

**ADVENT IV & CHRISTMAS EVE WORSHIP**  
**A Series of Readings and Reflections**  
**DECEMBER 24, 2023**

***The Birth of John the Baptist Foretold***

Luke 1:5-13

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. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshippers were praying outside.

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.

**Reflection:**

"Don't be afraid, Zechariah! God has heard your prayer." Imagine hearing those words spoken by the Angel Gabriel, but instead, it was your name, and your heart's desire was going to be granted. In life, it is easy to dwell on the things we don't think God has provided for us, and yet, every day God is faithful to us and is offering us graces and joy.

John the Baptist brought not only joy to his parents but fulfilled a great mission God had for him to prepare the way for Jesus. This time of year is a time to pause and reflect on what God has done in our life, and ask God to open our heart to see the will of God unfolding in our life.

***The Birth of Jesus Foretold***

Luke 1:26-38

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. 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. 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."

"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."

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

## **Reflection:**

How joyfully, how hopefully, waits the world on Christmas Eve as it waits upon the obedience and faithfulness of Mary – who, having been visited by the Angel Gabriel – agrees to become the mother of the Most High, the promised one of Israel, our Emmanuel.

God speaks to us in many mysterious ways. The story of the annunciation is a story of trust. Mary and Joseph did not understand everything. They put their full trust in God's divine wisdom and power. Like Mary, may we be able to understand and accept God's plan for us. Like Mary, may we allow ourselves to be an instrument of God's plan whatever it is. Saying yes to God is our greatest decision and our own simple contribution to the realization of His kingdom.

## **Mary Visits Elizabeth**

Luke 1:39-45

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. 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! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

### **Reflection:**

"God has blessed you above all women, and your child is blessed." So said Elizabeth to Mary. Blessed despite the grief that would come; blessed despite the tears that would be shed; for the child to be born in a humble way would be Lord, not just of Israel, but of the nations of the east, the south, the north, and the west, he would be, forever – Emmanuel – God with us.

Faith is a hard struggle. It is a trust that goes beyond any human sense of the word. To believe without seeing or knowing goes against all of our natural tendencies. Faith offers a new dimension: to believe, to trust, even if we don't know what will happen. Luke opens up the mystery of faith to us. It shows that faith is not easy. As Mary travels to her cousin's house in the hill country of Judah, she trusts in God and goes to offer comfort to her pregnant cousin.

A faith that only rejoices in consolation is a faith half-lived. Imagine what rejoicing comes to the person who keeps the faith during one of life's uphill journeys! A realistic faith is one lived through the hardships of life.

## **The Birth of Jesus**

Luke 2:1-7

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register.

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. 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.

## **Reflection:**

Such poor beginnings for this promised one. A small town in a small land. Born nowhere important; to no one important. How often our God works this way. How often he comes quietly and works his miracles in the most ordinary of places and the most ordinary of people.

The Christmas story is such a powerful testimony of humility personified. Truly, the Saviour of the world could not have come through less meagre means than a virgin girl, a lowly stable, and a feeding trough for a manger bed, yet God would not have it any other way. The beauty of the Christmas story is that God stepped down from His heavenly throne and humbled Himself by taking on flesh and entering this world the same way each one of us does as an innocent child. God chose to experience life to the fullest from our perspective so that God could understand and empathize with our trials. He did not isolate Himself from the temptations of this world, but endured the same struggles we do, so God could minister to us from the valley of despair in which we often find ourselves living.

## **The Shepherds and Angels**

Luke 2:8-14

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

### **Reflection:**

A holy mystery, this babe, this child of Mary. We do well to ask, “What child is this?” – and we do well to listen to the answer – the answer made by the angels concerning “peace on earth among those whom God favours” – peace among those who truly understand this child as the gift of heaven – our Emmanuel.

This familiar Christmastime story contains a depth of the gospel meaning that we may not see at first glance. Rather than bringing fear, the gospel (the “good news”) is described by the angels as “great joy that will be for all the people”. It is a message of joy because a Saviour and Lord has arrived to save and reign over us, including even those not born of Jewish descent. It is a message of joy because this Saviour and Lord is the One who brings peace and acceptance from God’s self.

### **The Shepherds Worship**

Luke 2:15-20

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

### **Reflection:**

There is a time for loud proclamation and joyous song, and a time for soft words and quiet lullabies. A time for rejoicing, and a time for prayer. Prayer to the one who came so long ago – and who is still with us today, our Lord Jesus – our Emmanuel.

To receive the good news of the gospel is to come to understand that, despite our background and failures, God reaches out to us with the loving message of peace. Receiving the gospel is not just understanding an abstract idea but it is believing by faith that the glorious God of the universe is now pleased with us and speaks peace into our personal lives. The result is release from fear and entry into freedom, joy, and an eager seeking after this Lord.

### **Visitors From the East**

Matthew 2:1-11

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:

“But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for out of you will come a ruler  
who will shepherd my people Israel.”

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

## **Reflection:**

Some wise men from the eastern lands, led by the star, come to see Jesus, and they bring gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

The visit of the wise men is a sign that Jesus is the Messiah. The gifts represent the things that Jesus will bring into the world: peace, salvation, and eternal life. Something of great importance was announced by the star in the east – and by the angels from heaven. The shepherds left their sheep, the magi, their homes – that they might discover that which was being pointed to. And so we today leave our homes – to discover – and to wonder – and to worship – to worship our Emmanuel.

## **Christ The Eternal Word**

John 1:1-5, 14; 3:16-17

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. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

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.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

## **Reflection:**

John's Gospel begins, not at Jesus' conception or cradle, but at the conception of the cosmos. No angels, swaddling clothes, or sheep enter the scene to deflect attention from the essential point: God, through whom the world was created, the one who gives light to all people, became a human being. God lived among us and died among us. In this one human being, out of all the billions who have lived, God's own glory shone with life-giving light.

Another important theme in John's Gospel is the idea of eternal life. John emphasizes that, belief in Jesus is the key to eternal life. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life."

This is the Christmas Story, a story that is not confined to a manger 2000 years ago in the ancient land of Israel - but rather reaches from the beginning of time to its very end. And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. THIS is the Word of the Lord. Praise be to God, to our Emmanuel.

For us, the Christmas Story is old and familiar. How would this story sound to someone who hears it for the very first time – especially a child. What kind of impact would it make? Would it make any sense to them?

Following is a story of how a child, Natasha, interpreted the story.

### **Two Babes In the Manger**

Soon after the fall of Communism, two Christian teachers were invited to Russia to teach Christian beliefs and principles, which had long been forgotten and forbidden for almost three generations. One of their stops was a large orphanage for children who had been abandoned. Since it was nearing the Christmas season, one of the teachers decided to tell the children, the story of the birth of Jesus:

*Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem, but because of all the travellers, they could not find a free guest room with any of their relatives, all descendants of king David. The couple could only find a place to rest with the animals of one of their relatives in Bethlehem. And that is where Jesus was born. Since they had no cradle for him, they laid Jesus in a manger, which was used to feed the animals. In the fields nearby, there were shepherds taking care of their sheep. An angel appeared before them and*



*told them of Jesus' birth, and told them to go see this special baby .....*

Throughout the story the children listened in amazement. Neither they nor their caregivers had ever heard this story before. When the teacher had finished the story, she opened up a box she had brought with her. In the box were coloured paper and crayons.

She asked them to draw a Nativity scene – with Mary, Joseph, the manger, and the baby Jesus, just like they heard in the story.

The children, who had never had much in the way of playthings or art supplies, were delighted. They busily started drawing and colouring. The teacher walked around the room examining what the children were doing. She was very pleased and amazed at the results, considering that these children had never even seen pictures of the Nativity. They certainly came up with an amazing variety of Nativity scenes. Finally, she came to little Natasha, a girl of about eight, and was surprised to find that she had – **two** babies in her manger.

She reminded Natasha of the story she had told them and the fact that there was only one baby in the manger, not two. But, little Natasha insisted, that there were two babies! The teacher couldn't understand why she had two babies in the manger.

The little girl responded, by retelling the story that **she** had just heard.  
*“An angel appeared to a young woman named Mary and told her that she would be the mother of the Saviour of the world.”*

Natasha recounted the story with great accuracy, until she came to the part where Mary put Jesus in the manger.

Then it became **her** story - Natasha's story:

*“And when Mary laid the baby in the manger, little Jesus looked at me and asked me if I had a place to stay. I told him that I had no mama and no papa, so I didn't have a place to stay. Then, Jesus told me that I could stay with him. I told him that I didn't*

*have a gift for him, like everybody else. Jesus said that I could keep him warm and that would be the best gift anybody ever gave him. I got into the manger with him and Jesus looked at me and told me that I could stay with him – for always.”*

The teachers and the orphanage staff all had tears in their eyes. Little Natasha had understood the story of the birth of Jesus better than any of them. For the birth of Jesus means that, no matter who or what we are, there is always a place for us in the manger and that we can stay with Jesus – for always – our Emmanuel – our God with us, forever.

**Amen**

## PRAYERS FOR CHRISTMAS EVE 2023

Dear God, the message of salvation is proclaimed tonight in the birth of your Son. Give us ears to hear the Good News and feet ready to run like the shepherds to tell others about your love found in a manger and hung on a cross.

Advent has been a time of waiting, of preparation. As Mary was prepared for the birth of Jesus, you have once more prepared us to celebrate his birth. Help us to be faithful as we prepare for your coming again.

Infant Jesus, as we gaze upon your small body with love, we stand at the Cross and look upon your body broken and your blood shed for us in love. Use our bodies as you did Mary's to house your Holy Spirit. Use our lips as you did hers in obedience to your will for our lives. Use our hands as you did hers to care for those around us. Use our feet as you did hers to follow where you lead.

Lord Jesus, we remember those in our midst who are sick, grieving, lonely, family members who are far away, those who have had surgery or received medical treatments, those estranged from us... we name them before you now or in the silence of our hearts. (...); Be with them and bring them healing, comfort, and your tender and gentle presence.

On this night of quietness and joy God calls us to be at peace: with God, with one another, with our neighbours, with the stranger and with other nations. Tonight, we beseech God to pour out love, mercy and grace on our troubled world, remembering those for whom peace is elusive and unknown and sorrow and suffering is the stuff of everyday life.

We particularly pray for the blessing of peace upon the peoples of Ukraine and of Palestine and Israel, that there may be peace, not walls, justice, not inequity, freedom from captivity, safety, not fear of violence and oppression in regions of the world experiencing war and conflict.

On this night of quietness and joy, we pray for those without shelter, food, family, or friends; for those who work long hours with little reward; for those separated from loved ones; for children and women who are abused or neglected. We pray for all who suffer from discrimination, isolation, and hopelessness. May the birth of the Christ child fill them with hope and love.

God of welcome, let your church be a place of solace for all pilgrims on life's journey. Give strength to the weary, confidence to the oppressed, and hope to the millions of refugees around the world.

We stand in this silent and holy night free to begin again, forgiven and forgiving people, unafraid to proclaim you as Lord. May our hearts beat as one with you, Child of Bethlehem, as we go forth declaring your glory and your promise of peace in our hearts. Glory to you, and peace to all people on earth.

**Amen.**

Hear all our prayers, gracious God, and receive them in the name of the Word made flesh who came to live among us, your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who taught us to pray ...

**Our Father ...**