

December 25th
Jesus Christ is born!
Scripture: Matthew 1:18-25

God With Us!

You may have your favorite holiday traditions: putting the star on the tree, making gingerbread houses, or getting together with family for Christmas! A tradition is something you do every year (if everything goes as planned). One of my favorite holiday traditions is having a nice, cold, glass bottle of root beer at our family gathering with my cousin. Growing up, my cousin and I always had one request for Grandma to buy us for the Christmas get together: glass-bottled Root Beer! I have always loved glass-bottled Root Beer, but the thought of sharing one with my cousin every year remains a fond memory of mine, and we still keep that tradition to this day!

On the first Christmas, when Jesus was born, God started a new tradition with us. The birth of Jesus, the life of Jesus, the death of Jesus, and the resurrection of Jesus is God's beginning of his tradition of being *with us*. The cool part about God's tradition is, through Jesus, God is with us every day. Christmas is a great reminder for you and me that God loves us so much that his desire is to be with us. It's the reason He sent his son into the world! We can remember that God is with us just by Jesus' name. Jesus means, "Jehovah is salvation," and salvation is a beautiful thing God gives us as a free gift of grace to us. Another name we can give to Jesus is Immanuel, which literally means "God With us." Essentially, what salvation means is that we are saved from our sins, which lead to death, but it also means that God is with us! Salvation is much more to us than just being saved, but it is God inviting us to be in relationship with him. God began a new tradition of being together, and He did so through Jesus! Only this tradition isn't a once-a-year thing, but an everyday thing. Christmas is the celebration of God with us!

Reflection Questions

- What are your favorite family holiday traditions?
- How does it make you feel that, through Jesus, God is present with you?
- How do you spend time with God?
- In what areas of your life do you feel God is closest to you?
 - In what areas do you feel God is farthest from you?

December 26, 2020
The Genealogy of Jesus Christ
Scripture: Matthew 1:1-17

Our Family

I wonder why Matthew decided to begin his story of Jesus this way? Well, in the times that the Bible was written, starting a story with a genealogy, or a family history, was not weird or uncommon. Matthew was making a point by beginning with Jesus' history, by saying, "This story is about Jesus!" Matthew was writing this story to a group of Jewish people, so they were waiting for someone like Jesus to come along, and Matthew is trying to convince the Jewish people that Jesus is their promised Messiah! There was a belief that the King of Israel was going to come from the line of David, the great king of Israel in the Old Testament. The beginning of Jesus' genealogy is proof that through Abraham who received God's blessing came David. From David came the line of Jesus' ancestors who lived in exile. From the Exile of Israel in the foreign land of Babylon came Jesus, and I think Matthew has a point for us: God has rescued his people! The Genealogy of Jesus is a reminder to us that God is still at work in our lives even when times are tough. He is still our hope!

Now that Christ is born and God has brought salvation to us he invites us into something bigger. Matthew is inviting us into the story of God's people. Through the work of Christ, his family becomes our family. This is good news for those of us in the world who don't have a family because in Christ we are all brothers and sisters! If you are reading this with your family you can rejoice! Salvation in Jesus means your family is invited into Jesus' family where we all will be family forever. This season of Christmas, let us give thanks for our families, because in Christ, our family is included in the family of God. This is good news for everybody in the world: those who have faced the struggles of broken families and those who have been blessed in their family ties.

Reflection Questions

- What is your family history? It might be fun to look at your family history together as a family to understand where your family has been and then to come up with a goal of where you want your family to be in the future!
- What does it mean for you to be invited into Christ's family this Christmas season?

December 27, 2020
The Prophet Simeon
Scripture: Luke 2:25-35

The Lesson from Simeon

In today's Scripture, we encounter Simeon. Simeon is one of the most overlooked character's of the Christmas story. Simeon was an old man when he met Jesus, but in seeing Baby Jesus, this was the completion of his life's work. Throughout Simeon's life the Holy Spirit was with him. The story tells us that, "Simeon was righteous and devout, and looking forward to Israel's consolation." Because Simeon was close to God and wanted to seek him honestly he was filled with God's spirit. Not everybody before Jesus Chrstit was filled with the Holy Spirit, but God chose some of his most faithful servants to be blessed with the Holy Spirit. In the story that Luke tells, Simeon was led by God's Spirit to Jesus to see him and be assured that, indeed, the King had arrived! Simeon knew who Jesus was before he even met him because of the Spirit of God in him. That's crazy! The Spirit of God helped Simeon see who God was, in Jesus, even though he was a baby!

What do you feel God is calling you to? It was clear that God's calling on Simeon was to see Jesus before he died. I don't know what Simeon's life work was, or what he did for a living, but I know he was called to hold baby Jesus before he died. I love Simeon's response, "Now, Master, you can dismiss your servant in peace." As if to say, "I've seen all I need to see, now if it is my time to go, I'm fine with that." I feel as though I would have a tough time being that content with life. What would be your, "I've seen it all," moment? The Good News of Jesus is that with his presence we can have peace with God, regardless of what we've done or haven't done, seen or haven't seen, whether we've lived perfect lives or broken lives, because with Jesus, we are all able to have peace with God.

Reflection Questions

- What is, or has been, your dream job?
- On a scale of 1-10, how content would you say you are in your life?
 - What is something you would say you need in order to be more content with life?
- What would be your reaction to seeing Jesus right now?

December 28, 2020
The Prophetess Anna
Scripture: Luke 2:36-38

Anna Meets Jesus

The story of Anna happens at the same time as Simeon. Anna is another great example for us of a faithful life of serving God. Anna was widowed for 84 years. Her husband passed away seven years into their marriage. Anna found herself by being in the temple with God in prayer and worship and fasting. She was at the temple with Jesus, his family, and Simeon. She, too, had been looking forward to what Scripture calls the redemption of Israel. Jesus is the redeemer of Israel: He is the one who will set all things right for Israel and the whole world. During this time, Anna was often seen in the temple (and known for) telling people about God.

I like to talk about things that I know about. For me, I could talk sports all day long: baseball, basketball, and football. When I was growing up playing sports and being around sports it was the thing I knew best. Anna's life is a good example to us in the season of Christmas because she talked about God to other people – she knew God so well! That sort of thing happens with the people for with whom you spend the most time. The same is true in our relationship with God, the more we spend time with Him, the more we get to know Him, and the more comfortable we will be with talking about Him to other people.

The story of Christmas (the birth of Jesus Christ) is God's story of taking the initial step for you and Him to spend time together. The birth of Jesus is God's way of saying, "I want to be with you." This season can be a great start to us spending more time with God, as we remember that God wants to be with us, always. I know one of the things that makes it difficult to spend time with people are those awkward moments of not knowing what to say, or not knowing what they will think, but with God it is different. We can know what God thinks about us because of what the Bible says. We can know that God loves us, wants the very best for us, calls us friends, and will be there for us when we need him. We know this because this is what Jesus did and said! With Jesus, God came to be with us, so that, like Anna, we can spend time with God and speak about Him with and to other people!

Reflection Questions

- What are some of your favorite ways to be with God? (ie: Prayer, Scripture reading, worship in song, fellowship with others, service)
- On a scale of 1-10, how confident would you be talking to others about God?
- Share with your family some of the ways you have seen God at work in your life this past week.

December 29, 2020
The Beatitudes
Scripture: Matthew 5:3-7

The Be-Attitudes

I have a few experiences in my life that have shaped me, and since those experiences, things have not been the same. One time I was hit in the face with a baseball, and after that experience, I never really wanted to play baseball again. At age 16, I got my driver's license, and ever since, I have been able to go where I want without relying on my parents to drive me there. You may also have some experiences that have forever shaped or changed you.

Jesus' birth is important for the world. Through the birth of the savior God established a new kingdom. The good news of this kingdom is: the King cares deeply for the poor and those people our world would consider unworthy. The King in God's Kingdom gave up himself for the unworthy so that they would be known as worthy in the kingdom! The beatitudes that Jesus gave, as told in Matthew, are the words Jesus used to tell the people of Israel of whom this new kingdom concerns: the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the humble, those hungry and thirsty for righteousness, the merciful, pure in heart, peace-makers, and persecuted. These are all people Jesus says belong in God's kingdom.

What Jesus tells us, as he told the people of Israel, is that God's kingdom cares deeply for those who are suffering, hurting, longing, or downtrodden because God can supply our every need. We may not be poor, but being poor in spirit can make us feel worthless; Jesus died to give you worth. We may feel as though we have no reason to mourn; Jesus can give us a heart to mourn with others as an act of care (Jesus cares for us). We may want to be humble, but sometimes it's hard to be humble; Jesus, by example, has given us the perfect picture of humility. The beatitudes, as Jesus explains them, can be our new ways of being. That is, if we trust in Him, He will provide for our very needs.

Reflection Questions

- What has been the most significant event in your life's story?
- How can these be-attitudes help us to spread the joy of Christmas to others?

December 30, 2020
Prophecy of Jesus
Scripture: Isaiah 61:1-3

Jesus Had A Mission Statement

A Jubilee is a year of restoration. In a year of jubilee all debt is forgiven, and the leader or king will wipe everyone's slate clean. Those in prison will go free, and all debt of money owed to the state will be reduced to zero. The purpose of a year of Jubilee is to get a fresh start. I think in a lot of ways our desire and hope is that the next year, 2021, will be some sort of jubilee for us. There always comes an excitement around new years because we are hopeful that the next year is going to bring something good for us. This is the idea of jubilee: a fresh start will give way to a new normal. In the old testament, a jubilee will typically happen within a king's first 2 years in power, as if to say, "Everything about my Kingdom will be done my way."

In the scripture for today the jubilee that was pronounced in Israel was most likely a forgiveness of financial debt and the freeing of debt-slaves. This is good news to the poor, who are in debt, and it is good news to the captives and the debt-slaves, whose debt has led them into enslavement. The year of jubilee in Israel can remind us of the jubilee we have in Christ. The season of Christmas can even be thought of as the beginning of a jubilee for us. We were in debt as well: slaves to sin. We owed our lives because of sin. The Bible says that, "for the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus" (Romans 6:23). The birth of Jesus (what we celebrate during the season of Christmas) is our reminder that we have Jubilee (the year of the Lord's favor) all the time!

Jesus quoted Isaiah 61:1-3 during his life, as if to say, "I am bringing the jubilee to all people, for all time!" Jesus had a mission statement, and his mission is to established a new kingdom for us, which means a new kind of Jubilee:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19)

Reflection Questions

- What can be your mission statement or a word that will guide you for the year 2021?
- Who are some people in your life that you know would do well by hearing the Good News of Jesus?

December 31, 2020
The Treasure in Clay Jars
Scripture: 2 Cor 4:7-18

The Power of God In Us

There is much that can be said about Christmas this year particularly. Maybe you don't share my feelings, and maybe you do, however, it feels as though the holiday season this year has been much more bittersweet. The truth of this year is that it has been a lonely year with little interaction. The holidays this year have served as a reminder to me that even when things aren't the way they should be, God is still with us, and he is still good. With God, things are always as they should be because He is the almighty creator and sustainer of life.

Afflicted, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. It seems as though Paul knows us well when he writes those words. The year 2020 has been a crazy year with the pandemic, racial unrest, loneliness and anxiety. Life has shown us that it can beat us down, but with God we won't be totally destroyed. This is the miracle of a treasure being carried in clay jars. Clay jars are fragile, and probably not the preferred piece to carry such a treasure. God would have it no other way, because God's miraculous power shines all the brighter in us even when the clay jar appears to have some cracks. So even though we may have felt the effects of a tough year, we don't give up.

God, who is the creator and sustainer of life is, through Jesus, making us new day by day, so that we would have the strength to not lose the hope we have. One day our despair will turn to thanksgiving, our pain will turn to pleasure, and our shame will turn to glory. The treasure we carry in our fragile and ordinary lives will be cause for rejoicing at the Glory of the Lord for all eternity. May the lessons of 2020 make us stronger in the future.

Reflection Questions

- What have been your biggest takeaways from the year 2020?
- Where have you experienced the presence of Jesus this year?
- What are some ways you can be a messenger of the Gospel in the next year?

January 1, 2021
The Ministry of Reconciliation
Scripture: 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

A New Friendship

Happy New Year! New Years day rings in a sigh of relief, as if to say, “ahh, we’ve made it.” I pray blessings over the year of 2021, that this will be a year of joy, welfare, and grace for you. I pray that this year you will be made new through the grace of Jesus Christ. The grace of Jesus transforms our old self into a new self. In Christ, through his grace and redemption, you are made a new person because of the spirit of Christ that is in your heart.

Who are your friends? How long have you been friends with them? How did you begin your friendship? I must admit, some of my best friends now were some dudes who I never thought I would be friends with. I have a problem with judging someone before I get to know them, and my friends now are actually an example of prejudice. It took me a while to develop the friendships I have now because I have the problem of assuming the worst things about people before I get to know them. I wouldn’t trade my friends for the world! I think they are great because I now know them better! There’s something about relationships that changes people. God created us for relationships: to “do life” with one another as we “do life” with God.

Paul did this with Jesus: he pre-judged Jesus, and it led Paul to actually kill people who followed Jesus. Then he met Jesus, and his whole life changed. Jesus does that. The Holy Spirit is in the business of changing our lives. Jesus’ spirit in us makes us new creations. This is not because there is anything wrong with us but because without Jesus’ spirit we are incapable of living the life God desires for us to live. It’s easy to judge others and ourselves by what they, or we, have done. Paul gives us comfort by writing to the church at Corinth that if we have a relationship with Christ we are given a new identity. Our new identity is that Christ, through his relationship with us, is changing us to be more like Him. That is my prayer for us this year, that we would be more like him: loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, gentle, faithful, good, and self-controlled.

Reflection Questions

- What are you hoping will be new this year in your life, your family’s life, or your friend’s lives?
- Of the 9 fruits of the spirit, which “fruits” are most natural to you, and which “fruits” are toughest for you to have?
- As a family, or whomever you may be reading this with, write a bucket list for 2021. Try including things on your list that would be a totally new thing for you, your family, or your friends as a reminder to you that Christ brings newness to our lives.

January 2, 2021
The Good Shepherd
Scripture: Psalm 23

Lost?

Where are we going? Maybe you have ridden in a car with someone who doesn't take the same path as you to the destination, so the feeling of worry sinks in. You begin to think, "We are never going to make it in time." I consider myself to be pretty directionally capable, and I usually don't need to use GPS or maps when I'm on the road. I've experienced a passenger, or two, who have ridden along with me wondering, "Where are we going?" Not being sure of where you are headed is not a great feeling.

In a sense, we can say this is true of 2021, we don't know where this year is going to lead, but we've just joined the journey. Psalm 23 gives us instruction for how to know where we are heading, and it's not following a dream or a path, but a person. God is the good shepherd; Jesus calls himself the good shepherd in John 10. Psalm 23 tells us this: The good shepherd will lead us to lie down in green pastures, beside still waters, and along the right path. The good shepherd will give us comfort, even in darkness. The good shepherd leads us to the table in the presence of our enemies. The good shepherd overflows our cup. The good shepherd pursues us with faithful love, so that we will dwell with God forever.

May we be good sheep this year, and let God guide us in the direction he wants us to go. It's not wrong or bad to have a dream or a destination, but are you willing to give your heart to God to let him shape and mold your heart to desire to go in the direction he is leading you? May Jesus guide you this year into his peace, comfort, fellowship with our friends and strangers (that we may gain a clean heart toward one another), joy everlasting, and His faithful love. When we follow the good shepherd He will always lead us right where we need to be.

Reflection Questions

- Have you ever experienced the feeling of God guiding you to do something?
 - How was that experience for you?
- What are some things in your life that leave your cup empty?
- What are some things you do to fill up your cup or things in your life that naturally fill your cup?

January 3, 2021
The Great Commission
Scripture: Matthew 28:16-20

I Am With You, Always.

You've probably heard of the Great Commission before. It is Jesus' last words to His disciples before he ascended into Heaven. The Great Commission is the mission Jesus calls all believers into: we are to make more disciples who follow the teachings of Jesus and love Him with all they have. If you are reading this, chances are you have been a product of somebody in your life living out the Great Commission and you have been, as we call it, discipled, by someone into a saving relationship with Jesus. As a result of being a disciple of Jesus, you have decided to love him and follow his teachings. God has called us into this mission with him because he wants us to be a part of His work in the world. To use a sports analogy: The Great Commission is Jesus' pep talk to us to get our minds and spirits into the game!

The phrase Jesus uses at the end of his pep talk is the heart of the Christmas story: "and I am with you always, to the end of the age." Jesus didn't say we would do this alone. The truth of "God With Us," is that He is with us through his Spirit. The way an athlete becomes a better is through competition: playing games on the field. The way a salesperson becomes a better is by perfecting his or her sales pitch to a client. The way a teacher becomes a better is by teaching.

The Holy Spirit empowers us to share the Gospel. This is how disciples grow closer to Jesus. Jesus knew that the best way for us to grow in our faith would be in sharing our faith. He also knew the real benefit of us sharing our faith with others is the benefit of a relationship with him. My prayer for you this year is that you will share your faith with others often and experience closeness in your relationship with Jesus as you share.

Reflection Questions

- How confident are you, on a scale from 1-10, in sharing your faith with others?
- What are some ways you can grow in confidence about sharing your faith with others?
- Spend some time in reflection and prayer, and ask God to reveal names of people in your life with whom you should share your faith.
 - Tell one another who those names are, and commit to praying for them together.
 - Consider planning out a time for yourself to share your faith with the people God gave to you.

January 4, 2021
Fellowship with God
Scripture: 1 John 1:5-10, 2:24-29

Expectations of Fellowship

Fellowship could be a word you might use to describe the season of Christmas. What joy we have in a God who desires our fellowship! Having fellowship with God means we have fellowship with light. To have fellowship with light means there is no darkness in us. Just as there is no darkness in God, there is no darkness for those who are in fellowship with God. Consider being in a dark room where you cannot see at all. You walk into that room to find something hidden in a corner. Chances are you won't find what you're looking for very easily. Unless, of course, you grab a flashlight, or turn on a light. It is true that God is our light that blocks out the darkness. Even in a dark room, one small candle will give light to the whole room. John testifies to God's light in this way: in him there is no darkness at all. Darkness cannot cover light, but light will blot out all darkness. The darkness in our lives is the darkness of sin. Sin separates us from God, the light.

The letter of 1 John was written to a group of people who believed that in order to be right with God one had to be given a special knowledge. They believed that fellowship with God required a certain knowledge. There is a problem with this belief: if fellowship with God depended on us, and what we know or how we behave, then we would never be worthy enough to have fellowship with God. The story of Christmas and the joy of the world is found at the birth of Jesus: the true light in the darkness. God was born into a dark world in order to be light. If you've put your faith and trust in who Jesus says he is, then you have the light of God living inside of you in the power of his Spirit. God made a way for us to have fellowship with Him when we would otherwise have no access to Him. This is the story we tell when we tell the Christmas story. To us a savior has been born, who is the light of the world, and He grants us access to have a deep, personal fellowship with God!

Reflection Questions

- What are some of the areas in our world where there is darkness?
- What are examples of light in the world?
- What would it look like for you to be the light of Jesus in your life?

January 5, 2020
The Lord's Prayer
Scripture Matthew 6:9-15

Seeking God's Presence

Perhaps a devotional about "God With Us" should start with the theme and purpose of prayer in our lives. My prayer for you through this devotion is that regardless of your previous understanding of "God with us," you will devote this year to seeking the presence of the Lord. Jesus taught his disciples to do this through prayer.

The prayer Jesus taught his disciples to pray can be split into two sections - there are praises and there are requests. Here is what Jesus is teaching us about our relationship with God: the ones who put God above all things have access to enter into a tender and loving relationship with Him by His grace. First, Jesus invites us to call God our father. It is through God's son that we have right standing with the father. This means that we can be children of God. "Your kingdom come," and "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven," are two statements that serve as reminders that our Father is in control.

After we acknowledge the greatness of our Heavenly father we are invited to ask Him for the things in our hearts. The rest of this prayer is 3 petitions, or prayer requests for: provision, forgiveness, and protection. To pray for our daily bread is to ask God to provide for our very needs. To pray for forgiveness is to turn our eyes upon the Cross of Jesus, where our sins were forgiven, and ask humbly that we may be more like Christ, as he has forgiven us. To pray against temptation is to ask the Holy Spirit to protect us from sin and live boldly, by the power of the Holy Spirit, amidst daily challenges and struggles. In the birth of Christ God has entered our lives so that we would know that His love for us invites us into life with Him!

Reflection Questions

- What words help to capture the greatness of God for you?
 - Make a list of those words
 - Examples: Father, Almighty God, God of (Insert a word describing a situation or emotion you are in need of).
- What are your most urgent prayer requests?
 - Take some time to ask God for these.