



A Celebration of Light for
Advent & Epiphany

2020



Dedications

This is dedicated to our God and Father who blesses daily when we spend a portion of each day with in quiet devotion. This is also dedicated to all those who will take the time to read each daily devotion, to all of those who have nurtured me in my growth as a follower of Jesus the Christ.

Thank You

I want to thank Barb, Larry, Irene, the Lieutenant, and Sassenach for taking their time to edit this work.

Acknowledgements/Sources

I cannot begin to acknowledge all the authors I have read over the forty-five years I have walked among some of the giants of our faith. Their names may not be written about in history, but they are written in the Lambs Book of Life. To only name some would be a disservice to the ones I fail to mention.

Then there is the internet and the countless websites I have visited and read. There are the good and then the not so good.

Lastly, and most important I want to acknowledge that my source was, is and will always be our Father who guides my thoughts. Thank you.

Forward

You hold in your hands a labor of love provided by our member Fr. Doug Mussey. As a brother in Jesus Christ, Doug has become more and more dear to me as I get to know him better. What I love most about him is his heart for Jesus. There is no questioning what Doug is all about: He is all about Jesus. Many have been the times when he and I have sat in my office, not to talk about “church” or the necessary politic of institution, but to simply remember and talk about God’s Word in all its beauty and depth, and to praise God for being incomprehensibly more than anything we could imagine.

When Doug suggested that he would like to write a devotional booklet for Advent and Epiphany to be share with our congregation, I was intrigued. As you’ll read in the devotions, Doug approaches God’s Word in a very unique way, and his thought process leads him to observations that you may not have had. As you read these devotions, you’ll learn a lot about the history surrounding Christmas and Epiphany, as well as church traditions through the centuries.

But learning facts and figures is not Doug’s intention. By sharing these bits of information, he hopes to deepen your understanding of what’s really important. As he closes each devotion, he brings his point home and challenges you to answer the questions that the facts demand. There may be a time or two when you do not completely agree with Doug’s observation; don’t let that get in your way. The important thing, as Doug emphasizes, is that you let the wondrous events of these seasons wash over you and cause you to reflect on what it means for *your* life.

We are truly blessed to have a man of God like Doug in our midst. Enjoy the fruits of his work. May these devotions lead you to a deeper, more profound and more infinite relationship with our Brother and Savior, Jesus Christ!

Pastor Dan

Advent 2020 Devotions

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A Brief History of Advent

For many Christians unfamiliar with the liturgical year, there may be some confusion surrounding the meaning of the Advent season. Some people may know that the Advent season focuses on expectation, and think that it serves as an anticipation of Christ's birth in the season leading up to Christmas. This is part of the story, but there's more to Advent.

The word "Advent" is derived from the Latin word *adventus*, meaning "coming," which is a translation of the Greek word *parousia*. Scholars believe that during the 4th and 5th centuries in Spain and Gaul, Advent was a season of preparation for the baptism of new Christians at the January feast of Epiphany. This is also the time of the celebration of God's incarnation represented by the visit of the Magi to the baby Jesus, His baptism in the Jordan River by John the Baptist, and His first miracle at Cana. During this season of preparation, Christians would spend 40 days in penance, prayer, and fasting to prepare for this celebration. Originally, there was little connection between Advent and Christmas.

By the 6th century, however, Roman Christians had tied Advent to the coming of Christ. But the "coming" they had in mind was not Christ's first coming in the manger in Bethlehem, but his second coming in the clouds as the judge of the world. It was not until the Middle Ages that the Advent season was explicitly linked to Christ's first coming at Christmas.

Today, the season of Advent lasts for four Sundays leading up to Christmas. At that time, the new Christian year begins with the twelve-day celebration of Christmastide, which lasts from Christmas Eve until Epiphany on January 6. Advent begins on the Sunday that falls between November 27th and December 3rd each year. Advent 2020 begins on Sunday, November 29th and ends on Thursday, December 24.

Advent symbolizes the present situation of the church in these "last days", as God's people wait for the return of Christ in glory to consummate his eternal kingdom. The church is in a similar situation to Israel at the end of the Old Testament: in exile, waiting and hoping in prayerful expectation for the coming of the Messiah. Israel looked back to God's past gracious actions on their behalf in leading them out of Egypt in the Exodus, and on this basis, they called for God once again to act for them. In the same way, the church, during Advent, looks back upon Christ's coming in celebration while at the same time looking forward in eager anticipation to the coming of Christ's kingdom when he returns for his people. In this light, the Advent hymn "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" perfectly represents the church's cry during the Advent season:

O come, O come, Emmanuel, And ransom captive Israel, That mourns in lonely exile here Until the Son of God appears. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

While Israel would have sung the song in expectation of Christ's first coming, the church now sings the song in commemoration of that first coming and in expectation of the second coming in the future.

To balance the two elements of remembrance and anticipation, the first two Sundays in Advent (through December 16th) look forward to Christ's second coming, and the last two Sundays (December 17th – 24th) look backward to remember Christ's first coming. Over the course of the four weeks, Scripture readings move from passages about Christ's return in judgment to Old Testament passages about the expectation of the coming Messiah to New Testament passages about the announcements of Christ's arrival by John the Baptist and the Angels.

While it is difficult to keep in mind in the midst of holiday celebrations, shopping, lights and decorations, and joyful carols, Advent is intended to be a season of fasting, much like Lent, and there are a variety of ways that this time of mourning works itself out in the season. Reflection on the violence and evil in the world cause us to cry out to God to make things right—to put death's dark shadows to flight. Our exile in the present makes us look forward to our future Exodus. And our own sinfulness and need for grace lead us to pray for the Holy Spirit to renew his work in conforming us into the image of Christ.

While Advent is certainly a time of celebration and anticipation of Christ's birth, it is more than that. It is only in the shadow of Advent that the miracle of Christmas can be fully understood and appreciated, and it is only in the light of Christmas that the Christian life makes any sense. It is between the fulfilled promise of Christ's first coming and the yet-to-be-fulfilled promise of his second coming that Karl Barth penned these words: "Unfulfilled and fulfilled promise are related to each other, as are dawn and sunrise. Both promise and in fact the same promise. If anywhere at all, then it is precisely in the light of the coming of Christ that faith has become Advent faith, the expectation of future revelation. But faith knows for whom and for what it is waiting. It is fulfilled faith because it lays hold on the fulfilled promise." The promise for Israel and the promise for the church is Jesus Christ; he has come, and he will come again. This is the essence of Advent.

November 29th – The Beginning

Where does the Christmas Story begin? I would like to give a totally different perspective or a new twist on this old, old story. First, let me say that I do not like the term story. In my opinion, stories are tales that are made up. The birth of Jesus was a real happening, or if you prefer, a real event that happened in real time and in a real setting. It is not something that was made up so that big box stores could rake in the profits to make their bottom line increase.

I would like to begin with the facts. The first fact is that God created the heavens and the earth. On the sixth day He made man and woman in His own image. God placed them in the garden and gave them specific instructions as to what was good and pleasing to eat and from what they should abstain. Then, He told them the consequences if they disobeyed. I can only assume they understood, as I cannot believe God would leave His children without understanding His instructions. Then He came and checked on them in the cool of the evening. However and unfortunately, the couple had a visitor one day. Well, you know the rest.

In the 30th chapter of Deuteronomy, Moses has a "sit down" or in today's terms a "come to Jesus" talk with the Hebrew children as they prepared to cross the Jordan and enter the Promised Land. The words are simple and easy to understand. Moses lays out the path they must take if they are to be successful in the land. His instructions are not to turn to other gods, but to follow the ordinances given to them by God. He goes on to say that the commandments are not too difficult for man to follow. He continues by telling them the advantages to following the God's instructions. He also adds the costs of being disobedient. The choice is clear. You may either choose life, or death. They were encouraged to choose life. But we all know what happened.

2 Esdras 7:129 reads, "For this is the way of which Moses, while he was alive, spoke to the people, saying, "Choose life for yourself, so that you may live!" The book of Esdras was written during the period of the Maccabees, thousands of years after Moses died. Had the life style of the people changed? It does not seem to be so. Fast forward two thousand, five hundred years, has the behavior of the masses changed? Do we follow the instructions given by God to His people? I'll let you be the judge. God, in His infinite wisdom knew that man would follow the ways of their ancestors. We, like them, are given the choice to either choose life or to choose the way of the prince and power of darkness.

Joshua, before he retired, called all the people together and gave them a similar speech saying, "You must choose for yourselves today whom you will serve." The options have not changed to this day. (And I might add, they never will.) We have the option to choose life or death.

To choose life is to choose the love of your Lord God, over the love of yourself. To obey him, and stay close to him, walking in His way. He is your life. Show Him how much you care by choosing to follow Him each and every day. As the Christmas carol states: "light and life to all He brings." Choose life!

November 30th – Fake News

One of the terms coined recently is Brexit. This term is designed to describe Great Britain leaving the European Union. Another term that has come in to use lately is Fake News. For me the term describes news that is slanted, distorted and biased. Although it may contain a partial truth, the whole truth is not presented in such a way as to give the listener or reader the entire truth or facts. It is done to persuade an audience to think as the presenter. In other words, it is misleading.

My 15 year old grandson is a whole lot smarter than I was at his age. In order to get the facts of a given situation or a problem, he ignores the opinions of others and does his own research to determine his position. I believe him to be wise beyond his years. Many of us should likewise and follow his example.

When God made man and woman and placed them in His garden, He gave them specific instructions as to conduct. This became His practice throughout His history with His creation. I know some people who think God made us and left us here to our own devices. To me that is totally against His character. When you read the history of God's interaction with humans, He never fails to provide guidelines.

He always imparts consequences if His mandates are not followed. To Adam and Eve He told them they would die. Now I do not know if they totally understood the meaning of death, but on some level God must have informed them of the meaning. Into the drama came the villain, the fake news reporter. He presents his side and with relentless misinformation, truth is questioned and disregarded.

Now it is time for the discipline to begin. Wait a minute! The fake news reporter was correct. They did not physically die immediately; however, the death of innocence was immediate. Yes, their eyes were opened and they knew right from wrong. Unfortunately, the fake news reporter did not give them all the information. The reporter failed to tell them the magnitude of their actions. He did not disclose the price they would have to pay. They were fooled into thinking that everything would remain the same. Their gullibility brought outcomes they never considered. I can hear them saying to themselves; "How could we be so stupid?"

Have you ever asked that same question? I bet you have, many times. We may trade the word "foolish" for "stupid" but the implications are still the same. We listened to someone who did not provide all the information we needed to make an intelligent decision. We drank the Kool-Aid. What were we thinking?

For too many, Christmas is only a time to run up the credit card balance, exchange gifts, for family to gather, watch football, and so on and so on. Have we surrendered to the fake news that the world has offered. It is a time to turn off all the fake news reporters who will tell you it is only a good story. Not so. Advent is a time of preparation for the light that is coming and already here. It is a time to listen to the One who brought the Good News of God's redemption through grace to the world. It is the only news worth hearing and really listening to. It is the only news on which you can stake your life. It is the only news that offers you the whole truth and nothing but the truth so help me God.

December 1st – The Garden

When God made man and woman, He placed them in the most beautiful garden that has ever been. It is unfortunate that we do not have pictures or a written description. However, if we use our imaginations, each of us will visualize our own idea of what it was like. For me, that means no crab grass, no weeds, no bugs to eat your bright red tomatoes. I see no worms to devour the sour green apples that go so well with brown sugar and cinnamon. There are palm trees that do not grow above eight feet and their branches never turn brown and require trimming. I hope you can see where I am going with this. It may be utopia, but it still needs tending. Oh, one other thing, the sun shines only when it is break time, the temperature never gets above 78 degrees, and humidity 35 percent. Paradise!

I am sure that if your imaginary garden did exist, you would not want to leave. I know I would not. However, I was not placed in the original garden and asked to be the gardener. But two others were. It may be easy to say that the choices they made would not have been your choices. It is easy to be a Monday morning quarterback. Or to put it another way, hindsight is 20/20. Each one of us has faced temptations and each one of us has failed. If you look at it from that perspective, none of us has the right to throw stones. We would all be like Adam and his bride, tilling the ground and getting a meager return for all our efforts.

Fast forward a few thousand years. It is Friday afternoon on a hill outside the city of Jerusalem. I doubt that I have to retell the events that have brought the narration to this point. Needless to say, this is the most critical tipping point in all of recorded history. Why, you ask? Consider the following. The Centurion who was in charge of the soldiers who crucified Jesus was wise enough to exclaim that this truly was the Son of God. One of the thieves crucified with Christ was not moved and therefore condemned himself to a life of continued suffering. But, the other thief's life was changed. Because of the radical shift in his life, Christ told him that this day he would be with Him in paradise. Talk about a change of fortune!

The word for paradise is "paradeisos." It is a Persian word and means "enclosure," or "park," and came to be associated with the gardens of the Persian kings. In Jewish thought, it became connected with the expectation of future messianic times and the coming of the new Garden of Eden. Although present in their time, it was concealed. The hidden paradise was the dwelling place for the patriarchs, the chosen, and the righteous.

For the thief on the cross next to Jesus, there was no mistake about where he would be spending his afterlife. He started the day believing his resting place would be "Gehenna." A place of punishment for sinners, a place of suffering and torment, and one fit for his previous lifestyle. He ended the day with the assurance of spending his life after life in the garden of God.

Between the first garden event and the tipping point of the cross there was the birth of a baby that became the gateway to the garden. According to scripture He is the only entrance for those who seek admission. The door is open, please come in and take a seat and fine rest for your soul. Reservations are required! Make yours before it is too late.

December 2nd – Power in the Name

What would you do if you found yourself exiled from the country of your birth? If you were Moses, you would marry a local girl and tend to her father's herds. Then one day you would find yourself in front of a burning bush which was not being consumed. Then, you would probably jump out of your sandals when the bush spoke to you. That way God would not have to tell you to remove them. Like Moses, I would want to know the name of the supernatural power who was speaking. God answered: "I am who I am." Why would I want to know that?

Well it is quite simple. A common belief in antiquity was that the name not only identifies the person or thing, but also contains characteristics or attributes which are ascribed to its holder. The Greek religion attached great importance to divine names, and tried to learn about their being and nature by way of the etymology of their given name. In addition, giving the name or naming the name was a way of gaining control. Thus, when the animals were brought to Adam and he gave each a name, he established his control. Likewise, the Greeks named their gods not only to pay them honor and respect, but also to gain control over them.

We may want to ascribe attributes and characteristics to God which He would not impose upon Himself. What can we correctly attribute to God? The only way to find the embodiment of God is to listen to what He has said about Himself. The best place to do that is in Exodus 34:5-7. God tells Moses that He is a God of mercy and grace, He is slow to anger, and He is forgiving. He is a lover of kindness and truth. He is a just God, and He is a God of judgment. If you have ever wondered what God's name means, now you know.

What is the name or names for His Son? We call Him by His Greek name, Jesus. His Hebrew name is Yeshua. However, there are other names given to Him through the Bible. As a matter of fact, there are 198 other names given to describe His integrity and character. Here are just a few of those names; the way, the truth, the life, the light of the world, faithful and true, the bread of life, the door, the good shepherd, the Alpha and Omega, the author and finisher of our faith, the Lord God almighty, the great physician, the one who is and was and is to come, mediator, risen Lord, resurrection and the life, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace and the list could go on and on.

I once taught a class where the objective was to bring to light all the characteristics of Jesus. In the first class discussion, I wrote down all those that the class could come up with. As the class progressed, they would come up with additional ones. At that point, I would take out the list and add to it. By the end of the class, we had more than the 198 the Bible offered. One of the strangest things that happened during that class was that no one ever called Jesus or gave Him the attribute or trait of being a friend. I was shocked and amazed.

We sing the song; "What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear." In one of His last discourses with His disciples, He calls them friends. This Christmas please make sure that this friendship is not a one way relationship. If he is not your BFF, I think it is time He was. Make it so!

December 3rd - -Bethlehem

One December's evening Glen Gaffney was driving home from work, when he came to a red stop light. Glen, being the law abiding citizen that he is, came to a full stop. While stopped, he looked around and noticed a sign in the front yard of the church across the street. The sign read; Come to Bethlehem; Come and See. Glen being the curious type, wanted to stop in and see what was going on. He called his wife to let her know that he would be a little late as he had to investigate the happenings in Bethlehem.

When the light turned green, Glen headed across the street, found a parking spot, and headed off to Bethlehem. What he saw was fantastic. The church had turned an additional parking lot into the streets of Bethlehem as they would have looked at the time of Jesus's birth. There were vendors selling anything you could want. There was food, toys and clothes from that period of time. There were even the sellers of self who would try to entice you to come join them in their perfumed bed. Glen was amazed and spent more than an hour wandering around getting caught up in the moment. He finally looked at his watch realizing it was time to leave and go home to his wife.

On his way back to his car, Glen noticed that there was a fire burning off in the distance. Like I said before, Glen is the curious type and he headed to the fire to find out what was what. When he arrived, he found a woman, a man and of course, a little child. They represented Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus. Glen stayed for a while and talked with them only to discover he was the only visitor that they had had that evening. Glen was again amazed. It finally came to Glen and the eyes of his mind were opened. The town of Bethlehem was nothing more than a ruse to keep people from the real event of Christmas, the birth of the Christ

The church had almost succeeded with him, but with all the others, they had. Glen walked away wondering how he could have been so gullible, how could he have almost fallen for something so obviously misleading. That was not in his nature. He went home, told his wife of the event, and asked God to forgive him for being so blind. Unfortunately, Glen's story (which by the way is true) is a microcosm of the world. The Christmas season used to start the day after Thanksgiving. Now it starts on or before Halloween. Why? The longer the selling time, the greater profit, the bigger the profit the larger the bonus. The world has done a masterful job of diverting people from what is really important, the birth of Christ. The world of merchandise says "Come and See" what wonders await. Oh, and by the way, everything is "on sale" and everything "for sale." And I mean everything.

In direct opposition to the big box stores, Jesus says, "come to Bethlehem." Come to the birth of forgiveness, come home to where you will find restoration, and return to the place of quietness. The words of the Hymn read; "come home, come home, ye who are weary, come home, earnestly and tenderly Jesus is calling, calling, oh sinner come home. This Advent season is the time to heed the calling of our Lord and Savior to come home to Bethlehem. Your ticket has already been purchased. Here is your personal invitation to Bethlehem and to come and see. All aboard.

December 4th – The Cradle of Life

If we want to become a part of the events of Advent and Christmas, we cannot just sit there like a theater audience and enjoy all the lovely pictures and pageantry. Instead, we ourselves must become caught up in the events of the day. This is a reversal of all things, we must become actors on this stage. For this is a play in which each spectator has a part to play. We cannot hold back. What will our role be, worshipful shepherds bending a knee or kings bringing gifts? What is being enacted when Mary becomes the mother of the Son of God, and when He enters the world in a lowly manger?

We cannot come to the manger in the same way that we would approach the cradle of any other child. Something will happen to each of us who decides to come to Christ's manger. Each of us will have been judged or redeemed before we go away. Each of us will either break down or come to know that God's mercy is turned toward us. What does it mean to say such things about the Christ child? He is God, the Lord and Creator of all things, He becomes small here and comes to us in a little corner of the world, unremarkable and hidden away. He wants to meet us and be among us as a helpless and defenseless child.

The miracle of all miracles is that God loves the lowly. God is not ashamed of human lowliness, but goes right into the middle of it, choosing us as His instrument to perform miracles right here and now where they are least expected.

When God chose Mary as an instrument, He wanted to enter the world in a manger in Bethlehem. It was not the idyllic family situation, but rather the beginning of a complete reversal, a new order of all things on this earth.

Joy abides with God; it comes down from God and embraces the spirit, soul and body. When this joy takes over a person, it spreads and carries one away. This is a sort of joy that exists, but also knows the heart's pain, anguish and dread which do not last. Pain can only numb a person for a moment. The joy of God has gone through the poverty of the manger and the agony of the cross. That is why it is invincible and irrefutable.

No priest or theologian stood at the cradle in Bethlehem. And yet all Christian theology finds its beginning in the miracle of miracles, that God became human.

All who at the manger finally lay down all power and honor, all prestige and vanity, all arrogance and self-will, all who take their place among the lowly and let God alone be on high, all who see the glory of God in the lowliness of the manger, are the ones who will truly celebrate Christmas.

For the good of all humankind, Jesus the Christ became human in a Bethlehem stable. Rejoice, oh Christendom, rejoice all you nations of the world, for unto us is born the Savior of the world. Rejoice and again I say, Rejoice!

December 5th – The Lineage of Jesus

The Gospel of Matthew begins by telling the lineage of Joseph from Abraham to Jacob his father. I have read a whole lot of commentaries on Matthew and most look at this section as a way to establish the lineage of Jesus and His right to rule. I believe there is much more in the first 16 verses than meets the eye. Consider that there are three sets of fourteen names. What does this mean? I do not know and neither do most commentators. Hidden with the names is a very interesting story. There is one that is overlooked by most. Is it significant? Maybe. Maybe not. Does it have anything to do with the Christmas story? You be the Judge.

According to the Gospel of Matthew, we have the names of three women listed in the lineage of Jesus. The first female listed is Tamar. As you recall Tamar was married to Er. Er died and according to tradition the next oldest brother was to marry Tamar. Judah, Er's father, had other plans. Tamar played a prostitute and tricked Judah into having sexual relations with her. Naughty. Naughty. The next young lady to join the lineage was Rahab. Rahab did not play the part age was full time harlot, she saved the Hebrew spies and helped their nation conquer Jericho.

The last to be announced is Bathsheba. What can I say? Well she took her bath on the roof top each evening. The king would go on the roof top in the cool of the evening. I honestly believe this was not a onetime event, but a nightly occurrence. Well, Bathsheba gets invited to the palace and the rest is history.

Ruth, a Moabite is also in the lineage, but not mentioned by Matthew. Moab was not exactly a monotheistic nation. However, Ruth did have her good qualities. These qualities were She was hard working, compassionate, willing to give and thoughtful of others. Something she passed along to one of her great grandchildren.

Lastly there was Mary. We know very little about her, and most of what we hear is conjecture. The one thing we know for certain about Mary is that she was chosen by God to be the mother of His son. Her response, well just listen to a few of her responses. "For with God nothing is impossible," "Let it be done to me according to His will," "For He who is mighty has done great things for me and Holy is His name," and "His mercy is upon all who fear Him," plus a few other gems.

Is she the only one to ever have been chosen? No. You were also chosen. And here is why. Jesus was God's chosen one (Matt 12:18 & Lk 9:35). Jesus chose His disciples (John 15:9). This may be a bit of a stretch but I do believe that since we are also His disciples (learners by definition) then we are also chosen. And I believe we were chosen before the foundations to bring glory and honor to the Father, the Son and to the Holy Spirit. 1 Peter 1:2 tells us that we were chosen to be obedient to Christ. Mary was and so should we be. When we like Mary give thanks for all the situations of our life, our prospective will change. Think about Mary, she is going to be an unwed mother. She will be ridiculed and shamed. She will be thought no better than Tamar, Rahab, or Bathsheba but never a Ruth. What is important is what God thinks. Mary also called herself "blessed." One meaning of the word blessed is "to speak well of." No greater gift could we give the Father than a reason for Him to speak well of us. And for us, there is no greater gift than His praise and blessings.

December 6th – A Man's Man

The Greek word for husband is *aner*. It means a male or an adult male person. The word speaks of men in various situations. What determines how the word is translated is determined by the context in which the word is used. That means that the word could mean husband, bridegroom, a man of importance, or a man of no importance. It also means a man who does his part in the life of a child.

The last time Joseph appears in person in any Gospel book is in the story of the Passover visit to the Temple in Jerusalem when Jesus is 12 years old, found only in Luke. No mention is made of him thereafter. The story emphasizes Jesus' awareness of his coming mission. Here Jesus speaks to his parents of "my father," meaning God, but the parents fail to understand.

Christian tradition represents Mary as a widow during the adult ministry of her son. Joseph is not mentioned as being present at the Wedding at Cana at the beginning of Jesus' mission, nor at the Passion at the end. If he had been present at the Crucifixion, he would, under Jewish custom, have been expected to take charge of Jesus' body. This role is instead performed by Joseph of Arimathea. Jesus would never entrusted his mother if her husband had been alive.

Was Joseph of the human race? Yes, but because of his actions, Mary just might think that he was "out of this world." As the step-father, he did his part in the rearing of Jesus. What he provided was an earthly model of what a father should be. In doing so He provided many examples to be used in sermons for later generations. For example, when Jesus would ask for a fish do you think Joseph gave him a serpent? If Jesus asked for a piece of bread did Joseph give him a stone? Joseph knew how to give good gifts to his children and was a man of importance in the life of Jesus.

In the first chapter of James, we learn unwanted, unwelcome, unexpected, and uninvited situations will come into our life if we let them they will determine the context of our lives. We do not have to go looking for these events. They will come as a part of our everyday living. No matter how hard we may try to avoid them, they will happen. They did in the life of Joseph.

According to B.F. Skinner, the father of operant behavior theory, for every stimulus (S) there is a response (R). For Skinner, life is made up of stimulus and response occurrences. Simply stated, when we find ourselves in a certain situation we respond. Steven Covey, states that what separates humans from animals is that we have the ability to interject a comma between the S and the R. In other words we have time to think about our response. We do not just respond. The longer the interval we place between the S and the R, the greater the likelihood that our response will be well thought out and rational.

Joseph, found himself in many situations that would determine and define the context of his life. We, like Joseph, also find ourselves in these situations which will determine our contribution to society. Will we respond quickly without thinking, or will we take time, think and use a comma. It is an important decision. Think about it.

December 7th – Joseph the King

According to the majority of commentaries the theme of the Gospel of Matthew is Jesus as King. In order to show Jesus as the rightful king, he begins his gospel by presenting the lineage of Jesus through Abraham and David. Matthew is attempting to establish the fact of Jesus' right to rule as earthly king came through Joseph.

In any earthly kingdom, the right of succession comes through the first born son. Joseph was, we can assume, the first born son of Jacob. However, Matthew is very clear that Joseph was the husband of Mary, the mother of Jesus. He also clearly establishes that Joseph was not the biological father.

Those are the first two details we are given about the life and time of Joseph. One, he was not the cause of Mary's pregnancy and second, believe it or not, he was the rightful king of Israel at the time of Jesus birth, an obscure fact that has escaped the Christian community for centuries.

We also know that Joseph was a righteous man. At least Matthew thought so. Why? Under Jewish law it was Joseph's right to have Mary stoned. We also know that he knew the voice of God. I am going to surmise, from my own experience, it takes a personal relationship with our Father to know when He is talking to you, and when you should listen. Joseph knew right away that he was not to do anything rash, but to take Mary as his wife. He also knew that God's word was faithful and true as he did not try to reason his way out of the situation. He did exactly as he was told. We also know he listened a second time and took the child and his mother to Egypt as instructed. Joseph is not involved in the physical birth of Jesus, but he is identified as one who has a major role to play in salvation history.

Did Joseph accept Jesus as his son? You bet he did, In Hebrew culture it is not uncommon for the woman to give the name to the child, as she was told by the angel. However, in this case, Joseph named the child, thus incorporating that child into his family and making him eligible for the throne.

In Matthew 13:55, we read that Jesus was called the son of a carpenter. In Mark 6:3, it states that Jesus followed in his father's footsteps. Here is an interesting point. The word used for carpenter has several meanings. It is a very old word and originally described workers in wood or those who built with wood. Later, it was used to describe artisans or craftsmen who worked with metal, as well as stone and wood. Either way, he worked with his hands and so did his son.

The lesson we need to learn from Joseph is not what he did in life, but what he did with his life. He loved his wife and did not want to bring shame to her. He listened to God and followed His instructions without fail. He instructed his son in the ways of the world and also in the ways of God. He demonstrated love and compassion, kindness and gentleness, strength in obedience and a willingness to change. No wonder God chose him to be the earthly father of His Son. How do we measure up as parents of the sons and daughters God has given us? I hope we all do, otherwise we may need to take parenting lessons from a carpenter. What do you think?

December 8th – Mary, Who was She?

Who was Mary and what do we really know about her? Well, for starters we know she was a young girl. In the book of Isaiah, we are told that a young woman would conceive and bear a son. When the Revised Standard Version of the Bible came out, people were shocked that the translation did not refer to her as a virgin. For those of you who are also shocked because I also used the term young woman here, there is the reason. In the Hebrew language, there is no word for virgin. The word used in Isaiah 7:14 is best translated young woman. So why would the Hebrew not have a word for virgin? Well, it was assumed that you would be a virgin until the day you finally had relations with your husband. It is that simple.

Luckily, Luke, in his gospel does tell us that Mary was a virgin. Luke uses the Greek word for virgin, probably in the Greek culture such a word was needed.

Mary describes herself as blessed. The word blessed means to "speak well of." It is the same word that we get the word eulogy from. Having God speak well of us is one thing, but then we must remember that means there is a whole lot to live up to. There is a paradox of blessedness. Yes, Mary was granted the blessedness of being the mother of the Son of God. Her heart may have been filled with the tremendous joy of so great a privilege. Yet, that very blessedness would be a sword that came to pierce her heart.

To be chosen by God so often means having to wear a crown of joy and a crown of sorrow. The truth is that God does not choose a person for ease and comfort and selfless joy, but for a task that will require all that the head, heart and hands can bring to God. God chooses us in order to use us. When Joan of Arc knew time was short, she prayed; "I shall only last a year, use me as you can." We must realize that serving God is not a time for lamentation. It is a time to demonstrate His glory.

We are also told that Mary was highly favored. Unfortunately, this translation is less than accurate. A better rendering is that she is full of grace. Because of the miss-interpretation, people have been encouraged to pray to Mary as a perpetual virgin who is divine. It does not mean that Mary was to be the source of grace but the recipient of grace. She might be the most blessed among women, but she is still a woman and an excellent role-model for women of all ages.

Mary was also excited at the prospect of being the mother of the Son of God. Her excitement is an unparalleled expression of her perfect faith. It is proof that she believes in and relishes the word of God. In addition, she was fully aware that it could and probably would bring shame, suspicion, reproach, suffering and even death. Mary was like any other person who believes firmly in the promises of God and submits patiently to His divine will. She saw the glory which will override the gloom. Mary was the mother of the Messiah, the Son of Man, the Son of God, and The Savior of the world. Talk about impressive titles.

In the paradox of blessedness, and in a life dedicated to the precepts of God, we find that it confers on a person the greatest joy and the greatest challenge all at the same time. Mary was up to the task. Are you?

December 9th - Betrothed

Betrothal (also called espousal) is a formal state of engagement to be married. In Jewish weddings during Talmudic times (c.1st century BC – 6th century AD), the two ceremonies, betrothal and the wedding, usually took place up to a year apart. The bride lived with her parents until the actual marriage ceremony which would take place in a room or tent the groom had set up for her. Since the Middle Ages the two ceremonies have taken place as a combined ceremony performed in public. The betrothal is now generally part of the Jewish wedding ceremony, accomplished when the groom gives the bride the ring or another object of at least nominal value. Betrothal in Judaism is separate from engagement. Breaking a betrothal requires a formal divorce, and violation of betrothal is considered adultery.

The origins of European engagement in marriage practice are found in the Jewish law (The Torah). Here marriage consists of two separate acts. They are called *erusin*, meaning sanctification, which is the betrothal ceremony and *nissu'in*, the actual ceremony for the marriage. *Erusin* changes the couples interpersonal status while *nissu'in* brings about the legal consequences of the change of status. However, in the Talmud and other sources of Jewish law there is also a process, called *kiddushin*, corresponding to what today is called engagement. Marrying without such an agreement is considered immoral. To complicate matters, *erusin* in modern Hebrew means engagement, not betrothal.

The first recorded tradition of giving a ring for marriage is in when a golden nose ring was given by Eliezer of Damascus to Rebecca, the wife of Isaac. Romantic rings from the time of the Roman Empire sometimes bore clasped hands symbolizing a contract, from which the later Celtic Claddagh symbol (two hands clasping a heart) may have evolved. This is a symbol of love and commitment between two people. Romans believed the circle was a bond between the two people who were to be married and signified eternity. It was first placed on the fourth finger/ring finger by the Romans, who believed this finger to be the beginning of the *vena amoris* ("vein of love"), the vein that leads to the heart.

In the fourth chapter of the book of Ephesians, we are told that we are sealed unto the day of our redemption. The word in Greek usually means a seal put on a letter or an official document. The seal indicated who it is from and that it may only be opened by someone of higher rank. Take the tomb of Jesus. It was sealed but someone, we do not know who, moved the stone. The meaning of the word indicates that a higher power than Pilot rolled it away.

There is another meaning of the word sealed. It draws the word picture of the bridegroom giving the bride-to-be an engagement ring. Since the Church is the bride of Christ and the church is made up of the redeemed, we can say with all the certainty that we have received an engagement from our Father who is in Heaven. I guess we could take it off and walk away but we have a prenuptial that entitles us to all the treasures of heaven. Who would want to walk away from such a treasure? Certainly not me. Would you?

December 10th - Repositioning

Covid 19 has had a way of changing and rearranging each of our lives one way or another. It is certainly true for my wife and I. We were supposed to leave for our trip to Europe sometime in October. It was our intention to visit my cousins in Leicester, England and then fly to the Ireland to visit a couple of friends. From there, we would travel to the continent, rent a car and travel to Portugal, Spain, Hungary, and Romania and we were to finish the trip off in Italy. Once in Italy, we would meander slowly down the boot stopping at little towns and inns, ending in Rome.

At the end of our stay in Rome we would hire a taxi and head to the town of Civitavecchia. There we would board a Princess Cruise Line ship for our trip back to the good old USA. Our transatlantic trip would take 14 days with four ports of call which included Corsica (Ajaccio), Barcelona and Seville (Cadiz), Spain before our cruise would end in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. The cruise is called a repositioning cruise and transfers the ship's home port to a new location and season. We were going to take the trip because we like new and exciting adventures.

If you have ever read the Bible cover to cover you have come across many repositioning stories. Joyce and I wanted to take our cruise, but I am not sure that all who were told to reposition themselves were too happy about doing so.

The first repositioning story comes very early in the text, say the third chapter of Genesis. Adam and Eve were repositioned from the garden to the real world. God placed them in permanent time out. Now they had to work for a living. As we move deeper into the Bible, we find that God called a man named Abram, telling him to come out from his people and journey to a land God would show him later. Really! Pack it all up and just go! And how long is this adventure going to take? Yeah, oh by the way, I'm sure Sarah will be happy about the move.

Then there is the couple who just got married and is about to have their first child, not to mention the house they were planning to buy. They had to reposition themselves back to the husband's ancestral home so that a census could be taken. What is this world coming to? Can't you just mail me a form, let me fill it out and I will mail it back to you, I promise. But no, we have to do it your way.

The last repositioning story is what this season is all about. This story is not told by any of the gospel writers but by Paul. It is found in the Epistle of Philippians. If you are unfamiliar with the story, I will fill you in. It goes like this; "Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth."

When God asks us to reposition ourselves, it may be the repositioning of our minds and habitation. This is something to think about. Wouldn't you agree?

December 11th – The Road Home

A newly betrothed couple is forced to register for a census in a town far away. The woman is pregnant. When they finally reach their destination after an arduous journey, there is no place to stay.

Scholars and clergy differ on whether the Nativity stories in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew are historical accounts or symbolic narratives of Christianity's beginnings. One thing is certain. The world of Mary and Joseph was a difficult and dangerous place, one whose harsh conditions were not fully chronicled in the Gospel accounts of their travails. Writers of the gospels of Matthew and Luke "are so laconic about the [Nativity] event because they assume the reader would know what it was like," said James F. Strange, a New Testament and biblical archeology professor at the University of South Florida in Tampa. Today, he added, "we have no idea how difficult it was."

Joseph and Mary's hardships would have begun more than a week before the birth of their son. The couple had to leave their home in Nazareth, in the northern highlands of Galilee, to register for a Roman census. They had to travel 90 miles to the city of Joseph's ancestors, south along the flatlands of the Jordan River, then west over the hills surrounding Jerusalem and on into Bethlehem.

It had to be a grueling trip. In antiquity, the most we find people traveling is 20 miles a day. This trip was very much uphill and downhill. It was not simple. It is estimated that Joseph and Mary likely would have traveled only 10 miles a day because of Mary's condition.

To protect themselves during inclement weather, Mary and Joseph would likely have worn heavy woolen cloaks, constructed to shed rain and snow. Under their cloaks, the ancient residents wore long robes, belted at the waist. Tube-like socks and enclosed shoes protected the feet. The unpaved, hilly trails and harsh weather were not the only hazards Joseph and Mary would have faced on their journey south.

One of the most terrifying dangers in ancient Palestine was the heavily forested valley of the Jordan River. Lions and bears lived in the woods and travelers had to fend off wild boars. Archeologists have unearthed documents warning travelers of the forest's dangers. Bandits, pirates of the desert and robbers were also common hazards along the major trade routes like the one Joseph and Mary would have traveled. The threat of outlaws often forced solitary travelers to join trade caravans for protection.

Mary and Joseph had to bring their own provisions. In wineskins, they carried water. Breakfast would be dried bread, lunch would be oil with bread, and herbs with oil and bread in the evening. What do you mean, no fast food places on the way, no rest areas and no police protection from those who would bring harm to us? What is this world coming to? Do you think we need help? I do. Can I assume you do to? Good.

December 12th – What Donkey?

I have often heard that Mary rode to Bethlehem on a donkey. I have also seen Christmas cards that portray Mary riding on the back of a donkey or pack animal while Joseph takes the reins leading them to their destination. Now there is nothing in the Bible that confirms this is true, but then, there is nothing to deny that this might actually be true. We need is further investigation. So here goes.

According to the Bible, Joseph was a carpenter. Now we do not know if he was an independent contractor, a day laborer, or the owner of a small business. If we are to believe the Reverend Grady Nutt, Joseph was a small business owner who taught his son the trade. Grady was fond of saying that being perfect has nothing to do with how well you hammered. A very true and informative statement.

If he was a day laborer, then he would make a day laborer's wages, which was a denarii. Denarii is a portion of silver and is worth about \$3.62 in today's dollars. Granted that things were less expensive in those days, but still, one denarii would not go very far. Remember, they still had rent or a mortgage to pay, food to buy, taxes to pay, and a tithe to give. Today, the family would be destitute. We must also remember that women did not work outside the home.

If Joseph was an independent contractor, he might have had a few more denarii, but probably not much. He would have to hire workers, pay for materials, advertising cost to keep his employees happy, and deal with all the other headaches an owner has to handle. Regardless of how he made his livelihood, I do not see how the family could afford a donkey.

Now let's turn to Mary. Some Christmas stories are developed around the belief that Mary was on the verge of delivery when she arrived in Bethlehem. There is nothing in the Bible to support that. If she was about to deliver upon arrival, think how hard the trip must have been for her. Rocking back and forth, bouncing up and down would be difficult. Tell me ladies, would you have wanted to make such a journey if you were going to deliver "tout de suite?" Of course not, and neither would Mary. But if she was only a few months pregnant, different story.

We are told that "while they were there," which leads to the assumption that they were there for some time. How did they support themselves? Did they empty their checking and savings accounts before they left? Did they buy travelers checks (remember them)? What did they do for funds? I would suggest that Joseph took his tools of the trade with him so he could seek employment in Bethlehem. Somebody had to carry the load, either it was Joseph or the donkey. I'm pretty sure it was not Mary. The important thing to remember is that they made the trip.

Either way they had to have an incredible journey into the unknown. They took off not knowing what lay ahead of them. It is kind of like the Christian journey of today. When we start our journey or trip with Jesus, we, unlike Joseph, have someone to help us carry our load. Not only will Jesus carry our burdens, He will also carry us in the hard times. Don't think so? Look back and count the footprints in the sand.

December 13th – The Honeymoon Suite

This may be a stretch and then again it may not. Bear with me for a while and I'll let you determine if my point is valid.

The Festival of Tabernacles or Booths is the third in the trio of great Jewish festivals. Attendance was mandatory for all adult Jewish males living within fifteen miles of Jerusalem. It fell on the fifteenth day in the seventh month. Like all great festivals it had a dual meaning and significance.

First, it had a historical significance. It received its name from the fact that all the festival people would leave their homes and live in booths. During the festival, booths sprang up everywhere. They were on flat roofs of houses, in the streets, in the city square, in gardens and even in the court yard of the temple. The law stated that the booths must not be a permanent structures, but built especially for the occasion. The walls had to be made of branches and fronds, and had to be such that they would provide protection from the weather but not shut out the sun. The roof top had to be thatched, but the thatching had to be wide enough for the stars to be seen at night (an original skylight). The historical significance was to remind them that they had been homeless in the desert without a roof over their heads. It was also to remind the people of Israel that they lived in booths when they were brought out of Egypt. Originally, the feast lasted seven days. By the time of Jesus an eighth day was added.

I can only imagine what it was like to live under these conditions. I have visited many third world countries and have seen firsthand what extreme poverty looks like. While on a trip to Morocco, it was not uncommon to see houses made out of mud brick with a roof of tin sheets held down by old used tires. Israel shepherds living like they lived 2,000 years ago. In Mexico, there are huts where whole families are crammed together in less space than my master bedroom. If you ever go to the capital of Brazil, look to the hillsides. You will see a shanty town of thrown together homes made out of anything they can get their hands on. Then again, you do not have to leave this country to see how the disadvantaged live.

Can you imagine living your whole life without electricity, running water and toilet facilities? I cannot. But millions do. That is the world that Jesus came into. It may be that Mary and Joseph lived in a booth left over from the festival. Since people were traveling in and out of Bethlehem, it might have been used by any number of people before it became the home of Mary and Joseph. Maybe.

The good news is that by the time the Magi came, they were living in a house. Joseph probably had constant work and their financial situation was stable, or as well as could be. This means they had moved out of the booth and had a permanent roof over their heads. To me that would be a letdown. How wonderful to lie in your bed each night and look at God's creation. All I have to look at is the ceiling, popcorn cannot compare with the wonder of the night sky. Which would you rather have? Man's creation or the night sky painted by our Father. Popcorn? Really?

December 14th – The Inn Keeper

During my days in the work-a-day world, it was not unusual for me to be on the road for weeks at a time. At one point, I spent two weeks in Israel and other time two weeks in Pasadena, California. There were other times when my travel required that I be gone one week. I would spend a week here and a week there, but I always came home in-between trips. I always wanted to spend time with my wife.

Then there was the time when I moved to Atlanta and Joyce, because of her job, stayed in Northern Virginia. I would fly home each Friday night, and then fly back to Atlanta on Tuesday morning. That does not mean that I spent the weekends at home. On Saturday afternoon, Joyce and I would pile in the car and head to Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania where I would conduct services on Sunday.

Then there was always the chance that I would have to fly some place during the week. Sometimes, it would be an up and back on the same day. Most of the time my trips were overnights. One thing that happens when you travel that much and stay at the same hotel chain each time is that you get to pile up a whole lot of hotel points and use them for free nights.

I remember one night when Joyce and I were flying somewhere. For some reason our flight was delayed and our arrival was about six hours late. We had planned to drive to our destination, but due to the hour, we decided to get a room. Joyce pulled up Garmin and found us a hotel. When we arrived at the hotel, we explained our situation to the desk clerk. She helped us use our points for a free stay. Sometimes those freebies come in handy.

When Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem, I'm sure they were tired and run down. What was the first thing they did? We are not told, but we may assume they needed a place to stay. Perhaps they checked accommodations for the night or they might have camped with other travelers. We just do not know. What we do know is that, according to the Gospel of Luke, while they were in Bethlehem Mary came to full term and needed to deliver her baby. Since we do not know where they were staying and the baby had dropped, it was time to find a safe place.

Here is where the inn keeper gets a bad rap. Somehow, the Christmas story portrays him sending Joseph and Mary out into the cold night without concern for her condition. I believe he did them a favor. An inn in those days was nothing more than a one room building where you rented a place to unroll your sleeping bag. There would be a fire burning outside to cook your meal. There were no rooms and no personal space. It was a very public place with no safety. I'm pretty sure that if they had stayed and Mary went into labor, there would have been several unkind words flung her way. It was truly a blessing that there was no room in the inn. Thank you, mister innkeeper.

Being born in a stable was not such a bad thing. Here Mary and the baby could cry and scream their lungs out and no one would be offended. It was time for the parents to bond with their child. This is the way Jesus comes to us, in the quietness of the moment He asks us if we want to bond. Our answers determine our future when He is crying out to us and asking us to bond. Your answer, yes or no?

December 15th – Birth

The text states that the birth of Christ Jesus happened like this. The narrative goes into a long discourse about the betrothal of Mary and Joseph, the angel and the trip to Bethlehem. For the life of me I cannot figure out what all these things have to do with giving birth to a baby. Granted, it is the story of how the baby came into being, but not the story of His birth. To me the birthing story begins when the wife calls the husband at work and says get home fast, its time. Or, she wakes him up in the middle of the night, tells him that her water just broke, and it is time to get the ready bag and head for the hospital. My experience.

Of course that is looking at birth from a male point of view. Now, how about a woman's view point. Since my wife had C sections, she did not have Mary's experience. When it was time for my second daughter to give birth to her first child, things were also different. When the pain of delivery became so excruciating she called the doctor to give her a spinal. It did not eliminate all the pain but made it bearable. From other women, I have learned that labor is no walk in the park. It is very painful and often can last from one to two days. If the woman is lucky, it lasts only hours. However, one of the things all the women interviewed told me was that the pain stops when the child is born. Their description, to a tee was the pain was worth the incredible joy.

One advantage of giving birth in this modern day is that, like my daughter, a woman can have mother's little helper to reduce the pain. Then there is Pitocin, the wonder drug that cuts labor time from hours to minutes. Poor Mary, she had only Joseph's help. I wonder if she sent him out to boil water.

Yes, the women do all the work and we men strut around like peacocks handing out cigars, thinking somehow we had a hand in the delivery. Even if the father was in the delivery room being her coach, the woman does all the work. Our major function is to remind them to push. It sounds as if we men get the better end of the deal. At least the least painful part of the ordeal.

There was a Jewish custom in Jesus' time that when a baby boy was born, the local musicians congregated at the house to greet the child with simple music. Jesus was born in a stable in Bethlehem and therefore the ceremonial music could not be played. The local musician could not show up, but the tradition was carried on anyway. We are told that after the angel told the shepherds about the wonderful news, there was immediately or suddenly a multitude, or crowd if you prefer, of heavenly host praising God and singing "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will towards men!"

There was a European monarch who worried his court by disappearing and walking incognito among his people. When asked not to do that anymore, he replied, "I cannot rule my people unless I know how they live." It is the great truth of the Christian faith that God knows firsthand the life we live because He has walked among us and claimed no special privilege. The only privilege we as Christians have is that we have been adopted as "Children of the Living God." Have you registered with the adoption agency yet? There is still time, but who knows how much. Better Hurry.

December 16th – The Manger

The manger! What was it and where would it be found? The former question is very easy to be answered. The manger was a feed trough where the caretaker of the animals would place their food. We have the picture that it was made out of wood, contained straw, and held the baby Jesus, while the animals breathed on Him to keep Him warm. What an imagination!

Most homes in the time of Jesus were not concrete block, aluminum, or plastic siding. They were made out of stone and were two story. The top floor was for living and the bottom was where the animals were housed. Just imagine the fragrance! If you have ever been to Israel and looked at the homes you might have noticed that a lot of them back up to a solid rock wall. Only the sides are stone. If indeed animals were kept below, the feeding trough or manger was cut out of the rock wall. In reality it was part of the wall. Why? Wood in that part of the world is scarce. So we might be able to say that Jesus had a rocky start or His foundation was made of stone.

Now, as for the location of the manger, in all honesty, we do not have a clue. There are a few theories to explore. The first is not really a theory but a custom. When Joseph and Mary wandered into Bethlehem, they probably followed the tradition of walking up and down the streets announcing their heritage. Joseph was a son of David looking for his kin to welcome them. But stop and think for a moment. David had how many wives and how many sons? Just think how many sons Solomon might have had. It was 28 generations from David to Joseph. How many offspring do you think were in town looking for shelter? It may be that one such relative invited Joseph to spend the night in an empty stable or maybe it was in use by animals. Either way, they were out of harm's way for the night.

Another theory states that the inn where they were rejected had a stable and the innkeeper, who having compassion on Mary allowed them to stay there for the night. I cannot see this happening. I fully believe that the couple wanted some sort of privacy which would not have happened there.

The other theory is that Jesus was born in a cave. In fact Justin Martyr found the exact cave where Jesus was born. Helena, the mother of the Roman Emperor Constantine, commissioned a church known today as The Church of the Nativity or Basilica of the Nativity to be built on that site. Was this where Jesus born? Maybe. Maybe not.

Jesus was not laid in a manger by accident. It is a major spiritual symbol. Animals go to the manger for physical food, but with Jesus lying on the hay, we can go to the manger for spiritual food. Jesus has an infinite storehouse of nourishment available and we can approach Him any time and never go hungry. Jesus feeds us with Word and Sacrament, his gospel and the Eucharist. Jesus wants us to devour his word, chew on it, slowly contemplating its meaning, swallow and digest it, and make it part of the fabric of our being. Jesus' Word is like no other food. It has the power to save our souls. Jesus is our soul's food.

December 17th – Defender of the Faith

The term Defender of the Faith is a title used by all kings and queens of England since the 16th century. The title was first given to King Henry VIII by Pope Leo X after Henry's defense of the Roman Catholic faith. The title was taken away when England left the Roman Catholic Church. King Henry then asked the English Parliament to give him the same title with a different meaning: defender of the Church of England. It is not unusual for royalty to have several titles. For instance, in Egyptian royal titles consisted of five names.

In Isaiah 9:6, we read what are the best known messianic prophecies of the Old Testament. It reads; "for to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father the Prince of Peace." It goes on in verse seven to state; "of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever."

I would like to suggest a hypothetical assumption since the Israelites were under Egyptian rule for four hundred years, they might have adopted some of their customs. If that is the case, then we may be able to surmise that Israel's kings would also have five names. The Bible gives the coming messianic king only four names. Could it be that there is supposed to be a comma between wonderful and counselor. If so, that would give the coming Christ five names. But for the sake of argument, I will stick with the four that are presented.

These names given to monarchs are called "throne names" and may not reflect the actual qualities of the king. That is until now. The coming messiah is called Wonderful Counselor which reflects and refers to the hope that He is to possess, more than anyone else in the government, the skills to govern. The second title, Almighty God (actually Divine Warrior) represents Him as an invincible champion of the oppressed. The third title, Everlasting Father, sees Him as an unfailing source of protection and love. The fourth and last title, the Prince of Peace indicates He is the controller of the people's well-being and prosperity.

If I am going to follow the Egyptian tradition, I must come up with another name that indicates and ascribes to Him the glory of who He is and will always be. The first thought that came to mind was "The Pearl of Great Price" because that is what it cost Him to save me from sin. The next title that came to mind was; "Apple of My Eye" but actually I am the apple of His eye. Then it was the "Bread of Life and Living Water" because He has provided me with the essence and the substance of all life. I must confess that it is a challenge to come up with a proper fifth title.

What about you? What is the fifth title you bestow on the one who was equal with God but did not count equality something to hold? Rather, He emptied Himself taking our human form so that we might dine in heaven with Him. For a Christmas present this year give Him the designation worthy of the love He has shown you. The gift of love cost you nothing, it cost Him everything. Maybe that title should be "Priceless. "

December 18th – Seasons of the Heart

Now comes the interesting part of the story. The shepherds were watching their flocks by night. This part of the story has given rise to the theory that Jesus was not born in the winter time but during the summer, as early as late spring or as late as early fall. Proponents of this theory base their evidence solely on the word night. They are quick to point out that only during the summer months were the shepherds in the fields with the flocks at night.

Israel has two seasons: winter (late Oct to mid-Mar), which is cool to cold and when the rains occur, and summer (Apr–Oct), which is warm to hot and virtually rain-free. Winter in Israel starts with showers in October and advances to periodic heavy rainfall from November to March. The weather patterns give credence to their theory.

The Greek word used for field can also mean farm or court. If the word should have been translated farm or court that would change the whole picture and way of looking at the story. This is the way I see the story as translated now. The shepherds were somewhere out away from the city tending the sheep. How far away? Far enough that the light of the city did not affect them and the noise of the sheep could not be heard. If the herd was of substantial size, the amount of land needed to graze the sheep would be rather large. It would seem logical that the shepherds were not on a farm.

Consider the word “court.” We usually associate the term court with royalty. It would be a total stretch of the imagination to think that these individuals who found it hard, if not impossible, to keep the cleanliness laws would be found in a royal court. However, this was their court and the sheep their subjects. Into their royal court comes the messenger of the Lord to announce that the King of Kings has been born. God’s grandest news delivered in the grandest court of all, creation.

Now let’s ponder the word “farm.” What do you think of when you hear the word farm? Barns, fields of grain or corn, the mid-west with miles and miles of flat lands stretching on forever come to mind. Few, if any, trees are scattered through the landscape. There would be fences to keep the crops safe, those who would rob out, and the animals in. I think the word ranch might be a better term to describe where the shepherds were. Unfortunately, that word is not used in the Bible.

I find that the individuals who subscribe to the theory that Christ was not born in December miss something more important than the time of year of the birth of Jesus. The story is not about a time of year or where the shepherds were on that glorious night. It is a story proclaiming that God came to earth to walk among us and to be like us, to experience what we experience, to feel the pain that we feel, to cry when there is hurt or joy. It is the story of hope, a story of God fulfilling the need of human redemption. A story of one who has no needs and came to meet the needs of others. It is a story of God answering the human cry for mercy, His coming to deliver that mercy in its highest form. It is a story that in the fullness of time God sent His Son to become the living water (which represents the necessity of life) and the bread of life (which represents the substance of life). God sent all we will ever need in one gift. Have you opened your gift or are you still playing with the wrapping paper? Mercy.

December 19th – Keepers of the Sheep

It is a perfect irony that the story of the announcement of the birth of Christ first came to shepherds. Generally, shepherds were despised and rejected by true orthodox Jews, because they literally could not keep all the ceremonial laws about cleanliness. They simply could not keep all the meticulous handwashing regulations. It was to these ordinary men that God's first message of redemption came.

I do not know this to be true, but it has been suggested that these shepherds were very special. We know that there were morning and evening sacrifices when an unblemished lamb was offered to God. To see that the supply of perfect unblemished lambs was always available, the Temple authorities had their own private flock that was pastured near Bethlehem. It is highly possible that these shepherds were in charge of this flock. Think about the shepherds who were rejected by the general population, who cared for the Temple lambs, being first to hear the announcement about the birth of the Lamb of God who came to carry away the sins of the world.

An angel came at night to tell them how they would find the Christ child. Why did the angel come at night, for the full effect? Let me illustrate it this way. During the day, you probably do not have all the lights on in your house. You certainly do not have your outside porch lights on. Why? It is because they would have little effect if any at all. Light is to illuminate darkness. Can you imagine the angel showing up during the middle of the day? Yes, but the power of light over darkness is better seen at night. The effect would not be as impressive as at night. Consider the stars and the moon. When do we see them best? Talk about fireworks!

With that controversy out of the way, let's move on to another one. Well, it may not be as controversial as I might think. Here again, I will let you be the judge. The reason that God sent the angel to the shepherds is found in the line; so, when the angel of the Lord had departed, the shepherds said, let us go to Bethlehem and see the wondrous thing proclaimed by the angel." Many people over the centuries having heard the good news have not responded as favorably as the shepherds. Some have laughed, some have scoffed, but most have just ignored the good news. They want Christmas and the presents it may bring, but not the real gift of life.

What did the shepherds find? They found a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a feed trough. When they had seen Him, did they return to their sheep right away? No. They told all they came in contact with about the good news that the angel had shared, and what they had seen. Then they went back to the business of tending the sheep. Ever wonder what we are supposed to do when we come in contact with Christ the Lord?

I am always amazed at the reluctance of some to share the good news. Why do we keep quiet about the one who came to set us free, the one who gave up His freedom to become a slave, and the one who is preparing a place for us in heaven? Those who were rejected by society did not reject the one who was to be the center of life. I see cars at Christmas that say; "Keep Christ in Christmas." Why only Christmas? Shouldn't it be a year round event? What do you think?

December 20th – Light (Part 1)

Light is electromagnetic radiation that can be detected by the human eye. Electromagnetic radiation occurs over an extremely wide range of wavelengths, from gamma rays with wavelengths less than about 1×10^{-11} meter to radio waves measured in meters. Within that broad spectrum, the wavelengths visible to humans occupy a very narrow band, from about 700 nanometers (nm; billionths of a meter) for red light down to about 400 nm for violet light. The spectral regions adjacent to the visible band are often referred to as light also, infrared at the one end and ultraviolet at the other. The speed of light in a vacuum is a fundamental physical constant, the currently accepted value of which is exactly 299,792,458 meters per second, or about 186,282 miles per second. When white light is spread apart by a prism or a diffraction grating, the colors of the visible spectrum appear. The colors vary according to their wavelengths. Violet has the highest frequencies and shortest wavelength, and red has the lowest frequencies and the longest wavelength. There are three measurable properties of light. They are amplitude, wave length and frequency.

There is no single answer to the question, "What is light?" that satisfies the many contexts in which light is experienced, explored, and exploited. The physicist is interested in the physical properties of light. The artist has an aesthetic appreciation of the visual world. Through the sense of sight, light is a primary tool for perceiving the world and communicating within it. Light from the Sun warms the Earth, drives global weather patterns, and initiates the life-sustaining process of photosynthesis. On the grandest scale, light's interactions with matter have helped shape the universe. Light provides a window on the universe, from cosmological to atomic scales. Almost all of the information about the rest of the universe reaches Earth in the form of electromagnetic radiation. By interpreting radiation, astronomers can glimpse the earliest epochs of the universe, measure the general expansion of the universe, and determine the chemical composition of stars and the interstellar medium.

Is this what Jesus meant when He said that He was and is the light of the world? I do not think so. I believe that Jesus is telling of the properties of His light. They are (1) a shining example of what God, His Father is like. He reflects His Father's glory as we are to do the same. (2) He is telling that when we walk in darkness He will be the light that illuminates our path that leads to life. He is the light that guards our steps along the way. (3) He is telling that if you want to find truth, you will never find it by searching in the dark recesses of the world. You must come to Him and He will provide and lead you in the way that the world does not know and does not care to know. And (4) by telling us that He is the light of world, He is telling us that we have nothing to fear from the darkness. We can turn the light off when we go to bed and sleep in peace because there is no boogey man under the bed.

He is telling us like the hymn said "Come to the light that is shining for me, sweetly the light has dawned upon me. Once I was blind but now I can see. The light of the world is Jesus." Do you see His light and reflect it? I hope so. And so does He.

December 21st – Light (Part 2)

Hanukkah falls on the eve of the 25th day of the Jewish month of Kislev and lasts eight days. That lands it somewhere in December on the Gregorian calendar (though in 2013 it fell on Thanksgiving in November, an extremely rare occurrence). Also called the Festival of Lights, Hanukkah celebrates events more than 2,000 years ago. First and foremost, it commemorates the rededication of the Second Temple in Jerusalem. This rededication occurred after a successful revolt of the Jewish people led by Judah Maccabee against their Syrian-Greek oppressors. Their oppressors had tried to assimilate the Jewish people and, in so doing, had desecrated the Temple. The reason the holiday is celebrated for eight days stems from what is told in the Talmud: when it came time for the rededication of the Second Temple, only one day's worth of pure oil was found to use in the temple's menorah, which was meant to burn all night every night. Miraculously the oil burned for eight days. This gave enough time to collect a fresh supply of oil and, with the belief that a miracle from God had occurred, a reason to celebrate for a full eight days.

Today, especially in North America, Hanukkah is often thought of as the Jewish counterpart to Christmas, an association that developed because of Hanukkah's proximity to December 25. The giving of gifts and displaying of holiday decorations have nothing to do with the Jewish holiday, but were customs adopted from Christmas traditions. True Hanukkah traditions include lighting the candles on a nine-branched menorah called a Hanukkiah and saying the blessings, making and eating potato latkes (pancakes) and *sufganiyot* (jelly doughnuts), both cooked in oil, and playing dreidel, a game of chance played with a four-sided top.

Saint Lucy's Day, also called Lucia Day or the Feast of Saint Lucy, is a Christian feast day observed on December 13th. The observance commemorates Lucia of Syracuse, an early 4th century martyr under the Diocletianic Persecution. According to legend, she brought food and aid to Christians hiding in the catacombs of Rome, wearing a candlelit wreath on her head to light her way and leaving her hands free to carry as much food as possible. Her feast day, which coincides with the shortest days of the year, is widely celebrated as a festival of light. Falling within the Advent season, Saint Lucy's Day is viewed as a precursor of Christmas.

For Christians, our Festival of Lights occurs on the 24th of December. We call it a Candle Light Service. It is our time to celebrate the birth of The Light of the World. It is our time to hear the Christmas story and light the Christ candle in the Advent wreath. We also sing carols, hear sermons and receive communion. At the end of the service, we light our candles and sing Silent Night, Holy Night. We then process with our lighted candles out of the church as a symbol of taking Christ's light into the world.

However, the best festival of light by far happens each and every night. Each night I go outside and look up to see the stars and the moon. I am in awe of my magnificent God. Then I thank Him for leaving the lights on so that I know He is at home. And one day I will go and be with Him, but not for a while anyway. Want to join me? I hope so, I understand there is plenty of room.

December 22nd – Fear, Respect, Revere

For much of my life, I was confused by the phrase "*Fear of the Lord.*" The Bible says God is love. He tells us to call Him Abba (*Daddy*) and He lets us "*come boldly into the throne room*"... why should we fear Him? What sense does that make? When I hear the word "fear", I think of dread or terror and an imminent threat to me or my loved ones. However, that's not what the Bible means by the "fear of the Lord." In the original language, it can mean something quite different.

I often hear people explain the fear of the Lord as a mere respect or reverence. The Bible uses the word fear at least 300 times in reference to God, so we make a mistake when we downplay it. The subject becomes even more mysterious when we read something like 1 John 4:18 that says, "perfect love expels all fear." So how do we marry this dichotomy? How can we fear God while he expels all fear?

Here is the definition of the word "revere" according to dictionary.com. It says "to regard with respect tinged with awe; venerate." According to the Jews – who were "entrusted with the oracles of God" according to Romans 3:2 the "fear of the Lord" means reverential awe. It doesn't describe the fear that makes you run from danger; it describes the "reverential awe" that we should have toward God.

If you revere God, you will pursue Him and want to be more like Him. This is extremely wise. I could make a good case that imitating God's character is where wisdom begins. I'd have a much harder time making a case that being afraid of God is the beginning of wisdom.

Virtually no one would think you should be afraid of your parents. However, the Bible is very clear that children should honor their parents, and revere is certainly in the ballpark. I didn't fear my father, but I greatly respected him. Revere was certainly accurate when I was younger.

There are other verses where the same principle applies. I could give examples ad nauseam, but I think you get the point. However, fear can mean fear, awe, or reverence, and most of the time it does mean fear, it doesn't always mean fear.

My wife fears spiders, but has zero respect for them. I know people who are afraid of God, but don't respect Him in the slightest. They truly "fear the Lord." That doesn't mean they have much respect for Him. Revere is different, and it encompasses the idea of respect. The word revere, in my mind, conjures up that "reverential awe" that the Jewish encyclopedia described. Revere means a profound amount of respect, so much so that it borders on and/or includes awe or amazement. That sounds exactly like how we should view God to me.

The term "fear not" is stated in the Bible 365 times, which, ironically, is how many days are in a year. We have a reason to fear all day, every day, if you want. As for me and my house, we will stand in reverent awe. Want to join us? We meet at the house church on the hill each Sunday morning at eight and ten-thirty. Refreshments are served and no reservations required. Just show up! Please.

December 23rd - Peace

How important is peace to God? When God sent The Prince of Peace to earth, He also sent a heavenly chorus to sing "peace on earth." What a sound that must have been. I'm sure that it was better than the last movement of Beethoven's 9th symphony or perhaps the Hallelujah Chorus by Handel. The word for peace in Greek carries the meaning of the "absence of hostilities." Why would the heavenly host sing about peace, when there never has been peace on earth and more than likely never will? You see that in all the recorded history of man there have only been 358 years without hostilities. What they were singing about is the possibility of peace, not the reality of peace. That certainty comes only when we stop being at war with God.

The first recorded feud with God took place in the Garden. There was peace there until, well you know the story. The first death ever recorded due to hostilities was peace. The second victim was humankind. Man killing man. And the story continues until this day. Today the victims are self-worth and self-esteem, integrity, loyalty, friendship, companionship, closeness and a whole host of others that bring destruction upon ourselves.

The Master in His first recorded sermon told the multitude that the peacemakers are blessed for they will be called children of The Most High. Why? Because they listen and remember that He also said that if we bring our gifts to His altar and remember that someone has something against us, we are to leave that gift and go make peace, then come back and present our gifts.

We need a clearer understanding of what it means to be at war with God. As the Apostle Paul said, if we know what is right and choose not to do it, then we are at war with God. We will only be at peace, when we surrender our will to God's will. It is not easy, in fact it is extremely hard. But still we must try. We must give up trying to bring God's will under the control of our will. We will always lose. There is an old saying that goes "you may win the battle, but lose the war." The only way to win is not to fight. The best way is never to engage in the first place.

Jesus told his disciples and us that the peace He brings is not the peace that is known to the world. It is an inner peace and the assurance that no matter what happens, under any circumstances, at anytime and anywhere He is still in control. Though the world may seem to be falling apart, the universe is still spinning at the exact speed to keep every galaxy, each and every star and planet in its proper place. Like an angel of the Lord told Zacharias, Mary and the shepherds, "Fear Not."

In the 5th chapter of the Book of Joshua, we read the story of the Hebrews crossing the River Jordan. Joshua saw a warrior with a sword standing in front of him. Joshua drew his sword and ran to ask the man who he was and if he was with the Hebrew people or against them. However, the real question was, were they with him? The man replied that he was the commander-in-chief of the armies of God, here to lead them in battle. Would they follow him? Of course Joshua stated that they would. The same opportunity awaits us. Our warrior king is willing to lead us in battle, the catch is, and we must be at peace with Him. I do not know about you, but I need someone to fight my battles. Someone who will go before me and defends me. Do you?

December 24th – Soul Security

The story is told of a group of children who were orphaned during WWII. The children left to themselves had no coping skills, and did their best to forage for food and shelter each day. One day the children were discovered and taken to a convent where they would receive proper care and the attention they deserved. The nuns had no difficulty meeting the physical needs of the children. Clean clothes replaced their tattered and torn coverings, four walls and a roof surrounded them instead of the rubble of bombed out buildings. Regular meals transformed their undernourished bodies into strong healthy ones. All should have been well, but it was not. The majority of children had trouble sleeping through the night. The nuns tried everything but nothing seemed to work. One day the sisters gave each child a piece of bread before they went to bed that night. To their surprise, the children took the bread to bed with them and slept the entire night away. At breakfast the next morning the children ate the bread with the rest of their meal. From that day on, each child received a slice of bread at night knowing they would have something to eat the next day.

Abraham Maslow, the noted humanist psychologist, suggested that a course of healthy psychological development runs through several stages. The basic needs that must be met for normal emotional development are physiological, safety and security. Safety and security needs are defined as those of stability, dependence, protection and freedom from fear and anxiety. If Maslow is correct, the children found their freedom from fear in a simple piece of bread. This allowed them to feel secure knowing that there would be something to eat the next day.

In his book, *A World Waiting to be Born*, M. Scott Peck visits the temptation of Jesus to turn stones into bread. For Peck, the issue is not food and the pains of starvation, but security. Bread is a symbol for "money" which can be translated into "power." In refusing to turn the stones into bread, Peck believes that Jesus was symbolically rejecting security or the attachment to the illusion of security.

When the multitude in chapter six of John's gospel comes seeking a continuous supply of bread as their ancestors had received in their desert wandering, Jesus had to remind them of who actually provided the manna. What the multitude was saying was, we want security and we want it now. They were no different than the multitudes of today. Although instead of bread, security is a big house, a fancy car, a prestigious position, a membership at the country club, and of course money in the bank. All of these offer a false sense and are an illusion of security.

What Jesus said instead was, He will provide all the security we need. He will not offer an artificial façade of temporal belongings which render momentary pleasure and a false sense of invulnerability. What He is saying is that when we choose Him to be our "Bread of Life" and cling to Him as our sole security, He will give us rest for all the days of our life. He offers the best present we could ever receive, "Soul Security."

December 25th Christmas

This is your Christmas now. It is not simply a commemorative holiday. It is not simply a remembrance of Jesus. It is not simply a remembrance of family and friends. It is not simply a time to give gifts and to be giving for a few days out of the year. Though it may include all of these things, the meaning of Christmas is greater. Let it be greater for you. Let it be a time, in which you remember you have a greater purpose in the world, and that you have been sent into the world to fulfill this purpose; to accept it, to experience it, and to follow it, so that you may be a gift.

This is Christmas for you. It does not happen only once a year, but it is a reminder that beyond all of your personal needs and immediate difficulties, you have a greater mission. As in the life of Jesus, you must come to find this. You must feel it and allow it to emerge. You must recognize that alone you cannot fulfill it because it is not for you alone.

You will wander in the desert, you will experience the temptations of the world, and you will feel the conflict between this greater emerging part of yourself and your personal wishes, preferences and fears. We, like Jesus, must allow this greater power and greater purpose to eclipse our life, to envelop our life and to reorganize and redirect our life. This is Christmas.

Let this be a time for you to remember that your life is greater than simply being a person in the world who has basic needs. It is this greater part of you, this greater calling and this greater purpose that gives meaning to all the lesser aspects of yourself and unites them harmoniously to fulfill their roles. Without this greater purpose, you would be fragmented, and the aspects of your personality and mind would not find a basis for integration or unity. Without this greater purpose, you will struggle with survival and with fulfillment, but without satisfaction; sensing, feeling and knowing that as time passes, your greater purpose and your greater calling are going unfulfilled and unanswered.

The Mass of Christ is a celebration of divine relationship. Christ is the individual who is united with the divine. The Mass of Christ is not the glorification of the individual; rather, it is the recognition of the relation between God and man. It is also the personal knowledge that within each and every individual is an unseen bond and their duty to humanity and their affinity with life. This is the celebration of relationships. This is the meaning of Christhood. This is the meaning of the Mass of Christ, Christmas.

Each year, God reminds us our need for Him. He does it twice. Twice a year there is an uptick in church attendance and an increase in giving. Then, there is a return to normalcy. Christmas is a reminder that we, like Nicodemus, must be born not only of the flesh but of the spirit. Being born of the flesh just will not do it. The cradle Christ is the alarm clock of life to remind us that God is calling us to come to the birth of life, and receive the gift of everlasting salvation. Have you taken possession of your gift? If you have, are you using it to its fullest potential? If not, why? Other than yourself, who is missing out on the gifts God gave you to give to others?

Epiphany 2020 Devotions

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December 26th – The Coming Christ

When I was in seminary, my first class each Tuesday morning was systematic theology. The class was required, and not a whole lot of professors taught the class. The professor I had, the name is changed to protect the guilty, was the worst. He had an outline, but never stuck to it. He was like a funny ball that was shot out of an air gun into a one foot square box. He just went bouncing everywhere. I passed, but barely.

One of the papers for this class was to give our opinion on when Jesus became the Christ, and then support that position. My answer did not get me an "A." But it did get me a strong rebuke. My standard answer to any ridiculous question is; when God made it so. My standard answer to the question, "how many angels can dance on the head of a pin?" was always to ask; "how wide is the head of the pin," or "what is the shoe size of the angels?" A wise guy, yes, and I never won any credit for my creative thinking. I have always received an A+.

Back to the original question; when did Jesus become the Christ? In my paper, I quoted many scriptures, Old and New Testament. I thought it was very impressive, the professor and Mary Ann; not so much. I do not know the professor's thinking on the subject because he never stated it. The whole reason of the exercise was to make us think. He was constantly telling us that when we get to a church, we need to have thought through many theological questions, and we need to be able to defend them. He was right in a lot of ways, but so wrong in many more. It has been my experience over the last 37 years of ministry that people are interested, but not to that level. They are more concerned with how God and Jesus interact in their daily life. That theological burden they left to me.

The seminary I went to was considered liberal by the denomination. I believe they left out the word classical. When inserted in the proper space, it would read, classical liberal. A classical liberal education is designed to provide the student with an education that covers a wide range of material. But, in my opinion, it is also designed to make the student think. It is designed to develop your mind, and not indoctrinate the student with denominational dogma. It is a good thing that God sent me there, as I would have failed at traditional seminary, or been asked to leave; because, I do not follow the thinking of the crowd.

Ok, it is time for the answer to the original question. The answer that almost got me failed was (The question again, when did Jesus become the Christ?), when we accept Him into our hearts and make him Lord of our lives. Yes, I know that He is, was and always will be, King of Kings and Lord of Lords. I know that He is the Alpha and Omega, the First and the Last, and that He will reign over all the earth after the final battle. That is all well and good. And, yes, He is Lord right now. But, if a person never recognizes Him as such, it does neither of them any good. They will both weep. Jesus is weeping now, and the individual will weep for all eternity.

What about you? When did Christ become the Lord of your life? One day we will all recognize Him as such. In Canada, December 26th is called Boxing Day. It is when all holiday trappings are put back in their boxes until next year. Please do not put Christ back in the manger until next year. Make Him your each and every day Lord. He wants to be just that. Please!

December 27th - Praise

Praise, mostly of God, is a frequent theme in the book of Psalms. The Hebrew title of which is "Praises." Yet praise is a theme that pervades the whole of Scripture. Genesis 1 is indirect praise. Direct praise is found in hymns scattered throughout the books of Exodus, 2 Samuel, Isaiah, Daniel, Ephesians, and Revelation. Words often used as synonyms or in parallel with "praise" and so help point to its meaning, are "bless," "exalt," "extol," "glorify," "magnify," and "thank."

Praising God is a God-appointed calling. Indeed, God has formed for himself a people "that they may proclaim my praise" (Isa 43:21). God's actions are to result in His "righteousness and praise springing up before all nations" (Isa 61:11). God has also predestined the church "to the praise of His glorious grace" (Eph 1:6). The future vocation of the redeemed in glory is to sing praise to God and the Lamb. Doxologies are fitting because they capture what God intends for people.

In the light of this calling to praise God, the oft-declared intention, "I will praise you, O God," and the exhortations for others to praise God, take on additional meaning. In giving oneself to praise, the worshiper declares his or her total alignment with God's purposes. The environment of those gathering for worship, judged by such admonitions, is one of lavish praise to God. Praise is fitting for what is the highest good, God. Praise is both a duty and a delight.

The biblical examples of praise to God, apart from citing his attributes and role, point to God's favors, usually those on a large scale in behalf of Israel. Exhortations to praise are sometimes followed by a catalogue of God's actions in Israel's behalf. God's most spectacular action involves the incarnation of Jesus, an event heralded with praises by angels in the heavens and to shepherds in their fields, "Glory to God in the highest" (Luke 2:14 Luke 2:20). Praise is the legitimate response to God's self-revelation. Personal experiences of God's deliverance and favor also elicit praise. An intimate relationship of a person or a people with God is sufficient reason for praise.

Praise to God in Israel took the form of artfully composed lyrics. A significant number of psalms are identified in their headings as "A Psalm." This is a technical term meaning "a song of praise." Israel's expressions of praise to God could include shouts, the playing of musical instruments, making melody, and dancing.

Unquestionably, the Book of the Psalms is the centerpiece for any discussion about praise. In it, the believer's vocation to praise is wonderfully modeled, so that even laments contain elements of praise. As a book of praises, the psalms build to a remarkable crescendo of praise in which all creatures are summoned to incessant praise of God, as are the stars and planets in the heavens, and even the angels.

Very appropriately, then, the Christian community repeatedly resorts in its worship to the Gloria Patri, "Glory be to the Father" and in clusters large and small sing, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow. Praise Him all creatures here below." I know you want to join me in praising of Father and His Son. You do, don't you?

December 28th – Living Water

When God called Moses to the burning bush for a fire side chat, Moses asked God what His name was. I do not think Moses received the answer for which he was looking. He probably expected to hear a common name for that region and that particular time. Instead, God told Moses that His name was; "I Am that I Am." If I were there, and with my sense of humor, I would have responded, "So, you have the same first and last name." I do not think God would have laughed, but maybe He would have shaken His head and grinned a little.

There are several places in the Bible where God makes the claim that; "I Am." To an orthodox Jew they knew exactly what Jesus was saying. Jesus was equating Himself with God, which He was, but not in the eyes of those in power. I'm sure they thought it was blasphemy, something they would never think of doing. But yet, they did all the time. No wonder Jesus called them hypocrites.

Jesus starts His dialogue on the "I Am" statements by telling the woman at the well that if she wanted to continue to draw water from the underground well, she could do so. However, she would have to come back each day, refill her pitcher, drink as much as she wanted, but she would always be thirsty. The water from the well may be cool and refreshing, and it may keep you from becoming dehydrated, but it is not life giving water. Jesus told her that only He could provide living water. Her response was to ask for some of that living water.

Why is this important? Because today, we think of water as water. We just turn on the tap, place our glass under the faucet, and instant water. Not so back then. There were two types of water, living water and (for lack of a better term) dead water. Living water was water that moved. Dead water was stagnant. There is a big difference. What would you rather drink, pure, clean, living water, or polluted water? When living water flows, it has a way of filtering itself. When water does not flow, it becomes stale, polluted and nasty. Which would you drink?

In the seventh chapter of John, Jesus stands up and cries aloud, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. If anyone believes in me, rivers of living water will flow out from that person's heart." The only way to get this living water is to believe that Jesus is the "river of life." My interpretation of what Jesus is trying to tell us is that He is the essence or the building block of life. Without water, things will die. Without spiritual water, our spirit will shrivel up and die.

I believe what Jesus is trying to tell the multitude and us is that He is the essence of life. When NASA goes exploring for life on other planets, the first thing they want to know, is there water? Water is the foundation of life. No water, no life. We are told that we should, with joy, draw water from the well of salvation. Isaiah wrote that some six hundred years before the birth of Christ. I sort of find it easy to tell who has been drinking from stagnant water, and who draws their water from the well of salvation. If you want to know how to tell the difference, look at their eyes, they reflect the inner soul. When you frown, so do your eyes. When you smile, your eyes light up with a beauty unlike any other that even a mask can't hide. The key to life, drink plenty of living water and keep smiling. They both will keep you young and wrinkle free. That is what you want, isn't it?

December 29th – The Bread of Life

“I am the Bread of Life” (John 6:35) is one of the seven “I Am” statements of Jesus. Jesus used the same phrase “I Am” in seven declarations about Himself. In all seven, He combines I Am with tremendous metaphors which express His saving relationship toward the world.

Bread is considered a staple food—i.e., a basic dietary item. A person can survive a long time on only bread and water. Bread is such a basic food item that it becomes synonymous for food in general. We even use the phrase “breaking bread together” to indicate the sharing of a meal with someone. Bread also plays an integral part of the Jewish Passover meal. The Jews were to eat unleavened bread during the Passover feast, and then for seven days following as a celebration of the exodus from Egypt. Finally, when the Jews were wandering in the desert for 40 years, God rained down “bread from heaven” to sustain the nation.

This is a phenomenal statement! First, by equating Himself with bread, Jesus is saying he is the substance of life. Second, the life Jesus is referring to is not physical life, but eternal life. Jesus is trying to get the Jews’ thinking off of the physical realm and into the spiritual realm. He is contrasting what He brings as their Messiah, with the bread He miraculously created. That was physical bread that perishes. He is spiritual bread that brings eternal life.

Third, and very important, Jesus is making another claim to deity. This statement is the first of the “I Am” statements in John’s Gospel. The phrase “I Am” is the covenant name of God (Yahweh, or YHWH), revealed to Moses at the burning bush. The phrase speaks of self-sufficient existence which is an attribute only God possesses. It is also a phrase the Jews who were listening would have automatically understood as a claim to deity.

Fourth, notice the words “come” and “believe.” This is an invitation for those listening to place their faith in Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God. This invitation to come is found throughout John’s Gospel. Coming to Jesus involves making a choice to forsake the world and follow Him. Believing in Jesus means placing our faith in Him, that He is who He says He is, that He will do what He says He will do, and that He is the only one who can.

Fifth, there are the words “hunger and thirst.” Again, it must be noted that Jesus isn’t talking about alleviating physical hunger and thirst. The key is found in another statement Jesus made back in His Sermon on the Mount. Jesus says, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.” He is saying, He will satisfy our hunger and thirst to be made righteous in the sight of God.

Our dilemma is we have desires we cannot fulfill, no matter what we do. That is where Jesus comes in. Pascal said, “There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of each man which cannot be satisfied by any created thing, but only by God the Creator, made known through Jesus Christ.” Jesus fills the vacuum. He is our Bread of Life. Come to the Table of the Lord and experience His fullness. Come. There is room for all. If need be, we will add another chair.

December 30th - Prayer

The common term used for prayer for those with a Yiddish background is to *daven* (pronounced daa-ven) and there are various theories where the word "daven" came from. Some say that "daven" comes from the Hebrew word *dovaiv*, which means "to move the lips." Davening is when Jews move their lips. We don't pray silently; we pray verbally, vocalizing our prayers.

In Hebrew, the word for prayer is *tefilah*. There are two translations that are literal and accurate. The word *tefilah* comes from the word *pellel* which means "to judge." *Tefilah* is a time of self-evaluation, self-judgment, introspection, when a person takes the time to focus on himself and goes within himself to see what it is that he needs, what is it that he is all about, what are his faults, what are his qualities, what is it that he needs from God, and why should God give it to him. This self-assessment process happens through *tefilah*.

On another level, in another translation, *tefilah* means "attachment." When we daven, we create a bond between ourselves and our Creator. Prayer is a process of putting things together. When we daven there are only two things in the universe, God and ourselves. The problem is that there are two entities that should be united as one. *Tefilah* remedies the problem and turns them into one. So *tefilah* is the process by which we begin looking at ourselves, focusing on ourselves, and proceed to focus on God, and bring ourselves close to Him, raising ourselves above the whole succession of life that prevails during the rest of the day.

We are naturally inclined to relate to things that are of a physical nature; we are not naturally disposed towards spirituality. This is not because spirituality is not our true, natural state -- deep down that's really who we are, spiritual. But our spiritual identity, which Chassidic teaching calls our "Godly soul", is covered up, covered up with a body. And the body it's covered up with the "animal soul" that we all possess -- the life force that enables us to relate to and take care of our physical needs, but which inhibits the spiritual desires of the spiritual, Godly soul.

The process of prayer is to help remove all of that which covers up and inhibits our Godly soul from being one with God. And I should add that much of the problems, the psychological difficulties that we experience, especially stress, is because of the inflated expectations that we have of ourselves because of our ego. When there is a conflict because we don't seem to be able to live up to our inflated expectations, we have all these problems of stress. When we daven, we lift ourselves up and reveal our true identity; then, the problems begin to dissolve.

May our prayer always be; Father God, "We give you our hands; to do your work. We give you our feet; to go your way. We give you our eyes; to see as you do. We give you our tongue; to speak your words. We give you our mind; that you may think in us. We give you our spirit; that you may pray in us. Above all we give you our heart; that you may love in us, and all mankind. We give you our whole self; that you may grow in us, you who lives and works and prays in us. Amen." Remember the affectual fervent prayer of a righteous man commends Gods attention. You are righteous, right? Oh!

December 31st – he Purification of Mary

The Purification of Mary is the ceremony performed by the mother of Jesus in the temple of Jerusalem 40 days after the birth of Christ, in fulfillment of the Mosaic Law requiring the cleansing of a woman from the ritual impurity incurred at childbirth. This rite is one of several prescribed in the Old Law to render a person pure who has been legally defiled.

The rite of purification after childbirth consisted in the offering of a pigeon or turtledove as a sin offering. (The accompanying sacrifice of a yearling lamb, for which a poor woman could substitute a second pigeon or turtledove, is not part of the purification ceremony itself, but a sacrifice of thanksgiving for a successful delivery.) The ceremony took place 40 days after the birth of a male child, 80 days after that of a female.

The sacrifice for purification was unnecessary for Mary. However, as a faithful Israelite obedient to the Law, she accomplished the prescription of the Mosaic code by offering two turtledoves. The ceremony of purification of the mother was joined to that of the dedication of the firstborn son who did not belong to the tribe of Levi. The law was fulfilled by the payment of five shekels to "redeem" the child—to have a Levite take his place in the direct service of Yahweh. There was no express regulation demanding the traditional presentation of the child to the Lord, and it was therefore not necessary that this ceremony be performed by the priests. More likely, it was performed by the parents, and in the case of Jesus, also by Simeon who held him in his arms and blessed God.

This double ceremony, a symbol of the obedience of Jesus and Mary, was marked not only by the fulfillment of Simeon's desire to see the "Christ of the Lord" but also by his prophecy concerning the mother and child, stating that this child is destined for the fall and for the rise of many in Israel. Anna, an elderly woman, joined in the praises of the Christ Child and told of him to those who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.

The liturgical celebration of this double event originated in Jerusalem; where as early as the 4th century it was celebrated under the title of "the fortieth day after the Epiphany." The feast spread to Byzantium in the 6th century and finally to Rome in the 7th century, where it acquired the title "Purification of Mary." However, the Roman liturgy still refers in its greater part, not to the Purification of Mary but to the Presentation of Jesus.

Because of their poverty, Joseph and Mary were only able to offer two turtle doves as a purification offering, and not the sacrifice of a yearling lamb. Because our God owns the cattle on a thousand hills, He could afford a spotless and unblemished lamb for our purification ceremony (our sin offering). And He did. You might ask; "What does God require of us for our purification rite?" According to David, my sacrifice or offering that I must make is a broken spirit; a broken spirit and contrite heart. That, and only that, God, will not despise. Do you have one? I hope so. If not, ask and our Father will be more than happy to see that you receive one. I guarantee it, money back.

January 1st – The Wanna-be King

Herod lay dying in his opulent palace in Jericho. He had been seriously ill for a long time. From the description in Josephus' writings, Herod had gangrene, severe itching, convulsions, and ulcers. His feet were covered with tumors, and he had constant fevers. The stadium of Jericho was filled with loved and important people from around his land, who were to be killed at the moment of his death, lest no one mourn when he died. It didn't seem to matter that they would not be mourning for him. As he lay on his deathbed, Herod's thoughts may have turned to the rabbis and their students whom he recently had executed for tearing down the Roman eagle from the temple gate, because it violated God's law against images. Perhaps he reflected on his beloved wife Miriamne's two sons whom he had drowned in the palace swimming pool next door. He could have remembered the execution of his favorite son, Antipater, only days ago for plotting against him; the one who was to take his father's place. Or, maybe he thought about the 45 members of the Sanhedrin whom he had murdered, the hundreds of family and staff whom he had suspected of plotting against him, or the thousands of subjects who died in his brutal campaign to claim a country they believed he had no right to rule. It is possible Herod also recalled, though only briefly, the massacre of a few boy babies in a town near his massive fortress Herodion, soon to be his tomb.

As he lay dying in Jericho, Herod revised his will to reflect the execution of his son Antipater. Archelaus, his son by Malthace, his Samaritan wife was given the best territory: Judea, Samaria, and Idumaea. Herod Philip, son of Cleopatra, his fifth wife, was to rule the area northeast of the Sea of Galilee: Gaulanitis, Batanea, Trachonitis, and Auranitis. Herod Antipas, another son of Malthace, was given Galilee and Perea. Shortly after completing this will, Herod died and was buried with pomp and circumstance in the Herodion, overlooking the fields of Bethlehem.

Greedy for more territory, Herod's sons went to Rome to ask for additional lands. A delegation from Judea and Jerusalem, fed up with the Herod dynasty, also went to Rome to request that the emperor, Augustus, appoint someone else to govern them. While they were gone, the country was in turmoil. Still upset over Herod's assassination of the rabbis and their students, Jews rioted in Jerusalem on Pentecost. The Roman governor from Syria came with soldiers, and fighting flared around the country. Judah, a Zealot from Gamla, seized Sepphoris and plundered the armory and palace.

The most powerful family of kings Israel had known for many years had the opportunity to meet and serve the King of the universe. Instead, they exemplify the ultimate fate of those who do not recognize the Messiah. They lived only for themselves, and not so that the world may know that there is a God in Israel.

How does your family live? My family is not powerful in the sense that we can change or alter the course of human history. But we can shape the future. Our power lies in the fact that we can shape the future of life itself, one by one. By that, I mean our children. I can train them up in the way they should go, or I can turn that job over to the mob. My wife and I, like Joshua, choose the way. They have chosen to raise their children in like manner. That is power to shape the future. With all my heart I hope you have done/are doing the same. Thank you.

January 2nd – Shekinah Glory

The Magi were certainly men of great learning. The word Magi comes from the Greek word "magos." Magos itself comes from the old Persian word "Magupati". This was the title given to priests in a sect of the ancient Persian religions such as Zoroastrianism. Today we'd call them astrologers. Back then, astronomy and astrology were part of the same overall study ("science") and went hand in hand with each other. The Magi would have followed the patterns of the stars religiously.

They had seen an unusual new star in the sky, and knew that it told of the birth of a special king in Israel. No one really knows what the new star in the sky was, and there are many theories including comets, supernovas, and conjunctions of planets or something supernatural! The Magi would have known about the prophecies of a special Jewish Savior (also known as the Messiah) from when the Jews had been held captive in ancient Babylon several hundred years before.

For anyone inclined to insist on the literal truth of scripture, this verse solves the question. If this verse is literally true, then the Star of Bethlehem could not have been any known natural phenomenon, simply because none would move that way. However, if we grant the author of Matthew, who assuredly was not an eyewitness at the Nativity, a little artistic license, the "star" might not have appeared literally in the way described. In that case, we can consider some natural, astronomical possibilities. In fact, there is some uncertainty about the use of the word for star in the Greek manuscript. Some contend that the word could have meant or implied an object other than a physical star.

So what was the star? Let me throw out another theory. Since the Greek word used for star has a literal meaning of shining, I believe what it is talking about is God's Shekinah Glory. The Shekinah Glory is a visible manifestation of God on earth, whose presence is portrayed through a natural occurrence. The word Shekinah is a Hebrew name meaning "dwelling" or "one who dwells." Shekinah Glory means "He caused to dwell," referring to the divine presence of God.

By definition, the Shekinah Glory of God can manifest itself as anything the Creator wants. It manifested itself as a burning bush that did not burn. It manifested itself as a pillar of fire by night and a cloud of smoke by day. God has also chosen to manifest Himself in the glory of the night sky. The Palmist knew this when he wrote "the heavens declare the glory of God." When I look into the night sky, I, like the palmist ask, "Who am I that you are mindful of me?" When you look to the night sky do you consider its vastness and how it reflects the glory of God?

When God wants to lead His people, He gets in front of them, and leads as He did with the Magi. Remember, the Hebrew children were led in the desert by God's glory. Also consider that God's glory is always on the move. It is ever changing, another important aspect of God's glory. It led the Magi to the Christ child. Where has the Shekinah Glory led you? Has it led you to the realization of your need for redemption? If you are not looking or looking in the right place, you will miss it. You will be like the people of Jerusalem who missed the birth of the King. What could have been so interesting as to draw their attention away from God's glory? I hope you do not miss the Light of lights as it passes by. If you do, you just might be left in utter darkness. Not a good place to be. Where may God find you?

January 3rd – Wise Men and Fools

There are three men in glittering velvet robes and fake beards in the living nativity at church. Sometimes, they tow a live camel. Bearing gifts, they traversed afar, following yonder star through the back of the sanctuary in the grand crescendo of our beloved annual Christmas pageant. I'm speaking, of course, of the Magi. Or is it wise men? Wait, kings? Intrigue swirls around these festooned foreigners. Where did they come from? With a wink Matthew writes, "the East." Indeed, his description is so utterly "specific" that church traditions in dozens of countries claim to be their country of origin. And who were they? Technically speaking, Matthew calls them *magi*—but what are magi? Are they kings, wise men, sorcerers, or astrologers, or maybe all the above?

Perhaps if Luke, the historian had written about them in his Christmas account, we might have had precise details. But Matthew's account is vague, shrouded in mystery: "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..." (Matt. 2:1).

Subsequent traditions embellished the narrative. As early as the 3rd century, they were considered to be kings, probably interpreted as the fulfillment of the prophecy in Psalms 72:11 ("May all kings fall down before him"). In about the 8th century the names of three Magi—Bithisarea, Melichior, and Gathaspa—appear in a chronicle known as the *Excerpta latina barbari*. They have become known most commonly as Balthasar, Melchior, and Gaspar (or Casper). According to Western church tradition, Balthasar is often represented as a king of Arabia or sometimes Ethiopia, Melchior as a king of Persia, and Gaspar as a king of India.

During the Middle Ages even more legends were developed. One such legend stated that they were thought to be the three sons of Noah (Ham, Shem, and Japhat) and therefore, one of them was often pictured as an Ethiopian. A twelfth-century bishop of Cologne even claimed to have found their skulls. They are now on display in a priceless casket with in that city. They were probably from an area which is now in either Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, or an area in what's now southern Turkey, northern Syria. Although they are often called the "Three Kings," the Bible does not say how many there were, or that they were kings. One theory is that they might have been Kings of Yemen, as during this time the Kings of Yemen were Jews. Three is only a guess because they brought with them three gifts; but however many there were, they probably would have had many more servants with them. Maybe that is why Herod was upset, with his army in Gaul, just a thought.

How did they arrive in Jerusalem? Well, forget the traditional view of three old men arriving on camels. During this time period camels were used as pack animals or beast of burdens and not transportation. I can also tell you with 100 percent certainty that they did not use magic flying carpets as Disney might suggest. More than likely the Magi came from the Medo-Persian Empire, the leftover remnants of the Babylonian Empire. What were they famous for? Horses, that's right, beautiful white Persian steeds.

The way I read the Bible is that this band of men were wise because they came to worship the King of Kings as opposed to the foolish who worshiped something that would not stand the test of time. Like them we must decide, worship the King or...?

January 4th – Breath of God

The opening lines of the Book of Genesis tell us that the Spirit of God moved across the great void. If we understand the idea of God, especially the Holy Spirit, being like a breath or wind, we can grasp the meaning of the Hebrew word "Ruach." This word refers to God as a breath, a wind, or a life force that sustains all living things, human beings included. Here in Genesis, it draws the word picture of the life giving nature of God moving across and empowering a lifeless void.

A little further down in chapter two of Genesis, we read that God made man and breathed into his nostrils the "breath of life." The idea of "breath" is completely integral to the human experience. We cannot live without the breath of life.

The word also exists in the New Testament, in a different form, but has the same meaning. The equivalent word in the Greek is called "pneuma." In the New Testament, "pneuma" refers to the Holy Spirit. For instance, when the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus in the form of a dove during his baptism, when Jesus breathed on His disciples and said "receive the Holy Spirit," and then when the writer of John uses the word "pneuma" to describe the Spirit as the bringer of truth (equating the word of God to the breath of God). Similar to "Ruach," although it mostly is in reference to the Holy Spirit, it can also refer to the animating life principle that exists in humans, a soul or spirit.

The word "Ruach," when applied to God, can often indicate divine creative activity. God creates, empowers, emboldens, and sustains all things, and the name Ruach Elohim reminds us of this power and facet of God's character. Furthermore, with every breath we take, we should remind ourselves that our life exists because of the life force of God. His breath has filled, and is still filling our lungs. The spirit or wind that we cannot see empowers us and drives us to live for the Creator in everything we do. With every breath we take, we seek to serve our God who fills us with the breath of life as only He can.

There is another important time when the Bible speaks of the word "Spirit." It is found in the book of Luke, the first chapter. The angel of the Lord tells Mary that the Holy Spirit will come upon her and she will become pregnant and give birth to the Savior of the world. But is the "Ruach" still alive today and performing the same duties? Yes. It still gives life in barren deserts. Orthodox Judaism still believes that two miracles take place at each and every birth. The first is birth itself, and the second is that God still breathes into each life that first breath.

As Christians, we are told not to quench the spirit. Quench is a powerful, evocative word. It means to extinguish, to blot out, to suppress, to stifle, to obliterate. Do we seek to remove the word of God? Think of it. The word of God is conveyed to our hearts through His Spirit. If we rub out His word, we have no life. If we kill the flame of God's love, as expressed through His revealed and recorded word, we are extinguishing our source of life, forever, and that is not a good thing. We ask God to bless our country; however, what we need is to ask for is for Him to have mercy on us for trying to remove His word. What we need is an infusion of God's breath to bring new and restored life. If you agree, stop and say a prayer that God will send a revival and a renewed spirit to this dry and thirsty land. Thank you. He is waiting to hear from you.

January 5th – Ancient Ways

Thus says the LORD; Stand at the crossroads, and look,
and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies; and walk in it,
and find rest for your souls. But they said, "We will not walk in it." Jeremiah 6:16

When you read Jeremiah 6:16, you get a brief history of humanity's interaction with God, or vice versa, and unfortunately, it will be the story until the end of time. Why is that, you might ask? The only answer I can give you is that we humans think we can manage on our own. As Dr. Phil would ask, "How's that working for you?" More than likely, the answer would be, "just fine." In reality, things are not fine. They are terrible.

The Beatles (remember the fab 4?) sang a song with the lyrics; "all you need is love, all you need is love, all you really need is love." Not far behind was a group called the Youngbloods. Their song went; "come on people now, smile on your brother, everybody get together, time to love one another right now, right now." Some fifty years later, and humanity has not come together and there is more division than love.

During that same era, Barry McGuire sang a song entitled; "Eve of Destruction." The song asked a very important question, that being; "you don't believe we're on the Eve of Destruction?" Before the question is asked, he gives many instances of why he believes the world is in a self-destruct mode. McGuire sites the loss of human respect for each other. He sees all the hate in the world, but reminds us to say grace at each meal. Finally, he wants to know if you are feeling the fears he is feeling, especially if the button is pushed.

Tim Teague was the Family Minister at Truro Anglican Church in Fairfax, Va. One Sunday, he was asked to give the homily. His opening question was a shocker. He asked if God was in charge on earth today. His answer was, "no He is not." Then Tim asked the question, "Ultimately, is God in charge?" To that Tim answered, "Yes." Tim went on to give examples of the chaotic state of the world, and then asked the question, "Is this what God intended?" Of course it wasn't. At the end of the sermon Tim asked the question, "What is the state of your life, and is God in charge?"

God asked Isaiah to ask God's people a very important question. It is, "Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food." In the previous verse, Isaiah writes; "everyone who thirsts come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price." This is the Christmas story, God's gift of redemption for a hurting world; because He knows that we cannot pay the price required for salvation. In a world that is longing after the things that never satisfy the longings of our soul, can you hear the cry to come home?

When God sent His son into the world to be born of a virgin, He knew it was time to call us back to the cross roads of life. He knew it was time for all creation to come home, to feast on the fatness of His bounty. He knew we needed rest for our weary souls. Today, God is calling us back to the cross roads of life where we will find rest and nourishment. What is your answer to His calling? No, I mean, what is your real answer? Is that your final answer? Are you sure?

January 6th - Epiphany

Today is Epiphany, a Christian feast intended to celebrate the "shining forth" or revelation of God to mankind in human form, in the person of Jesus. The feast is also called Twelfth Day, as it is the twelfth day after Christmas.

My question is, "Why did it take so long for this day to be set aside by the church?" One easy answer is that the church did not exist when the first annunciation of the coming Christ was made. In fact, there wasn't much around at that time. In my mind, the first announcement of the coming Christ is found in the third chapter of Genesis. Here God tells our adversary that the seed of the woman will strike his head. Most, if not all, commentators believe this to be the first mention of Christ and His coming.

There are more announcements found in Isaiah, where he tells us that a son will be born and His name shall be "Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace." Again, there was no church to proclaim this good news, but there was an organized religion with its rules and regulations; however, not too many of them had personal relationships with the living God.

Moving a few hundred years into the future, we come to the home of a woman named Mary. The angel came and made known to her that she had been chosen to be the mother of the Messiah. There is no recorded evidence of her telling anyone except her cousin Elizabeth. Now, there are good reasons to keep this a secret. If you're a single woman, you cannot go around announcing that God has had intimate relations with you, and you are going to bare His sin. Who would listen? She would be written off as just another who needed psychiatric help.

Fast forward nine months, we hear, in the night sky, a choir of heavenly host singing peace on earth and good will to those who seek His face. But, before the choir sang, a single angel broadcasted the news, that to them was born in the city of David, a child who is Christ the King. This time, instead of an individual, the heralded news came to a group of men. Important, yes, because their testimony was accepted. And, they did go and tell the news on their way back to the field.

Sometime later, we have the Magi coming to Jerusalem asking about the one who was born King of the Jews. To their wonder and amazement, the citizenry had missed the entire event. It was like it had never happened. Their minds were not in tune with things above, but on the things of this earth. How sad, a perfect chance to join the wise men that were looking for the King of Kings.

Today is the day that the Church officially celebrates that its Savior and Messiah has come into the world in the form of a child. That He "did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness, and being found in human form." I think that is a little sad. For me, each day I wake up, and have an opportunity to celebrate with my God and His Son. Each day, I get to explore anew the meaning of Emmanuel, God being with me. It gives me a chance to deepen my relationship and to share His love with others. What about you, care to join me each and every day in giving thanks for the provisions of this life and the next?

January 7th - Epilog

As stated in an earlier devotion, I had to come up with an argument about when I thought Jesus became the Christ. Like I said then, the professor wanted us to learn to think about and be able to defend our position. Although he was not my favorite professor, I did learn a lot. What I learned was that there is more than one answer to each and every question. I learned to explore the possibilities. And for that I am grateful, forever grateful.

When I accepted my first assignment to a local church I was still in seminary. The congregation numbered about 1,000 and ran close to 700 in Christian Education on Sunday. I was assigned to be their Minister in Administration/Senior Adults. The administration part I knew a lot about, but not so much the senior citizens. But I learned. I was also assigned the task of teaching the teachers. That meant, on Wednesday night, all the Christian Ed teachers would meet and discuss the lesson for Sunday.

My style of teaching is to ask a whole lot of questions, and have a discussion. Unfortunately, this style of learning was completely new to them. They were accustomed to having someone tell them what to say and think. The class struggled for a while, but soon we reached a point where people were confident and comfortable to open up and talk. What many of the teachers related to me was that they had never been asked to think or give their opinion, and therefore did not know how to participate.

My next teaching opportunity came at another church when a Sunday School class was declining and needed someone to come and be their teacher. The class was made up of seniors who had been in church all their lives. To say the least, they were not accustomed to my teaching method, and the class struggled for quite a while. However, we eventually grew to one of the largest classes in the church. Not that I am a great teacher, but I have found that people want to be asked what they think. I remember after one Sunday's lesson, a parishioner came to me and told me that she had been in church for 70 years, and no one had ever asked her to think. Score one for the good guys.

As you have read through the devotions for the last few weeks, I hope you have stopped and reflected on the questions that I have asked. Remember, there are no right or wrong answers. They are there to ask you to reflect on your relationship with our Father and His Son. They are there for you to ask yourself, "When I come to the cradle of Christ, what does it mean to me, and what does God expect of me?" But most of all, "What does Christmas really mean to me?"

Barney Campbell, retired Senior Pastor of Hyde Park Baptist Church, once asked this question to his congregation, "What will your answer be on the final exam?" He went on to explain that we all must take the exam, and we all must answer. The exam will be given by God and the question is, "What have you done with my Son?" Please remember that the question will only be asked once and you will only give one answer. Although God has a sense of humor, that is no guarantee He will ask, "Is that your final answer?" But I will, what will be your final answer? Think about it.

January 8th - Conclusion

If we want to be part of these events, Advent and Christmas, we cannot just sit there like a theatre audience and enjoy all the lovely pictures. Instead, we ourselves must be caught up in this action, the reversal of all things: we must become actors on this stage. For this is a play in which each spectator has to play a part, we cannot hold back. What will be our role? Are we worshipful shepherds bending a knee or kings bringing gifts? What is being enacted when Mary becomes the mother of God, when God enters the world in a lowly manger?

We cannot come to this manger in the same way as we would approach the cradle of any other child. Something will happen to each of us who decide to visit Christ in the manger. Each of us will be judged or redeemed before we depart. Each of us will either break down and come to know that God's mercy has been turned toward us or we will walk away condemned forever.

What does this mean to say such things about the Christ Child? It is God, the Lord and Creator of all things, who became a small infant, who comes to us in a little corner of the world, unremarkable and hidden away, who wants to meet us and be among us as a helpless and defenseless child.

All who stand at the manger and lay down all power and honor, all prestige, all vanity, all arrogance and self-will; all who take their place among the lowly and let God alone be high; all who see the glory of God in the lowliness of the child of the manger; these are the ones who will truly celebrate the meaning of Advent and Christmas. Remember, no priest or theologian stood at the cradle in Bethlehem. Yet, all Christian theology finds its beginning in the miracle of miracles that God became human.

Celebrating Advent means being able to wait and waiting is an art that our impatient age has forgotten. We must learn to wait for the greatest, the most profound and the gentlest things of this world. Nothing happens in a rush but only according to divine law of germination and growth and becoming.

Joy abides with God, and it comes down from God, and embraces the spirit, the soul, and the body. When joy has seized a person and spreads throughout his entire soul and carries one away, a certain joy exists that knows nothing at all of the pain that the heart suffers and the anguish and dread of loss. The joy of God has gone through the poverty of the manger and the agony of the cross. That is why it is invincible and irrefutable.

For the good of all humanity, Jesus our Christ became fully human in a Bethlehem stable. Rejoice, oh Christendom for unto us a Savior is born.

Adaptations from the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer