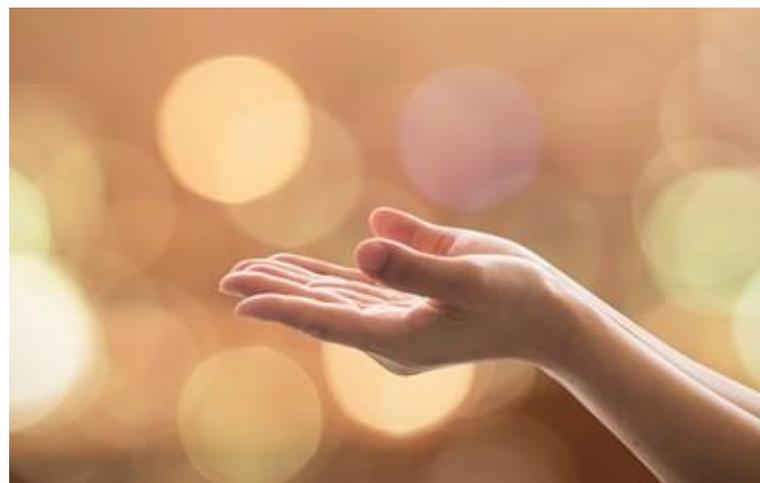


# Forty Days on the Gift of Salvation

A Prayer Focus Booklet for Bethany  
UMC for Spiritual Strengthening  
November – December 2020



## Notes:

The purpose of this booklet is to encourage members and friends of the congregation to read Scripture about Jesus' birth and pray for a period of forty days, beginning Sunday, November 22 through to the end of the year. Having a devotional booklet for the Advent season specifically for Bethany United Methodist Church was something we started in 2017. It was met with such gratefulness and graciousness that we decided to offer it annually.

This year we will focus on the prophecies regarding the birth of Jesus as well as the birth narratives to which they point. These prophecies and birth narratives speak of the humble servanthood of Jesus and of God calling people to follow Him, as we play a part in God's plan for salvation of all humankind.

My hope is that this booklet will serve as a type of Bible study as well as a daily prayer focus for our church. I have used a type of Bible Study in this devotional that you might consider in your own devotional life. It is called the SOAP method, an acronym for Scripture, Observation, Application, and Prayer. This is a method commonly used by Pastor Wayne Cordeiro and the members of New Hope Christian Church of Honolulu, Hawaii.

Feel free to share this resource with anyone you like since it is not copyrighted. It's my gift to you written in my own words.

-- Pastor Steve Portner

Day 40

Thursday, December 31

Scripture reading: Matthew 2:19-23

### Change of Plans

**O**bservation: When Joseph and Mary returned from Egypt with the child Jesus, we would prefer a “lived happily ever after” ending. That was not to be the case. Joseph at first intended on going to Judea, but turned aside when he heard that the treacherous Archelaus was ruling there after Archelaus’ father, Herod, had died. Warned in a dream not to return there, Joseph instead took his family to Nazareth. Nazareth had a poor reputation. One of the disciples had said, “Can anything good come from there?” (John 1:46) Yet this was where the child Jesus grew up until he was old enough to set out on his earthly ministry.

**A**pplication: The year 2020 is coming to a close, and it’s not off the mark to say that it was a year of changed plans. The coronavirus interrupted all of our lives. Some even lost their lives as a result of it. Even with a change of plans, however, we know that God is with us.

**P**ray: Emmanuel, “God with us,” we know that you are the one who is in control. You go before us, and we trust “that all things will work together for good for those who love the Lord” (Rom. 8:28), even when it may mean a change of plans for us. Amen.

Day 1

Sunday, November 22

Scripture reading: Genesis 12:1-3

### Promised Blessing

**O**bservation: God made a covenant with Abram (before his name was changed to Abraham). This was a covenant with two sides, one that God would live up to and one that those who call God their God were to live up to. Humanity was to call God their God. In return, God would make Abram’s household blessed. Blessed for a reason: to be a blessing onto other nations. A covenant simply stated and a covenant that would work out the best for everyone – as long as the covenant agreement was upheld. Therein lies the problem. God keeps his end of the deal. Humanity is the one who continually breaks the covenant by seeking after other gods; that is, anything that takes priority over the one true God in their lives.

**A**pplication: It was because humanity broke this covenant that Jesus had to come. The Bible is the story of how God again and again offers humanity the opportunity to restore that covenant.

**P**ray: Lord, everything would be so much simpler if only we upheld our part of the covenant that accept You as our Lord and our God. Guide us in the days ahead in how we can better work toward that goal. Amen.

## Day 2

Monday, November 23

**S**cripture reading: Genesis 49:10

### The Promised Ruler

**O**bservation: “The scepter will not depart from Judah” (Gen. 49:10). This was the promise that the king will be of the line and lineage of the tribe of Judah. During the time of exile this must have been hard for the Israelites to believe. Not only did they not have a king, they did not even have a kingdom. As a conquered people occupied by a foreign country, it seemed like this prophecy was broken. Jesus Christ would rise as the fulfillment of this prophecy. His lineage could be traced back to Judah and Abraham (see Matt. 1:2-3).

**A**pplication: Do we see Christ as the promised King? What does it mean for you that Christ is ruler of your life? That he is ruler of this world? That he is the ruler of the past, present, and future?

**P**ray: Heavenly Father, thank you for sending us Your Son. He is the Son of the King. He is the King! May he be the King over us. May all we are and all we have be subject to His rule. Amen.

## Day 39

Wednesday, December 30

**S**cripture reading: Matthew 2:16-18

### Tragedy

**O**bservation: This is a part of the Christmas story we don't see emphasized too much. It is so tragic. A mighty king like Herod resorts to killing children less than two years old, just out of a jealousy for fear that one of those babies may grow up to be a king some day. Bethlehem was only a small village, so the number of children killed was not huge, but senseless slaughter of the innocents is heart breaking regardless of the number. This is another parallel to the Egypt story where the Israelite children were put to death out of fear by the Pharaoh (Ex. 1:16).

**A**pplication: We would prefer that Christmas time be only about family and sentimentality, yet this story is a reminder of the fallen world in which we live where tragedy occurs and evil sometimes overshadows the good. This is a story that reminds us yet again why Jesus had to come to save the world.

**P**ray: Lord, our hearts go out to all those in our world right now who are dealing with sadness and tragedy in their lives. We long for the day that we will be in paradise with you, where there is no more fear or darkness. Amen.

## Day 38

Tuesday, December 29

Scripture reading: Matthew 2:13-15

### Off to Egypt

**O**bservation: Jesus was in danger, and God knew it. So he sent an angel to warn Joseph in a dream to flee to Egypt. You remember how Egypt played a part in the Israelite's history. That was where another Joseph had been sold as a slave. It was there that Jacob and all his family were saved from the ravages of a famine. Egypt has a history of being a place of refuge, a place of salvation, for the Israelites. It also has the reputation of being a place of slavery when the Israelites overstayed their welcome. Joseph would flee to Egypt for refuge but he would not stay long. Salvation comes through God alone.

**A**pplication: We don't often think of Jesus and his family being refugees. We should pause a moment and think about all the people in our world today who are moving from one place to another, not because they want to but out of necessity for survival.

**P**ray: Lord Jesus, you identify with all of us on this earth, including those who have no place to call their home. We are so blessed, yet so often fail to give thanks for our many blessings. Forgive us, we pray. Amen.

## Day 3

Tuesday, November 24

Scripture reading: Numbers 24:17

### The Promised Star

**O**bservation: Balaam here, like in yesterday's reading in Genesis 49:10, prophesies about a scepter rising, this time out of Israel. He also prophesies about "a star will come out of Jacob" (Num. 24:17). Interesting that the Messiah is prophesied as being a star and then a star is used to guide the Magi to the stable where Jesus was born. In a way, Jesus himself is as a guiding star for us, in addition to being our Savior. In the covenant that God made with Abraham, God said Abraham's descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky (Gen. 15:5; 22:17; 26:4). In the book of Revelation Jesus is referred to as the bright and morning star (Rev. 22:16).

**A**pplication: Are you allowing Christ to guide you and direct your paths? Often the way before us looks dark, but with Jesus present with us, we have the bright and morning star to illuminate the way.

**P**ray: Lord, we need your guidance more than ever in these difficult days. Every day we read about the chaos and darkness in our world. It is of such great comfort and encouragement to know that the morning star, the light of the world, is there with us and for us. Amen.

## Day 4

Wednesday, November 25

**S**cripture reading: Isaiah 7:14

### Immanuel, God With Us

**O**bservation: Matthew 1:23 quotes this verse as the prophecy regarding Mary being the virgin mother of the baby Jesus. When he originally uttered these words, Isaiah was likely referring to an event that was to take place in his time. Perhaps an unmarried young woman from Ahaz's household would have a child who would not be weaned before the two enemy kings "will be laid waste" (Is. 7:16). At any rate, Matthew saw it as a fulfillment of the prophecy at the time of his writing as well. Mary, an unwed virgin, conceived and would bear the Son of God, who shall be called Immanuel, which means "God with us."

**A**pplication: There are those who think that God, if there is a God at all, is remote and distant. They believe that God set the world in motion and then had nothing else to do with it. We believe that God is present, God is with us, at all times and in all places. We have a God who is very much involved in our everyday lives.

**P**ray: Immanuel, God with us, thank you for being present always with us. We do not have to ever fear being alone. Amen.

## Day 37

Monday, December 28

**S**cripture reading: Matthew 2:11-12

### Paying Homage

**O**bservation: The Wise Men knelt down near Jesus, paying him homage. Grown men from a foreign land who give respect to a child, treating him as their king. Pretty amazing. And they presented Jesus with gifts, each representing a role that the Christ would live out in his ministry. Gold for a king. Frankincense for a priest. Myrrh for the burial of the dead. What? Burial of the dead? Such a strange gift to give to a child. Yet that was Jesus' ultimate purpose in being born: to die so that our sins would be forgiven.

**A**pplication: What do we bring to Jesus? Although the gifts the Magi brought to Jesus were wonderful, don't you find it interesting that they were never mentioned again? Those were priceless gifts that could have been very useful to a poor family like Joseph's and Mary's. Yet what was more precious to Jesus than what the Magi brought was the very homage they gave. They gave themselves to Jesus. Jesus desires us to do the same.

**P**ray: Lord Jesus, we love you and give you ourselves as homage to your Lordship over us. Use us as you will. Amen.

## Day 36

Sunday, December 27

Scripture reading: Matthew 2:9-10

### A Moving Star

**O**bservation: This part of the Christmas story has always fascinated me. When did the Magi first see the star? Why were they convinced enough that it would lead them to a king that they would leave behind their homeland to follow it? Was it a low-lying star that moved before them, like the pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night in Moses' day? If these were the wise men we think they are, why didn't they see through Herod's deception? Did the star stop moving over Jerusalem for a while before moving on to Bethlehem, and was that the reason the wise men stopped there for a while?

**A**pplication: Some things we will probably never know for certain. But we do know that when the wise men saw the star, they were overjoyed. One can only imagine what they felt when they finally got to meet the person the star was leading them to.

**P**rayer: Lord, some things in life we don't fully understand. Remind us to rely on you: to trust you with all our heart and lean not on our own understanding (Prov. 3:5). When we trust in you, we will be filled with joy. Amen.

## Day 5

Thursday, November 26

Scripture reading: Isaiah 53:10-12

### The Promised Offering for Sin

**O**bservation: This prophecy points to one who would suffer and be glorified as God's servant. "The Lord makes his life an offering for sin" (Is. 53:10). Isaiah tells of a servant who would suffer even though that servant was blameless: "though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth" (Is. 53:9). No one is without sin, except for Jesus. So, we would be hard put to think this prophecy could apply to anyone else other than Jesus. The one Isaiah prophesied about would not only be without sin, but "he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors" (Is. 53:12). There is only one person who fits that description – Jesus.

**A**pplication: We are helpless to do anything to remove sin from our lives. The one without sin, Jesus the Christ, takes away our sin when we confess to him as our Lord and Savior.

**P**rayer: Lord, when we think that Jesus was born into this world so that he could die – die to take away our sins—and he had done nothing to deserve his suffering – we stand amazed at your grace. Thank you that you would do that for the likes of us. Amen.

## Day 6

Friday, November 27

Scripture reading: Jeremiah 23:5-6

### A Righteous Branch

**O**bservation: Jeremiah prophesies that a “Righteous Branch” will rise up from the line of David. He had berated the people of God for being like shepherds that did not care for their flock. Instead they scatter the flock and have driven them away (Jer. 23:2). The “Righteous Branch,” on the other hand, will “reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land” (Jer. 23:5). This leader will be so unlike the typical leader of Jeremiah’s (and our) time.

**A**pplication: In a time where so many people are self-seeking, even those who would call themselves our leaders, we have a righteous leader and ruler in Christ Jesus. He knows the difference between right and wrong, and we can take confidence that he will rule justly and wisely.

**P**ray: Lord, we praise you and give thanks in knowing that you are our ruler. We need One who is ultimately in control, who looks out for others rather than himself. Amen.

## Day 35

Saturday, December 26

Scripture reading: Matthew 2:7-8

### Two-Faced

**O**bservation: It is really disturbing when someone says one thing when they are plotting to do something else behind your back. This is what Herod was doing with the Magi. He wanted them to scope out Bethlehem and let him know what they found. Why? Herod said, “So that I may go and worship him” (v. 8). In reality, he was planning on executing the baby as soon as he had proof that such a “baby king” did exist. Today we call that being two-faced, someone who is insincere or who acts one way with certain people, then in a contrary way with others.

**A**pplication: Each of us have had our experiences with two faced people. Perhaps we have even been that way ourselves. We may act Christian when we are around other Christians, then act anything but Christian when we are trying to impress other people.

**P**ray: Lord, forgive us when we are two-faced, and help us to be forgiving of others who have been two-faced with us. When we hold grudges we are at risk of mistreating others, being vengeful, and eventually hurting ourselves. Forgive us in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Day 34

Friday, December 25

Scripture reading: Matthew 1:18-25

Merry Christmas

**O**bservation: Today we have the reading that is traditionally spoken on Christmas Day. In just a few short verses we read of scandal, potential divorce, an angelic dream, a divine proclamation about what the parents should name their child, and we are given the very reason the child was born. In other words, Christmas can be a little messy and chaotic. We just read that the first one was.

**A**pplication: Perhaps your Christmas seems a little messy and chaotic this year. The year 2020 has been a difficult and challenging one for each of us in a multitude of different ways. Yet, in the midst of all the mess and chaos, we are reminded once again, that Jesus is at the center of it all.

**P**rayers: O Lord, Christmas was not so much a "Silent Night," due to no animals crying out in the stable where Jesus was born. It was a silent night, holy night, because of the peace within that only Christ can bring, despite what is happening in the world around us. Lord, thank you for bringing peace on earth, a peace that begins with me. Amen.

Day 7

Saturday, November 28

Scripture reading: Jeremiah 31:15-17

Weeping

**O**bservation: This prophecy points to Matthew 2:16, where the people of the town of Bethlehem are, like Rachel in this prophecy, weeping for their children. Herod had killed all the boys in the town who were two years old or less in an attempt to eliminate the possibility of one of them one day challenging his position of leadership as king of the Jews. The prophet Jeremiah was referring to the women of Israel weeping at the loss of their children during their captivity and exile from the land. The part of Jeremiah's prophecy that typically gets overlooked is verses 16-17 which says, "there is hope for your future."

**A**pplication: There are times of mourning in our lives, and that time is to be respected. Yet, we often need to be reminded that the time of weeping will eventually lead to hope when we have Jesus as Lord of our lives.

**P**rayers: Lord, our prayer today is for all people who are grieving, especially those who have lost one child or more to death. May they be uplifted by your presence and assured that Your Son looks over (not overlooks) our children as well. Amen.

## Day 8

Sunday, November 29

Scripture reading: Hosea 11:1

### Out of Egypt

**O**bservation: The prophet Hosea was speaking of the nation of Israel, which had been called out of slavery in the land of Egypt. This passage points to Matthew 2:13-15, where we are reminded that Jesus too was called out of the land of Egypt. That was where his family had fled, and then lived for a while, to escape the bloodthirsty wrath of King Herod. Joseph, Mary, and Jesus stayed in Egypt until King Herod had died. Moses led the people of God on an exodus upon leaving Egypt: to the promised land and to freedom. Jesus led the people of God on an exodus upon leaving Egypt: to the cross and to freedom from sin for us.

**A**pplication: Jesus' service to us began even before he started his earthly ministry. He was born to take an exodus from the cradle to the cross, so that we might be saved.

**P**rayer: Lord, you had a plan from the very beginning. We would not be able to live up to what was needed for salvation. So, You sent Your Son Jesus to make the walk that we could not. Jesus made the exodus to the cross and gave us hope. Amen.

## Day 33

Thursday, December 24

Scripture reading: Matthew 2:3-6

### Disturbed

**O**bservation: It was disturbing news to Herod that possibly a new king was born. King Herod got violent when he felt himself threatened. He had even had his wife and two of his children murdered because he considered them a threat to his power. The wise men of Herod's court – the chief priests and teachers of the law – reported that the king the Magi were looking for was prophesied to be born in Bethlehem. Isn't it curious that the chief priests and teachers of the law know about where the king was to be born, yet had taken no effort to try to find him?

**A**pplication: What is good news for some people can be met by others with hostility, like with Herod, or with indifference, like with the religious leaders.

**P**rayer: Lord, we pray that when we think of Jesus, we will always approach him with thoughts of adoration, like the Magi. Jesus Christ came to save us from our sins, and thereby transform the world. Some appreciate that. Others do not. May we always stand in praise. Amen.

Day 32

Wednesday, December 23

Scripture reading: Matthew 2:1-2

### Magi

**O**bservation: There is not much we know about the Magi, which we have traditionally referred to as the wise men. Also, according to tradition, they were counselors of high standing from Parthia, near the city of ancient Babylon. Apparently, they were also astrologists who watched the stars for signs. A moving star was enough of an anomaly to cause them to leave their homeland and follow wherever this star would lead them. From their studies they had determined that this star would lead them to a king worthy of worship.

**A**pplication: Among the first people to recognize Jesus as king were people outside the nation of Israel. These were non-Jewish (Gentile) people who had come to worship one who would be king over them. That the Christ who had come was there for the Gentiles as well as the Jews would be a startling fact for the Israelites to consider.

**P**rayer: If Jesus did not also come to save the Gentile (non-Jewish) people, then you would not be reading this devotional, attending a church, or calling Jesus your Lord and Savior. Thanks be to God that Jesus came to save all people from their sins, Jew and Gentile alike. Amen.

Day 9

Monday, November 30

Scripture reading: Micah 5:2

### From Bethlehem Ephrathah

**O**bservation: When King Herod inquired about the visit of the Magi, he called together the chief priests and scribes of the people. They quoted this prophecy of Micah in response to Herod's concern about where the Messiah was to be born (Matt. 2:6). Bethlehem was such a small, seemingly unimportant little town. It was hard to believe that a future king would come from there. But Herod would take no chances, so he sent his contingent of soldiers there to murder any children who might challenge him for his throne.

**A**pplication: We need to be careful not to underestimate the worth of any person, any place, any thing that we might deem beneath our notice. God is able to take the seemingly insignificant and do something mighty and powerful from it. From "one of the little clans in Judah" (Micah 5:2) would come the mighty ruler of Israel and mighty ruler over us.

**P**rayer: Lord, help us to look at others through your eyes, to see the value that all people and all things of your creation have. All that you have created has sacred worth. Amen.

## Day 10

Tuesday, December 1

**S**cripture reading: Isaiah 9:6

### Wonderful Counselor

**O**bservation: This is a prophecy so beautiful and poetic that it is not uncommon to see it reprinted on many a Christmas card. “For a child has been born to us... Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” This is a word of great hope to a people who have long lived in exile and despair. “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light” (Is. 9:2).

**A**pplication: As we come to a close of reviewing some of the great prophecies about Christ’s birth, we are reminded that God’s great plan for salvation of all humankind had long before been set into motion, even since the beginning of time. Jesus’ story did not begin with the book of Matthew in the Old Testament. Our salvation was all a part of God’s plan from the very beginning. It took Jesus to accomplish that for us.

**P**ray: Wonderful Counselor, advise us for the future. Mighty God, may your power prepare the way. Everlasting Father, your plan is indeed eternal. Prince of Peace, you grant us hope in the midst of the chaos of our time. Thank you for your gift of salvation. Amen.

## Day 31

Tuesday, December 22

**S**cripture reading: Luke 2:39-40

### Jesus’ Childhood Years

**O**bservation: Scriptures don’t provide us much information about when Jesus was a boy growing up. We have quite a gap between the day of his circumcision, when he was eight days old, until he was twelve (v. 42). Then another gap in time from the incident when he was twelve until he begins his ministry at around age thirty. I don’t know about you, but I would have loved to read a biography of Jesus’ early earthly life. However, that is not the focus of the gospels. They are focused on why Jesus was born into this world. And so, the stories we do have point toward Jesus’ purpose, rather than his personality and personal history.

**A**pplication: Can you imagine growing up with Jesus? He “became strong, he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him” (v. 40). He no doubt amazed other people even when he was a youth.

**P**ray: Lord, we pray that when people look back and reflect on our lives, that at least some will be able to affirm that the grace of God was upon us. Help us be the examples of the Christian walk we need to be to point others to your son, Jesus. Amen.

## Day 30

Monday, December 21

**S**cripture reading: Luke 2:36-38

### Redemption

**O**bservation: Simeon had told Joseph and Mary that their baby boy was destined to cause the rising and falling of many, and to cause their own soul to be pierced (vv. 34-35). Joseph and Mary were still reeling from that news when another prophet, Anna, came up to them “at that very moment” (v. 38). Anna gave them assurance that everything would work out according to God’s plan by giving thanks to God and telling everyone about the child who would bring about the redemption of Jerusalem. Talk about an eventful day for Joseph and Mary that was full of emotional ups and downs.

**A**pplication: The way ahead was not going to be easy. There would be a lot of ups and downs – miracles, betrayal, stories of hope, words of denial. All would work out, though, as a part of God’s plan of redemption, for Jerusalem and for us.

**P**rayer: Lord, thank you for redeeming us. We were hardly worth redeeming, broken sinners that we are, yet you loved us enough for Jesus to die on the cross for our sins. Praise you for your amazing gift of grace. Amen.

## Day 11

Wednesday, December 2

**S**cripture reading: John 1:1-18

### In the Beginning

**O**bservation: The words, “in the beginning,” is how the book of Genesis starts out. Likewise, “in the beginning” is how the gospel of John starts out. We are definitely intended to draw a comparison. Jesus did not just “arrive on the scene” in Bethlehem. Jesus, as the Word of God made flesh, has been around since before the beginning of time. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). This is another reminder that God’s plan for salvation had been set in motion since before the beginning of time. God knew we could not save ourselves, so God had prepared to send us Jesus who would save us. God’s Word became flesh and lived among us (John 1:14).

**A**pplication: It is amazing to consider that even as Adam was naming the animals (Gen. 2:19), God was smiling upon him with a plan of salvation in mind. We watch over our children as they grow and we smile at our hopes and dreams for them. God did the same for us.

**P**rayer: Heavenly Father, how great Thou art! When we, in awesome wonder, consider all the worlds thy hands have made...our souls sing to thee! Amen.

Day 12

Thursday, December 3

Scripture reading: Matthew 1:1-17

## Genealogy

**O**bservation: Matthew arranged Jesus' genealogy in three groups of fourteen names each, making it easier for the typical Jew to remember all the names. This establishes that Jesus' stepfather, Joseph, was a descendant of Abraham and King David. Jesus' real father was God the Father, so he did not have a Jewish lineage except through his stepfather. Matthew was writing primarily to a Jewish community, so a genealogy was what a Jew would have considered to be "in the beginning." It was important for a Jew to be able to trace one's Israelite heritage back to Abraham.

**A**pplication: Whereas it is interesting to know what our roots are, we should not allow our present and future to be limited by our past. Some of the dark blots in Jesus' family tree were the stories about the harlot Rahab (v. 5), the Moabite Ruth (v. 5), and the scandal around Bathsheba (v. 6).

**P**rayers: Lord, we thank you for our ancestors. If it were not for them, we would not be here today. Thank you that Jesus accepts us for who we are, despite what some of our past may look like. Amen.

Day 29

Sunday, December 20

Scripture reading: Luke 2:33-35

## Pierced

**O**bservation: Simeon proclaimed words of prophecy over the infant Jesus. Jesus would be "a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of [the Sovereign Lord's] people Israel" (v. 32). That all sounded wonderful. Joseph and Mary marveled at the words. Then Simeon brought the hammer down: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, ...and a sword will pierce your own soul too" (vv. 34-35). Simeon was prophesying of how Mary would feel when she was watching her son while he was pierced to a cross. Her own heart would be pierced with grief.

**A**pplication: Good news and bad news seems to come together all too often for our taste. What would be bad news for Mary (watching her son die on a cross) was also good news for us (Jesus died to save us from our sins).

**P**rayers: Lord, we long for the day when there will only be good news for us to hear. And we know that won't happen this side of heaven. We are grateful for the good news we regularly do receive, and the grace you provide to face and find assurance during the difficult times. Amen.

## Day 28

Saturday, December 19

**S**cripture reading: Luke 2:25-32

### Waiting

**O**bservation: Simeon had waited a long time. According to tradition, he was an old man, righteous and devout, who had prayed a long time “for the consolation of Israel” (v. 25). His nation was in trouble and he knew it. And he also knew there was nothing he could do about it except pray and wait for God’s answer to his prayer. The Holy Spirit had revealed to him that he would not die before he did get an answer to his prayer. He recognized that answer immediately, in the person of an eight day old infant, Jesus. The song he sang in praise is called the “Nunc Dimittis,” based on the first words in a Latin translation.

**A**pplication: At Christmastime we know about waiting, don’t we? Usually it’s the children who have the hardest time of all, as they anticipate the presents under the Christmas tree. Through the pandemic crisis, we have had our challenges with waiting as well. Like Simeon, we pray, wait on God to answer our prayer in his timing, and pray some more.

**P**ray: Lord, help us to trust you more in our seasons of waiting, especially when they seem extra long, and to rely on your timing to see us through. Amen.

## Day 13

Friday, December 4

**S**cripture reading: Luke 3:23-38

### Another Genealogy

**O**bservation: This is another genealogy, similar to the one in Matthew 1:1-17, although this one is not divided into sections and it reverses the order, working from Joseph and back into time. It also omits any reference to women, such as Rahab, Ruth, and the wife of Uriah (Bathsheba). Note also that the lineage doesn’t end with Abraham, but is traced back to God (v. 38). It has been suggested by commentators that Luke purposefully traced the lineage back to God so that Jesus’ life was identified with all nations, not just with the Jews.

**A**pplication: All of us are related to Jesus. According to Paul the apostle we are co-heirs with Christ (Rom. 8:17) and are also “Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Gal. 3:29). We are part of the family of God.

**P**ray: Lord, forgive us when we think of Jesus as just some historical figure that really has nothing to do with us today. He is family. We are his family. We are surely as connected to him as we are other members of our ancestral heritage. We are blessed to be called “heirs” of the kingdom, along with Christ. Amen.

## Day 14

Saturday, December 5

Scripture reading: Luke 1:5-18

### The One to Prepare the Way

**O**bservation: It may seem strange to read about the birth of John the Baptist when at Christmastime we are used to hearing about the birth of Jesus. Yet God would not bring Jesus into this world until his arrival first had one to herald his coming. It is interesting that the news of the coming of John the Baptist was met with doubt by his father, whereas the news of the coming of Jesus was met with submission by his mother. John would be the child of aged parents. Jesus would be the child of a young virgin. God's work continued on, even in the face of such differences.

**A**pplication: Sometimes we make excuses for why God can't work through us – we're too young or too old, we are too innocent or too full of doubt, or a myriad of other excuses we could come up with. With God nothing is impossible. With God no one is out of reach to be used by him for his glory.

**P**rayers: Father, I make myself available to you to use as you will. Lead me through my times of fear and doubt, so that I may best serve you and prepare the way for whatever it is you have planned. Amen.

## Day 27

Friday, December 18

Scripture reading: Luke 2:21-24

### Doing What They Can

**O**bservation: Jewish male babies in ancient Israel were named on their eighth day of life, at the same time they were circumcised. It was a Jewish ritual that demonstrated a sign of passage that the child was incorporated into the life of the entire Jewish community. An offering of animal sacrifice was to be given on behalf of the child being circumcised. If the family was wealthy, they could offer a lamb. If the family could not afford a lamb, they could sacrifice a pair of doves or two young pigeons. Mary and Joseph apparently could not afford much, but they did what they could, and offered the minimum sacrifice.

**A**pplication: Sadly, Christmastime for many has become a time where the gifts they offer come more from a sense of trying to outdo (or out-give) what someone else is able to provide. Thus, what was intended to be a time spent in the spirit of giving turns into a vendetta in the spirit of competition.

**P**rayers: Lord, thank you for the reminder that Christmas was never meant to be a time of trying to outdo someone else. We are, like Joseph and Mary, to do what we can and give God the glory. Amen.

## Day 26

Thursday, December 17

**S**cripture reading: Luke 2:16-20

### Treasures

**O**bservation: At Christmastime we often speak of treasures. Well, in today's culture we refer to them more as gifts. Treasures are usually those things that we are given that carry a lot of meaning, often sentimental significance, for us. In Matthew's gospel, we hear about the treasures the Magi bring to Jesus: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. In today's reading in the gospel of Luke, we read of a different kind of treasure: Mary treasuring in her heart what the shepherds told her (v. 19). The treasure in the heart can be more meaningful than the treasure of goods we could possess.

**A**pplication: This Christmas consider treasuring in your heart Jesus and the words people tell you about Jesus. The transformation of heart you receive by treasuring Jesus is the greatest gift you could ever know.

**P**ray: Lord, your desire to be our God and for us to be your children is a treasure, a gift beyond compare. Jesus, let us take to heart what you needed to do – going to the cross to save us from our sins -- to make that possible. Amen.

## Day 15

Sunday, December 6

**S**cripture reading: Luke 1:19-25

### Doubt

**O**bservation: Zechariah, in the light of the fantastic news that he was to have a son in his old age, doubted the word of the angel Gabriel. Gabriel's response indicated he was incensed with Zechariah's doubt, so he muted Zechariah until the child would be born. Zechariah could not even tell people what he had just experienced. And so, with Zechariah's imposed silence and Elizabeth's voluntary seclusion, John the Baptist was born into a relatively quiet world. Quite a beginning for one who would become known for his fiery preaching.

**A**pplication: One would think that it would be hard to doubt God's ability while standing in the presence of an angel. But Zechariah doubted. Is it no wonder that we often wrestle with doubt ourselves? There were consequences to Zechariah's doubt, but he was still used as one of God's instruments. That means there is hope for the likes of us as well.

**P**ray: Lord, forgive us for our times of doubt. We are grateful that our doubts, even though there are consequences for them, do not cut us off from your grace. Amen.

## Day 16

Monday, December 7

Scripture reading: Luke 1:26-34

### Questioning

**O**bservation: Although both Zechariah and Mary first reacted to the angel in fear and were told “Do not fear” (v. 12-13, 29-30), they had very different responses to Gabriel’s startling news for them. Mary’s questioning the angel was different than Zechariah’s doubting the angel. Whereas Zechariah expressed doubt about what God could do, Mary expressed a question about what she was capable of doing. Mary was concerned about personal failure. Zechariah was concerned that God could not live up to what he promised.

**A**pplication: I once held a Bible study where one of the participants remained very quiet. When I inquired about her perpetual silent demeanor, she responded that she was taught never to question God. For one, if we never ask questions, how are ever going to learn? Secondly, asking questions is not the same as doubting. Asking questions means we want to learn more. Doubting means there is no room for discussion.

**P**rayer: Lord, help us to want to learn more about you and your ways. That would be a life-long adventure well worth taking. Amen.

## Day 25

Wednesday, December 16

Scripture reading: Luke 2:13-15

### Surprise!

**O**bservation: I try to imagine what it may have been like to be one of the shepherds that extraordinary night. They are watching their sheep as usual. It’s night time. And then, all of a sudden, out of nowhere, a stranger appears among them. And then, the whole area is basked in an unearthly (heavenly, actually) glow. No wonder they were terrified! As they are trying to adjust their senses to one such being standing in their midst, a whole host of these beings appear all around them. All of them begin calling out, their voices rising loudly and in unison to words of praise. Can you imagine?

**A**pplication: I have been surprised by God before, but never to that magnitude! I often call out to God to answer my prayers. But, have you ever noticed in the Scriptures, that at the times when God does show up with an angelic presence, the first response is fright?

**P**rayer: Lord, perhaps we are lulled almost to sleep in our relationship with you. We may be taking you for granted, rather than standing in awe of the magnificent God that you are. Sometimes we need to be surprised to make us aware again of your presence. Awaken us, O God. Amen.

## Day 24

Tuesday, December 15

Scripture reading: Luke 2:8-12

### Lowly People

**O**bservation: As far as social status in the community is concerned, shepherds were about the lowest on the scale. They couldn't take off time to go to worship, because their jobs were too demanding. They were often tricksters, or even thieves, in order to supplement their low wages. They rarely washed. And they smelled like sheep's wool. They would not be on anyone's list of most influential people – except God's. He chose the likes of shepherds to be the ones to first receive the news of a newborn king.

**A**pplication: When we read Scripture, we find that time and time again God chooses some of the most common, most unimpressive, and at times most repulsive people to be his spokespersons and heralds of something new. How different God's criteria is than ours! Do you think God chooses the ordinary so that we would take note that anything extraordinary is because of him and not us?

**P**ray: Lord, you look at our hearts rather than our appearance. Thank you for choosing common folk, people like us, to be the bearers of such great news that Jesus was born to save us from our sins. If other, less than perfect, people could serve you well, then so can we. Amen.

## Day 17

Tuesday, December 8

Scripture reading: Luke 1:35-38

### Nothing Impossible with God

**O**bservation: In the New International Version (NIV) of the Bible, verse 37 reads, "For no word from God will ever fail." I like the King James Version (KJV) which reads, "For with God nothing shall be impossible." Such an overwhelming declaration to a young woman, whom some commentators say was likely only about fourteen years old. Mary responds with submission to the Lordship of God: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be according to your word" (v. 38, NRSV).

**A**pplication: Sometimes the magnitude of the task set before us appears too large for us to handle. And it would be, if we were to try to tackle it alone. At such times we need to remind ourselves that God is with us. And with God nothing is impossible. Thanks be to God that God sometimes takes us along for the ride.

**P**ray: Lord, you know the situation we are in right now. It can look overwhelming to us. Grant us courage, strength, and assurance that you are indeed with us and will provide for us what we could otherwise not provide for ourselves. Amen.

## Day 18

Wednesday, December 9

**S**cripture reading: Luke 1:39-45

### At the Sound of a Greeting

**O**bservation: While we have been through this time of isolation due to the coronavirus, the sound of a greeting carries that much more significance. The greeting represents someone who wants to be in relationship with us, and we thrive on such times of intimacy. Elizabeth exclaimed in a loud voice when Mary came to visit her. At the sound of Mary's greeting, the baby who would come to be known as the John the Baptist leapt within Elizabeth's womb.

**A**pplication: Relationships are so important to us. Mary had a relationship with Elizabeth. They were cousins, going through similar challenging times of pregnancy, after being visited by the same angel. Who would believe them? They did have each other. Elizabeth's baby would have a relationship with Mary's baby. John the Baptist would be the herald for the coming of Jesus as the Messiah.

**P**rayer: Thank you, Lord, for the wonderful relationships we have with good friends and supporters in our lives. We also thank you for the relationship you desire to have with us, which you proved by sending us your beloved Son. Amen.

## Day 23

Monday, December 14

**S**cripture reading: Luke 2:4-7

### Something Borrowed

**O**bservation: Something was pointed out to me recently where I had not made a connection before. When Jesus was born, he was born in a borrowed manger and wrapped in linen cloths. When Jesus died, he was buried in a borrowed tomb and wrapped in linen cloths. From birth to death, Jesus never really had anything he could call his own, at least from a human perspective. All during his life he moved around from place to place, and there really were no material goods that he could call his own.

**A**pplication: I often reflect how often I say I want to be like Jesus. Then I wonder how much being like Jesus means living like Jesus did, only for it to dawn on me just how far from being like Jesus that I am, at least in the respect of possessing no material goods. Jesus lived day by day through the generosity of others, with not even a roof over his head to call his own.

**P**rayer: Lord, I too often depend on my possession of material things for my sense of security and hope for the future, rather than focus on just how much I should be depending on your day to day providence instead. Your grace is sufficient. Amen.

## Day 22

Sunday, December 13

**S**cripture reading: Luke 2:1-3

### Context

**O**bservation: Prophecy stated that Jesus was to be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). Yet as the time for Jesus' birth drew near, Mary and Joseph were living in Nazareth. What would cause them to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem so late in Mary's pregnancy? A census called for by the Roman Empire! Every person was to be registered in their hometown. As powerful as the Roman Empire was, God maneuvered "the powers to be" so that Jesus could be born at the very place it was prophesied he would be born.

**A**pplication: We look upon our leaders in awe. We marvel at the power wielded by our government. Yet that power is as nothing when compared to the might and power of our Lord.

**P**ray: Lord, let us not forget that you are the one who is in control. As impressed as we may be with our human made structures, creations, and forms of government, you are the Lord of history. You see all that has been, all that is, and all that could be. We are grateful to live under your guiding hand. Amen.

## Day 19

Thursday, December 10

**S**cripture reading: Luke 1:46-56

### Magnificent

**O**bservation: This song is known as the Magnificat, based on the first word of the poem as it is written in Latin: "magnified." "My soul magnifies the Lord," Mary sings. Her first words give thanks for the blessing God has bestowed upon her. The second part of the song speaks of revolution, where the things they have once known will be turned on their head. Rulers will be brought down, but the humble lifted up. The hungry will be filled with good things, but the rich sent away empty.

**A**pplication: Through the Lord the things we have so often taken for granted will be reversed. Those who we think insignificant are able to do amazing things through God's grace. God continues to amaze us by especially choosing to work through the least, the lost, and the broken.

**P**ray: Lord, forgive me for the times when I have tried to magnify my own significance. You are the one who is significant. More than that. You are the one who is magnificent. No one else can compare. Yet you care for each one of us. You lead the insignificant to importance, the lost to new horizons, and the broken to become new creations. Thank you, in Jesus' name. Amen.

## Day 20

Friday, December 11

Scripture reading: Luke 1:57-66

### What Next?

**O**bservation: It had been a long time since Zechariah had been able to speak. It had been over nine months previously that Zechariah had emerged from the temple, unable to speak. Add to that eight days since the child was born. It was the day of circumcision. Naming day for a male Jewish child. It was custom to name the child after another relative. When Elizabeth instead insisted the child's name was John, and Zechariah, through writing on a tablet agreed, the crowds were amazed. They were shocked even more when Zechariah began speaking again. Not only speaking, but singing God's praises. What then did all this mean?

**A**pplication: If the crowd was amazed that a mute man could suddenly speak again, and that a child could be named after no relative they knew of, then they better hold on. They had seen nothing yet. God was going to do something unprecedented through this child.

**P**rayers: Lord, the moment we stop being amazed at what you're doing in our lives and in the world around us, we should check our pulse. We should always be on the edge of anticipation, wondering what's next. Amen.

## Day 21

Saturday, December 12

Scripture reading: Luke 1:67-80

### Preparing the Way

**O**bservation: This passage of Scripture is referred to as "Benedictus" (The Song of Zechariah). After months of silence, Zechariah breaks out in song. The Lord is fulfilling what he promised. That is what Zechariah is singing about: "He has raised up a horn of salvation for us" (v. 69). And the very son that was just named would be the one who would "go before the Lord to prepare the way for him" (v. 76). Even at eight days old, John's path is set before him. John's way is prepared, just as he had been born to prepare for the way of the Lord.

**A**pplication: God has a plan for us, even before we are born. That may be difficult for us to comprehend. Yet Scriptures say that God had plans for Jeremiah before he was born (Jer. 1:5). He had plans for John the Baptist before he was born and named as well.

**P**rayers: Lord, you have a plan for my life. That is why you created me. Help me to live into your plan, and to not try to wrest control of my life away from you, where it rightfully belongs. Help me to point to the salvation of the Lord through whatever means you have designed me for. Amen.