

Advent Conspiracy – Daily Prayer Guide Sunday Dec 20 - Friday Dec 25

Sunday Dec 20

Scripture Reading

Matthew 2:1-12

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 in the east 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 Christ 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 be the shepherd of 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 make a careful search 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 in the east 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 and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Meditation

Anticipation. Expectations. Hope. This is what the Magi must have felt in their quest to see the newborn Christ. The magi were most likely counselors to kings, well known for their ability to interpret dreams and the movements of the stars. They were not Jewish men seeking the Messiah. We don't know why the Magi (and their entourage) set out on this journey, but we recognize that they were on a search for Jesus.

When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were enough of a presence that King Herod, known for his paranoia, invited them in. He claimed that he also wanted to know of this new Messiah. Herod wasn't searching for Jesus himself, but he was allowing others to do it for him.

When the Magi found Jesus, they were humbled and worshipped him. They were transformed by a baby. They returned home by another route. They returned home knowing that they had met the Christ. Their lives were given a new route because of Jesus.

For the Magi, they completed a two-year journey to meet Jesus. Different people take different paths to the Prince of Peace, but at the end of the journey, we begin to be transformed by the One who came to save us. This process is continuous and without end. At this time of year, when anticipation and hope are high, what does your transformation look like? Are you

changed because you have a relationship with Jesus? Are your days different because you know the Messiah?

We don't learn about the fate of the Magi. When they returned to their country, did their friends and family see a change in them? After meeting Jesus, I would guess that change would be obvious.

Reflection & Prayer

- Think about the magi's journey to an unknown destination. They didn't know what lay at the end, but were convinced that there was a greater story, a greater power at work in their lives. Do you sense that greater story in your life? Why or why not?
- What would it look like for your life journey to find its way towards a greater story?
- When you stop and take time to reflect on the story of the Gospel, are you moved to worship like the magi? Take some time and reflect for yourself...

Written by Jaye Barbeau

Monday Dec 21

Scripture Reading and Meditation

LUKE 1:1-25

Is there something you've prayed for a long time? Something that seems impossible? Maybe you want it with your whole heart but it looks like it's not going to happen. You're not the first.

With that prayer for the impossible in mind, read Luke 1:1-25.

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

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 upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years.

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 give him the name John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth.

Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

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 answered, "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 proper time."

Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.

When his time of service was completed, he returned home. 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."

Reflection and Prayer

What does this account of Zechariah's encounter with Gabriel teach you about God? About prayer? About faith?

So - that prayer of yours. Do you want to pray it again?

What do you need to do right now to prepare for that prayer to be answered?

When God answers, who will you tell about it?

Written by Becky Stephen

Tuesday Dec 22

Scripture Reading

Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

Mary was a young Jewish teenager. While the angel's announcement to her was certainly one of great hope for her people, it was for her a pronouncement of personal disaster. Here she was, engaged but unmarried, about to turn up pregnant by someone other than Joseph. Her excuse? "I'm pregnant by the power of God's Spirit." Right. Try that one on your parents and friends. As the angel speaks of a coming royal deliverer, I can imagine her mind is full of vision of her ruined social life. She'll be misunderstood by family. Shunned by friends. Ostracized by village neighbors.

And that's only the beginning. What else is in store for her? Well, for starters her son is going to grow up and become a source of deep division within her people, and within her own heart (see Luke 2:33-35). She will at one point think that her son has lost his mind (see Mark 3:21), and will have to endure his public execution by the Romans (see John 19:25). I cannot imagine this was the kind of life she ever dreamed of.

It is really quite amazing, then, that she responds to the angel's announcement the way she does. Her first question involves the mechanics of "spontaneous pregnancy": "How can this be? I haven't slept with a man?" After a quick theological lesson in divine *in vitro*, her next response is jarring. "I'm your servant. Let it happen according your plan." Woah. I'm certain I would not have answered in this way. But this young, imperiled teenager shows humility and openness to God's plan, regardless of the great personal cost involved. I can only hope to imitate her exemplary hope and humility when my own life falls apart. The things this young teenage girl has to teach us are profound and challenging.

Reflect:

- Think through the social stigma Mary would face in an ancient, patriarchal, traditional culture when her pregnancy was made public. Think about the humility it took to respond to God's plan the way she did. How would you have responded if you were in her place?

Prayer:

- How *do* you respond when life throws a major curveball your way? What is the most recent, unexpected upsetting of your life? How have you wrestled with God about it? Allow yourself to go there now.
- What would it look like for you to come to peace with God's ways in your life? Ask God for perspective and hope in the midst of your circumstances.

Written by Tim Mackie

Wednesday Dec 23

Scripture Reading

Luke 1: 39-56

"Mary didn't waste a minute. She got up and traveled to a town in Judah in the hill country, straight to Zachariah's house, and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby in her womb leaped. She was filled with the Holy Spirit, and sang out exuberantly, "You're so blessed among women, and the babe in your womb, also blessed! And why am I so blessed that the mother of my Lord visits me?" The moment the sound of your greeting entered my ears, The babe in my womb skipped like a lamb for sheer joy. Blessed woman, who believed what God said, believed every word would come true! And Mary said, I'm

bursting with God-news; I'm dancing the song of my Savior God. God took one good look at me, and look what happened—I'm the most fortunate woman on earth! What God has done for me will never be forgotten, the God whose very name is holy, set apart from all others. His mercy flows in wave after wave on those who are in awe before him. He bared his arm and showed his strength, scattered the bluffing braggarts. He knocked tyrants off their high horses, pulled victims out of the mud. The starving poor sat down to a banquet; the callous rich were left out in the cold. He embraced his chosen child, Israel; he remembered and piled on the mercies, piled them high. It's exactly what he promised, beginning with Abraham and right up to now. Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months and then went back to her own home."
[Excerpted from Eugene Peterson's, *The Message*]

Mary didn't waste a minute sharing the good news of what God was doing in her life with Elizabeth. She was so filled with joy and with the power of the Holy Spirit that she could hardly contain herself. What a world we would live in, if we all could simply not refrain from bursting out with the uncontainable joy found in knowing God's love.

Pause

- and find a space of stillness; close your eyes, make yourself comfortable, pay attention to your breath, your internal and external sensations
- in this space, reflect on a time in your life when you have been filled with the Holy Spirit; remember the genuine joy and truth experienced in this moment

Pray

- that you might be inspired and awestruck by Mary's faith, and in this inspiration that you might burst forth with Good News, dance and sing the song of your Savior, and embrace a sense of being the most fortunate person on earth because you are showered with the blessings of love, mercy and compassion

Before you leave your home

- consider ways that you might bring the Good News into your daily actions and interactions, maintaining a sense of your partnership with the Holy Spirit when going out into your day and into the world

Written by Mariah Lefebber

Thursday Dec 24

Scripture Reading

Luke 2: 1-20

"About that time Caesar Augustus ordered a census to be taken throughout the Empire. This was the first census when Quirinius was governor of Syria. Everyone had to travel to his own ancestral hometown to be accounted for. So Joseph went from the Galilean town of Nazareth up to Bethlehem in Judah, David's town, for the census. As a descendant of David, he had to go there. He went with Mary, his fiancée, who was pregnant. While they were there, the time came for her to give birth. She gave birth to a son, her firstborn. She wrapped him in a blanket and laid him in a manger, because there was no room in the hostel. There were shepherders camping in the neighborhood. They had set night watches over their sheep. Suddenly, God's

angel stood among them and God's glory blazed around them. They were terrified. The angel said, "Don't be afraid. I'm here to announce a great and joyful event that is meant for everybody, worldwide: A Savior has just been born in David's town, a Savior who is Messiah and Master. This is what you're to look for: a baby wrapped in a blanket and lying in a manger. At once the angel was joined by a huge angelic choir singing God's praises: Glory to God in the heavenly heights. Peace to all men and women on earth who please him. As the angel choir withdrew into heaven, the shepherders talked it over. "Let's get over to Bethlehem as fast as we can and see for ourselves what God has revealed to us." They left, running, and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. Seeing was believing. They told everyone they met what the angels had said about this child. All who heard the shepherders were impressed. Mary kept all these things to herself, holding them dear, deep within herself. The shepherders returned and let loose, glorifying and praising God for everything they had heard and seen. It turned out exactly the way they'd been told!"
[Excerpted from Eugene Peterson's, *The Message*]

The story is familiar, and the words from Luke 2 ring in our ears like the well-known voice of a loved one or lyrics from our favorite song. And when the angelic choir opens up to sing their song, God's promise of shalom pours out onto a world in dire need: *Glory to God in the heavenly heights. Peace to all men and women on earth who please Him.* Through the birth of Christ, God births His plan to restore peace and shalom to the world, and it is that promise that we remember during this season of Advent. Today, thank God that through Christ we are given all that we could possibly need to cultivate shalom.

Praise God for

- the Story of Christ's birth, and the chance we have to be a part of the Story of *shalom* each and every day of our lives

Imagine

- that you were a part of that first heavenly host, proclaiming "Glory to God in the Heavenly Heights," and consider how you might proclaim that same Glory to God in your life today, on Christmas and in every day following

Pray

- that you might experience the promise of shalom in your own life, that it might inspire and motivate you to live out that promise in your home, work, relationships and most of all, in your heart

Written by Mariah Lefebber

Friday Dec 25

REVELATION 5:1-10

Have you ever been...

so full of love that you burst out singing?

so overjoyed that you could not help but laugh?

so grieved that all you could do was sob?

so overwhelmed that you could not stand up?

God has made us – heart, mind, soul and body – to respond to Him.

Read and respond to God in Rev. 5:1-10:

Then I saw in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals. And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, "Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?" But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it. I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside.

What do you weep over? What do you see that causes you to despair? What feels impossible? Cry to God.

Then one of the elders said to me, "Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals." Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. He had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. He came and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne. And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.

Cup your hands like a bowl. Offer your prayers of thanks to God:

For his triumph and for his salvation through Jesus, the Lion of Judah, the Lamb who was slain

For his Spirit, who is present for us

For all the people of God who pray

For hearing our prayers

And they sang a new song: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth." Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they sang: "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!" Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!"

Sing a song to the One who sits on the throne and to the Lamb! Sing a song that someone else wrote! Sing a song from your heart that no one has every heard! Or use the words from Rev. 5 to loudly praise to our God!

The four living creatures said, "Amen," and the elders fell down and worshiped.

You, too.

Written by Becky Stephen