus, relationship with Him was also born. Seek Him in prayer, inconvenience yourself for Jesus and there you will find Him joyously awaiting you.

Sarah Blankenship is a senior at Asbury University. She loves Wilmore and has lived here for almost 14 years. She is very excited to see how God will call her next.

AN UPRIGHT MAN

Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly (Matthew 1:19 NKJV).

Over the centuries since Christ's birth, volumes have been written about Mary, the mother of Jesus. But what do we know about His earthly father, Joseph? Scripture tells us that he was a "just" man. Why was he chosen for this incredible task?

Joseph, born into King David's lineage, showed his moral character in that, after Mary was found to be pregnant, he did not want to embarrass or "expose her to public disgrace" (NIV). As he was wrestling with what to do, an angel appeared to him in a dream, explained the situation and even told him what to name the child. When he awoke, Joseph "did as the angel of the Lord commanded him...." He had simple faith.

We know that Joseph earned a living as a carpenter. During the gap in time from when Jesus visited the temple (age 12) and the beginning of his earthly ministry (age 30), I believe that Joseph taught Jesus his trade. By working daily with him in his shop, Jesus honed woodworking skills and saw a godly man in action.

Joseph was a faithful man who loved his wife, trusted God and worked with his hands. Born into a good family, he chose to follow God, even when it was hard. He had a simple faith and followed the angel's commands instantly. Joseph was the earthly man whom God chose for the most important task in history, serving as earthly father to God's Son. May we learn from his example and trust God implicitly with our lives. He knows what is best.

Jay McCants is the husband of Heather and the father of Olivia and Isaac. The family lives in Bagdad, KY, and has been part of the WFMC family for the past seven years.

ONLY ONE THING

“Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her” Luke 10:41-42 NIV).

Recently, my favorite Christmastime name for Jesus is “Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14). I find it so moving that God chose to come to earth to be with us. When I meditate on the birth and life of Christ, I’m amazed at the personal difference it makes. I can know Jesus. He is saving me, teaching me, healing me, showing me what to do, and He loves me and wants me. His presence in my life begins with that birth of baby Jesus, Immanuel, God With Us.

I wonder if your calendar this December looks anything like mine... little squares overflowing with things scheduled for months, last-minute additions, trying to squeeze everything in. I’m trying to enjoy all of the moments. And then there are the stressful and difficult parts. The people you don’t want to disappoint, the gifts that don’t come together, the best laid plans that fall apart. And then there are the sad parts. Lonely moments, hurt when efforts go unnoticed, reminders of deep loss, regret that hangs over your celebration. Life is complicated, sometimes with things we choose, sometimes with things that are chosen for us.

In this complicated season, let’s follow Mary’s example by focusing on the one thing. Certainly many things will have to be done, but one is necessary. As we seek the Kingdom first, and cast our anxiety on Him, all these things are added in their proper place. Our Savior has come, and He is with us (Psalm 27:4, Matthew 6:25-33, Philippians 3:13-14).

Erin McLaughlin has attended WFMC since moving to Wilmore in the fall of 1999. She enjoys serving with youth ministry and music ministry and being part of the WFMC family.

THE CHRISTMAS AND EASTER CONNECTION

Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, ...humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:5, 6, 8 NIV).

Christmas is almost always celebrated in a vacuum. This seems to be true of our culture at large, but is often the case among those of us who should know better.

Here's what I mean. We're all conditioned to respond warmly to, or romanticize the notion of, a "babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger." But seldom do we connect the dots and extend the line to Calvary and the empty tomb. I suppose the empty tomb is not so hard to add to the mix, since it is a place of joy. The problem with the empty tomb, though, is what it took to get there. The brutality and shame of the cross and the notion of human sacrifice for sin is just not polite dinner conversation, and seems out of place at an Advent celebration.

Yet we do a great disservice to ourselves, to non-believers, and to our loving, merciful, just God, when we neglect the rest of the story. I wonder how retailers and consumers would respond if the connection between Christmas and Easter was front and center.

Years ago, when our children were young, we added the Apostle Paul's version of the "Christmas Story" to our family Christmas tradition. You'll find it in Philippians 2:5-11.

Why not consider including Paul's version as part of your family's Christmas tradition? Christmas is a non-event without the death and resurrection of the Savior.

John R. Swaim is Chief Operating Officer of First Southern National Bank. He and his wife, Marilyn, have been members of WFMC for more than 20 years. He served as chairman of the church's recent Foundation, Faith, Future Capital Campaign team.

SOUL ACHING INTIMACY

Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings (Romans 5:3a NIV).

Rejoice in our sufferings? That seems like a betrayal of our most primal desire. We fight with all our might to insulate ourselves from grief and agony, and would risk most of what we have to protect the dreams we have so diligently spent a lifetime building. Why would we rejoice when we can no longer look away from the devastation of suffering, both immediately around us and in the world at large?

We have the ability to rejoice in our suffering, not because we delight in pain, but because it will be in the aftermath of loss, in our failing body, in the relationship with a child who cannot bond, in the gutted marriage, in the trenches of addiction, in the dying, starving and neglected lives around the world. It will be in the aftermath of such losses that we can gaze into the tear-filled eyes of our sweet Savior and find hope. It is there in profound intimacy with Christ where we find our soul aching to rejoice. When we wrestle the beast of suffering and the undoing of ourselves has left us in a heap on the ground, we open our swollen, heavy eyes and realize we can see Jesus. We realize He was beside us all along.

Suffering viciously reveals our humanity and it simultaneously reveals new depths of intimacy with our Savior.

Are you exhausted, fighting the realities of this broken world, and missing the intimacy with Jesus that awaits? Will you dare to believe that pain will guide your heart into deeper relationship with Him?

Courtney J. Watts is finally believing Jesus will never leave her and never stop pursuing her. She is brought to tears by the magnificence of the ocean and can make a killer lasagna.

THE MATTER OF FORGIVENESS

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace (Ephesians 1:7 NIV).

I think there is no more fundamental factor of Christianity than "the forgiveness of sins." Think of all of the people we pass by each day who give absolutely no thought as to their sins being forgiven. Anyone can be forgiven by God, but not until they know they need to be. Then, God can't forgive if they do not repent. God will never force His forgiveness on anyone who doesn't seek it.

I like what Oswald Chambers said: "Unless there is a possibility of forgiveness establishing an order of holiness and rectitude in a person, it would be a mean and abominable thing to be forgiven without being altered by the forgiveness, it being a damage to me and a sign of unmitigated weakness on the part of God."

We can scarcely talk about forgiveness without mention of the prodigal son. Though the older brother mentioned the far country, the harlots, and riotous living, the father mentioned none of that, only that he was home. What a picture of God; not only sins forgiven, but forgotten, and removed as far as east is from west. As the prophet says in Jeremiah 31:34 KJV, "I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

Now, note that the Triune God, in all three persons, is involved in all this. The Father sent His only begotten Son to be the sacrifice for our sins. Never minimize the agony of all that for both Father and Son. Then it falls to the Holy Spirit who inspires and directs, that our Master's will is done. All praise, honor, and glory to the Triune God!

Winston B. Smith, is retired from the faculty of Asbury University where he taught biology.

HE DID IT—FOR EVEN YOU AND ME

Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise....(Matthew 1:18a KJV).

There are two distinct moments in my Christian life in which I remember a river of tears rushing down my cheeks and being absorbed by the front of my shirt. The first was when I realized the enormity of my own sin. The second was when I realized that God loves me so much that even in the midst of my fallen nature and darkest moments of failure He sent His beloved Son to rescue and save even me.

The first moment was, admittedly, easier to accept and grasp than the second. It was the simple knowledge of God's law and His expectations that exposed the vastness of my sin. Without such understanding I simply would have remained indifferent to the severity of my fallen nature. In contrast, coming to grips with the second moment, the realization that God loves even me, was more difficult. It is one thing to know the law, break the law, and receive the due consequences thereof. But it is entirely different to be guilty and then receive love when all around the cry for justice takes center stage.

The significance of Christ's birth is the evidence that God Himself stepped into our time line, and through the tiny cry of the newborn Messiah overturned the guilty verdict demanded by justice. His grace and mercy was not in the cross alone but also in the very act of leaving heaven and taking up the flesh of a man. And He did it... for even me.

Now the birth of Jesus was on this wise... for even you!
Amen.

Johnson Cannon is married to Amy and they have five children—four boys and one little girl.

BIOLOGY AND MYSTERY COMBINED

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (1 Peter 1:3 NASB).

Our one and only grandchild was born in May 2017. She was wonderfully created and knitted together in her mother’s womb—biology and mystery combined. When Cora breathed her first breath we rejoiced and we tried to imagine the possibilities before her. Will she be a ballet dancer like her mother or an ice hockey player like her father? Only time will tell.

Jesus was born about 2000 years ago. We’re told that He is God’s one and only Son. We read in the Gospels that He was created and knitted together in his mother’s womb—biology and mystery combined. When Jesus breathed His first breath, the angels and shepherds rejoiced and His mother treasured and pondered the certainties before Him.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son...(John 3:16 NIV).

My father, an only child, was born in May 1931. He was wonderfully and fearfully created and knitted together in his mother’s womb. When my father breathed his last breath in August 2017, we rejoiced and tried to imagine the possibilities before him. Death and life eternal—biology and mystery combined.

As we celebrate Cora’s first experiences of life on this earth and my father’s first experiences of eternal life, we give thanks to a loving Creator whose mercy extends to those who fear Him, from generation to generation—biology and mystery combined (Luke 1:50 NIV).

Jan Coleman has lived in Wilmore since 2013. She enjoys music and reading and hanging out with Cora.

KNOWING FEAR FIRST- HAND

...Jesus...who being in very nature God,...made himself nothing...being made in human likeness (Philippians 2:5-7 TNIV).

In Matthew 2:11-21, we read about the wise men's visit to meet the newborn King. They offered their gifts and worship to the young Jesus, and left Bethlehem. That night, as Joseph slept, an angel came to him and commanded, "Get up, take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."

Imagine how Jesus, a toddler, experienced being suddenly taken from his bed in the middle of the night, wrapped in a blanket, and held in Mary's arms as they rode on the donkey in the dark hour after hour. The fully human little Jesus would have sensed His parents fear and anxiety. He would realize that something was wrong. And for about 3 years Jesus, Mary and Joseph were foreigners in Egypt. They were a refugee family, fleeing from great danger.

In God's plan, Jesus came as an infant, to experience all of childhood. And, not just the childhood of the rich and comfortable, but the childhood of the poor, the refugee, the foreigner. God's plan included Jesus coming to know first-hand the fear of great danger, and the stress of a refugee family.

In this advent season, may we keep the refugees, and those who work with them in our prayers. May we find ways to show the love of Jesus to those around us who struggle in poverty or live in fear of deportation.

Cathy Stonehouse has called WPMC her church home since 1987. After retiring from Asbury Theological Seminary in 2011, she has spent time each year working with PhD students in the Philippines.

Lord, the God of Israel, ...has established for us a saving power in the House of his servant David ...that he would ...show faithful love to our ancestors, and so keep in mind his holy covenant. This was the oath he swore to our father Abraham (Luke 1:68-73 NJB).

FULFILLING COVENANT PROMISES

People can feel uncomfortable hearing that God owes us anything. But priest Zechariah's prophetic paean of praise reflects his biblical knowledge that both parties in a covenant are obligated to fulfill what they have sworn. God, who cannot lie, absolutely *has* to do for us what He promised (which He also otherwise wants). The original behind the phrase *show faithful love to* in the quotation above reveals much more than comes through in English translations. They are the three Greek words, *poiein + eleos + meta* (from Hebrew *asah + hesed + im*). Every time these three are used together, they indicate loyal/faithful, life-preserving deeds fulfilling obligation toward another otherwise hopeless member in a mutual covenant.

The birth of Israel's king as sworn to David was an act of God to fulfill His covenantal obligation to restore His people's loving unity so they could shine forth, attracting the world to life in abundant blessing as God swore to Abraham. It's all about God's honoring His promises, manifesting underlying truth and eternal love.

Fear not whatever He commands, for He must faithfully enable obedience. Whenever things seem darkest, it's a comfort to know, as it was for Zechariah, that God not only loves us and freely provides, but also owes us a covenantal debt to loyally perform what He has sworn to us as members of eternal life with Him.

James Mace received his BA from Oklahoma Christian University. He holds three master's degrees. He is now finishing a PhD degree at St. Andrews, Kent-Canterbury, and Reading, UK.

JOY

Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning (Psalm 30:5 KJV).

Life contains pain. Sometimes it's that heavy, stone-ache, heart-hurt pain that follows you to bed each night and is still lying next to you in the early morning darkness. Sometimes it's that searing, gasping for breath, lying curled up on the bathroom floor kind of pain that leaves you petrified, paralyzed, not knowing how to carry on. You cry out, "Where are you, God?" and His voice softly speaks, "You can find me in a manger."

Indescribable. Uncontainable. The One who hung the stars and called them by name, now lying vulnerable, helpless, in a pain-filled world. Pain shared with all humanity. Immanuel, God with us. He put on the mantle of pain-racked brokenness in order to clothe us in the garments of expectant joy. Joy expressed in a glorious angelic chorus on a glittering star-studded night. Joy settled deep in the thoughtful expressions of worship from mysterious magi. And joy in the face of a simple young maiden cradling God; He who was both newborn, yet eternal.

Joy is here. It is found in the broken heart of God and in the healing heart of resurrection. It is found in the ache of suffering and the dance-filled days of glorious redemption. It is found in the small, tugging-smile moments, and the overwhelming, awe-felt contemplations of creation. We will have our nights of weeping, but we will not be alone. For slowly, ever so slowly, the darkness of night gives way to the dawning of joy. A child is born. A son is given. Creation shouts with joy. Weeping may endure for a night, but *joy* comes in the morning.

Joy Dupree is an adjunct professor of English at Asbury University. She and her husband, Paul, have a blended family of five children and three grandchildren.

THE WORD IS COURAGE

Be strong and let your heart take courage, All you who hope in the Lord (Psalm 31:24 NASB).

Jesus spoke... “Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid” (Matthew 14:27 NASB).

The word I seem to be hearing is “courage” and a search reveals this word often paired with “fear not” in both Testaments. Mary was told by the angel not to be afraid because of his awesome appearance and message (Luke 1:30). Probably a teenager, she needed *courage* to travel a good distance to visit her relative Elizabeth (Luke 1:39-40). As her story unfolded she needed *courage* to withstand malicious gossip as the baby was being formed within her. And she would be without her family during the birth.

I would suggest that Gabriel told Mary of the second advent; Joseph was informed about the first advent (Luke 1:26-38; Matthew 1:18-25). He was told not to be afraid as he needed *courage* to be protector and provider, *courage* to travel to Egypt to avoid the slaughter of the innocents (Matthew 2:13-18), and to train up Jesus. Thankfully the *encouragement* of the Scriptures sustained them and they could rejoice in God’s faithfulness (Luke 1:46-55). And now, like them, we can also have Jesus!

While living in Florida, I worked at the Life Choice Pregnancy Center helping young teens who needed *courage* to make right choices—not “convenient” choices. In this troubled age we need *courage* for engaging our very secular culture, *courage* to stand firm, lovingly pushing back and doing the right thing even when times are tough. We can be *encouraged* because God is forming Jesus in us (Galatians 4:19; Colossians 1:27) as we learn to be salt and light for a world gone crazy!

Diana Zeigler is a senior citizen living at Wesley Village, Wilmore, wife of Richard and grandmother to six.

CHILDLIKE JOY

And [Jesus] said: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of God (Matthew 18:3 NIV).

I think one of the most brilliant parts of God’s plan for redemption was to send His Son as a baby. What better way to show us the father/child relationship God desires to have with each of us? Throughout His ministry, Jesus taught us about His Father. How to talk with Him. What it’s like where God lives. How Father God expects us to behave. And how much He loves us.

In Romans 8:15 we are told that our adoption into God’s family allows us to call him “Abba” which can be translated as “Daddy.” Imagine our Heavenly Father’s joy at hearing His children call Him “Daddy.” My heart goes to goo when I hear my granddaughter, Abbie, excitedly cry “Mimi!” as she races from her Sunday School classroom into my arms. I love seeing the world through her eyes! And I have also begun seeing my relationship with my Father God through child-eyes.

Abbie completely trusts that when I kiss her “boo-boo” (small injury), it will feel better. Do I hand my hurts to God with the same confidence?

When I give Abbie a gift, she bounces eagerly with shining eyes and huge smiles. God gives me gifts every day: a spectacular sunset, the softness of my favorite sweater. Do I respond with the same delight? Or do I set Him aside for later?

This Advent season, I want to crawl into my Abba’s lap and tell Him about all the delights of my day. I want to ask Him to kiss my “boo-boos,” and I want to thank Him for His wonderful gifts. I’m His kid and He’s my Daddy. It doesn’t get better than that!

Ann Warnock recently moved to Kentucky and is Mimi to four precious grandchildren: Abbie, Nathan, Madeline and Elliott.

THE CHRISTMAS STORY ACCORDING TO JOHN

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ (1 John 1-3 NIV).

Much of what our culture associates with Christmas—e.g., the decorated tree and Santa—has no basis whatever in any biblical account of the Savior's birth. If Santa were our guide and surety we'd be justifiably worried for our eternal security! Yet, one of the fundamentals of our faith is that the Lord's birth, teaching, healing, and His death and resurrection are historically authentic. If not, we are in so many, many ways, lost and wandering alone without direction. The 'beloved disciple,' John, did not leave a classic Christmas narrative. In fact, John left a succinct account of our Lord's birth: "The life appeared" (1 John 1:2). In our Lord's incontestable appearance we may fellowship with him and other Christians and, not incidentally, with the Father and with the Son! How so? Fellowship of that nature requires a common, shared commitment to historically authentic truth among and between the faithful. For Christians to encourage, sustain and love each other we must have mutual confidence in our shared faith. John's Christmas story, thereby, provides a sure, solid foundation for our assurance that we are NOT lost and have a totally reliable guide through life and into eternity.

David Randall and his wife Lea are parents of Ben Randall, who is married to Emily. Dave is on faculty at UK and, until his recent retirement, was part-time faculty at Asbury University.



THE BIRTH OF JESUS, THE BIRTH OF...

But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
Though you are small among the clans of Judah,
out of you will come for me
one who will be ruler over Israel,
whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.

Micah 5:2

Editor: Martha Evans Sparks

Abbreviation WFMC = Wilmore Free Methodist Church