

BORN TO YOU ... A SAVIOR



DEVOTIONS
Advent 2025

Hope Church
christmasathope.org

As an added feature, these devotions have reflection questions for each day's message. These can be used for self-study or as prompts for discussion when reflecting as a group.

YOU'RE INVITED TO
CHRISTMAS
AT HOPE



Visit Greece:
1301 Vintage Ln

Tues, Dec 23rd
4^{pm} 6^{pm}

Wed, Dec 24th
12^{pm} 2^{pm} 4^{pm}

Visit Brockport:
6601 4th Section Rd
Wed, Dec 24, 4^{pm}

Two locations & online:
christmasathope.org

*Advent Devotions were written by Dr. Kari Vo.
Brought to you in partnership with Lutheran Hour Ministries*

A NEW THING

TEXT: *The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. (Mark 1:1) In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:1, 14)*

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. (Matthew 1:18a) At Christmas we celebrate the time God did something absolutely new, something nobody had ever heard of before. As human beings, we are used to gods who rule heaven and earth...powerful gods who demand to be worshipped ... gods who expect people to sacrifice to them. Every nation on earth has a god like that. But who has a God like this one, who comes down from heaven to become a Man Himself? Who becomes a baby, lying in a manger, worshipped by shepherds. Who has a God who humbles Himself to serve, not to be served, and to give His life as a ransom for many? Who has a God who suffers and dies on a cross, and then rises to live again forever—all so that He can share that everlasting life with anyone who trusts in Him?

We do. We have that God—because He has made us His own. And this God who made us and redeemed us now calls us to trust Him.

WE PRAY: *Dear Lord, as I hear the story of Your coming once again, let Your Holy Spirit give me true faith in You. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- When did you first hear about Jesus?
- Who have you told about Jesus?
- What difference does Jesus make in your life?

EMBEDDED

TEXT: *The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. (Matthew 1:1)*

One thing I really like about the book of Matthew is that it starts with a long list of Jesus' ancestors. You might find that boring—I did, once—but it does this for me: It shows me that Jesus, even though He's God Himself, is completely embedded in the human race.

I mean, look at the people He has in His family tree! I see one murderer and adulterer (David), one spy who married a prostitute (Salmon), and one king who practiced human sacrifice (Manasseh). I see a man who was called the "friend of God" even though his cowardice caused him to put his wife in danger twice (Abraham). I see a wise man who fell into idolatry (Solomon) and a good king who hung out with bad company, and nearly got himself killed that way (Jehoshaphat). I see a poor foreign girl who married a local landowner and became the great-grandmother of a king (Ruth). I see a man who gave in to the urge to show off and doomed his country (Hezekiah) and another one who had the chance to ask God for any miracle he wanted, and actually turned the offer down (Ahaz). This is a wild group of people to have in your family tree!

And Jesus is embedded into this mosaic. Which means He's embedded into us, the human race—the sometimes glorious, sometimes sick-and-sorry group of sinners Jesus came to save through His death and resurrection.

WE PRAY: *Lord, I'm glad You came so close to us. Thank You, and please stay with me! Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- Does your family tree contain unusual people?
- Why do you think God highlights the failings of Jesus' ancestors and not just the good sides?
- If Jesus' ancestors are like this, what does that say about how God thinks of you?

IN THE DAYS OF HEROD

TEXT: *In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years. (Luke 1:5-7)*

Luke starts his story on a grim note. Because “the days of Herod” are more than just a date marker. They are a reminder that Judea was ruled by a mad king—a man who saw enemies everywhere, and even killed his own wife and children when he thought they were plotting against him. He was not a safe man to have in power. Those were dark days. They were even darker for

Zechariah and Elizabeth because of personal grief.

Although they loved God and walked in His ways, they were never able to have children, and now they were facing old age. Was God punishing them? No doubt the neighbors thought so—it’s the kind of thing people always say. And that would make life even darker. But in the middle of this darkness, God

was preparing to send light. He was about to send His own Son Jesus, the Light of the world, into the world as a human being. Jesus was coming to save us all through His suffering, death, and resurrection. And Zechariah and Elizabeth’s son would prepare the way for Him. God had not forgotten them. He hasn’t forgotten us, either.

WE PRAY: *Dear Father, You see the darkness in my life. Send me the light of Your Son Jesus. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- What makes your days dark right now?
- Do you ever think God has forgotten you?
- How do you find help and hope in Jesus?

SUDDEN GIFT

TEXT: *Now while he [Zechariah] was serving as priest ... there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him ... But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord."* (Luke 1:8a, 11-12a, 13-15a)

What a gift God is giving to Zechariah and Elizabeth! After hundreds of years of silence, God is finally acting as He did in the old days—sending a miracle baby to people past the age of childbearing, and giving that baby a mission. And what is that mission? To “turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, ... to make ready for the Lord a people prepared” (Luke 1:16b,17b).

Prepared for what? Why, for God Himself to come into our world—to insert Himself into the human race as one of us, a true human being, who comes to live and to die and to rise again, all in order to rescue us from the powers of evil. Zechariah’s son John will prepare the way for *that* to happen—for Jesus to become our Savior. What an amazing gift! And God has given Zechariah the privilege of being part of it. And He has given us the privilege of knowing about it, and rejoicing in it, and welcoming Jesus as our own Savior.

WE PRAY: *Thank You, dear Lord, for coming to us. What a gift You are to me! Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- What is the best gift you ever received (not counting Jesus)?
- If Jesus is a gift, who gave Him? Why?
- Is He a gift you get to keep forever? Why or why not?

DOUBTFUL

TEXT: *And Zechariah said to the angel, “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.” (Luke 1:18)*

I have a hard time blaming Zechariah for his reaction. I mean, here he is, an old man, who has been praying for a son for most of his life. I wouldn't be surprised if that prayer has turned into something automatic by now—something the asker no longer really expects God to take seriously, because it's just been too long. But God does take Zechariah's prayer seriously. He

tells him it's happening

now, this very year. And Zechariah—well, I can't help wondering if he really *wants* this gift by now! Maybe he is suddenly thinking of screaming babies, and broken nights, and the endless tasks involved in raising a child! After all, he isn't young anymore. I'm glad God is patient and has a sense of humor—

not just with Zechariah

but with us. Because we, too, have our moments when God answers us and shatters our cozy little world, and we just can't cope. Even when it's something good, something we've been begging for—suddenly we see all the downsides, and well, we fail to rise to the occasion. Thank God He knows we

are like that, and He loves us anyway. God doesn't

give up on Zechariah, or take away the gift He's promised him. And He doesn't give up on us either. How could He—the One who died and rose to make us His own dearly beloved family?

WE PRAY: *Lord, thank You that You're patient with me when You do something new in my life, and I pull back in fear and doubt. Help me to trust You! Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you think you'd want a baby at, say, age 70?
- Why or why not?
- When has God surprised you in your own life?

GOD'S SENSE OF HUMOR

TEXT: *And the angel answered him [Zechariah], "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time." (Luke 1:19-20)*

I love God's sense of humor expressed through the angel Gabriel. Because He could have gotten mad, couldn't He? But He doesn't. He simply reminds Zechariah of the facts of the case—"Hey, you're talking to an angel. Right here, see? I stand in the presence of God? Right. So why are you doubting me?" And then God gives Zechariah the extra "sign" he was asking for, the

answer

to his doubtful "How will I know this?" "Fine," says the angel on God's behalf, "if you want a sign that badly, you can be mute for the next nine months. Will that do you?"

I think of my own husband the pastor, and I wonder. Would he survive for nine months with no voice? What a discipline for a preacher, poor man!

But the discipline is a loving one—for Zechariah will indeed see God's promise come true, and he will see his son John born, the first visible, touchable sign of God's coming into the world. For John is Jesus' forerunner, and he goes before the One who is both God and Man, who will give Himself up into death to save the world—and who will rise from the dead to give life to all of us.

WE PRAY: *Dear Lord Jesus, thank You for Your patience with me when I am slow to believe—and thank You for loving me anyway. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- Does it surprise you to think God has a sense of humor?
- Where else do you see it?
- Why is John a sign of Jesus' coming?

HIDDEN

TEXT: *And when his [Zechariah's] time of service was ended, he went to his home. After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, "Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when He looked on me, to take away my reproach among people." (Luke 1:23-25)*

I wonder why Elizabeth kept herself hidden for five months. Was it only that she wanted to be sure there would be no miscarriage? Somehow that doesn't quite fit to me. Elizabeth shows no signs of doubting God's promise to give them a son.

Maybe she just didn't want to deal with the reactions her neighbors would give her when they heard of the pregnancy. Because people have all sorts of opinions, and they offer them freely, often too freely. But I suspect that for

Elizabeth, this has a lot more to do with seeking God—with thinking over what He has given her, and thanking Him, and making plans for the future. Certainly being John's mother was going to be a major task. This baby would prepare the way for Jesus Himself! She must have spent many hours thinking about that—both what John would do, and what Jesus was coming to do.

Because it's right there in the Scripture—that God Himself was coming into our human race, to make Himself one of us, and to rescue us from sin and death. And He would do it the hard way—not through acts of royal power, but through His own shameful death on a cross, and then rising to life again. Did Elizabeth realize this, as she thought and prayed? Maybe someday we'll get to ask.

WE PRAY: *Dear God, thank You for coming Yourself to be our Savior. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- What do you do before you start a major life task?
- How will John's work help Jesus' ministry?
- Why do you think God came Himself instead of sending an angel or other creature?

SURPRISE!

TEXT: *In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. (Luke 1:26-29)*

Dear Mary! What a shock that must have been, to see an angel, right in the middle of washing the laundry or feeding the chickens. And the way he greets her! "Favored one" and "The Lord is with you!" I wonder if she thought the angel got the wrong house?

She had good reason to wonder. After all, she knew her Bible. God had sent angels before to announce the birth of a child, but those had always gone to married women—often women in old age! Virgins didn't get that kind of visit—until now.

But she listens. And she discovers that God is about to do something wonderful—for He's sending His own Son into human flesh, and He's going to use Mary herself to make it possible. As a result, we too are "favored"—all because God gave us Jesus, who became our Savior through His suffering and death—and who rose from the dead to give us life. Now "the Lord is with you" is something God can say to Mary and to all of us who trust in Jesus—for He has promised never to leave us.

WE PRAY: *Dear Father, thank You for sending Your Son! Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- Why would God choose a humble village girl instead of a princess?
- Why do you think He chose a virgin instead of a married woman?
- What does it mean to you, to know Jesus is with you forever?

“FAVOR WITH GOD”

TEXT: *And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a Son, and you shall call His Name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to Him the throne of His father David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end.”*
(Luke 1:30-33)

The angel started out by calling Mary “favored one,” and he repeats it again just a second later: “You have found favor with God.” It’s obviously important if he keeps saying it to her! What does this word “favor” mean? I looked it up

in the Greek, and it’s the same word we translate as “grace” elsewhere. Mary is about to receive a wonderful blessing from God—she will be the mother of Jesus our Savior. And she’s receiving that gift, not because she has earned it in any way—but rather because God is gracious and full of lovingkindness, and His goodness overflows onto her, freely and abundantly.

That’s true for us, too, isn’t it? We have found favor with God, not because of anything we’ve done, but because of Jesus, our Savior—the One who loves us so deeply He even laid down His life for us. Yes, and He rose from the dead so that He could share His own everlasting life with us who trust Him. He wants us with Him forever.

WE PRAY: *Lord, it’s hard for me to believe You love me that much. Thank You. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- When have you received something good in your life without earning or deserving it?
- Why does Jesus love you so dearly?
- How do you feel, knowing that you are one of God’s favored ones?

HOW?

TEXT: *And Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” And the angel answered her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the Child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.” (Luke 1:34-37)*

I love the simplicity of how Mary answers the angel. She doesn't argue, she doesn't doubt, she just asks “How?” Because Mary knows where babies come from, and she knows that virgins don't normally get pregnant. And so she wants to know what God's plans are. Should she move up the wedding date, or what? The angel recognizes that she's being practical, not doubting, and he answers her in the same spirit. “No,” he says, “you don't have to worry about the details. The Holy Spirit will handle this by miracle.” And he tells her about her relative Elizabeth, who is also pregnant when that shouldn't be possible. And so Mary is set free to be happy. She doesn't have to do anything. She can simply accept this wonderful Gift from God—His own Son!—and rejoice in Him. And we can do the same—relax and be happy, because Jesus has come to be born and to live and to die and to rise, all to make us His own.

WE PRAY: *Lord, I'm so glad You handle everything. You have given me all that I need. Thank You. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- If you were in Mary's place and the angel gave you that kind of news, what would you have said? Why?
- If God is in control, do we need to worry?
- How can we learn to trust Him?

CONSENT?

TEXT: *And Mary said, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her. (Luke 1:38)*

Mary is in an interesting spot. God has not asked for her consent, at least not directly. The angel has simply told her, “This is how it will be.” Does that sound unfair? And yet, isn’t there a sense in which all of us who belong to

God have given

our consent to be used by Him long ago? My husband doesn’t need to ask me before he commits me to helping a friend who is in an emergency. He knows my heart already. Of course I’ll say yes!

And the Lord knows Mary’s heart as well. He knows she loves Him. He knows she will consider the Gift He is giving her to be exactly that—the best gift ever!—and a great honor and responsibility as well. And we can see that He is right—because when she visits Elizabeth, she bursts out in a great song of praise for the wonderful thing God is doing through her, sending our Savior Jesus into the world.

It’s the same for us. We know that serving Jesus is an honor and blessing, because He’s the One who loved us so much He died and rose for us. It doesn’t really matter whether we enjoy doing the particular thing He asks of us or not. We have the chance to love Him by our actions—and we are glad to take it.

WE PRAY: *Dear Lord, I know how greatly You love me, and I love You back. Use me as You see best. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- Who loves and trusts you so much they wouldn’t even need to ask if they needed your help?
- Why would you come through for those people?
- What service has God trusted you with, knowing you’ll do it for love of Him?

GOOD BEYOND BELIEF

TEXT: *In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country ... and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ... And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy." (Luke 1:39a, 40, 41b-44)*

I love Elizabeth's reaction. As soon as she realizes that Mary—and Jesus, in Mary's womb!—have come to visit her, she cries out with joy. And her baby, John, leaps inside of her for the same reason. We too have good reason to cry out and jump for joy, because Jesus has come to us—we, who had no claim on Him at all, no reason to expect such love and blessing! But God *has* come to us in human flesh and blood, one of us—and not just for a short visit, but to be our Savior forever. Through His suffering and death He broke the power of evil over us; and now that He has risen from the dead and lives forever, we know that we, too, will live with Him forever. We will never lose Him, and He will never lose us. His lovingkindness is forever.

WE PRAY: *Dear Lord, thank You for coming to me in my own life, and making me Yours forever. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- What is the best thing that ever happened to you? (No fair saying "Jesus"!)
- When you first had that good thing happen to you, how did you react?
- Does it surprise you to know that Jesus considers you—you personally!—to be *His* joy? (See Hebrews 12:2.)

CLOSE

TEXT: *And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for He has looked on the humble estate of His servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is His Name. ...” And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home. (Luke 1:46-49, 56)*

Mary is overjoyed, so much that she can’t help bursting into poetry, trying to describe what God has done for her. She has good reason!

For the next nine months, Mary will live more closely connected to God than anybody before or after her. While she carries Jesus, her body will provide everything He needs—oxygen, food, warmth, all physical needs. Her choices will influence His future—what she eats, the stresses she endures. Her voice will be the first that He hears; and He will feel her emotions through the effects they have on her body. He will be wholly dependent on her. What an honor, and what trust God shows in Mary! And after Jesus is born, He will be

almost as completely dependent on her and on Joseph for years to come. They will protect Him; they will feed, shelter, and teach Him. God set all of this up so that Jesus, in turn, would become the One we all depend on—our dear Savior, who rescued us at the cost of His own life, and who lives forever as our beloved Lord and the home of our hearts.

WE PRAY: *Dear Jesus, I am glad to depend on You. You have never let me down, and You never will. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- What do you need in order to feel safe being close to someone?
- Are you comfortable depending on someone other than yourself? Why or why not?
- How about depending on the Lord—what has your experience been there?

GREAT MERCY

TEXT: *Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. (Luke 1:57-58)*

Elizabeth's neighbors heard that God had shown her great mercy, and they were happy for her. They came together to celebrate at the time of John's circumcision, eight days after he was born. But what does that mean, "great mercy"? I suspect the first thing they were thinking of was her safety. Childbirth was a dangerous thing in those days, all the more for a woman as old as Elizabeth was. But of course that wasn't all. In a culture where childlessness meant you might not have anyone to take care of you in old age, the birth of baby John was indeed "great mercy." So

John represents both safety and security for Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah. But he means something to us, too—because John is the "first installment," if we can say that, of God keeping His promise to send the Savior—Jesus, His own Son, who would be born just six months later. John will prepare the way for the One who makes us truly safe forever, at the cost of His own life. Now that Jesus has broken the power of death over us by rising from the dead, He will raise us also on the Last Day—and bring us safely into His kingdom.

WE PRAY: *Lord, You are my true safety. Thank You. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- What kind of safety does Jesus offer us? How do you know?
- When you are afraid, how does He help you?
- How does Jesus embody God's mercy to us?

INVISIBLE

TEXT: *And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, but his mother answered, “No; he shall be called John.” And they said to her, “None of your relatives is called by this name.” And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. (Luke 1:59-62)*

Just imagine how frustrated Elizabeth must have been with the neighbors.

They won't listen to her when she tells them the baby's name—no, they have to go “over her head” to ask Zechariah. She probably wanted to throw something at them.

That kind of thing can make you feel like you're invisible—like people are looking right past you to find someone who *really* matters. If it happens often enough, you may start believing them—that in fact you don't matter, you have no value, and your feelings and opinions don't count.

But God doesn't overlook us—even the last, least, and lowest of us. It was for us that He was born into our world as a helpless baby. It was for us that Jesus taught and served and cared for people—and then allowed Himself to be betrayed into death, though He had done nothing wrong. Jesus knew that His death would set us free from the power of death—and His resurrection would lead directly to ours. How much do you matter? Enough for Jesus to give Himself for you—gladly.

WE PRAY: *Lord, when I feel invisible, remind me that You see me and care for me, please. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- What do you need to feel like you matter in the world—like someone cares about you?
- What do you see in Jesus' words and life that show you that concern?
- How can you help others who feel invisible?

TALKED ABOUT

TEXT: *And he [Zechariah] asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And they all wondered. And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, "What then will this child be?" For the hand of the Lord was with him. (Luke 1:63-66)*

I don't think I ever noticed this verse before, that "all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea." The little drama going on in Zechariah's family was apparently pretty public. It looks like Zechariah wrote down his story for Elizabeth—and whoever she passed it on to. During those nine months, the neighbors would have found out everything—from the angel's appearance to Zechariah's mistake, and how God kept His promise anyway! And now, the final installment—when Zechariah gets a second chance to trust in God by naming the baby John—just as God told him to. But the neighbors missed an even bigger story. No doubt they overlooked

young Mary, the helpful cousin from Nazareth. It was too early in her pregnancy for them to realize she was carrying a child, too. But she was, and her baby would turn out to be Jesus the Messiah. He is God Himself come into this world as a human being—why? To serve and to save and to give Himself up as a ransom for all of us, so that we might become children of God. Through Jesus' death and resurrection, we have life and joy forever. **WE**

PRAY: *Dear Lord, Your coming is the best news ever. Thank You. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- Are you interested in your neighbors' lives?
- Do you think the neighbors ever found out about Jesus?
- Is there someone you could tell about Him? Ask the Lord for help.

SURE AND CERTAIN

TEXT: *And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying, “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited and redeemed His people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David, as He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from of old, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us ...” (Luke 1:67-71)*

Did you ever notice the weird way Zechariah describes what God is doing? He says, “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited and redeemed His people.” Zechariah puts it in the past tense. Now, that makes sense if you realize that Jesus is already on earth at the moment Zechariah is speaking. Jesus is inside His mother Mary as an unborn baby, and it will be six more months before He is born in Bethlehem. So yes, I can see why Zechariah says, “*He has visited*” His people.

But why does he say, He has “*redeemed His people*”? Because Jesus’ suffering and death on the cross is more than 30 years in the future! Why the past tense? I think it’s because Zechariah—or maybe I should say, the Holy Spirit—knows

that what Jesus will do to redeem us from sin and evil is so guaranteed to happen that he can use the past tense about it. Jesus’ death and resurrection is so sure and certain that God can talk about it as already accomplished. He is our trustworthy Savior forever.

WE PRAY: *Dear Savior, I know nobody as trustworthy as You. Thank You that I can lean on You with all my heart. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- How do you know when someone is trustworthy?
- How can you tell whether Jesus is safe for you to trust or not?
- Tell about a time when God came through for you.

ABOVE AND BEYOND

TEXT: [Zechariah said:] “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare His ways, to give knowledge of salvation to His people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” (Luke 1:76-79)

I love that image of the sunrise giving us light so that we can find the way of peace and walk in it. But surely that’s going a bit far? I mean, there’s no need for the sunrise to actually leave heaven and come down to earth to help us find our way. It can sit up there in the sky far away and shed its light on us. That would be good enough, right? Apparently God doesn’t think so. Because

this sunrise is Jesus Himself. And

He’s not happy to stay in heaven far away from us and give us salvation from a distance. No, He’s going to come *down* from heaven, down to the human race—down to a manger bed filled with straw. And He will come down even further than that—from life to death on a cross, and three days in the grave.

But He won’t stay there! Like all good sunrises, Jesus will indeed rise—and He will become our light and salvation forever.

WE PRAY: Lord, thank You for going above and beyond for my sake. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Think of the last person who helped you. Did they go above and beyond, or did they do just enough?
- Why is Jesus going so far to help you?
- How does that affect the way you relate to Him?

FOUND TO BE WITH CHILD

TEXT: *Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with Child from the Holy Spirit. (Matthew 1:18)*

Those words “She was found to be with Child” show a major shock to Mary’s family. Because in that time and culture, nobody would have wanted to find out that their daughter was pregnant—especially when the father was not the man she was engaged to! I suspect there was a lot of screaming and yelling! Someone would have had to break the news to him. Depending on how Joseph took it, that could ruin the family’s reputation.

Mary had just spent three months living with a family who believed her story. Now she was back home, and probably facing conflict, anger, fear, and shame. Did Mary try to tell her family the truth? Did they refuse to listen?

This is the world Jesus would be born into—a world filled with pain and fear and shame, a world where even those who love each other still suffer from distrust and grief. It’s what Jesus came to fix—the effects of sin and evil on our lives. He would give up His own life to set us free from that. He would even rise from the dead to give us new life, life forever—filled with peace, trust, and love for God and each other.

WE PRAY: *Lord Jesus, I’m so glad You came to help us in our need. Thank You. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- If you had been part of Mary’s family, would you have believed her story about the child being from the Holy Spirit?
- Why or why not?
- How do you think Mary found the strength to make it through this time?

LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON?

TEXT: *And her [Mary's] husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. (Matthew 1:19)*

Poor Joseph. There he was, happy and planning for his wedding. Then, in a single hour, all his hopes were shattered.

But look at how he handles it! He isn't shouting and screaming about the wrong he believes Mary has done to him. He doesn't try to pay her back. No, he's already looking for a way to let her out of the marriage arrangement as quietly as possible, because he doesn't want to shame her.

Now that's a good man, humanly speaking. That's a man who reminds me of his future foster son, Jesus Himself. Because Joseph is willing to bear as much of Mary's pain and shame as he can, given the circumstances. His main concern is how to protect her. And that is how Jesus feels about us.

Jesus, of course, takes it further—because He's never going to find out that the bad news about us was all a mistake as Joseph did with Mary. No, we are truly the broken, sinful people we've been called. And so Jesus expresses His love for us by showing us mercy all the way to the cross. He suffers and dies for us. And when He rises to life again, He gives that same life to us—who are no longer condemned sinners, but are now His own bride, the forgiven people of God (see Romans 7:4, Revelation 19:7-8).

WE PRAY: *Dear Lord Jesus, thank You for loving us and making us Your own, though You knew the truth about us. I love You. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- If you were in a parallel situation, would you have behaved as kindly as Joseph?
- God chose Mary to parent His Son. Would you say God chose Joseph also?
- What characteristics do you think God was looking for in them both? Why?

DO NOT FEAR

TEXT: *But as he [Joseph] considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a Son, and you shall call His Name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and they shall call His Name Immanuel” (which means, God with us). (Matthew 1:20-23)*

The angel says, “Do not fear to take Mary as your wife.” Joseph had good reason to be afraid before the angel came to him. At that point, he still thought Mary was pregnant by another man. And if Joseph had gone ahead and married her under those circumstances, what kind of a life would he have had with a woman whose heart was elsewhere? But God sees the

problem and deals with it openly in His message to Joseph.

God always does see the problems that we face—even the ones that seem too sordid or too embarrassing to confess to anybody else. And in His kindness, He deals with them—even when it means coming down to earth as our Savior, to give His life and to rise from the dead for our sake. Nothing and no one is too low for Him to love and to rescue.

WE PRAY: *Dear Savior, thank You for noticing me and my problems, too. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you have embarrassing worries and problems?
- Do you ever hesitate to bring them up when you’re praying and asking God for help?
- How does it make you feel to know that Jesus has already noticed your problems and is finding ways to help you?

JOSEPH THE DREAMER

TEXT: *When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a Son. And he called His Name Jesus. (Matthew 1:24-25)*

It interests me that God communicates with Joseph purely through dreams. It's maybe not surprising, though, since Joseph is named after the man in Genesis 37-50 who had dreams from God—and God used him to rescue the whole family of Israel from famine.

God used the Old Testament Joseph to rescue a whole country—and foreigners, too!—since he was in charge of all the grain of Egypt. By contrast, Joseph in the New Testament is caring for a single mother and her baby, which might not seem like much. But this baby is Jesus, who is the Bread of Life—and through His life, death, and resurrection, He will save the entire world.

As He tells us, “I am the living Bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever” (John 6:51a). No one who trusts in Jesus will ever be destroyed.

WE PRAY: *Lord Jesus, Your Name means “God is salvation,” and that’s what You are to me. Thank You. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- What does your name mean? Are you named after anyone?
- Why is Jesus’ Name appropriate for Him?
- How do we “eat” the Bread of Life that Jesus gives us?

JOSEPH THE PROTECTOR

TEXT: *In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ... And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with Child. (Luke 2:1, 3-5)*

I love the way Joseph protects his family. Here we see him taking Mary and her unborn baby roughly 90 miles to Bethlehem on a tax registration trip. At first glance it looks like the opposite of protection; Mary is close to giving birth, and probably didn't enjoy the trip at all!

But in those days, having her give birth far away from home was probably the kindest thing Joseph could have done for her. For her to give birth at home when everyone knew she'd only been married for six months or less—no. There was probably gossip already because she looked nine months pregnant! So Joseph took her with him—knowing that the longer they stayed away, the

harder it would be for gossipy neighbors to figure out exactly when the baby had been born. Thus he protected both Mary and Jesus. And if it fulfilled God's prophecy that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem? Why, that was even better!

WE PRAY: *My Savior, You protect me from sin, death, and the devil. Thank You for loving me so. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- How do you behave when you're protecting someone?
- Do you think Mary appreciated what Joseph was trying to do?
- Jesus protected us by suffering, dying, and rising again so that we could be set free from sin, death, and evil. Why would He do this for you?

A WISHED-FOR BIRTH

TEXT: *And while they [Joseph and Mary] were there, the time came for her to give birth. (Luke 2:6)*

There's one thing nobody can stop, and that is the birth of a baby when its time has come. Then it doesn't matter where you are, if you are busy, or if you have a safe place to give birth. That baby is coming out regardless.

And so it was with Jesus. Joseph found her the best place he could to labor and give birth; but it wasn't what any of them wished for. There was no room for them in a better place. And so Mary bore Jesus and laid Him in a manger, like the poorest of babies.

Because God did wish for this birth—at just that time, in Bethlehem, far from the help of family, in conditions so poor they make me shudder. His Son Jesus would be born the same way He lived the rest of His life— usually homeless, generally poor, but fulfilling the Scripture. He chose this birth because He came to be Savior for all of us—not just the comfortable and well-off, but the poor, the homeless, the ones without family or friends to care for them. Through His death and resurrection, Jesus has made Himself our family—our help—our home forever. Because He loves us.

WE PRAY: *Dear Jesus, thank You that You came into my life and lived as I live. Not in ease but in difficulty—because You love me. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- If you had been Joseph, where would you have looked for help when Mary's pains came on?
- Do you think he was able to find help? Why or why not?
- Why would Jesus choose such a birth? Why did He choose such a death?

A SAFE PLACE

TEXT: *And she [Mary] gave birth to her first born Son and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths and laid Him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. (Luke 2:7)*

Now that I've gone through labor and childbirth, I can't imagine doing that in the kind of discomfort Mary probably bore. "There was no room for them in the *kataluma*," says Luke—and whether the word "kataluma" should be translated "inn" or "guestroom," it really doesn't matter. There was no room in that comfortable place for a woman in labor, or her frantic husband, or her tiny newborn baby—no room for God Himself.

Why put Jesus to sleep in a manger? Well, labor and delivery make you sleepy afterward. And my first urge when I got sleepy was to put my baby somewhere safe and warm—where no one could drop him, step on him, or harm him in any other way. If the place Mary gave birth was a stable, no doubt there were rats. Mary must have been worried. And so she and Joseph put Him in the safest place they could find—a feeding trough.

Jesus is no longer a baby, of course. But He feels the same protective urge toward you and me, because through His suffering, death, and resurrection, He has given life to us. And now that we are God's own beloved children, He wants us in the safest place possible. So He has taken us into Himself—as He prays to the Father, "that they also may be in Us ... I in them and You in Me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that You sent Me and loved them even as You loved Me" (John 17:21b, 23).

WE PRAY: *Thank You, dear Lord, for loving and protecting me. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- Have you ever cared for a baby?
- If so, how did you keep the baby safe?
- What does Jesus protect you from? How does He do it?

BORN TO YOU

TEXT: *And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."* (Luke 2:8-11)

I still remember the moment they showed me my newborn son. A baby was born—and to me! He was mine—mine to love, mine to rejoice in. And though he's grown now, he's still mine in a certain sense, and will be forever. That's

the gist of the news the angels brought to the shepherds—for they said, "To you is born this day ... a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." How amazing, that God would send us a Savior—and not just any Savior, but His own beloved Son, who is God Himself! How amazing, that Jesus would be born to us—not just to Mary and Joseph, but to every sinful, broken human being who has ever lived. Jesus is ours—ours to love, ours to rejoice in.

And we are His—because Jesus has given His life for our sake, to make us His own. That's what the cross was all about. And now that He has risen from the dead and will never die again, we too will live forever with Him. We are His and He is ours—born to us, forever.

WE PRAY: *Dear Jesus, I am Yours and You are mine—thank You. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- Why are people usually happy when babies are born?
- How is Jesus yours forever?
- How are you His?

SUDDENLY

TEXT: *[The angel said:] “And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased!” (Luke 2:12-14)*

I love the way it happens that, as soon as the first angel stops speaking, suddenly a huge number of angels fill the sky and praise God for sending us Jesus, our Savior. It’s as if they could barely wait to start singing their joy over the wonderful good news God sent them to proclaim.

You can hear the joy in their words: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace.” They are delighted, they are overjoyed, that God has done such a wonderful thing for us—the sinful, broken human beings who turned against God so long ago and then could never find our way back to Him again. But now God has made a way back—through this tiny baby, who is both God and Man, and who is our promised Savior. Because of Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection, the angels knew with absolute certainty that our people would someday rejoin the angels and all creation in loving and enjoying God forever. And we can share the angels’ joy whenever we get

to tell the good news

of Jesus to someone who has never heard or believed it—a friend, a family member, a next-door neighbor. Because God is in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself, and calling us home to Himself in love.

WE PRAY: *Dear Father, thank You for giving us Your Son Jesus! Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- When did you bring anyone good news of any sort?
- How did you feel about doing that?
- How do you think Jesus feels about *being* our good news, the One who saves us?

A BABY IN A MANGER

TEXT: *When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this Child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. ... And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. (Luke 2:15-18, 20)*

What a contrast between the joyful host of angels the shepherds had seen, and the tired, stressed family they found by Jesus' manger! I wonder what they thought of Him, dressed in the humble swaddling clothes Mary had packed. He didn't look much like a Savior!

But the shepherds were wise, and they trusted the angels. And so they spread the good news to everyone they talked to—that God had finally sent our broken, suffering world a Savior, Jesus Christ our Lord. And as they went back to their sheep, they praised God, because they knew that God's promises are never in vain. It would be years before Jesus grew up and carried out His great saving acts—taking all our sin and guilt to the cross, dying to defeat death, and rising again to become our living Lord and Savior—the Source of real life for everyone who trusts in Him. But in the meantime, those who heard the story had hope to hold onto—because God's rescue mission was already started.

WE PRAY: *Thank You, Lord, for coming to save me and all people. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- What great things are you waiting for in your own life?
- Does it help to know what's coming?
- As you look forward to Jesus' second coming, how do you find patience and joy?

WELCOME TO GOD'S PEOPLE

TEXT: *And at the end of eight days, when He was circumcised, He was called Jesus, the Name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb. (Luke 2:21)*

When Jesus was eight days old, it was time for Him to be named and circumcised. Every Jewish boy was circumcised as God commanded Abraham, to mark Him as someone who belonged to God and who lived under God's Law.

Circumcision was a ceremony that happened at home, though we don't know where Jesus and His parents were living at this point. I hope Joseph had found them somewhere more comfortable to stay—a house, perhaps, or even just a guest room with a relative! Certainly he was doing his best to keep both mother and Child well and happy. But neither Joseph nor Mary

could spare Jesus the pain that came with circumcision. This was God's command, and it had to be done—even to God-in-the-flesh Himself, Jesus our Savior. And so Jesus felt His first pain since birth, and shed His first blood. What a welcome to the Savior who would save His people through a painful, bloody death! But if circumcision reminds

us of pain, it also reminds us that Jesus has joined Himself to us and all God's people forever. He is on our side—the human side—and He bears the marks of it in His own body. Even now that He has risen from the dead, He continues to be ours, one of us. And where He goes we go—because Jesus has made us His own forever. **WE PRAY:** *Dear*

Jesus, thank You for accepting pain for me and joining Yourself to us forever. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Were you baptized as an infant?
- How are Baptism and circumcision similar? How are they different?
- Why do you think Jesus chose to go through all the same experiences we must go through, even the painful ones?

“A SIGN THAT IS OPPOSED”

TEXT: *And [Mary and Joseph] brought [Jesus] up to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. ... he [Simeon] took Him [Jesus] up in his arms and blessed God And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary His mother, "Behold, this Child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed" (Luke 2:22b, 25a, 26, 28a, 34)*

I wonder what Mary thought when Simeon called her baby “a sign that is opposed.” Looking down at His innocent face, it must have been hard to imagine people hating Him—hurting Him—doing their best to destroy Him. And yet, Mary knew her Bible. She would have known that suffering would come to her Son the Messiah. And of course it did—as a refugee in Egypt, during the years of His ministry, and finally when He laid down His life for us on the cross. As Isaiah says, “He was despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (Isaiah 53:3a).

But that wasn't the end of the story. For Jesus was and is a sign, the greatest sign there could ever be of God's love. Jesus' death and resurrection for our sake make it clear that God's intentions toward us sinners are nothing but love and mercy and redemption. In Jesus we see the height and depth and breadth of God's love—for us.

WE PRAY: *Dear Jesus, Your love reaches even to me! Thank You! Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- When did Jesus first meet opposition?
- Signs have meaning. What does Jesus mean to you?
- How can you be a sign to people who need God's love and mercy?

SENT BY THE SPIRIT

TEXT: *And there was a prophetess, Anna She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband ... and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of Him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem. (Luke 2:36-38)*

It interests me that both of the people who meet the baby Jesus in the temple are people who are used to listening to the Holy Spirit. Simeon had a promise from Him, that he would see the Messiah before his own death. Anna is called a prophetess, though we don't know anything more about her service; but we do know that she told everybody she could about Jesus. No

wonder they met Jesus on His first trip to the temple—God sent them there! And so they were able to hold Him in their arms, to rejoice and tell all their friends the good news. And now it's our turn. Because we, too, have the

Holy Spirit living inside us.

He is the One who brought us to believe in Jesus our Savior; He's the reason we know that Jesus gave His life to rescue us, and then He rose from the dead so that we could live with Him in God's kingdom forever. Because of the Spirit, we rejoice and carry Jesus in our hearts. And we, too, can tell all the people we love about Him.

WE PRAY: *Dear Holy Spirit, thank You for giving me trust in Jesus. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- What do you know about the Holy Spirit?
- How does He help you in your life?
- nervous, ask Him to make it so you're already comfortably talking about Jesus before you even realize!
- Ask Him to give you a chance to tell someone about Jesus. If you're

UNEXPECTED TROUBLE

TEXT: *Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star when it rose and have come to worship Him." (Matthew 2:1-2)*

I feel sorry for the wise men. They came from the east in all innocence, expecting to visit a newborn king. And so naturally they looked for Him first in the palace of the king of Judea—I mean, where else would you find the heir to the throne?

They didn't know the baby wasn't from Herod's family. They didn't know that Herod was a monster who would kill tiny children to protect his throne. And so, with the best of intentions, they were caught up in a horrible story. I hope they never learned what happened.

But this can happen to us, too. In complete innocence, we can say something or do something that turns into tragedy—and we never intended it. We would give our lives to undo it, but we can't. And it breaks our hearts. If you

are in this situation, God understands and grieves for you. Jesus Himself must have known that His birth led to the death of other children. Let Him comfort you. And if you ever fear that you do in fact bear some real guilt for what

happened—let Jesus deal with that, too. Because that is the reason He came to earth, to take away all sin and guilt and to heal the damage they do to us. He wants to see you healed and blessed—He died and rose again to make it so. And He calls you to Himself in love.

WE PRAY: *Dear Jesus, You know everything. Please help. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you carry regrets?
- How can you carry that grief to Jesus?
- Is there someone who could use your prayers for an unhealed grief?

ESCAPE

TEXT: *When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea" Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the Child, and when you have found Him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship Him." (Matthew 2:3-5a, 7-8)*

I can't help wondering why Herod sent the wise men on to Bethlehem, instead of just refusing to help. Did he think maybe they were hiding information from him about Jesus—stuff he might still find out? Did he actually believe they would fall for his line about "I want to worship the child, too"? The wise men weren't fools. I suspect they knew exactly what Herod

was

going to do about Jesus as soon as they discovered he didn't belong to Herod's family. They knew how kings behave. And so they made agreeable noises and got on the road to Bethlehem as soon as they could.

It isn't easy when you have to deal with evil people, whether that's a king or an abusive boss or relative. Sometimes all you can do is pray for help and escape as quickly as you can. If that's you, you can be sure God cares about your situation—because He came into our world to save us from all evil, sin, and abuse. Jesus bore our suffering Himself by His own free choice, so that through His death and resurrection, He could give us life, peace, and freedom forever.

WE PRAY: *Lord, when I'm in danger, help me! Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- Why do you think Herod is so afraid of a baby?
- Why are the people of Jerusalem disturbed?
- When have you asked God to help you against an evil person or situation?

A GIFT FOR THE NATIONS

TEXT: *After listening to the king, they [the wise men] went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house, they saw the Child with Mary His mother, and they fell down and worshiped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered Him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way. (Matthew 2:9-12)*

It's a lovely picture, isn't it? These respected wise men from foreign countries, down on their knees in front of Jesus, offering Him gifts. I wonder what the wide-eyed toddler made of their presents. I suspect Mary had to make sure He didn't put them in His mouth!

But there are more gifts here than just gold and frankincense and myrrh. For Jesus Himself is a Gift, and not just to the Jewish people—God has given Him to all the nations of the world as our Savior and Redeemer. These men on their knees are just the first of the Gentiles to worship Him. During His life, He will serve and teach and preach and suffer—and ultimately, give His life so that all humanity may live. Through His life, death, and resurrection, Jesus will call us all back to God in joy and forgiveness.

WE PRAY: *Dear Father, thank You for giving us Your Son—the best of all Your gifts. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- What do you think happened to Jesus' presents in the end?
- Why do you think God sent both Jewish shepherds and Gentile wise men to see Jesus?
- What gift of love could you give Jesus?

DANGER

TEXT: *Now when they [the wise men] had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Rise, take the Child and His mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the Child, to destroy Him.” And he rose and took the Child and His mother by night and departed to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, “Out of Egypt I called My Son.”* (Matthew 2:13-15)

That must have been a scary night. I can see Joseph waking Mary, whispering so they wouldn't wake Jesus. They would have packed as quickly as possible by the light of a lamp—maybe even leaving some things behind. And then the three of them would be on the road.

Good parents don't mess around when their child is in danger. And God didn't mess around when we were in danger—when He saw that we had turned away from Him and put ourselves into the devil's power. Even at the very beginning of the world, He promised to send us a Savior (see Genesis 3:15). And then He came Himself to be that Savior, to rescue us. Because He

loved

us so, He was born among us as a human baby, Jesus. He put His own life, death, and resurrection between us and ruin. What greater love could there

be? **WE PRAY:** *Dear Lord, You saw me in danger and You came to me. Thank*

You.

Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- How far would you go to protect someone you loved?
- What do you think it was like for this family, living as refugees in Egypt?
young child?
- Why would God choose a life that involved danger and trouble, even as a

BLAME

TEXT: *Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. (Matthew 2:16)*

This question used to trouble me: How could God allow these little ones to die when His own Son was safely on the way to Egypt?

Logically it makes no sense to blame God. Herod is the one who did the evil, not God. But saying that never helps. It's as if we expect the Herods of this world to behave that way, so when they do, we just grieve and move on without surprise. But not with God. We expect good from Him. And when we see horrible evil happening, we cry out in shock and blame. It isn't logical, but it's human.

I only got over this when I realized that in fact, God didn't save Jesus from death. He postponed it. The last baby of Bethlehem died too—betrayed, flogged, nailed to a cross 30 years later. And He did it for the other babies—and for me—and for you.

Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection is the only way I can bear the horrors of the world. Because Jesus is God Himself, and He chose His path deliberately—not to save Himself, but to rescue all of us from evil, at the cost of His life. He loves us that much. If that is what God's heart is like, the Herods of the world will never win. Jesus lives and reigns forever. And because of Him, we too will live.

WE PRAY: *Lord, when horrible evil happens, save us! Amen.*

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- Do you have trouble watching the news? **Reflect & Discuss**
- Why do you think both ends of Jesus' life are marked by horror?
 - How do you lean on Jesus for help in evil times?

GOING HOME

TEXT: *But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, "Rise, take the Child and His mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the Child's life are dead." ... And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth (Matthew 2:19-20, 23)*

I wonder what it was like for young Jesus, listening to His parents make plans to go home. Because as young as He was, Egypt probably felt like "home" to Him. He was probably not quite two when they left Bethlehem—did He remember it at all? And He had never seen Galilee. What Jesus knew as a young child was a mixture of His family's language and culture and that of His Egyptian playmates.

Still, God wanted Him in Israel, and that is where they went.

If you think of it, that's not a bad picture of how Jesus' life went as an adult, too. Because during the years of His preaching and healing, He is constantly on the move; He says, "The Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head," and He's right (Luke 9:58b). Bed was often a stranger's home or a spot on the side of the road. There would be no true lasting rest for Jesus "at home" until after He suffered, died, and rose from the dead. His great work made it possible for us, too, to become children of God, forgiven and blessed. And now Jesus has gone home to His Father's house ahead of us to get things ready for us (see John 14:2, 17:24). He wants us with Him forever.

WE PRAY: *Thank You, Lord Jesus, for making Your home mine. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- What makes a place "home" for you?
- What do you think it will be like to live in Jesus' home forever?
- Do you expect to enjoy it?

QUIET

TEXT: *But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. ... And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man. (Luke 2:19, 52)*

What next? The rest of Jesus' childhood seems to have been pretty quiet, with the exception of one trip to Jerusalem (see Luke 2:41-52). Jesus would have learned the things any child learns: how to care for His own needs, how to do chores and help around the house. Mary probably taught Him to cook (see John 21:9-13). He would have learned to make friends in the neighborhood. Jesus probably went to school and learned to read the Hebrew Scriptures. And of course Joseph would have taught Him the work of a carpenter (see Mark 6:3).

I'm glad for the quiet years, because Jesus' family could use some time to be at peace. We know Mary thought about the events around her Son's birth; no doubt she told Jesus the stories of the angels and the wise men. Both Mary and Joseph would have looked ahead to Jesus' future, trying to understand God's plan—and to prepare Him as best they could for what was to come. For they knew Jesus was the Messiah, and He would save God's people from the power of sin and evil. And if they understood the Scriptures clearly, they would have seen the troubling prophecies about His suffering, death, and resurrection—for us.

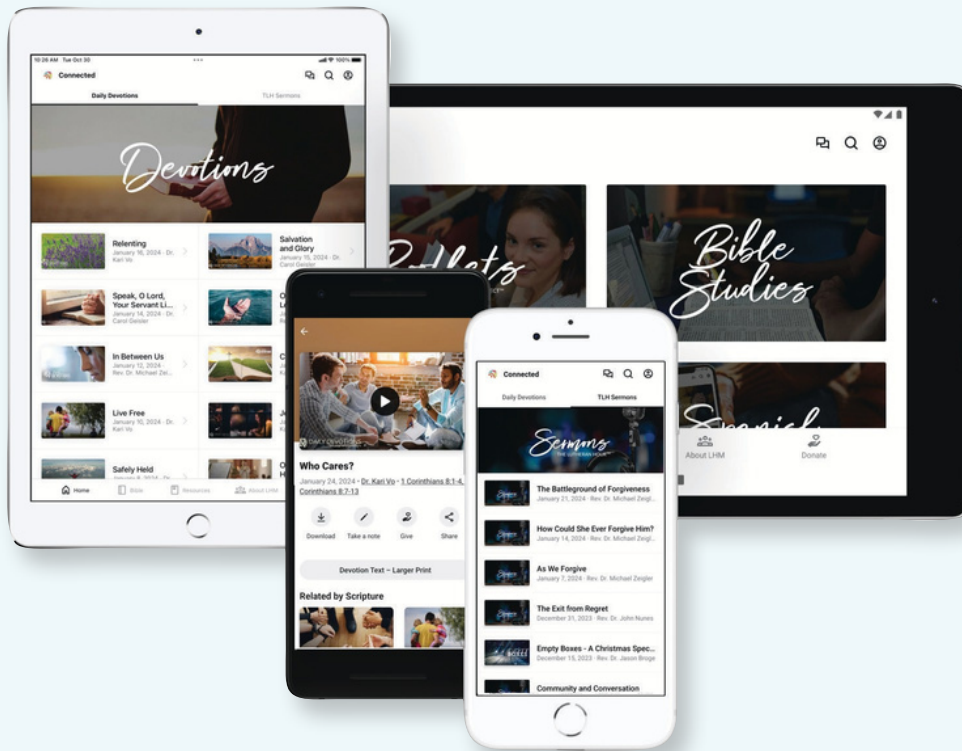
I'm sure they prayed, both for Him and with Him. And they loved Him deeply. It was a good starting point for the One who would love us most deeply of all.

WE PRAY: *Dear Lord Jesus, thank You for loving me and becoming my Savior. Amen.*

Reflect & Discuss

- Does it surprise you that Jesus' growing-up years were so quiet?
- Why or why not?
- What do you think were the most valuable things He learned during that time? Why?

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