

HOLY INTERRUPTIONS

ADVENT STUDY
2025



St. Andrew's
Community Church
A GLOBAL METHODIST CONGREGATION

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“Holy Interruptions”

ADVENT means “arrival” and signifies the start of an event or the arrival of a person. In Christian communities around the world, **ADVENT** refers to a four-week season in the Church calendar dedicated to the hopeful anticipation for the arrival of Jesus. It is a time to intentionally engage in **PRAYER, MEDITATION, and SCRIPTURE STUDY** that emphasizes **HOPE, PEACE, JOY** and **LOVE**.

Even though the nation of Israel had long waited for the arrival of Jesus, His announcement and birth were very much **HOLY INTERRUPTIONS** to those in the original Christmas story. A **HOLY INTERRUPTION** is a surprise moment where God invites us to a deeper faith and relationship with Him by disrupting our normal routine, capturing our attention and speaking to us.



One moment:

- Mary and Joseph are in love and preparing for their wedding and life together;
- The shepherds are going about their normal routine tending to the sheep;
- The wisemen are studying the stars just like any other day.

The next moment, because of a **HOLY INTERRUPTION**, their lives and our lives are changed forever.

This daily reader, written by your three pastors, will take a closer look at the **HOLY INTERRUPTIONS** experienced by those at the time of Jesus' birth. As we spend intentional time together during this season of **ADVENT** in prayer and studying God's word, let us not lose sight of the **HOPE, PEACE, JOY** and **LOVE** we experience today because of the holiest of interruptions 2,000 years ago.

Rev. Joshua Coats

Sunday, November 30

Hope – Genesis 3:15; Genesis 49:10; 2 Samuel 7:12–16; Isaiah 7:14; Luke 1: 26–56

This week, for the first Sunday of Advent, we light the candle of **HOPE**. Prior to Mary's story, in the Old Testament, hope is found in the mighty acts God has accomplished in the past, providing a hope when all hope appeared to be lost. God has acted on His people's behalf in the past, therefore they can hope in Him. The prophets instructed Israel to be expectant of a new kind of hope: one like a Son of Man, a Messiah, an anointed one. In Genesis, the serpent is told *"And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel"* (**Genesis 3:15**). From that point forward, a redeemer is expected through the offspring of a woman.

Through the life of Noah, the pattern is established that the obedience of one man could save the lives of many. The covenant with Abraham establishes a chosen people and his call to sacrifice his only son on a mountain—only to be given **HOPE** at the last moment in the form of a ram—points to a greater sacrifice that will be made on a mount called Golgotha. The legacy of grace continues through Jacob, who became the father of 12 tribes and he is assured through the

lineage of one of his sons, Judah, a coming king will arrive (**Genesis 49:10**). Through Moses, we see God's salvific power to provide a Passover lamb to save His people from certain death and to make a way through a sea where there appears to be none.

Through David, God's kingdom rule is established and the prophecy is made that the coming redeemer would be of his line (**2 Samuel 7:12-16**). It is the prophet Isaiah who shares another helpful clue: "*Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel*" (**Isaiah 7:14**).

There are many other clues and signs to point to Jesus as the Messiah. But it is to this one that we will turn our attention over the next several days. It is to this sign we can look and rejoice as we read of the story of Mary in the book of Luke. The mere fact that this story exists should give us great hope that we can indeed trust our good and great God to accomplish His purposes in the world, even when all hope seems lost. HE is the source of our hope, our strength and our portion forever!

Scriptures for Further Reading: Psalms 73:26; Psalm 130: 5-8; Psalm 146:5-8; Isaiah 25: 9; Isaiah 40:31; Lamentations 3:22-30; Daniel 2:44; Daniel 7:13-14; Romans 8: 23-25

Monday, December 1

Confused and disturbed – Read Luke 1:26–29.

Scripture tells us that, in the 6th month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the Angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee, to a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David. Gabriel appeared to her and said, “Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!”

The scripture does not tell us where she was when this occurs. Likely, she was alone. Throughout the centuries, artists often portray her in a home (her own family’s home), room or porch. She’s often busy doing something else—reading, praying, even doing household chores.

So, it is no surprise that when Gabriel shows up and makes his announcement, Mary’s reaction to this salutation is described as “confused and disturbed”. In Greek, the terms are **διεταράχθη** and **διελογίζετο**, something akin to being “troubled” and “to reason, ponder or debate within one’s self.” It is clear, though, that she is not just confused and disturbed because suddenly she is in the presence of the ANGEL Gabriel. Her reaction is linked with what Gabriel says. And it is no wonder!

Imagine being called “favored” by an angel or even being told “The Lord is with you.” It is apparent from the start Mary is humble and unaware of what she has done in her short life to earn such accolades.

According to cultural customs of when a young woman would have been expected to be betrothed at the time, Mary would likely have only been between 12 and 16 years old. At such a young age, with little experience on this earth, what could this young teenage girl from Nazareth (can anything good come from Nazareth?) have done to be chosen and favored by God? The implication is...nothing. She is simply bestowed with the precious grace and favor of God.

It can be disturbing and confusing when you consider how freely God gives His grace. Who are we that we should deserve something so precious? God often chooses those with ordinary and marginal places in the world to play a grand part in His extraordinary plan. Their weakness can only point to His great strength. The hope for today is the reminder that it has never been about what WE do anyway but what God does in and through us. Let us find great hope in Mary’s story today.

Scriptures for Further Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:27; 2 Corinthians 12:9; Ephesians 2:8-9

Tuesday, December 2

Do not be afraid – Read Luke 1:30–33

“Do not be afraid.” These are words easier said than done! Mary has just come face to face with an archangel of the Lord. What a **HOLY INTERRUPTION** indeed!

The name “Gabriel” means “God is my strength” or “Mighty one of God”. Previously, Gabriel has been seen visiting Mary’s cousin Elizabeth’s husband, Zechariah. But he is also seen in the book of Daniel (chapters 8 and 9) offering Daniel help and understanding with the visions the Lord shows him. In every instance where Gabriel shows up, fear is the immediate reaction. As one who can stand in the presence of God, Gabriel must be very mighty indeed!

It is amazing to consider his words in response to Mary’s apparent fear: “*Do not be afraid, Mary. You have found favor with God.*” Favor. What a concept! What has Mary done in her short life to earn such favor with God? Tradition has some answers, for example that she was exceptionally devoted and obedient growing up. It certainly helps that she is engaged to be married to Joseph, who is in the line of David, and is also herself a descendant of David as the

prophets foretold. But the favor of God is tricky. Is it to be earned by an obedient life? Or is it freely given? We cannot know for sure.

Noah is another with whom God found favor. Isn't it fascinating that this favor exists prior to either person's obedience of the special mission they are given? In any case, it is the favor of God to entrust Mary to build a new kind of ark. Not one of wood, like that built by Noah. But one within herself, built by the Holy Spirit. Within her own body, she is to hold the future **HOPE** of the world, One who will be enthroned and reign over a kingdom that will never end.

Scriptures for Further Reading: Genesis 6:8; Daniel 8:16, 9:21; Luke 1:19



Wednesday, December 3

How will this be?...I am the Lord's servant – Read
Luke 1:34-38

We begin to understand just how much Mary's life has been interrupted in this story by her response to the angel in **Luke 1:34**: *"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"* The Greek is roughly "for a man I have not known/experienced." Mary is inexperienced but she knows how a child is supposed to be conceived and she knows part of the puzzle is missing.

But "the Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." The same word meaning "come on" is used in Acts 1:18, when Jesus explains what to expect when the Holy Spirit arrives and the term

"overshadow" brings to mind the pillar of cloud that revealed the presence of God in Exodus. None of these terms convey coercion but the act of being empowered.



It is made even more clear Mary is not being forced into anything unwillingly when she responds “*I am the Lord’s servant...may your word to me be fulfilled.*” Mary responds as if she had a decision or a choice in the matter. Because she did. But, in spite of the burden she knows it will be—young, unmarried, and pregnant in a town full of people who are bound to notice—it is implied here that Mary gave her full consent to do whatever needed to be done.

God does not force Himself on her, just as He does not force Himself on anyone. But Mary’s choice is to allow her life to be wholly interrupted. Wholly...and yet also Holy. Mary chooses courageous obedience. Just as in the beginning, one woman, Eve, chose to disobey and the whole of humanity suffered, another woman, Mary, chooses to obey and God uses her obedience to change EVERYTHING. Mary’s “Yes!” is an open pathway to the fulfillment of **HOPE**.

Scriptures for Further Reading: Genesis 3:6; Exodus 40:35; Acts 1:8

Thursday, December 4

Mary Visits Elizabeth – Read Luke 1:39–45

Today, our scene shifts from one **HOLY INTERRUPTION** to another. Mary hurries to the home of her elder cousins, Zechariah and Elizabeth. Upon her quick arrival and greeting, Elizabeth is suddenly filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaims *“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!”* Can you even imagine?

She has not even told her cousin the news yet and Elizabeth KNOWS! She is not fearfully preparing to yell at Mary and ponder every little way this could go wrong. She is overcome with joy and feels as if she herself is favored by the Lord just by her cousin’s visit. Wouldn’t it be amazing if every person Mary encountered was suddenly so full of the Holy Spirit? If they all could have such a Holy Interruption in their day?

I wonder if she thought God might work the same way in Joseph? Remember, Mary has not even told him yet. So, already, Elizabeth and her baby know before the man who would be the child's earthly father.

And consider John the Baptist. Here, we actually get to see one of Gabriel's proclamations about him come true: "...*he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born.*" He is already preparing a way for the Lord. What a **HOPEFUL** moment this must have been for Mary. Any fear or doubt that could have been created by Elizabeth's opinion on the matter is immediately wiped away by the revelation of the Holy Spirit. The God she knows has made a way where there was none is already fighting on her behalf.

How is God fighting on your behalf today? In what ways would you like for the revelation of the Holy Spirit to go before you today? Pray for God to move in your difficult situations as He did for Mary. May you proclaim like the prophet Micah: "*But as for me, I watch in hope for the Lord, I wait for God my Savior; my God will hear me.*"

Scriptures for Further Reading: Micah 7:7; Isaiah 40:3;
Luke 1:15

Friday, December 5

Mary Worships – Read Luke 1:46–56

Our devotional today includes what is often called the Magnificat. The name comes from the first word of the Latin translation of **Luke 1:46** (“Magnificat anima mea Dominum” or “My soul magnifies the Lord”). When we see the stories of women in Scripture as they encounter the **HOPE** of God, they are often moved to worship. Just look at Miriam (fun fact: our Mary’s name shares the same origin as the name Miriam) in **Exodus 15** and Hannah in **1 Samuel 2**. It is also apparent Mary knows her Psalms because different portions of the Psalms are referenced throughout.

It is telling that Mary’s response to what she has seen and heard from her cousin Elizabeth is to worship and praise God. It paints a telling picture of who she is as a person, of Who she knows God to be, and her **HOPE** for what the child within her will accomplish. To Mary, God is faithful, mighty, merciful, worthy of praise but also able to see and lift up those the world considers lowly. She praises in the past tense, as though God has already accomplished what He has set out to do in His mission, creating justice for the humble, meek, hungry and poor. The journey has barely even begun

and she is already rejoicing! Hope does that though, doesn't it? Hope has a way of stirring our hearts to see our situations differently, to see the whole world through a different lens.

I wonder what might happen if, like Mary, we allowed our **HOPE** – and more importantly, **WHO** we have our hope in—to determine our course for the day? What if we tackled every new day and situation by praising God first for what we know He will accomplish through it? Jesus didn't begin His earthly ministry until He was around 30 years old. Here, Mary is already praising God for what she knows He will accomplish even if it is 30 years away. Now that is **HOPE!**

The Magnificat is like a spiritual investment in a future reality. How can you worship the Lord today for the **HOPE** He gives you for the future? Can you look at your situation, your family, your loved ones, your calling or career and rejoice today over how God will use them for His purposes in the future? Because that is hoping like Mary.

Scriptures for Further Reading: Habakuk 3:18; Psalm 34:1-3; Psalm 103:17; Romans 8:28

Saturday, December 6

Mary kept all these things in her heart – Read Luke 2:1-19

Here we see a very pregnant Mary traveling with her betrothed, Joseph. The time came for the baby to be born and he was...

That has to be the shortest birth story ever written. There is no account of who helped, or the pain that was felt, or estimate of the baby's weight or length, or how much weight the mama gained while she was pregnant? What is even more unconventional is that this is the birth story of Jesus! From the very beginning, we see what Mary claimed about God in the Magnificat to be true: *"He has brought down rulers from their thrones, and has exalted those who were humble."* (Luke 1:52).

Little did she know the ruler brought down from His throne would be God Himself, humbly born and placed in a manger and most certainly a **"Holy Interruption"** during a required journey.

So humble were the accommodations in fact, that lowly shepherds were living in fields nearby and keeping watch over their sheep. They, too, received a **Holy Interruption**, this time an angel of the Lord and later a whole heavenly host, proclaiming a sign of **HOPE**: a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. The shepherds hurried to find Mary and Joseph and the baby and then went to “Tell it on the Mountain,” so to speak. But Mary...

Scripture tells us Mary “...*treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart* (**Luke 2:19**). It has been hinted at that this is a clear indicator that Mary was the author’s source for information about the birth of Jesus. But the idea of her holding all these things as treasure reveals the great **HOPE** she had for what God was already accomplishing. What a real treasure it is to be told what God will do and then to watch and participate as He accomplishes it!

Scriptures for Further Reading:

2 Corinthians 1:20; Joshua 23:14-15



Sunday, December 7

Peace

Today marks the second Sunday of Advent. We celebrate by lighting the second candle of the Advent wreath, the **PEACE** candle. God's incarnation of Himself in the birth of Jesus carries the expectation of **PEACE**. In fact, the King of glory is called by many names. One of them is the "*Prince of Peace*."

This promise came through the words spoken by the prophet, Isaiah. In telling forth the promise of God to send the Messiah, we read these words:

"For a child is born to us, a son is given to us.

The government will rest on his shoulders.

And He will be called: Wonderful Counselor

Mighty God, Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace."

Isaiah 9:6

God's people expected the Messiah to be a great military leader like their forefather, King David. When you live under Roman oppression, could the Messiah be anything less than one who conquers enemies? Surely like their forebears praying for deliverance from slavery to Egypt, God would send another deliverer to bring about rest from their enemies. And yet, God has a different plan.

Reflection: Is there anything that causes you to feel oppressed, stressed or distressed? How do you expect God to deliver you? What if God chooses a different way to bring peace into your life?

Prayer: O God Who rules over all creation, our world is less than what You created it to be. Instead of living in constant peace, our lives are stressed and oppressed by the chaos and turmoil of this world. Help us to breathe deeply, and call upon the name “*Prince of Peace*”. AMEN



Monday, December 8

Peace

We learn to enjoy quiet moments. They bring balance to the frantic pace that so many of us live. We are able to settle under our favorite blanket. We get a book to read, listen to quiet music and may light a fire in our hearth or simply a scented candle. Maybe we even have a cup of something hot to drink. Life is good. Then there is an interruption.

Maybe it is your only day to sleep in late after an exhausting week, and your neighbor's dogs bark before the sun rises. Or you are trying to have a quiet, relaxing moment to decompress from the day, when your neighbor decides to sit around a chiminea while blasting Christmas music. You enjoy

Christmas music, but you don't really need to hear "All I want for Christmas is you" with karaoke singers.

Or someone contacts you with a so-called "emergency," but as you listen you know this could have been handled later.

Nevertheless, the urgency they feel interrupts your peace.



Disturbing the peace is not a holy interruption. At least it doesn't seem that way. Joseph, the one who is betrothed to Mary, has his peace disturbed. It had to be very unnerving to listen to the news that she is going to have a baby. There is only one way people have babies, and that is not possible in their relationship. Surely Joseph is right to be disturbed. What does God say about this?

Reflection: Think of a time someone disturbed your peace. How did you handle it? Would you handle it differently if it happened again?

Prayer: Holy God, we admit that we like the quiet peaceful moments that help us have quiet peaceful lives. When we hear someone teach us Your way, it can shake us out of our comfort and disturbs our peace. Give us faith, God, that You act in ways that are greater than what we have believed.
AMEN

Tuesday, December 9

Peace

Hannibal Smith was the leader of a group from a 1980s television show, The A Team. Somehow at the end of each episode Hannibal would light a victory cigar, smile and then state “I love it when a plan comes together.” When we make plans and they come together to produce the desired result, we can truly appreciate how all the preparation makes a difference.

Perhaps you have heard of PPPPPP. This stands for “Previous Proper Planning Prevents Poor Performance.” Joseph had a plan to marry Mary, and likely that plan included eventually starting a family. His plan likely included living happily ever after. And then the interruption comes along to seemingly derail a carefully prepared plan. This is why we sometimes think “We make our plans and God laughs” because God has a different plan.

The amazing thing is that God’s plan for Joseph’s life was bigger than Joseph’s plan for his own life. God chose Joseph to be the earthly father to the Prince of Peace. Imagine how that disrupted Joseph’s plans! Imagine how disruptive this news was in Joseph’s life!

The result of this was unsettling for Joseph. In quiet moments when we often experience peace, Joseph's mind would have been filled with many thoughts. After weighing his options, it was clear that Mary did not need to have him pile on with others who would question her purity. "*He decided to break the engagement quietly.*" (**Matthew 1:19b**) Then he would move on to a different plan...until God shows that His plan is better.

Reflection: Have you ever had a plan that God disrupted? Did you respond with disappointment for the plan or trust that God's plan was better?

Prayer: Holy God, we do love it when our plans work out. We sense that we are smart, thorough and well prepared. Help us to appreciate that as good as our plans may seem, Your plans are always better. Your plans bring glory to You, and You give us peace that You have our best interests close to Your heart. AMEN

Wednesday, December 10

Peace

Have you ever had a dream that seems so real, that when you wake up, you have to pause to think about it? Have you ever had a dream where you suddenly had an answer to a question or problem that you are seeking an answer for? Has God ever spoken to you in a dream?

Imagine Joseph waking up after a night with a very real dream. He had made up his mind to deliver the hard/sad news that he was not going to marry Mary because of this holy interruption of pregnancy. God's plan is different, and it is communicated by an angel Joseph dreams about. It is reasonable to suspect that God had never spoken to Joseph in a dream before this moment. The next question then is "How did Joseph decide God was speaking to him in a dream?"

The gospel does not really offer an answer to that question. Perhaps Joseph asked a prophet since they sometimes interpret dreams. Maybe there was another person that confirmed this idea of God dream-speaking. We really don't know. And yet...we do get the idea that Joseph was 100% committed to marrying Mary and being the child's father.

With that in mind, consider another educated guess. That guess is that Joseph had peace about the decision to follow through. It stands to reason that he was at peace with the decision because he was at peace with God.

Reflection: We make many big decisions over the course of our lives. These may include our jobs, getting married, starting a company, moving to a new city, giving our lives to Jesus...fill in your own blanks. What gives you peace whenever you make a big decision?

Prayer: Holy God, when Your plan calls us to a direction, we ask that You would speak to us so that our hearts and minds are at peace. Strengthen our faith so that we are not half-hearted or mostly hearted. Rather may we be 100% committed like Joseph was. AMEN

Thursday, December 11

Peace

If you haven't named a baby, then please know this. It is much more challenging than naming a family pet. There are many considerations that people use to name a child. Family names are considered for acceptance or rejection. Parents want to pick a name that others will not make fun of. Trendy names seem to cycle among generations, and some simply look for unique spellings. There is often purpose and reason for choosing the name.

So, what do you name an immaculately conceived baby? According to Luke's gospel, Mary is told that she will have a baby, and she is to name him "Jesus." Of course, in the Jewish faith community it was the father usually having the authority to name the child, and said child usually has a family name. Jesus was not a family name on Joseph's side. So why did they choose that name?

They didn't choose the name. God chose the name! The angel visiting Joseph in a dream also said the baby would be named "Jesus." When God chooses the name the stress of having to decide was non-existent. Like all Jewish names, the name "Jesus" has significance. It means "the LORD saves."

Reflection: Why did your parents choose your given name?
Does it have significant meaning that also helps describe
your life?

Prayer: Oh God Who saves us, we thank You
for sending Jesus for our salvation! We know
that our sin separates us from You, but Jesus
saves us so that we have peace with You.
Thank you, in Jesus' name. AMEN



Friday, December 12

Peace

Whenever thinking of peace, most people think of the absence of conflict. Wise people know that peace can be experienced even when conflict is raging. It is easy to imagine this is true for Joseph.

Consider that God's plan interrupts Joseph's plan for his life, and now Joseph is 100% committed to this plan. Still it is reasonable to believe Joseph had a lot of conflict to deal with and overcome because of this. Other men in the faith community likely thought Joseph was marrying an immoral woman, not a woman of purity. Likely they believed Joseph was dishonest about her pregnancy coming from

supernatural intervention. This would hurt Joseph's business, reputation and standing in the faith community. Likely he was not welcomed by those who believed him to be dishonest.

Joseph did not listen to the voices of the naysayers. Even though he may have been called a social pariah, he did not falter in his faithfulness to God's plan. Having been called to a role of a unique,



scandalous idea, Joseph had peace. He responded to God, made his decision and was able to remain faithful despite any rejection or consequences. It was most certainly well with his soul.

Reflection: What is the craziest decision you have made? Did people criticize you? Did you lose friends over it? Did you stand strong or allow peer pressure to change your mind?

Prayer: Lord, let our hearts have peace that strengthens us when faced with conflict. May we sing again the old song:

*When peace like a river attendeth my way
When sorrows like sea billows roll
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say
It is well, it is well with my soul...AMEN*



Saturday, December 13

Peace

The trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem must have been a journey filled with emotions. Joseph knew the due date for this baby had to be getting very close. What would happen if Mary went into labor while they were out in the middle of nowhere?

And they could not have been happy about the journey to begin with. Each step was a constant reminder that the Roman government was in charge. The Romans would not let them register for the census at home. They had to travel. Why did the Romans even need to take the census! They treated the Jewish people as a lesser race of old religious myths. And the stress of knowing that Bethlehem would be crowded and they may not find a place to stay. Doesn't sound too peaceful.

Let's remember that this is God's plan. God would get them to Bethlehem because He had the prophet share that is where the Messiah would be born. Hundreds of years before the census, God knew Joseph and Mary would have to travel to Bethlehem. And the lack of accommodations did not take God by surprise. God's Spirit moved in a person's heart to give them some less than desirable sleeping arrangements.

What was Joseph's response? Faith had taken him this far, so surely faith would sustain him in God's peace. Jesus – the LORD that saves – has been born. Imagine Joseph singing a song that would be written about 1800 years later “Hail the heaven born Prince of Peace! Hail the Sun of righteousness!”

Reflection: Have you ever had an experience when travel plans broke down, and yet you could see God at work in the chaos? If so, share this with your family or close friends.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, when we consider Joseph's experiences of your birth, we stand in awe of this man of faith. May we learn and grow in our discipleship from the only man to ever call You his son. May we be as courageous, as faithful and as steadfast in trusting Your plans. AMEN



Sunday, December 14

Joy

Today marks the third Sunday of Advent. We celebrate by lighting the third candle of the Advent wreath, the **JOY** candle. Unlike the other purple candles, the joy candle is pink, symbolizing the joy of the coming Christ. This candle is sometimes referred to as the "Shepherd's Candle" because it commemorates the shepherds' joyful reaction to the news of Jesus' birth in their **HOLY INTERRUPTION** described in Luke 2.

Biblical joy is more than a happy feeling. It's a **LASTING EMOTION** that comes from the **CHOICE** to trust that God is Who He says He is and that God will do all He has promised. Happiness is an emotional reaction to favorable circumstances. It is temporary and will easily fade when difficulties arise.

Joy on the other hand is a gift and fruit of the Holy Spirit (**Galatians 5:22**). It is long-lasting and life-giving and is present regardless of our circumstances.

Read James 1:2-4

Reflection: To consider it an opportunity for great joy when troubles of any kind come our way can be much easier said than done. How do you typically react to trials, and how does the perspective in James 1:2-4 challenge that reaction? How can you shift your attitude from dread or anger to joy and positive expectation when facing difficult circumstances? Use the space below to write out your own prayer to God thanking Him for the gift of joy He has made available to us all.



Monday, December 15

Joy

Read Luke 2:8-20

On that first Christmas, there were shepherds tending huge flocks of sheep in the fields near Bethlehem. This was not normal. Shepherds did not typically tend to huge flocks near towns or villages. I'll give you one guess why - they stunk. If you have ever driven through the panhandle of Texas you probably know what I am talking about.

Typically, huge flocks of sheep would be confined to areas far from towns and villages. However, the village of Bethlehem was an exception. For 30 days, one time a year (Passover), a large flock of one-year old lambs were allowed to graze near Bethlehem. Those sheep belonged to the High Priest and every lamb had been declared by the priests to be unblemished. They were separated to be sacrificed in the Temple in Jerusalem or eaten as Passover lambs.

The size of the flock required a lot of shepherds. God including the shepherds and sharing the news of the birth of Jesus to them, let alone sharing with the shepherds first, would have been scandalous in the Jewish tradition.

Shepherds were in a constant state of ritual impurity. Among the many laws in the Jewish faith were prohibitions against making contact with feces and dead things. Shepherds were never clean - it was impossible. As a result, shepherds were never allowed to go the temple, to offer sacrifices, or to go to the synagogue. Even the most pious shepherds would have been labeled unclean and could not come into the presence of God.

However, they were the first ones God would assign to visit His Son. By choosing the Shepherds, God was saying that **ALL** were invited to Jesus. Choosing the lowest of the low to come to the birthday celebration of His Son declares that none are excluded. All are able and invited to enjoy a relationship with Jesus. That truly is good news that will bring great **JOY** to all people!

Reflection: Have you ever felt like an outcast or marginalized like the shepherds would have felt in their day? How might God choosing the shepherds to announce the birth of His Son bring you joy in the moments where you may feel “ritually unclean” or not “good enough”?

Tuesday, December 16

Joy

Read Luke 2:8-20

There are many things we can learn from the shepherds **HOLY INTERRUPTION** in Luke 2. Over the next five days, we are going to take a closer look at each one.

First, they listened. The shepherds took the time to listen to what the angels had to say. That may not feel like a big deal at first glance. Who wouldn't stop and listen to an angel who just shows up out of nowhere with a message from God, right?

But how often do we actually slow down, stop what we are doing and listen to God? Many of us live our lives at such a fast and hurried pace that we may not even notice if God were to send an angel to us with a message? And even if we did notice, would we be too busy to take the time to listen?

For the next 5-10 minutes, do nothing. Turn off the music. Put your phone on silent. Get away from any distractions you may have and just sit in silence and listen. God may very well have a message for you that you have just been too busy and distracted to hear.

Wednesday, December 17

Joy

Read Luke 2:8-20

The second thing the shepherds did during their **HOLY INTERRUPTION** was believe. They didn't think of excuses or reasons why the angels may not be real. They didn't say, "That's great, but I think you are lying ." They believed what they were seeing and hearing and the terror they first felt when "*the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them*" quickly turned to faith.

There are many obstacles to believing: **fear** - of what following Jesus might cost; **self-reliance** - the belief we can rely solely on our own strength, knowledge and abilities; **pride** - making it difficult for us to admit our need for God; **pain or trauma** - can lead to questions about God's goodness and reliability; and **shame** - can make us feel unworthy of God's forgiveness.

Surely other obstacles come to mind that are not listed above. Take a few moments to reflect on what your obstacles may be to believing and invite the Holy Spirit to help you overcome them.

Thursday, December 18

Joy

Read Luke 2:8-20

The third thing the shepherds did during their **HOLY INTERRUPTION** was to take action. The angels didn't tell them to go, but their belief and excitement led them to say to each other in verse 15, *"Let's go to Bethlehem! Let's see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."* Verse 16 then tells us that they hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus lying in the manger.

Faith can be thought of in terms of a math equation: faith = belief + action. Paul writes in Romans 10:9-10, *"If you openly declare that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For it is by believing in your heart that you are made right with God, and it is by openly declaring your faith that you are saved."*

In what ways can you openly declare your faith today? If faith without works is dead as James writes in **James 2:14-26**, how might God be calling you to put your beliefs into action? Take a few moments to think of practical ways you can openly declare your faith this week.

Friday, December 19

Joy

Read Luke 2:8-20

The fourth thing the shepherds did during their **HOLY INTERRUPTION** was to tell others. After seeing Jesus, verse 17 tells us “*the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child.*”

The shepherds didn’t care how crazy it might have made them look or sound. They didn’t care that they were ritually unclean outcasts. They had a transformational experience and encounter with God and told anyone who would listen.

Isn’t that the way it is when we have a great experience? You see a great movie or were present for the game winning shot at the big game or had an amazing meal at the new restaurant and you can’t stop talking about it. How much more so should we be that way with Jesus? When we truly experience God’s presence the way the shepherds did, we can’t help but tell others. There is a **JOY** that comes from an encounter with Jesus that just overflows.

Take a moment to consider who in your life needs to hear about Jesus?

Saturday, December 20

Joy

Read Luke 2:8-20

The fifth and final thing the shepherds did during their **HOLY INTERRUPTION** was worship. Verse 20 tells us *“the shepherds went back to their flocks, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen.”*

Worship is the church’s appropriate response in thanksgiving and praise to Who God is, to what God has done, and to that which God has spoken. The shepherds were overcome with joy, which not only led to telling others but to praising God as well.

The truth is everyone worships. Worship is not just a religious or Christian action. All day long we give our time, energy, money, and affection to something or someone. Worship is about what we value most and it’s a core activity of the human soul – it’s the way God created us. We are great worshippers. It’s what we do – it’s who we are – it’s how we are wired. Often times, it’s not an issue of the quality or quantity of our worship, but the object of our worship.

One can say I love God and that He is at the center of my life, but what we worship is not determined by what we say. It is determined by the way we live – it's not determined by our words, but by our walk. Unfortunately, many things can become idols in our lives and become the object of our worship instead of God.

Take a moment to consider who or what has become an idol in your life. Confess that to God and then spend the next 5-10 minutes worshipping God. Play a worship song from your phone or write a worshipful prayer in the space below. This is your opportunity to respond in thanksgiving and praise to Who God is, to what God has done, and to that which God has spoken.



Sunday, December 21

Love

Today marks the fourth and final Sunday of Advent and we will light the candle of **LOVE**. If you want to read a scripture for today's devotion, then read **Matthew 1**. But be advised that it is not really exciting to read because it is mostly a genealogy from Mary back to Abraham.

When thinking of the different people whose lives were interrupted by Jesus birth, we identify those who are named. But there are unnamed family members that could also have had the normal understandings of faith interrupted too. Homes in biblical times often had multiple generations under one roof. It would not be unusual for Mary to live with parents, siblings and grandparents. How do you think that their lives were interrupted?

Well, for the unnamed relatives we can really only speculate, and perhaps we can deduce a few things to suggest there was love involved. For example, the relative that is mentioned is Elizabeth who invited Mary to live with her for 3 months. Elizabeth believed Mary because the baby in Elizabeth's womb (John the Baptist) leaped with joy at Mary and her baby's entrance.

After the 3 months stay with Elizabeth, Mary was able to return home. This is very important for us to know because if her father believed Mary was lying about her pregnancy, he could have thrown her out into the streets. The fact scripture says she was welcomed back home indicates she was not expelled.

It could not have been easy for her family to live with the scandalous news of Mary's pregnancy. Perhaps it was made easier by Joseph's acceptance that this was all the action of God. Clearly Mary's family loved her enough to pass faith to her, and loved her enough to welcome her home.

Reflection: How do you live with love for family members who may have acted scandalously? Does your attitude and deeds exemplify love for them?

Prayer: Loving God, we know that you love all people unconditionally. There is nothing we have ever done or could ever do that would make You love us more. Help us to be willing to love people the way You love us all. AMEN

Monday, December 22

Love

We don't know Mary's parent's names, but we do at least know about Joseph's father. That genealogy from Matthew tells us Joseph's dad was named "Jacob" and his grandfather was "Matthan." Technically that means that they are named, but that is all we know. We don't know the names of his mother or grandmothers. Hey, you can only write so much of a genealogy.

So what might the response of Joseph's family been in light of the news that Joseph was going to follow through with the marriage to Mary? Again, we can only speculate, but such speculation can reveal some things that lead to our appreciation of the story.

It is easy to imagine that his family was initially shocked. Perhaps that moved to incredulity accompanied with probing questions to quell disbelief. Maybe someone said "let's weigh your options carefully to make an informed decision" or they sought confirmation about what his dinner was the night an angel appears to him in a dream.

Joseph would not have had to worry about being kicked out of the home. Either because there was no law preventing him from going through with the marriage or because he could have built his own home. His experience of the scandal probably got him labeled a fool by some or a loving man by others. What we know about Joseph is that he was a good, faithful and honest man. Such traits are often formed at home and in the faith community. It is easier to respond in a loving way when we have experienced love.

Reflection: When you made a big mistake, how did you experience love from family and friends? When you are loved it is easier to give love to others. Think of a time you were loved and have imitated giving that love to others.

Prayer: Loving God, our capacity to love others is often tested in our families. Because we love them, we may judge them more harshly than we would judge someone we don't know. May our love for our family be strong enough to confront any news with a commitment to keep loving each other. AMEN

Tuesday, December 23

Love

Family...we don't get to choose them. We are born into family. Some family members we enjoy, and others...well, we can't deny they are family even if we don't enjoy their company that much.

Are you having a family meal with:

- *The uncle who hugs a little too long...
- *The aunt whose perfume makes you gag...
- *The cousin who wants to be the center of attention...
- *The other cousin that interrupts conversation with supreme knowledge of all things...
- *The annoying family pet that always has to come...

Okay, the last one may be stretching the definition of family. Without those kind of family members, how would we laugh at Christmas comedy movies (Cousin Eddie come to mind?)?

Hopefully this has you thinking about Joseph and Mary's extended, unnamed family members. Again, we are speculating, but such imagination is not unreasonable. It simply is not something you can prove beyond the shadow of a doubt. But there is one thing we can say with certainty about Jesus' family's ancestors, and it is pretty impressive.

Joseph is from the lineage of King David. Yep, the slayer of giants, writer of songs, harp-playing, good looking, greatest king of Israel's history. Being from the Davidic line made it easier for people to believe that Jesus could be the Messiah. And David's best quality – he was a man after God's own heart! Love for God is the greatest legacy he passed down.

Reflection: What family legacy have you received? Is it a legacy of faith or are you the one who is passing on a legacy of faith?

Prayer: God of love, we realize that someone who came before us had to pass the good news of Your love to our generation. May we also be people who live in love with You and love for all people, so that others may come to believe in You. AMEN



Wednesday, December 24

Love

Today is the last day of Advent, and tomorrow is Christmas! What would it be like if God's plan to return to earth and establish the fullness of God's reign were to happen tomorrow? Are you ready for such an action to happen?

Jesus' birth is an expression of the love of God. God – holy, perfect, merciful, beautiful... - leaves His celestial throne and lives among us in the fullness of our humanity. As a baby, God makes Himself vulnerable. People have to care for Him, feed Him, clean Him and provide for Him. Invisible God becomes incarnate.

We like to question what other god would do this for people because we believe no other god would. Mythologies suggest other gods have done something like it, and yet mythologies portray a god who does such things to gratify the god's whims. God the Father becomes human for our benefit. Knowing that no sacrifice can correct the fall of humanity into sin, God takes on human flesh to become the sacrifice! Why does God do this? **LOVE!**

This belief is expressed in an old hymn “Love Came Down at Christmas”. Verse 3 reads:

“Love shall be our token, love be yours and
love be mine;
Love to God and all men and women, love for plea and
gift and sign”

Reflection: We celebrate this love of God in 3 services – 3:00 pm is child friendly; 5:00 pm and 11:00 pm are more traditional candlelight communion services. Are you planning to come? Are you planning to bring someone to celebrate the love of God in Jesus’ birth?

Prayer: “O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray; Cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today. We hear the Christmas angels, their great glad tidings tell; O come to us, abide with us, our Lords Emmanuel.”
AMEN

O Little Town of Bethlehem – Words by Philip Brooks



Upcoming Events

Fri, Dec. 5 **College-aged worship night @ 6 pm**

Sat, Dec. 6 **Tastes of the Season**
*from 10 am to 12 pm

Sun. Dec. 7 **St. Andy's Kids' Gingerbread Bash**
*from 4 pm to 6 pm

Fri, Dec. 12 **College-aged Christmas Party**
*starting @ 5:30 pm



Sun, Dec. 14 **Sounds of the Season**
*Jami Smith
Christmas Worship
concert @ 6 pm



Wed, Dec. 17 **St. Andy's Youth Christmas Party**
*starting @ 5:30 pm

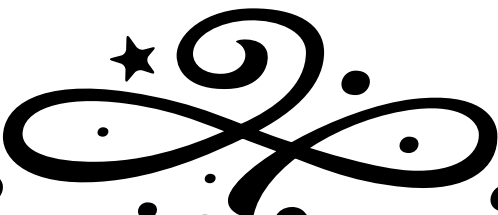
Wed, Dec. 24 **Kid/Family Friendly Service @ 3 pm**
&
Candlelight/Communion
Services @ 5 pm & 11 pm

Jan. 2 & 3 **Choosing Love Marriage**
Conference



Sun, Jan. 4 **Cliché - a new sermon**
series on things
Christians say that are
not completely true.





merry
Christmas
and Happy
New Year



A black and white calligraphic illustration of a holiday greeting. The text "merry Christmas and Happy New Year" is written in a flowing, cursive script. The word "merry" is on the first line, "Christmas" on the second, "and Happy" on the third, and "New Year" on the fourth. The text is framed by two large, symmetrical, swirling flourishes at the top and bottom. Each flourish has a small five-pointed star at its upper end. The entire design is set against a plain white background.

