

# Sundays of Advent & Christmas

## 2024-25 Messages

From Pastor Norman Staker

Bethel Lutheran Church (ELCA)  
Russell, Kentucky

### **Sundays of Advent**

First Sunday In Advent – Dec. 1 – “*The Days Are Surely Coming*”

Second Sunday In Advent – Dec. 8 – “*Ready For Christmas But Ready For Christ?*”

Third Sunday In Advent – Dec. 15 – “Lift Us to the Joy Divine”

From Sylvia Gardner

Fourth Sunday In Advent – Dec. 22 – “*Mary And Elizabeth*”

### **Sundays of Christmas**

*Nativity of Our Lord* Sunday (*Christmas Eve*)– Dec. 24 – “*Things Aren’t Always What They Seem*”

*Christmas Day* – Dec. 25 – No Service

First Sunday After – Dec. 29 – “The Original Home Alone”

*New Years Eve* – Dec. 31 – “No Service”

*New Years Day* – Jan. 1 – “No Service”

Second Sunday After – Jan, 5 – “*Experience The Gift Of Christmas*”

# ***“THE DAYS ARE SURELY COMING”***

Message for the First Sunday in Advent

From Pastor Norman Staker

December 1, 2024

JEREMIAH 33: 14-16 \* REVELATION 1: 4B-8 \* JOHN 18: 33-37

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM  
OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN. COME THOU LONG  
EXPECTED JESUS. HE IS RISEN; HE IS RISEN INDEED!!

**T**oday is the first Sunday in Advent. Here's a question, probably the question: "Are you ready for Christmas? I know it is probably a crazy question; Thanksgiving was just this past Thursday; you probably haven't even finished the last of the turkey and pumpkin pie. But I know that leftover turkey and dressing does not stop people from putting up their Christmas tree, even on the day after Thanksgiving and many did that the first of this month!

Here we are, the 1st Sunday in Advent and our own church does not even have our Christmas tree up yet but it's going to be put up next Sunday! This is what Jesus was warning us about. "Don't let me catch you unprepared for my return to earth." Watch, be prepared.

Watch and be ready. It sounds like an easy thing to do. It's not. It's not, because it is not our human nature to watch and wait for anything. That is why people already have their trees up and their shopping in progress.

Today, on this first Sunday and first day in December, we turn the page to a new year which starts with the season of Advent. The word Advent means "coming." There are four Sundays in this season, marked by waiting and expectation at Christ's coming.

Every year we look forward to the usual Advent cast of characters. John the Baptist helps us to prepare. He calls us to realign our lives in faithfulness. And we accompany young Mary. We hear how God intends to use her in the divine plan for the world's salvation.

Our first reading from Jeremiah tells us the days are surely coming. With those five words, the prophet opens his testimony to God as keeper of promises. With those five words, we enter the season of Advent. But I need to clarify something; yes the days are surely coming is not some early scriptural reference to the unstoppable march of shopping days to the 25th of December when, ready or not, the holiday arrives. The same march of days that sometimes drains us rather than empowers us for the festival at its end. The days are surely coming points instead to the time when God's promises will be kept. Christmas serves as both sign and foretaste of that keeping. The days are surely coming declares that the realm of the future is ultimately the realm of God. And Advent? Advent offers a season of preparation for the God who comes; in the child of Bethlehem, in the Lord at history's end. Advent proclaims the days are surely coming not out of a sense of fearful dread for what looms out of our control, or from an apathetic observance of the same old, same old, year in and year out. Advent proclaims the hope that history moves toward a goal whose name is redemption. Such is the promise of God for the days surely coming. But what kind of days are they to be?

So what is this text, today's Gospel reading from Luke? It certainly doesn't evoke thoughts of Christmas! What is going on here? This Biblical text is crammed full of words that conjure up thoughts of disaster rather than revelation! Most of us associate very specific sights and sounds with Christmas. Some of us may envision a favorite ornament to hang on the tree; others think of a cherished toy always displayed at this time of year. Whatever the specifics, most of the images of Christmas that fill our minds involve rich colors, fine fabrics, sparkling stars, favorite foods, glittering ornaments, costly stones, shimmering tinsel, and beautiful lights.

But there is another side to the season, a different view of Christmas. For some people, Christmas looks dull and sparse rather than sparkling and rich, rugged instead of polished, dark rather than light, futile rather than festive. Here's the question: Can the truth of Christmas be experienced devoid of any festive symbols of the season? What kind of preparations must be made, what kind of decorations must be displayed in order for Immanuel to enter our lives, for God to be with us?

This year Advent begins in a very unusual place. At the beginning of this new church year, we start at the end – the very end! We don't look backwards to Christ's first coming. Advent begins by focusing our eyes forward, to Christ's coming again at the end of all things. From the perspective of the holy scriptures, Advent, the coming of Christ, is much more about disorder than about order! God's visitation to earth is not contingent upon burning candles and shimmering stars.

Again take a look at Luke's message. Luke employed words and images that seem to have nothing to do with the advent of Jesus in order to declare that these very words and images, and the harsh conditions that they suggest, should be viewed as sure signs that the advent of Jesus is imminent.

In our Gospel reading today from Luke, the disciples ask Jesus about the end of the world. How will they know when that moment is drawing near? They sound a little like children in the back seat on a long family trip, "Are we there yet; how long before we get there?"

Jesus relates cosmic signs that will mark the end. There will be signs of global disaster. People will be overcome by fear and dread. Then the Son of Man will come from the heavens. Jesus encourages his disciples to remain alert and ready.

The end of the world – it's not something we generally spend a lot of time pondering. However, that potential may seem more sobering as we face the effects of global warming, the melting of the polar ice caps and climate change. With scenes of plastic continents floating in the world's oceans and news of a persistent pandemic, we actually do entertain thoughts of global apocalypse.

And with increasing divisions in our country, with a sense that we might be heading towards another civil war – or at the least, a war of our incivility towards each other. With concerns over the health of our democracy, we might very well imagine the end times of our nation.

Watching the news leads to an ever-growing sense that things are falling apart. We lie awake at night worrying over what kind of world we're leaving for our children and grandchildren. Our hearts grow weary and we pour ourselves another drink, if we do that sort of thing. So maybe this Advent talk about the end times isn't so outrageous, after all. Advent teaches us to wait for Christ's coming in hope and expectation.

Spiritual waiting endows us with a whole set of character traits. Very briefly and quickly, I'm going to mention five traits:

- The first one is patience. This is something deer hunters develop. Tomorrow starts deer gun season in Ohio. Time spent on the deer stand waiting for that big one to come by. Hunters may have to wait several hours in their stands for a deer to present itself. There's the old joke, "Lord, give me patience, but please hurry

up!” Waiting spans time, and how much time, we don’t always know. As we wait, we learn patience.

- The second characteristic of waiting is endurance. Waiting is about the long game. The thing we wait for, our goal, is in the future. It’s going to take some time before it arrives. As we mature in the spiritual practice of waiting, we grow in endurance.
- A third characteristic of waiting is that we actively prepare. Waiting isn’t a passive activity. We don’t toss our waiting in the corner and forget about it while we focus on other things. No, when we wait, especially when we wait with spiritual expectation, we are very actively engaged. This kind of active preparation is how expectant parents get ready for their baby. They use this time of waiting to get everything squared away and in place for when baby arrives on the scene. Waiting isn’t lazy; it’s filled with action, with active preparation.
- Fourthly, waiting involves alert focus. If a hunter plays games on his/her phone or even snoozes, the opportunity to see a deer, especially one that might be very close, will pass by without the hunter’s knowing. When Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane with his disciples, he bid them, “Watch and pray.” We wait with alert focus. We look for Christ to enter our midst in spirit and in power.
- And finally, we wait in hope. To wait without hope is a most despairing thing. Waiting without any hope is a living hell. No, waiting demands hope. In the spring, we wait to see the greening of trees. We know it’s coming, and we wait in hopeful expectation.

As we wait, we do so in the hope that Christ will come. Christ has come, he comes to us presently in spirit and in power, and he will come again when time reaches its conclusion.

The Nicene Creed states, “He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.” We wait for this end in hope and expectation, for who is this one who will be the judge? Is it not our same Lord who came to dwell among us, who took on our flesh to live in solidarity with us in all our joys and sorrows? Is it not our very Lord who became the Lamb of God to take away the sin of the world? Did he not hesitate to accomplish his destiny on the cross for our sake? And were not his actions there the very healing of that chasm between humanity and God first made in Eden? Is not this the one who will judge all things? This one who is to come, is

it not our same Lord who denied death its victory, our Lord who stepped from his own grave to forge the way to life eternal?

Yes, this is the one who will judge us! And where will his judgment be grounded? Will he judge according to our flaws and limitations, or will he judge from his nature, from his grace and truth, from his love?

Yes, from his endless supply of grace and truth and love! And that is why we wait in hope and expectation. This is why we pray, 'Come, Lord Jesus!' Heaven and earth may pass away, but Christ's word of life will not pass away. So let us ground our hope in what lasts: Christ's grace and truth.

**Amen!!**

# *“READY FOR CHRISTMAS BUT READY FOR CHRIST?”*

Message for the Second Sunday in Advent

From Paster Norman Staker

December 8, 2024

MALACHI 3: 1-4 \* PHILIPPIANS 1: 3-11 \* LUKE 3: 1-6

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM  
OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN. COME THOU LONG  
EXPECTED JESUS. HE IS RISEN; HE IS RISEN INDEED!!

**I** have to say for years I ignored the opening of this passage from the Gospel of Luke, so that I could concentrate on the call of John to prepare a way for the Lord. For years I took the opportunity to remind myself and those who had the patience to listen to me, that we needed to prepare for God's coming. I reminded us that we needed to change our approach to life and pay attention to the ways to the ways in which we are crooked and lumpy and filled with obstacles to a right relationship with God. Having seen no real improvement in either myself or those around me during the 22 plus years of my preaching, it is tempting to return to the end of this passage and to try, once again, to find just the right words to spark the conversion that is still needed.

Those words, 'Prepare the way of the Lord' were muffled with "in the fifteenth year of the Emperor Tiberius" echoing in my head. Finally, I had to ask myself just what the Emperor Tiberius had to do with anything. What did it matter that Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea and that Herod was ruler of Galilee? It seemed nothing more than filler, details that communicated a historic context for the events about to be related. But it didn't stop there; his brother Philip was ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis and Lysanias ruler of Abilene during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas and guess what, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. These words take up the first two verses of chapter 3. These verses were there to tell generations of faithful that John appeared and preached and baptized in a particular time, in a specific location.

I heard about a man who smoked cigarettes. He began reading articles on cigarettes and became alarmed by the strong relationship between smoking and lung cancer.

He finally confided to a friend; “I’ve been reading so many articles about smoking and lung cancer that I’ve decided to quit reading.” He didn’t decide to quit smoking, but to quit reading! That’s what many people do when they read the Bible and it convicts them of their sins! They decide to quit reading the Bible! The problem of that solution is that our sins aren’t “going away;” we must go to God and get His solution for the problem of our sins.

The attitude of that smoker is one none of us should adopt. Children, for example, need to be challenged. Maturing from a child into an adult requires challenge. Without it, we remain children. When we’re children, grown up people take care of our needs. One of the necessary parts of growing up is becoming more responsible. If children are to grow and mature, they need to be challenged.

Noah’s message to his generation was not, “Something good is going to happen to you.”

Jeremiah didn’t get put into a pit for preaching, “I’m okay; you’re okay!” Daniel wasn’t put into the lion’s den for telling people, “All roads lead to God.” The Two Tribulation Prophets won’t be killed for preaching, “God is in Heaven and all is right with the world.” John the Baptist wasn’t beheaded for preaching, “Smile, God loves You!”

Instead, what was the message of all these men of God? Simply one word – “Repent!” It’s an important subject!

Without repentance, there is no salvation! We need to know all about it so we won’t be mistaken and get to the judgment seat deceived. Jesus said, “When the Judgment Day comes, many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord! In your name we spoke God’s message, by your name we drove out many demons and performed many miracles!’ Then I will say to them, ‘I never knew you. Get away from me, you wicked people!’ They were surprised!

We’re in the season of Advent now; it’s the second Sunday already so we’re halfway to Christmas. Once again, we encounter John the Baptist, who unfortunately came to a very violent death as I just said. John comes as a challenger. He’s the transition man. John’s purpose is to help us step into a new



day. The Jesus Thing can't happen without this 'Transition Man.' John prepares us. And he does so with a prodding stick. John comes with all the tact and grace of a drill sergeant.

The reading from Malachi foresees his coming. "See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me. But who can endure the day of his coming?" Malachi states, "He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver." That's who John is. John comes to refine us.

So we're going to look at who needs to repent, what repentance is, and how long do we have to get right with God. Why is repentance important? For one, it was the first sermon Jesus ever preached. "Now after John was put in prison, Jesus came to Galilee....saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.'" The apostles said repentance is the only way to escape hell. Jesus said there's only 2 options: "Repent or perish."

Repentance is not optional; it's universally commanded. "God has commanded all men everywhere to repent." Some think, "I don't need to repent."

In a small country church a rich man had for years been the leading elder. The congregation was looking for a new minister, and this elder interviewed each candidate. One fine candidate preached his sermon on "Repentance." Afterward the elder said, "I don't like it that you called our people sinners!" The minister said, "Are you a Christian, sir?" "Of course I'm a Christian!" he said. "Then you were a sinner and sought Christ for salvation" the minister said. "Oh, no. I never was a sinner," the elder said. "Well, sir," said the minister, "it's impossible for you to be a Christian then, because Christ came to save all sinners!"

Our faith grows through challenge. Oddly enough, one of the popular interpretations of a life in faith states just the opposite. If we're really good Christians, then life will be on Easy Street. Everything will fall into place. We'll be blessed. Why? Because we're good Christians!

But nowhere in the Bible do we see this played out. Jacob wrestles with the angel, and he limps for the rest of his life. The Hebrew slaves trek for forty years through the wilderness. When Mary said 'yes' to the angel Gabriel, she didn't move to a house on Easy Street. No, she moved into a barn. And Jesus himself eventually sweated it out in the Garden.

Walking in faith doesn't put us in a protective bubble, removed from suffering and struggle. If that were to happen, if God would miraculously take away our struggles and meet all our needs, then God would be leaving us as children. If all of our needs were met, if God were to take care of us so that we never faced hardship or suffering, then we would go through life as immature beings.

You might say that God regards us with such dignity and respect that God allows us the opportunity to grow through the challenge of suffering.

This isn't to say that God purposely sends us suffering for our growth. I don't believe that. Suffering stinks. Suffering by itself is a bottomless vat of meaninglessness. But suffering can be transformed from meaninglessness into purpose when new growth is borne from the struggle. This is the heart of resurrection thought. New life springs from death.

Paul wrote: Suffering produces endurance; endurance produces character; character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us.

And Paul understood this first person. This morning we heard the beginning of Paul's letter to the church in Philippi; Paul just gushes with warm fuzzies in this letter. He's so filled with joy and encouragement over the friendship he has with the Philippians:

'I thank my God every time I remember you; I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will bring it to completion; this is my prayer, that your love may overflow.'

Paul writes this glowing letter from prison. In his own way he was being held in a refiner's fire. The physical conditions of prison in Paul's day were grueling. He had no idea how long his imprisonment would be. All he could do was wait and reflect. Why am I here? What is my purpose?

As Paul waited in prison, his high places were brought low and his valleys were lifted up. And within the crucible of his own struggle, Paul's soul was refined into an unrivaled rarity of being.

John the Baptist himself went through a similar dark night of the soul. Like Paul, he also will be imprisoned. From his cell he will send word to Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" Behind his question we hear his

struggle. He has staked his entire life on this one crazy dream. Was he right? Has all the striving been for naught?

Jesus sends a word of assurance. “Go and tell John, the blind can see, the lame can walk, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news preached to them.”

John came to remind the people of his day NOT ONLY that the Lord was coming, but that the day of the LORD was not a holiday. A Holy Day, certainly. But not a holiday. He came to remind them of what was needed in order to be ready for the coming of God. And what was needed was repentance. Because God’s highway, the one that needed to be surveyed, drained, straightened, and resurfaced, was the human heart. And one of the reasons we celebrate the season of Advent is to awaken us to the need to examine and repair our current state of readiness.

John shows us three areas of our lives that need to be tested.

The first is our religious life. He warns his hearers, sharply, that just because they are children of Abraham does not make them safe. In the same way, so should we be aware that just because we come to church on Sunday does not make us immune to what John calls the wrath to come. Don’t rest on the past, says John. Check the present. Where’s the evidence that your relationship with God is a living reality, rather than a dusty trophy of an almost abandoned habit?

The second is our possessions. John said, “He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise.”

The third area that we need to check for potholes is our working life. Two people asked John what they should do, a soldier and a tax collector. “And he said to the tax collector, “Collect no more than is appointed you.” And he said to the soldier, “Rob no one by violence or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.” Both the soldier and tax collector were looked down upon by the Jewish people; tax collectors were no better than collaborators, on a social par with prostitutes if slightly better off financially. And the soldiers probably were Herod’s enforcers, assisting the tax collectors in shaking down the populace and taking a cut of the proceeds as a fringe benefit. John will be beheaded at the whim of an immature, spoiled king. His own refining fires will demand his life.

We’re in this season of Advent. This week, two candles have been lit on the Advent Wreath, and the fire has doubled. John invites us into the refiner’s fire. Before us stands the challenge of life. Within it lies the hope of transformation.

I don't know what your challenges are, but I trust that you have them. As you face your challenges, consider this. We were made in the image of God. May God prepare your spirit, challenging and refining you until His own mysterious image shines through you.

AMEN!!

# **Lift Us to the Joy Divine**

**Message for the Third Sunday in Advent**

**From Sylvia Gardener**

**December 15, 2024**

**We are just days away from Christmas, and I hope that this season is full of hope, peace, joy and love for you. I hope that you have had time to reflect on the promises of the Advent season, the season in which we prepare ourselves for the coming of Jesus.**

**This third Sunday of Advent we light the candle of joy. We sing, “Joyful Joyful We Adore Thee.” In our gospel lesson the angels in the night sky proclaim, “Behold I bring you good news of great joy ... for to you is born this day ... a Savior who is Christ the Lord.” The whole long story of scripture declares that God’s joy is at the heart of our lives.**

**The biblical definition of joy says that joy is a feeling of pleasure and happiness that is dependent on who Jesus is rather than on who we are or what is happening around us. Joy comes from the Holy Spirit, abiding in God's presence and from hope in His word.**

**The whole story of scripture is really about joy. “The desert shall rejoice and bloom,” the prophet Isaiah says to the people of Israel. “The Lord is king, let the earth rejoice,” and “Be joyful in the Lord all you lands,” the psalmists proclaim. Paul says. “Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice! And even, on the last night of his life, as Jesus sat with his disciples he had joy on his mind: “I have said these things to you that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.”**

**Joy is not the same as happiness. Happiness is a fleeting sense that things are great at this moment, or that you’re having fun. Happiness happens to us. Even though we may seek it, desire it and pursue it, feeling happy is not a choice we make. Joy, on the other hand, is a choice we purposefully make. Even if our day-to-day is filled with hurt and disappointment, we can still choose joy.**

**Christmas is a joyful time, but one gets tired of enforced “joyfulness”, especially when it’s Walmart and Amazon doing the enforcing. You won’t**

**find joy by wandering through a mall this time of year, or watching a TV Christmas show, or going to a Christmas movie. Chances are that even the gift you really wanted for Christmas won't deliver that much joy.**

**Joy is in its essence a deep sense of peace and security and wholeness. It can rise up spontaneously, as it did for the angels, the deep glad joy that comes when longed-for good news arrives.**

**Joy is also a quiet sense of the goodness in our world, a sense that even in our busiest or hardest times we're being held in God's hands.**

**The story of that first Christmas seems to begin with anything but joy. In the Christmas story, the angel Gabriel told the Virgin Mary that she would give birth to Jesus, the Son of God.**

**Mary's response to the angel's message is a model of joyful acceptance and faith.**

**In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. And everyone went to their own town to register.**

**By the time Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem, the Inn was full and they had to sleep in the cattle barn. And there Mary gave birth to her son and wrapped him in cloths to keep him warm. And the shepherds out in the fields heard the angels singing and heard their announcement of "great joy."**

**That's the way the Church has remembered that first holy night. This beautiful story captures our deepest conviction that God took on flesh in that child and lived among us.**

**Who would have guessed that God would act in this way by becoming human? And yet we needed to know, to touch and to see the great, mysterious God for ourselves. Jesus came to give a face, and that face was the face of love. Now we can say that we have encountered the Word made flesh. We have seen the face of God.**

**There is no way, of course, to prove that joy is at the heart of life. But this we know. Those who believe the angels' message and those who have trusted Jesus' promise that the joy of God can fill our lives, have found their lives more full, more joyful and more alive.**

**Be still and remember the times that you have felt some form of true joy in your own lives. It probably was an unexpected moment that inspired such an awesome feeling it that it took your breath away. Some of my own moments include: a winter camping trip in the Adirondacks and waking to a quiet, star-filled night- the silence of it; a beautiful rainbow in Idaho; the perfect snowflake landing on my backpack; the veins of a flower or leaf; or the rain on the metal roof of my family's home.**

**Christ is born again and again, because Christ is alive in every one of us. To discover that joy is to know that it has to be shared. To have a glimpse of the Christ Child, to see that the maker of the stars and sea became a child on earth for you and for me is to be given a joy that we have to share.**

**JOY TO THE WORLD, THE LORD HAS COME.**

# ***“MARY AND ELIZABETH”***

Message for the Fourth Sunday in jAdvent

From Pastor Norman Staker

December 22, 2024

MICAH 5: 2-5A \* HEBREWS 10: 5-10 \* LUKE 1: 39-45 (46-55)

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM  
OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN. O COME, O COME  
IMMANUEL. HE IS RISEN; HE IS RISEN INDEED!!

**I**n those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.'

This is a story from the days before cell phones; what did we ever do!! – “One day, I needed to call home, and the only pay phone I could find was in use. So, I stood to the side and politely waited until it was free, thinking it would only be a couple of minutes. Five minutes went by, and still the man was on the phone. He was just standing there, not saying a word. Two more minutes went by, and he still wasn't talking.

Finally, I tapped him on the shoulder and asked if I could use the phone. I really wouldn't be long, but needed to make an important call.

"Hold your horses," he responded, covering the receiver. "I'm talking to my wife."

Ok, for the folks who know nothing about pay phones, I have a question: Is Google male or female?

A: Female, because it doesn't let you finish a sentence before making a suggestion.

Now that I have made all the ladies mad for suggesting you like to talk, let me be really clear about what I'm trying to say: first of all, that was all made up; I didn't mean any of the part about women not letting men finish a sentence before cutting in. All of us, every last one of us, no matter our age or gender, we all want to feel



like we have been heard, that whoever we talk to, actually listens. Wouldn't you agree?

Mary needed someone to listen to her.

It's not certain where Zechariah and Elizabeth lived, but the history books hold it was about 5 miles from Jerusalem, making Mary's trip about 100 miles. In a car, that would take less than 2 hours, traveling around 70 mph. Mary didn't have a car; back then, Mary would have traveled four days, usually by foot, to reach her destination.

We can easily believe today that she had been there before. In that day, you didn't call or send an email that you were coming – you just showed up at the door. What if Zechariah and Elizabeth had just left to go shopping?

Mary arrives as anyone would in that day... unexpected; again no way to contact them in advance to tell them she was on her way. When she came into the house, she would have offered a greeting that is also a blessing. There is nothing out of the ordinary in how this visit is unfolding, except that both of these women have experienced a wonderful miracle.

To the modern-day reader of Luke, we may pass over this verse with little more than a slight curiosity. Yet, here is a miracle and the fulfillment of an angelic prophecy. Back when Gabriel spoke to Zechariah by the altar of incense deep in the Temple, he spoke these words about John the Baptizer – “He will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb.”

I have to say I'm tired of preaching sermons about Mary. No, I'm not tired of Mary, who seems to me to be a very real and yes, human, indeed, major example of what faith-filled life can be. She partakes of the quality of many women in the Bible, women who didn't wait for the world to change to suit them, but who reached out and changed it. I'm thinking about Miriam and Rahab, about Ruth and Hannah, about Esther and Deborah, and Pharaoh's daughter, and Dorcas and the Hebrew midwives, about Mary of Magdala, that is, Mary Magdalene and the Syro-Phoenician woman and the woman with a hemorrhage. Personally, I think Mary was a wise choice as Jesus' mother because I suspect she taught him most of what he knew about engaging 100 percent with life rather than waiting for life to change in some magical way to be safer, better, more just, happier, more fulfilling, more lovable, and more loving.

But I am tired of preaching sermons about Mary because I suspect that making her the subject of a sermon allows us to think that she was ontologically special. I don't want to encourage either myself or any of you to think that Mary was different in some essential way from you and me. The relatively recent tradition of her immaculate conception aside, she wasn't.

Verse 45, 'And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment.'

As far as I can tell, the only thing that separates Mary from the ordinary run of the mill churchgoer is that she actually believed in God's promises. To be sure, she is not the only person in the history of our faith who believed in those promises. And that's my point. But the fact is, she started by believing she was talking with an angel. She believed that there actually were angels, those messengers from God, not those little crystal things we buy and put on our desks so that we can think we have tamed God and anything God might ask of us. Plus, she believed that God might want to send her a message. While it sounds like she was a little startled by the message she got, she said yes because she believed that God was present and active in the world, and in her life.

She was able to be blessed because she believed that God wanted to bless her and her people and her world. She was blessed and she was a blessing because she believed that God acted through ordinary people, I mean, what other kind are there, but Mary believed that God acted through ordinary people to bless a good creation. Because, to use words that have, unfortunately become an advertising slogan, "If not us, who; if not now, when?"

'And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment...'

Mary put her life on the line because she believed in God's fulfillment of all God's promises. Let's not bother to unpack ancient Jewish law about unmarried women bearing children and what betrothal means as far as sexual relations go. Let's not wrestle with whether the word virgin means 'unmarried woman' or what we should call Joseph. Let's simply notice that Mary put her life on the line when she got pregnant. Every woman did and, in some places on the globe, women still do. We cannot really get our heads around the number of women who died, and still die, in childbirth. Folks, that's not the point. The point is that Mary decided she wanted her life to count for something and she agreed to participate in God's fulfillment of God's desire for creation in a big way.

And that is why this sermon is not about Mary; it's about you and me. Do you want your life to count for something? Is your Advent this year about counting for something? Your Advent, not Mary's. Do you believe that there will be a fulfillment as our text says? I mean really believe it! I don't mean talk about it happening 'someday.' I don't mean being able to quote scripture about the end time. I mean, do you believe that righteousness and justice, that love and peace can be the way of life right here, right now, on this earth?

That is all Mary did; she believed; Mary believed. She figured if she was going to err, she would err on the side of risking grace. She would err on the side of believing, and then of acting on her beliefs.

Yes, I know we're all busy people.. I would guess Mary was pretty busy too. Maybe her date book was full of planning the wedding or sewing her trousseau by hand, which was the way it was done in those days. When she wasn't getting ready to set up her own household, she was probably busy with the hundreds of things that she had to do each day, like drawing and carrying water or grinding grain or milking the goats, then of course, there's always olives to press, things few of us do.

Yes, some of us have careers to think about and families to raise and taxes to pay and even soccer games to shuttle children to and groceries to be bought and houses to clean and....But the question remains, 'Do you believe in the fulfillment of God's promises?' Because, if you do, you can save a lot of stress by looking at that seemingly endless list through the lens of your belief and ask how many of the minutes of your life are about being blessed and being a blessing? And, how many of them are about something else entirely?

You might start with this question, 'Does my life look like I hope the fulfillment of God's realm will look?' If it does not, what might it look like? Why don't you live that life? Then it will be said of you, of you now, "Blessed are you who believe that there will be a fulfillment of what was spoken to you by God!" Can you, can we, like Mary say, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed."

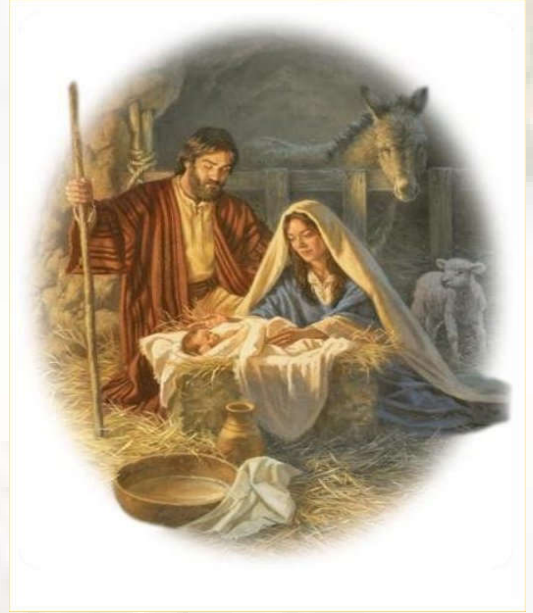
This Advent season, Jesus comes to us, the least likely individuals in the least likely of places and He says to us: "You who are highly favored! The Lord is with you!" He promises the outpouring of His Holy Spirit on us so that Christ might be

formed within us. God forces Himself on no one. He takes the initiative and He makes the invitation. You and I are here this morning and have a living hope, a steadfast faith, and the experience of God's eternal and life-transforming love. This hurting and broken world doesn't need to know so much of what Mary knew; it needs to know if we do.

AMEN!!!

# ***“THINGS AREN'T ALWAYS WHAT THEY SEEM”***

Message for “Christmas Eve”  
The “Nativity of Our Lord” Sunday  
From Pastor Norman Staker  
ISAIAH 9: 2-7 \* TITUS 2: 11-14  
LUKE 2: 1-14 (15-20)



GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR  
FATHER AND FROM OUR LORD AND SAVIOR,  
JESUS CHRIST, THE NEWBORN KING OF KINGS  
AND LORD OF LORDS. AMEN. HE IS RISEN; HE IS RISEN INDEED!!

**F**or many of us, Christmas Eve is one of the gentlest times of the church year. All the hustle and bustle of preparations is over; at least, for the moment. Familiar sounds and smells and tastes enfold us with comfort and delight. Thoughts of the long journey of Mary and Joseph and the lack of hospitality they found at the end of it may prick at us, but it was, after all, a long time ago and the event is long over. Mary and Joseph are long dead. It is all too easy for most of us to focus on those what I'll call 'perfect' pictures from the Christmas cards over the mantle or in the basket in the living room. And do we even think about those words of the angel, 'Do not be afraid.'

In your minds eye, what should Christmas look like? What does it mean to you; what does it really mean to you? Just like Mary, we can treasure up the wonder and joy of Christmas and ponder, we can think about them; we can meditate on them in our hearts.

Luke 2:12: This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”

Have you ever noticed that there aren't a whole lot of stories in the Bible about babies? Actually, when I did a word search, there were only four distinct stories that came up. One was with Moses when he was put in the Nile River as a baby. A

second one was when two women fought over one baby in 1 Kings chapter 3. Solomon offered to cut the child in half and give one half to each of the proclaimed mothers. That could have been the first possible case of a split personality. The third one doesn't come until many years later, as John the Baptist leaped for joy in his mother's womb, last week's Gospel text. The final and I'd say, the greatest story of a baby is of course the birth of our Savior Jesus Christ. Babies don't play prominent roles in the stories of the Bible. Yes there are other stories of Biblical women who gave birth but these 4 are probably the most well-defined.

Babies by their very nature don't do a whole lot. They cry, they eat, and they go to the bathroom. As far as their usefulness, they don't provide a whole lot of service. They are cute to look at and to cuddle with. Beyond that, they are more a drain of time and effort in their few months of babyhood than anything. Yet babies are precious in the sight of their parents because they still look at them as gifts of God. They know they won't remain babies forever. They look at their baby and wonder to themselves, "I wonder what this little child will do with his life? Will he be a good athlete? Will he be famous? Will she be a strong Christian gal?" Will she be the first woman president? In that baby there is a tremendous source of potential and hope.

Every year at Christmastime we hear people tell us what the holiday means to them. For some people Christmas is a time for opening gifts, eating cookies, visiting with families and friends. For others it's a time of hectic schedules and endless "to do" lists. And then there are those who simply say that Christmas is for children.

How about you? What is Christmas to you? Well, before you and we answer that question, let us look at God's Word and see what Christmas means to the people we find there. One such person is Mary. This evening, we will take a look at Christmas from Mary's eyes. As we do, the Holy Spirit will lead us to see that Christmas is about 1) A Promise Worth Keeping and that it's also about 2) A Gift Worth Treasuring.

First of all, a Promise worth keeping. Luke gives us the most detailed account of Jesus' birth. We've shared that before. It is a simple narration. The simplicity of the story helps to bring out the beauty and importance of what's recorded. What the Lord allowed to be recorded is more than a simple story, though. It is the historical record of our Savior's birth. This was a story, which Luke tells us, "Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart."



Consider all the things she had to think over. First, we're told how it was that she and Joseph went to Bethlehem. It happened while Caesar Augustus was ruler over the Roman Empire. In those days, that included most of Europe, Asia Minor and North Africa. Caesar wanted to take a census for the purpose of taxation, anything to make him richer. The Jewish way of recording people was not according to the place where they lived, but according to the family to which they belonged. That meant each person went to the home-village of his family.

Mary and Joseph lived in the town of Nazareth in the province of Galilee. Both were of the "house and lineage of David," the most famous king of Israel. So it was necessary for the two of them to travel to Bethlehem, a distance of approximately 80 miles. I'm sure Mary remembered that trip well. Luke tells us that Mary was pledged to marry Joseph and that she "was expecting a child." Keep in mind that Mary did not ride along in the back seat of a Cadillac or Lexus SUV. The two of them made the journey on foot and on the back of a donkey. No doubt Mary remembered this trip! I'm sure all of us would, if in Mary's or even Joseph's shoes/sandals.

Once in Bethlehem, the miracle took place. Mary gave birth to a child. Luke tells us it was "her firstborn, a son." This birth was also something Mary would not soon forget. If you've ever given birth – or even witnessed a birth – it is a memory that stays with you a lifetime. I'll never forget when Garrett was born; it was a C-section and I was right there with Joyce. Yes, I made it through the whole thing without losing anything, if you get my drift. But I'll never forget what all happened that March day. I'm ashamed to admit it but when the nurses took Garrett to be cleaned up, I went with him and then left poor Joyce, who had just gone through a really tough experience all by herself and only after they had gotten Garrett taken care of did I go back to the new mother.

But, imagine the surroundings in which Mary had her child! There was no warm bed, most likely just a pile of straw; no nurses or doctors, no fancy hospital equipment, just her husband and a bunch of curious and frightened farm animals.

And, yet, this whole ordeal was something Mary treasured up and pondered in her heart. She cherished these memories. She looked on them with wonderment and with a smile. The reason was that Mary knew exactly why this child was born. He came into the world to be our Savior, just as the angel Gabriel had foretold.

Christmas, according to Mary, is all about a promise worth keeping. It's about a promise God made before the beginning of time and one, which he fulfilled in that stable in Bethlehem. This is the very promise which the apostle Paul remembered as he wrote to the Galatians, "When the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive the full rights of sons." That's what Christmas is all about. It's about a child – the Son of God – who was born for us. He was born to rescue us from the curse of sin and death. He was born to die, so that he could rise again and destroy death's grasp forever. And God did this according to his divine timetable. The child that Mary held was her Savior. Jesus was born to free our sons and daughters. That child was born to make us children of God through the forgiveness in his blood.

A promise worth keeping and secondly, a Gift worth treasuring.

The emotions that must have coursed through Mary as she tried to consider this miracle! This was, indeed, a promise worth keeping. God loves us that much. What love he showered on Mary as he chose her to be the mother of his only begotten Son. That night Mary experienced the blessed power of God's grace. The very first Christmas – something to treasure.

Mary wasn't the only one to treasure Christmas. Shepherds also heard the good news. An angel appeared in the night sky proclaiming, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a manger."

Of all the people to hear this good news, God sends his angel to the shepherds. Shepherds were not the most liked people in Palestine. They were poor and despised. Still, God sent his messenger to these lowly, everyday folk. The shepherds didn't waste any time. They didn't question the angel or argue. They accepted the news and left with excitement. They 'went with haste.' It probably didn't take too long to find the only baby in Bethlehem who was in a manger. Once they found him, they worshiped God, and they told everyone they met all the things they had seen and heard. The shepherds treasured this message. In fact, it was their greatest gift. The shepherds went back to their flocks. Outwardly, their lives may have seemed the same. Yet, they glorified God in their everyday lives by sharing this treasured message of salvation.



Mary must have treasured and thought about that surprise visit by the shepherds. That must have been the clincher for her. Her child wasn't just her child. The Christ child was a treasured gift for all humankind. Those shepherds were the proof. Jesus was their Savior, just as he was Mary's, just as he is yours and mine. There is a hymn that says, "Can I, will I forget how Love was born, and burned its way into my heart unasked, unforced, unearned, to die, to live, and not alone for me, to die, to live, and not alone for me." That's a line from a Christian hymn, "Where Shepherds Lately Kneled," a hymn that focuses on the adoration of the baby Jesus in the manger, and emphasizes the personal significance of the event.

Mary pondered the events of that first Christmas. She turned them over and over in her mind. She treasured them in her memory. This was good for her to do. The shepherds did too; they returned to the hills, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. And for Mary, there were many more experiences yet to come: Jesus' preaching, his miracles, his suffering and death, his resurrection – all these would solidify the purpose of this child's coming. He came to give us the greatest treasure of all; forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. That's the gift Mary treasured most. And so do we or we should!

So, what's Christmas mean to you? Presents, Christmas stockings hung with care, good food, family and friends – these are all Christmas blessings. And they have meaning to us. Yet, as you open your gifts this year, don't forget to take time and ponder on the greatest treasure of all, God's Son. Take a moment to quietly ponder on these sacred words recorded in Luke 2. Thank God that he has given you his holy Word, and with it, a glimpse of Christmas through Mary's eyes. And thank God that, like Mary, we can treasure up these things in our hearts. You know, it's a terrifying prospect to think about living that completely, to think that we matter that much, to know that we are never passing by under God's radar screen. But that is what this gift means. Remember? The text doesn't say that Mary and Joseph had just been given a child. No, it says, 'To you is born this day a child.' The gift was for the shepherds, the innkeepers, the soldiers, the tax collectors, the prostitutes, the oblivious, the broken, the poor....and you and me. The life and promise were always meant for us; they are ours now; they always will be. Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors! My prayer is that you and yours have a very safe and even more a very Merry Christmas.

Amen.



# ***“THE ORIGINAL HOME ALONE”***

Message for the First Sunday After Christmas

From Pastor Norman Staker

December 29, 2024

1 SAMUEL 2: 18-20, 26 \* COLOSSIANS 3: 12-17 \* LUKE 2: 41-52

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM  
OUR LORD AND SAVIOR, THE NEWBORN KING OF KINGS. AMEN. HE IS  
RISEN; HE IS RISEN INDEED.

**W**ell, here we are almost at the end of another year. Do I still say “Merry Christmas” or do I greet you with “Happy New Year?” Liturgically we are still in the Christmas season, this being the first Sunday of Christmas, but most people are probably looking ahead to 2025. Maybe you are too. Our text today begins:

“Now every year Jesus’ parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day’s journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the temple sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions.” Skipping ahead to verse 48, ‘When his parents saw him, they were astonished and His mother said to him, “Son, why have you treated us like this? He said to them, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?”’

I would imagine most of you have seen the classic Christmas movie, “Home Alone.” Kevin McCallister gets left behind at home as his family goes on vacation to Paris and Kevin has to survive an attempted burglary. Today’s text takes us back to the original ‘Home Alone’ story, as Jesus is left behind in Jerusalem after the Passover celebration. It’s better than comedy. It’s reality. But it’s not like reality TV, where you have a bunch of sinful drama. It’s salvation reality, with Jesus in the house of God. So let’s watch ‘The Original Home Alone.’

I'm sure most of you have left something behind in your life: your phone, your wallet. Have you ever gone off and left your child behind? There's that moment of panic; oh no, where did I leave my phone, or my wallet? Fortunately, I've never forgotten either of the kids. Several times I've gotten to church wondering if I forgot my glasses, can't read up close without them, or my message, that would be a short sermon! I'm not close by so to drive that 17 miles or so to run home and get whatever I may have forgotten, it sure would be frustrating. Joseph and Mary left Jesus, their own son, behind. But Mary and Joseph lost God's Son who was supposed to be the Messiah! They knew that he was nearly assassinated as an infant; remember, Herod wanted to kill all boys under the age of two! The one important responsibility they had was to protect and raise God's Son so He could save the world, and they lost Him in the largest city in Israel. And it didn't take 10 minutes for them to find him. They had already been walking for one day! Now they had to walk an entire day back. And who is to say that they didn't have more children by this point? They would have had to drag them in tow as well. Remember Jesus was 12 so Mary and Joseph could have had more children in addition to Jesus.

The festival of the Passover was the most important of the three Jewish celebrations that also include Pentecost and Tabernacles. Passover, of course, is the festival commemorating the night the angel of death killed the Egyptian firstborn while passing over the homes of the Jews. Against the great horde of pilgrims making the trip to Jerusalem, the backdrop to this celebration of God's blessing included entrepreneurs and merchants who offered their wares to the travelers. Imagine the number of people selling food, souvenirs, clothing, and toys while others were offering housing. There would have been a great deal of hustle and bustle with many things to see and do. The sights, sounds, colors, smells, and tastes would have filled those present with an excitement one didn't normally experience daily in humdrum hometown life.

How did this happen; how did Jesus get left behind? We're not sure, but we can speculate a bit. According to tradition the women and children would walk in the front of this big caravan of people, and the men would walk in the back. Jesus was kind of a 'tweener' at this point. At 13 he would have been considered officially confirmed, so to speak. He was close at age 12. So maybe Joseph thought he was in front, and Mary thought he was in back. There must have been a throng of young people present. Jesus, a very human boy, no doubt would have been as outgoing as anyone there. You can imagine that he wanted to meet others and explore his surroundings with them. Sure, he probably checked in with his parents from time to time and he was allowed to venture away as long as they knew his



general whereabouts. We can't forget he was 12 and in his day, he was considered almost an adult and would not be expected to tag along everywhere with his parents. He had probably never been late to anything or missed any other appointments, after all, He was the perfect child. So we can't entirely blame them. Nonetheless, it happened. In hindsight it is easy to point the finger and see what should have been done, especially when you're charged with protecting and raising the Savior of the world!

And isn't this a picture of what we so often do in life; and how easy it is to leave Jesus behind. We get so busy on life's journey. Going to work, going to school, preparing for a vacation, raising children, trying to maintain our health; somehow in the progress of life you stop for a moment, and you haven't been in worship for weeks to months on end. You haven't opened your Bible. You haven't said your prayers like you could. You've taken God's grace, His protection, His mercy for granted. At Christmas you can be so busy preparing food and presents and getting your house ready that you forget Who is supposed to be at the center of this festival.

Why did Jesus do it? This may have been His first opportunity to really dig in deep with some of these teachers and ask questions that his rabbi up north maybe didn't have the insight into.

After the Passover, most of the people would have gone home, but a few people would stick around and talk and ask questions. Once the official festival was done, they could have more time to dig into the Word and talk about it without having to perform the sacrifices and worship services. Jesus didn't want to leave. Luke says, "they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers."

Luke mentions two things, he was listening to them and asking them questions. He wasn't like some of us who think, 'If I don't ask any questions, and don't show any interest, then we'll get out of there sooner.'

But that's not how God wants us to approach His Word. He wants us to dig in and put some thought into it. It's good to ask questions, to try and discover more. There are limits to our knowledge. There are plenty of things God doesn't reveal to us. But there are also plenty of things God has revealed to us, things that He wants us to know. There's always more to learn.

You're never too young or too old to learn. Twelve years old was no hindrance to Jesus. That would typically be about 7th grade. Being in that age group can cause problems with a sinful nature, but Jesus explored these things in an entirely perfect way. He wants to grow closer to His true Father by exploring the Scriptures more than He probably ever had before, seeing how God interacted with His people throughout the stories of the Old Testament. And think of what He's there for! The Passover! Here is a picture of what He was born to be! The Lamb sacrificed for the sins of the world! Wow! Imagine Him seeing those sacrifices and perhaps saying to Himself, "That's going to be me!" Jesus was learning His own history, finding prophecies about Himself. He put time and effort into understanding these things. He wasn't just memorizing the Bible for memorization's sake. This opportunity was more important to Him than just going back home to Nazareth, so He had to stay behind.

Now think of you. You were adopted into God's family in your baptism. You were chosen by Him from eternity. You don't think of family just as what you were born into. It's not just physical. It's spiritual and eternal. It's divine. God reveals Himself to you in the Bible. He wants you to know Him well. The apostle Paul told us to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus." What an advantage our young people have by having these Bible stories as a part of their daily education! What an advantage they can have through Sunday School and Catechism! Yet how many only do the bare minimum? How many get through Sunday School and even catechism class with no questions, no desire to learn more, just to join the church? How sad that is! You have an entirely different family that God wants you to know about, but if you show no interest, does that mean you don't really care?

And that's why Jesus had to do what He did, as our perfect substitute, the One who would study the Bible perfectly, learn it like we were supposed to, in order to fulfill what God expected of us, for us. Paul writes to the Galatians, "when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive the full rights of sons." Jesus did this willingly. He went to school for us, passed the test, and by faith He gives us the credit for the grade He earned. Do any of you know any teachers who ever did that? Jesus got a perfect score; A+ for us.

When Joseph and Mary finally found Jesus, well, they didn't sound too happy with him. It was probably a good thing they were in public. Maybe that's why Mary talked to Jesus instead of Joseph, and she was His birth mother. His mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us this way? Your father and I have been

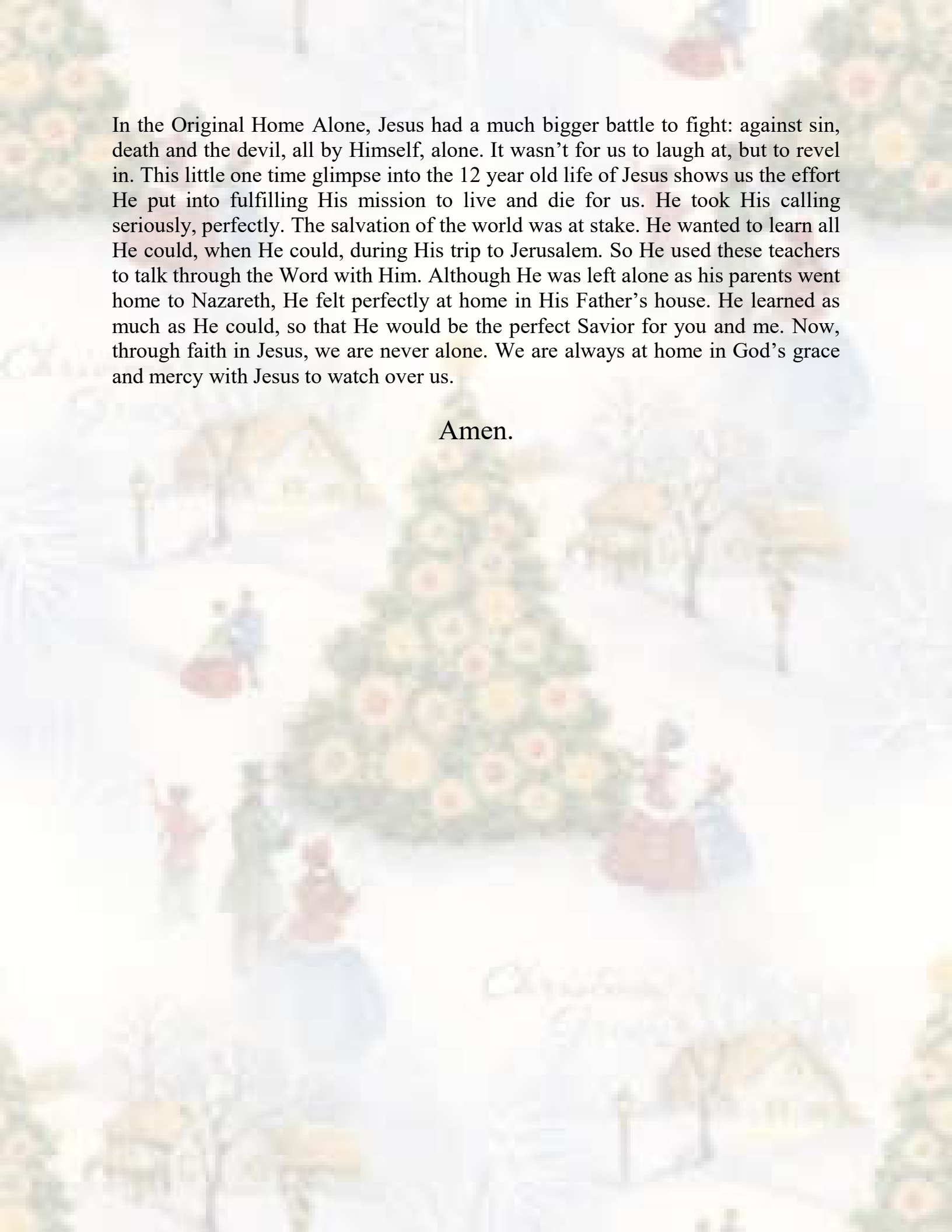
anxiously looking for you.” Notice how she took it personally, as if Jesus treated them this way on purpose, as if He was trying to torture them. Mary told Jesus that your father and I have been anxiously looking for you. They must have looked bedraggled and exhausted at this point. I can’t help but wonder if this didn’t cause a scene among the people who were there.

We forget that God’s purpose isn’t for us just to get what we want when we want it. His purpose is to bring us to heaven. Sometimes we are on the wrong path. Sometimes it’s necessary for us to turn around or stop and reevaluate what’s really important in life. He has a higher purpose for us than we do for ourselves, and He knows what He’s doing. It’s nothing malevolent. It’s spiritually simple. We just don’t get it.

Now imagine how many 12-year-olds might have responded. “Duh! Don’t you remember the angel Gabriel? Elizabeth? The Wise Men? Come on, mom. You’re embarrassing me. Uh.” In His holiness He could have scolded them for not checking where He was in the first place. But He doesn’t do that. He explains it simply and respectfully. “Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be taking care of my Father’s business?” What business was that? Being the perfect student. Growing in the knowledge that He was supposed to have. Understanding the way of the cross, living and dying for them and for us.

They did not understand what he was telling them. Scripture says, ‘He went down with them and came to Nazareth and was obedient to them. His mother treasured up all these things in her heart.’ Joseph and Mary didn’t completely comprehend what Jesus was saying. They were learning too. What is it going to mean, being the parents of the Messiah? What is this going to involve? We can’t treat Him as if He were only our Son. He is God’s Son. He is humanity’s Son. He has a much higher purpose than just doing what we want. He has been called to do what God the Father wants. I doubt that Jesus could have just told them that. They would have to learn that through experience.

In Home Alone, Kevin McCallister had to use every trick in the book in order to fend off the Wet Bandits. His feistiness ended up benefiting him. He used torches, nails, spiders, paint cans, and even a zip line in the battle. Due to the incompetence of the bandits and some help from a neighbor, he was able to fend them off while home alone, although he kind of trashed the house in the process. I’m still amazed at how quickly he cleaned the place up though!



In the Original Home Alone, Jesus had a much bigger battle to fight: against sin, death and the devil, all by Himself, alone. It wasn't for us to laugh at, but to revel in. This little one time glimpse into the 12 year old life of Jesus shows us the effort He put into fulfilling His mission to live and die for us. He took His calling seriously, perfectly. The salvation of the world was at stake. He wanted to learn all He could, when He could, during His trip to Jerusalem. So He used these teachers to talk through the Word with Him. Although He was left alone as his parents went home to Nazareth, He felt perfectly at home in His Father's house. He learned as much as He could, so that He would be the perfect Savior for you and me. Now, through faith in Jesus, we are never alone. We are always at home in God's grace and mercy with Jesus to watch over us.

Amen.



# *“EXPERIENCE THE GIFT OF CHRISTMAS”*

Message for the Second Sunday after Christmas

From Pastor anorman Staker

January 5, 2025

JEREMIAH 31: 7-14 \* EPHESIANS 1: 3-14 \* JOHN 1: (1-9) 10-18

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM  
OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN. IN THE BEGINNING  
WAS THE WORD. HE IS RISEN; HE IS RISEN INDEED!!

A boy asked his father, "Dad, if three frogs were sitting on a limb that hung over a pool, and one frog decided to jump off into the pool, how many frogs would be left on the limb?" The dad replied, "Two." "No," the son replied. "There are three frogs and one decides to jump, how many are left?" The dad said, "Oh, I get it, if one decides to jump, the others would too. So there are none left." The boy said, "No dad, the answer is three. The frog only decided to jump." Does that sound like last year's resolution? Great inspiration and great resolutions, but often times we only decide, and months later we are still on the same limb of do-nothing.

Just so you know, I'm not getting into resolutions, broken, kept, or not even made this morning.

Happy New Year again! And to begin the New Year we are given the first words from the gospel of John. What an abstract passage! Word becomes flesh. Light becomes life. Or is it that abstract at all?

Most intelligent people will tell you and me that we cannot see the spoken word; we can only hear it. We cannot hear the light, only see it. Yet we know they exist and when taken together in the form of John's gospel, we can blow out the minds of the so-called intelligent people, because one begins to truly see the word, and truly hear the light, leading to abundant life that is above comprehension. Have I lost any of you yet?

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him

was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

‘In the beginning was the Word.’ The Word is one of the highest and most profound titles of the Lord Jesus. To determine the exact meaning is not easy. The Word was so important in the Old Testament; for instance, the name for Jehovah was never pronounced. It was such a holy word that they never used it at all. But this is the One who is the Word and is now presented as the One ‘in the beginning.’ This beginning predates the very first words in the Bible “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” When we go back to creation, He is already there, and that is exactly the way this is used, ‘in the beginning was the Word.’ Getting a little technical, it is not ‘is the Word;’ it was not in the beginning that the Word started out or was begotten. The Word was in the beginning; when was that; just as far back as you want to go! Do you see why kids in catechism and even grown adults do not really like John 1 as a birth story for Jesus?

According to our bulletin insert, today is the second Sunday of Christmas! So I ask you, can Christmas be anything other than Christian? Think about it; Christ is seen in both words. Christmas is a ‘Christ’ festival! When we use ‘Christian’ as an adjective, remember adjectives are words that describe, but when used as a noun, is it not a reference to the fact that Christ has a place in who or what is being described?

One of the blessings of the Christmas season for many folks is that it is a time to reclaim the familiar. Many of us share family traditions that have been carried on from one generation to another, and we enjoy the familiar carols and well-loved scripture readings that are part of our Christmas celebrations.

All of these things are wonderful because they add to our enjoyment of Christmas Day and the whole Christmas season, which we are still in. Familiar as they are, and much loved as they are, all of these things point beyond themselves to the essence of Christmas, to what we claim as the ‘reason for the season.’ This is what those familiar and well-loved words from John’s Gospel do for us; they point us to the heart of it all, to the very essence of Christmas. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word became flesh and lived among us.”

But some people have observed celebrations of Christmas that were of such a nature that we have wondered how much place there was for Christ in what was being done. If we look into our own hearts, in those moments of unprotected

honesty, we have discovered that we, too, have attached a number of associations and accouterments, those personal accessories that we have used for a specific activity, that almost have to be present, if Christmas is really going to be Christmas for us.

Where would you rather spend Christmas, away from home or in your home? Have you ever considered that, even though Christmas means home, no one was at home that first Christmas! It is ironic but no one was at home that First Christmas: Mary and Joseph's home was Nazareth and they were in Bethlehem; the Shepherds were at work, out in the fields, that night; the Wise Men weren't home as they were traveling to find the newborn King; even Jesus, Himself, was not at home!

In December 1903, after many attempts, the Wright brothers were successful in getting their "flying machine" off the ground. Thrilled, they telegraphed this message to their sister Katherine: "We have actually flown 120 feet. We will be home for Christmas." Katherine hurried to the editor of the local newspaper and showed him the message. He glanced at it and said, "How nice. The boys will be home for Christmas." He totally missed the big news; man had flown.

Christmas celebrates the birth of Jesus. Any birth is a beginning, but a birth is also a continuation of what went before and a look to the future as we think about what may still come in the child's life. Our Christmas festivities are a celebration of the birth, the whole life, and the ongoing ministry of Jesus.

John 1:1 declares that 'In the beginning was the Word;' verse 14 declares 'The Word became flesh and lived among us.' The sad part is that we can get so caught up in celebrating what we have celebrated so many times before that we may miss the surprise of what we read in verse 11, some of 'his own people did not accept Him.' I recall standing at the side of my granddaughter, Alissa's, crib, looking down at that little baby and thinking to myself, who wouldn't love such a beautiful baby? We all come under that same spell when we celebrate Christmas as the birth of a baby, a soft, cuddly newborn with all the innocence and all the potential of a life just begun. Who wouldn't love the idea of a baby born in a manger? I mean, paintings, sculptures, carols, cantatas, movies, greeting cards all perpetuate this picture of a gentle Jesus, surrounded by loving parents, adoring shepherds, singing angels, and comforting barnyard animals. What's not to love about this picture?

But this is only part of the fuller picture that John's gospel gives us. When we read past verse the first 14 verses, we are given a picture of the whole life of Jesus. Sure, our Christmas festivities celebrate his birth, but we know that he didn't stay a

baby in a manger. Our text last week showed us that, Luke 2 he's born in a manger, Luke 3 he's 12 and in the temple. All of the Gospel writers make it clear that all throughout his earthly life some people did not accept him. When we look even closer, we see that from his very birth powerful people found Jesus a threat.

Right off, Herod wanted to know where to find this baby who had been born and who was being hailed as a king. And despite what he told those Magi, the Wise Men, he had no intention of offering his worship and praise.

Later in Jesus' young adulthood, the religious leaders in his hometown congregation turned Jesus out of the pulpit, angry that a carpenter's son could speak with such authority. As he continued his ministry, other members of the religious establishment criticized him for healing on the Sabbath, but they may have been more angry that he was upsetting the status quo by freeing people from physical and economic burdens.

Then there were those political and religious leaders and even his own disciples who were angered and perplexed that he welcomes and accepted women, Samaritans, lepers, tax collectors, and even children to share community work with him.

Powerful people saw all that he did and they wondered, 'What is the world coming to?' And as they pursued that thought, they wondered what to do with this Jesus. In looking at his birth, life, and ministry, these people saw what we all should see, that following Jesus brings changes to us and the world around us. This is a blessing to the poor, the suffering, the marginalized, and those searching for a new purpose and meaning in their lives. But to those afraid of change, to those not willing to let go of past hurts or selfish pursuits, and to those not open to forgiving or being forgiven, Jesus is a threat! A serious threat! That's why the full picture of Christmas always extends past the manger to incorporate the cross. But you and I have heard the rest of the story, we know that the full picture of Christmas also extends past the cross to the empty tomb of Easter.

The Herods of this world are threatened because a new kind of king is born. And with the birth of a new kind of king, a new kind of kingdom is inaugurated. The teaching, healing, inclusiveness, justice, mercy, forgiveness and most of all, the love of Jesus continue in the lives of those who follow him. Christ is with us when all the Christmas music has been sung and all the festive ornaments have been packed away. Christ is with us as we move forward into the new year of 2025.

Christ is with us as we say and do those things that make a positive difference in the world and in the lives of other people, for his sake.

The Word became flesh and lived among us; the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it; we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

This passage from our Gospel text shares Who the Baby of Bethlehem is: the Eternal Word, God Incarnate. This passage tells of the witness's testimony; how God wrapped Himself in human flesh and came to show us God's face. And this passage tells us about the wonder, the wonder of how we who have failed the Lord in so very many ways; we who have fought and not honored his name; we who have not been faithful to his calling in our lives; we who have rejected the Word – to us God returns grace upon grace. God's grace, mercy and peace be with you in the new year ahead.

AMEN!!