

Wait with a Purpose

My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. (v. 46)

Every December when his children were little, pastor and writer Lou Lotz and his wife would make an Advent Activity Calendar and hang it on the fridge. Every day they'd lift up the paper flap and there would be a family activity for the day and an accompanying Scripture reading. The calendar provided a way to focus attention on the coming celebration of Jesus' birth.

That's the point of Advent calendars, and the season of Advent—to prepare for the coming (or advent) of Jesus. Just as all creation waited for Jesus' birth, we now wait for Jesus to come again. In our passage today, Mary provides us with an example. As she waits for Jesus to be born, she worships God for being faithful, for taking care of his people again and again, and she joyfully welcomes her part in that work.

For kids, December can feel endless and a little empty—full of nothing but waiting. For adults, in contrast, December can feel overstuffed and sometimes a little empty of joy. In the devotions between now and Christmas, we invite you to wait joyfully. Each day we will offer a Bible reading and short activity—acts of service, fun, reflection, or prayer. With Mary, we hope you will lean on God's faithfulness in your waiting and find ways to participate in God's good work in the world. —*Christy Prins*

Today's Activity

Make a list of the things you are looking forward to in this Advent season, and prioritize those that make your spirit rejoice in God like Mary did.

Look at the Stars

When I look at your heavens . . . the moon and the stars . . . what is man that you are mindful of him . . . ? (vv. 3-4)

We caught fish all day on the river, then camped for the night along the shore. It was a clear, cool night, and there was only a sliver of moon. Gazing up at the heavens, a billion diamonds scattered on black velvet, I became dizzyingly conscious of God's enormity and my insignificance. I couldn't help but think, *Who am I, compared to all this?* "When I look at your heavens," says the psalmist, "the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars . . . what is man that you are mindful of him . . . ?" And yet God is mindful of us. Indeed, the psalmist proclaims, we are just a little lower than the angels, and we are given dominion over creation. The mind reels.

Surely one of the most salutary activities of life is to go outdoors after dark and gaze up into the heavens. The same God who flung those stars into space at the dawn of creation is your loving heavenly Father. What problem of yours is greater than him? What anxiety can he not calm?

"The heavens declare the glory of God," says the psalmist, "and the sky above proclaims his handiwork" (19:1). Go outside and see for yourself.

Today's Activity

Go out after dark and look up at the stars. Share a little starlight wonder by cutting out and decorating a star to hang in your window. Find a template at woh.org/AdventCalendar.

Visit a Friend

Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord. (v. 45)

Mary must have smiled. Finally, after all the gossip and the whispering and the snide, disapproving looks, finally someone believed her. Elizabeth believed her, and believed in her. “Blessed are you among women,” cried Elizabeth, “and blessed is the fruit of your womb!” What a blessing it is when someone says, in effect: “I believe you. I believe God is in this. I’ll stand by you.”

Very often, something special happens when we visit someone or are visited. Think about it. Some form of healing takes place. A relationship is restored. A plan is hatched. A confidence is shared. A burden is lifted. Food is eaten. Prayers are spoken.

One of my vocational frustrations as a minister was that I had to spend so much time at a desk. So much of what I was expected to do took place at that big lump of lumber. The work had to be done, and it was my job to do it, but it was seldom my favorite part of the day. What I most enjoyed was visiting people. “How are you doing? Is the church meeting your needs? How might I best pray for you? Let’s see a photo of that new grandchild!” Imagine the transforming effect it could have on a church if we all visited one another now and then. Remarkable things have a way of happening when God’s people visit each another.

Today's Activity

Visit someone, either in person or through a phone call, and build up your relationship.

Welcome a Stranger

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. (v. 2)

Strangers can be strange, and we might not choose them as friends. But one element of hospitality is this: hospitality accepts differences. The host doesn't ask the guest to change. Indeed, part of being a good host is a willingness to *be* changed by your interaction with the stranger. I know, this is difficult. But hospitality accepts differences. Welcomes them, even.

Look at it this way: in welcoming a stranger you are welcoming Christ himself, who said that whatever hospitality we show to one of “the least of these” (Matt. 25:40), we show it to him. “I was a stranger,” said Jesus, “and you welcomed me” (v. 35). We have been shown the ultimate act of hospitality by God who, while we were yet sinners and strangers to God's holiness, sent his Son to die for us that we might be welcomed into his family. One way we can respond to God's hospitality is to show hospitality to others.

Have you ever been a stranger? Maybe you've walked into a situation where everyone knew one another, but you didn't know anybody. Perhaps you felt like everyone knew the unspoken rules—except you. You felt powerless and vulnerable. But then one person stepped up, smiled, welcomed you, and showed real interest in you. Remember how good that felt? Give someone that feeling. Welcome a stranger.

Today's Activity

Welcome someone new with a small homemade gift or treat. Consider a new neighbor, or someone that you don't know yet at church, school, or work. Print a gift tag at woh.org/AdventCalendar.

Pray for Peace

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them. (v. 6)

What does God have in store for this fallen world? When God's kingdom has fully come, when "the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption" (Rom. 8:21), what will that look like? Isaiah's remarkable prophecy envisions a future time in which peace will envelop all of creation, and even natural conflict between predator and prey will be resolved. This peaceable kingdom will be so tame and gentle that even the most ferocious animals will submit to the leading of a little child.

"Glory to God in the highest," the angels said, "and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" (Luke 2:14) Why is there so little peace in the world? Maybe the problem is that we've tried to split the angelic message in two. We want peace in our hearts, and peace on earth, but we don't want to give glory to God. So long as nations seek glory for themselves, glory that rightly belongs to God, there will be no peace on earth. And so long as you and I seek glory for ourselves, the glory that rightly belongs to God, there will be no peace for us. Pray for peace, and to God be the glory.

Today's Activity

Pray for peace in your life, in your community, in your country, and in our world. Give God the glory for the peace you experience.

Listen to the Elderly

Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel. (v. 25)

Anna and Simeon were old. They were past the age of working, managing a household, or taking care of children. Instead, each in their own way, they devoted themselves to God, testifying to others of God's goodness and faithfulness.

At times, it can be hard for older people to see their value when they can't do what they used to. There is another, better way to think about old age. Psalm 92 was written long ago, but it describes people you and I know today: "The righteous flourish like the palm tree . . . They still bear fruit in old age; they are ever full of sap and green" (vv. 12-14). Still bearing fruit in old age. Still fresh and green—that's how I want to be. In old age we may have to live differently, but we don't have to live less.

We may admire the enthusiasm of youth, which bubbles over like champagne. But from the elderly we can gain deep wisdom that has been aged in casks of experience. There were a lot of eyes in the temple that day, but only old eyes—Anna and Simeon's eyes—saw the holy child for who he was.

Today's Activity

If you are younger, **spend time** with an older person. Send a note, make a call, or plan a visit. Ask questions and listen to the answers. If you are older, reflect on how you have seen God's faithfulness over your life and share your testimony with a younger person.

Embrace the Unexpected

But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years. (v. 7)

The Christmas story abounds with unexpected happenings. Think about it. Zechariah and Elizabeth didn't expect to become parents at their age. The shepherds didn't expect an entourage of angels to appear in the sky. King Herod didn't expect his reign to be challenged by an infant. The wise men didn't expect to find the King of the Jews in a cobwebby stable in Bethlehem. And Mary certainly didn't expect to become pregnant: "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" (Luke 1:34). The Christmas story is one surprise after another.

Where should we be looking for God in this season of Advent? Where do we expect to touch the hem of heaven? We tend to look for God in the familiar places—candlelight worship, beloved hymns, quiet times of prayer. But given Luke's birth narrative, aren't we equally likely to experience God's presence where we'd least expect to find it?

Look for God's grace in failure and disappointment. Look for God's leading in setback and sorrow. Behind a frowning providence there often lies a smiling face if we'll but look for it. Don't neglect to look for God's grace in the unexpected, even the unwelcome. God has a way of showing up in the most unexpected places: "And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger" (Luke 2:7).

Today's Activity

Reflect on the unexpected events God is using to write your story. Write down one of these and thank God for using it for your good.

Feed the Birds

Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? (v. 26)

The book *Birds of the Bible* by Peter Goodfellow describes how ravens fed Elijah, God sustained the children of Israel with meat from quail, the Holy Spirit descended like a dove onto Jesus after his baptism—who knew Scripture contained so vast an aviary?

Jesus used “the birds of the air” to illustrate the attitude of trust that should characterize the people of God. If God cares for the birds, may we not assume that he cares also for you and me? When Jesus says, “Do not be anxious about your life” (v. 25), that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t make provisions for the future. The chickadees and sparrows outside my window spend almost every waking moment scratching for food. What Jesus is warning against is worry.

I enjoy watching birds. They remind me of that line from the old song by Civilla D. Martin, “His eye is on the sparrow, / And I know He watches me.” December in Michigan, where I live, means deep snow and frigid temperatures, which makes life hard for birds. So I feed them. And I remember that through the birth of Jesus, God provides for my deepest spiritual needs too.

Today's Activity

Set out food for the birds and watch as they eat it. Then add a bird ornament to your Christmas tree and remember that God provides for every need. If you need an ornament, visit woh.org/AdventCalendar to print and color your own!

Do Good in Secret

But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. (v. 3)

He was a candidate for public office, and his campaign speech was one long, self-congratulatory tribute. Those of us in the audience were given a guided tour through the treasure room of his virtues—how he'd served at the local soup kitchen, dispensed medicine to poor children in Africa, served on the boards of various charities. On and on he went. He didn't actually sound a trumpet "as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets" (v. 2), but he certainly blew his own horn. How often the finest people spoil the finest things they do with an overeagerness for credit.

How eager we all are for approval and acclaim. In a hundred subtle ways, we strive to keep ourselves in the spotlight, marching our personal virtues up and down through the conversation. Vain people that we are, we want to be recognized for our good deeds. But ultimately it's only the Father's approval that matters.

Years ago, Alcoholics Anonymous published a little pamphlet titled "Just for Today," encouraging a list of practices for recovering alcoholics to perform. For example, "Just for today . . . I will do somebody a good turn, and not get found out; if anybody knows of it, it will not count." Try it. In this Advent season, when we especially strive to be charitable, do your good deeds in secret. Don't call attention to yourself. It is enough that God knows.

Today's Activity

Do a good deed for someone without telling them.

List Your Ancestors

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. (v.1)

Among my most treasured possessions is an old family Bible. Written on the inside cover, in my mother's small, neat handwriting, is a family tree. Mom traced her ancestry back four generations. It was important to her to understand where she'd come from, and who were, as she called them, "my people."

There is a family tree in your Bible too. Matthew traced Jesus' lineage all the way back to Abraham. Matthew wanted his readers to know that Jesus is rooted in Abraham, to whom God had promised that "in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed" (Gen. 22:18). There are some interesting people on Matthew's list. There's Jacob, the trickster who deceived his father and cheated his brother. There's David, who stole another man's wife and then had him killed to cover up the crime. There's Ruth, a foreigner. There's Rahab, a Canaanite prostitute. Isn't it interesting that the Son of God was ushered into human history through a lineage stained with sin and scandal?

What is your family history? Who are "your people"? Perhaps members of your family have strayed from paths you'd have chosen for them. Perhaps you yourself have strayed. Remember that God is able to work through human frailty to accomplish his will. As Luther supposedly said, "God can carve rotten wood and ride the lame horse."

Today's Activity

Draw your family tree—either your birth family or your spiritual family (those who have encouraged or mentored you in your faith). Thank God for them!

Sing “Joy to the World”

[Jesus] emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. (v. 7)

Jesus was a man. Not half God, half human. Not God pretending to be human. He was a man, flesh and blood, muscle and bone, who was born into this world just like all the rest of us. With the exception of sin, Jesus experienced all the stuff you and I experience—disappointment, humiliation, doubt, anger, love. I take considerable comfort in the thought that Jesus knows what it’s like down here in the trenches of humanity—the fear, the struggle, the temptations. Jesus is no false friend who says, “I know how you feel,” but really doesn’t. Jesus knows what it’s like to be human.

In our Bible reading today, Paul tells us that being human required Jesus to humble himself completely, even to the “point of death . . . on a cross” (v. 8). Then he encourages us that when we follow Jesus, we should serve each other just as selflessly as he served us. Following his example of love and humility brings great joy.

Although we sing it as a Christmas song, the hymn “Joy to the World” describes the joy of Jesus’ second coming, not as a servant, but as a king to put all things right. However, the notes don’t go climbing up the octave. Rather, they come tumbling down. How very appropriate. At Christmas, God came down to the trenches, where you and I live. God became flesh.

Today’s Activity

Sing “Joy to the World,” and reflect on Jesus’ example of humility and service.

Display Baby Pictures

[Mary] gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger. (v. 7)

Go through your treasure trunk, find your baby pictures, and think about this: you began your journey through time as a microscopic kernel of humanity, invisible to the naked eye, hidden away deep beneath your mother's heart. Even at that earliest microscopic moment, your sex had been determined and the color of your eyes. At 18 days your heart began to beat—thump, thump, thump—a rhythmic pattern that continues nonstop until the day you die. At 10 weeks all your organs were present. At 13 weeks you had fingerprints different from those of every other person on this planet. There is only one you.

I wonder how Mary felt as she looked down at her newborn child, the way mothers do, studying every hair on his little head, every crease on his scrunched-up face. The sound of his breathing. The smell of his milky breath. And this was no ordinary child! The Messiah, the child of whom the prophets spoke, had been born at last, and there he was, snuggled in her arms. The Gospel says Mary “wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger” (v. 6). I wonder which of the two miracles most occupied the virgin Mary's mind—that she had given birth, or who she had given birth to? God—the creator of the cosmos—had become flesh, and there in Mary's arms was the proof of it.

Today's Activity

Look at your baby pictures and reflect with wonder on the miracle of Jesus' birth.

Be Willing to Cooperate

Behold, I am the servant of the Lord;
let it be to me according to your word. (v. 38)

Imagine God tapped you on the shoulder and said, “Excuse me, but I have work to do in this world, and I could use a little help. Would you give me a hand?” It doesn’t usually happen quite that way, of course, but Scripture teaches that the fulfillment of God’s purposes requires human cooperation.

Presumably, God could have sent the Messiah down from heaven fully grown, with no human help whatsoever. But instead, God chooses to be dependent on our human response to the divine initiative. So he sends the angel Gabriel to tap Mary on the shoulder, so to speak, and inform her that her help is needed. Think about it: the plan of Almighty God, creator of the universe, cannot unfold without the cooperation of this simple peasant girl. The plan of salvation cannot be initiated without this young woman being willing to face the pain, the risk, the shame and suspicion, and say, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (v. 38).

Resistance to authority is popular nowadays, and at times it’s the right approach. But cooperation is equally important. Mary’s cooperation with God was bold, and something wonderful happened as a result. What work might God do in your community, your church, your country that can only happen with your cooperation?

Today’s Activity

Make a list of things you sense God might be wanting to accomplish in this world, and then write down one tangible thing you can do to cooperate in that effort.

Be Thankful for Someone

I do not cease to give thanks for you,
remembering you in my prayers. (v. 16)

Over the years I've tried to cultivate the habit of starting each day by thinking of someone to be thankful for. I'll be brushing my teeth, or shaving, and I'll think: Who should I be thankful for today? Once I even put a sticky note on the bathroom mirror: *Be Thankful for Someone*. God has sprinkled so many wonderful people into my life, and being grateful for them only seems right and proper. Beyond that, gratitude has a way of making me feel peaceful and calm. What a pleasant way to begin the day.

Again and again in his epistles Paul thanks God for friends and fellow believers: "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you," he says to believers in Philippi (Phil. 1:3). Here in Ephesians, Paul says, "I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers." Paul is generous with gratitude.

If you're anything like me, you have a lot of people to be grateful for. Some people we can name—parents, teachers, mentors. But many are anonymous—the fellow who held the door open for you, the driver who allowed you to merge into traffic, the hospice nurse who was so loving to your grandfather in his last days. Your Advent activity for today may seem profoundly simple, but its effect can be simply profound: Be thankful for someone.

Today's Activity

Think of someone you are thankful for
and send them a note to tell them.

Receive God's Good Gift

The free gift of God is eternal life
in Christ Jesus our Lord. (v. 23)

My adolescent granddaughter has a habit I've come to admire. I've observed this behavior in her many times, and every time I see it, I'm more impressed. When someone gives her a compliment or some small gift, she smiles and says, "Thank you." And that's it. Me, when I receive a compliment, it makes me feel uncomfortable, and my instinct is to deflect the compliment, minimize my accomplishment, and adopt an "Aw shucks, it was nothing" attitude. But with Lorelei there are no deflections, just a clear, sincere "Thank you."

Why is it so hard to receive a gift, a kind gesture, or even a compliment? Perhaps receiving makes us feel dependent and weak, and we'd rather feel independent and strong. Perhaps we think that we shouldn't receive something unless we've earned it. But refusing others' gifts and kind gestures is isolating; it distances us from others. It creates bad feelings. If people want to give you a gift, let them.

I also hope you have received the greatest gift of all. "The free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord," said Paul. You cannot earn this gift. You cannot deserve it. You can only receive it. The gift is salvation, and it's yours for the asking. Friend, God wants to give to you the greatest gift of all. Receive it!

Today's Activity

Reflect on your attitude and consider how you can receive gifts with grace and gratitude this season. Then thank God for salvation—the greatest gift of all.

Name Your Favorite Christmas Smells

For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. (v. 15)

What does Jesus smell like? I remember a public meeting where citizens were invited to voice their opinion on a certain proposal to be voted on by the town council. A young woman stood up and said, softly and respectfully, that she had prayed about this issue and felt led to oppose it. She then quoted a Bible verse. There were snickers from the crowd, and a few of the town council members seated up front rolled their eyes. But I caught a whiff of the aroma of Christ.

Here in today's passage, Paul says that believers are "the aroma of Christ" (v. 15). Like a powerful scent, by our words and our deeds we spread the aroma of Christ to everyone we meet. When we are patient and long-suffering, slow to anger and quick to forgive, then we smell like Christ. When we speak the truth in love, when we are not ashamed of the gospel, then we smell like Christ. When we live a life of holiness and personal righteousness, then we smell like Christ.

In this season, there are so many good smells—pine needles, candles, gingerbread. You probably have your own list, tied to traditions and sweet memories. But this season should also be full of the aroma of Christ. When people are in your presence this week, will they smell Christ?

Today's Activity

Find your favorite Christmas scents and recite today's key verse while you smell them so you can remember to be the aroma of Christ to others this Christmas.

Be Still

Be still, and know that I am God. (v. 10)

When I asked one of my Bible study friends what he most wanted for Christmas, he gave a wistful sigh and said: “Some stillness and silence would be nice.” How about you? Our Bible reading today suggests that God wants that for us even more than we want it ourselves. Psalm 46 begins with a promise that God will protect us in the hardest times, and it ends with a forceful command to be still.

I worry, sometimes, that I’m not cultivating that stillness. I’m not listening, not paying attention to God, not cultivating a quiet place on my insides where the voice of God can find resonance. I go skipping from one diversion to the next, skimming along on the surface of life and not going deep. Noise, hurry, and confusion seep into my life. Perhaps if I relied on God more as my refuge, he wouldn’t need to command me to be still and accept his help.

When I catch myself in a blur of worry and hurry I stop what I am doing, take a deep breath, and say to myself: “Be quiet. Be still. God is in control.” To be still doesn’t mean doing nothing. It means to stop acting like everything depends on you. It means to cease striving. The hymn writer Kathrina von Schlegel said it best: “Be still, my soul: the waves and winds still know / His voice who ruled them while He dwelt below.”

Today's Activity

Find a quiet place, by yourself. Turn off your phone and other distractions, and take five minutes to sit in the stillness.

Support Others

“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us). (v. 23)

The giant sequoia tree is one of the largest tree species in the world, often reaching almost 300 feet tall. However, their roots run very shallow. Sequoias grow in groves, and their roots intertwine, so when strong winds blow, the trees hold each other up. It’s a beautiful picture of mutual support. They can grow that tall because they support each other.

Mary was called by God to do something incredible, but so was Joseph, who was called to support and protect her. They probably felt isolated, yet they weren’t alone. An angel, a cousin, shepherds, wise men. And of course, more than anyone else, God was with them. “‘They shall call his name Immanuel’ (which means God with us)” (v. 23).

When we choose to follow God’s call, we aren’t alone either. One of the treasures of the Christian life is what the New Testament calls *koinōnia*, which means “fellowship, communion, participation.” I know a lovely older woman who, every week, studies the “Prayer Concerns” page of the Sunday worship bulletin and makes a plan to personally support every person named—a card or a note, a phone call, a visit. She even delivers fresh-baked bread. What a transforming effect this simple ministry has had on the congregation! What could you do to support someone today?

Today's Activity

Send a Christmas card to someone who needs your support. You can find a printable card to color at woh.org/AdventCalendar.

Treasure Up All These Things

And his mother treasured up all these things
in her heart. (v. 51)

“Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been searching for you in great distress” (v. 48). Believe me, that’s a lot more polite than I would have been if my adolescent child had left me for three days without telling me where he was going. Jesus’ teenage response almost makes it sound like his parents were at fault: “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” (v. 49). Mary didn’t understand her son’s meaning, but she kept an open mind and “treasured up all these things in her heart” (v. 50).

There are only a few snippets of Scripture in which we see Mary’s interactions with her son, but she and Joseph showed an enlightened parenting. Mary seemed to realize that you don’t have to understand your child completely to love your child completely. She gave her child the last word in an argument and was able to open a discussion without closing it by saying something like, “Because I said so, that’s why!” Instead, Mary chose to live with what she didn’t understand. She had raised an adolescent son who felt secure enough to voice his expectations for his parents as readily as they voiced their expectations for him, which is rare. Mary allowed her child to think his own thoughts, even make his own decisions. Blessed are you when you have a parent like Mary.

Today's Activity

Name a bit of parental advice (or advice from a child!) that you have come to treasure. How has it helped you?

Go Caroling

Oh come, let us sing to the LORD; let us make
a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! (v. 1)

I have lovely memories of my wife and me bundling up our young children, joining friends from church, and strolling around the neighborhood singing Christmas carols. Homeowners would look out their windows and wave. Some folks would step out onto the porch and stand there as we serenaded them. It was cold, but somehow that didn't seem to bother anyone. Later, our little choir would gather at someone's home for hot chocolate.

In an increasingly secularized American culture, Christmas carols are one of the public expressions of Christian religion that are still readily accepted in most places. I have heard the hymn "Silent Night" played in shopping malls, and public school holiday concerts. Even secular folks seem to enjoy Christmas carols, and I like to think they take to heart what the carols have to say.

Just as that first Christmas was marked by angelic singing, so Christians down through the ages have celebrated Christ's birth by singing. God willing, we will continue to do so for long years to come, for this is a message that is worth singing about. Today, December 20, is Go Caroling Day. Caroling spreads good cheer, it connects us with friends and neighbors, and it's a fun way of testifying to the faith we hold dear. "O come, let us sing to the LORD!"

Today's Activity

Gather up friends and family and **sing carols together**. If you can, go caroling in your neighborhood or in a place that could use some cheer, like a nursing home.

Take Sides with the Poor

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. (v. 18)

As Jesus began his ministry, he visited the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth. The passage of the day was from Isaiah 6:1-2, with themes that Mary echoed as she praised God before Jesus was born (Luke 1:46-55). Each describes the restoration and healing that God offered Israel, and the ways that restoration was good news to those with the least power. Then Jesus made a bold claim: “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (4:21).

God puts down the mighty and lifts up the lowly. God pulls down the proud and elevates the humble. God sends the rich away empty, while the poor he fills with good things. God loves us all, rich and poor, powerful and powerless. But in the tumult of history, God does take sides—with the little guy: the poor, the weak, the oppressed, the widows and orphans.

That’s good news if you are poor and powerless, but what about the affluent, the privileged, the powerful? We can’t change God’s nature to suit ourselves. But we can change ourselves. We can choose to side with the poor whenever we have the opportunity. In our churches and in our lives we can be on the lookout for ways to befriend the least, the last, the lost. That may look different for each of us, but as you are able, a question to consider at this time of year is, “How can I volunteer my time and money?”

Today's Activity

Select a charitable organization and **make a tangible gift** of money or time.

Watch the Sunrise

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. (v. 5)

It's the largest object in our solar system, a mind-bogglingly enormous sphere of flaming gas—hydrogen and helium mostly—held together by its own gravity, researchers tell us. Its interactions with the earth drive the seasons, ocean currents, weather and climate, and it provides us with two very pleasant phenomena—warmth and light. The sun rises every day of the year, but daybreak is an event few actually witness. I like to watch the sunrise. I put my alarm clock out of reach, so I can't hit the snooze button and go back to sleep. I get up, make coffee, and go sit on the deck. It's a good time to clear your mind, to think, to await the morning light, and to remember the good news: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (v. 5).

John's version of the Christmas story knows nothing of shepherds and angels. The Virgin Mary is not mentioned, nor the wise men. No baby, no swaddling cloths. In John's Gospel, the Christmas story is that God becomes one of us in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ, the Light of the World. "In him was life," said John, "and the life was the light of men" (v. 4). And that light can never be extinguished.

Tomorrow morning, let's you and me get up early, watch the sunrise, and be grateful that the light of the world has come, and that the darkness has not, cannot, and never will overcome it.

Today's Activity

Take time to watch the sunrise.

Name Your Fears

The LORD is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of
my life; of whom shall I be afraid? (Ps. 27:1)

When I was a child, my grandmother took it upon herself to do something my parents never would have: she gave me money to memorize Bible verses. I received nickels for every verse I could recite. The practice had its desired effect. I memorized Scripture, scores of verses that have stayed with me all my life. I cannot count the number of times when, in seasons of struggle, I have found myself thinking, “Of whom shall I be afraid?”

How appropriate that on the night when God’s perfect love was revealed in the form of a baby born in a barn, heaven’s first words to earth were “Fear not” (Luke 2:10). To live unafraid does not mean that scary things will never happen to you (the angels were pretty scary, after all). It means knowing that whatever happens to you, God is with you, taking the worst and using it for some redemptive purpose. Whatever frightening issues you are facing today, you are not alone. “I am with you always,” said Jesus, “to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20).

What are you afraid of? Name your fears. Say them out loud. Now, do you think God is frightened by the things that frighten you? Do you think God is intimidated by the things that threaten to overwhelm you? Despite their fear, the shepherds didn’t miss the good news and neither should you.

Today's Activity

Name, write down, or draw your fears,
and prayerfully give them to God.

Give Christmas Presence

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given. (v. 6)

In 1615, Anthony van Dyck finished painting *Adoration of the Shepherds*. One version shows the shepherds kneeling in the stable, all straining forward to see the infant Jesus, snug in his mother's arms. And the shepherds' wives are present—a nice touch! One of the women is stretching out her hand to offer the holy child an egg. The wise men, we are told, gave fantastic, opulent gifts—gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But this woman gives a simple, practical, and very useful gift.

There are gifts we can give at Christmas that cost little or nothing, yet they can be very useful, and profoundly meaningful. I'm thinking about things like the gift of encouragement (1 Thess. 5:11). And then there's the gift of prayer. In my last church, there was a group of people who met early on Sunday mornings to pray for me, their pastor. That meant the world to me.

Perhaps most important, we can give the gift of ourselves, our presence. The irony of the Christmas season is that we get so busy that we have little time for the people in our lives. This Christmas, don't just give presents, give presence. That's what Christmas is all about: God giving the gift of himself. God gives us his presence, in the form of a child, born in a manger. "To us a child is born, to us a son is given."

Today's Activity

Give the gift of your presence to a friend, family member, or someone at church. Take time to listen, or play, or do something together.

Read the Christmas Story

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law. (v. 4)

There is a thought-provoking verse in the book of 1 Kings. Trying to explain the escape of a prisoner he was supposed to be guarding, the sentry says: “As your servant was busy here and there, he was gone” (20:40). Do you ever get the feeling that while you were busy here and there, doing this and that, the important things in life slipped away from you? This feeling can be particularly acute at Christmas. In the bustle of Christmas preparation, the celebration itself slips by. Some people work strenuously to make Christmas meaningful—buying presents, sending cards, baking and decorating, visiting family—only to flop in a chair on Christmas night, frazzled and exhausted.

If you are feeling that way, there is good news. Today isn’t done yet, and you haven’t missed Christmas. God sent forth his Son. Jesus is here, now, today, by his Spirit! Paul said that God sent Jesus in “the fullness of time” (Gal. 4:4) to redeem us. All creation waits for that redemption (Rom. 8:20-23), and when it comes, we *can’t* miss it.

Don’t let Christmas slip by you today. Here’s what I want you to do. Find a nice, quiet place to sit. Read the Christmas story. Then just sit, breathe deep, be still, and receive the gift you most need but seldom think to ask for—God himself. Merry Christmas!

Today's Activity

Read the Christmas story aloud, found in Luke 2.
Thank God for the gift of Jesus.

Leave the Stable

And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. (v. 20)

The shepherds hurried to Bethlehem, found Mary and Joseph and the baby, made known the angelic announcement, and then, says Luke, they “returned.” Returned to what? A speaking tour about their experience? No, they returned to their sheep. The shepherds returned to their ordinary, ho-hum lives.

Joseph and Mary returned. “They returned into Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth” (Luke 2:39). The wise men returned “to their own country” (Matt. 2:12). Even the angels returned to heaven. The point is, nobody stays in the stable. After Christmas, everyone returns to the ordinary.

Most of life is lived in the ordinary, and that’s where most of our walk with God takes place. Granted, there are mountaintop experiences in life, and there are valleys, and all of us get some of each. But most of life is spent not in the valley of crisis or on the mountaintop of victory, but in the ho-hum, flat terrain of ordinariness—making dinner, paying bills, changing diapers, eating and sleeping. So the question is, how does the miracle of Christ’s birth impact our ordinary time?

Christmas certainly had an impact on the shepherds. They returned, “glorifying and praising God” (Luke 2:20). They may have been humble shepherds, but they understood that something holy had happened, that life was different, and that they were different. How are you different in the afterglow of Christmas?

Today's Activity

Think of one thing—a hope, a habit, a feeling—you want to take from this Christmas into your ordinary time.