



Beyond the Tree

20 Meditations to Set Your Heart and Mind on the Christ of Christmas

Erin Davis

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ERIN DAVIS

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There are two kinds of people in this world.

There are those who seem to ooze Christmas spirit. If you're one of these, you love everything about Christmas. You look forward to December with anticipation. You love the traditions of this time of year—the smell of pine trees, the feel of a warm cup of cocoa in your hands, the twinkle of little white lights all around your neighborhood.

Then there is the second group. Those whose spirits limp into the Christmas season. Who struggle to embrace the hubbub of this time of year. Who want to keep their eyes focused on Jesus, lying in a manger, but somehow just can't seem keep their attention there.

Honestly, I tend to hang out in the second camp. Don't get me wrong, I love Christmas, but I struggle to dwell on the Incarnation (the fancy church word for Jesus coming to earth as a tiny babe). The demands of daily life keep pulling my thoughts out of the manger and on to things that honestly don't matter as much.

That's why no matter how many times I've heard it, I can't get enough of the Christmas story. Reading

it is like the ultimate treasure hunt—the more I dig, the more pure gold I find!

That's why I've written this little series of meditations. They've helped set my heart and mind on the Christ of Christmas, I hope they do the same for you.

So whether you're reading this while listening to Christmas music or feeling more like grumbling, "Bah, humbug!" Grab your shovel, and let's get to digging!

To get started go ahead and read Matthew 1–3 and Luke 1–3 before moving to the first chapter.

1

Tell Your Spirit to Shut Up

*But I have calmed and quieted my soul,
like a weaned child with its mother;
like a weaned child is my soul within me (Ps. 131:2).*

Go back. Read that passage again.

Who did the psalmist say was responsible for calming and quieting his soul?

“But I have calmed and quieted my soul.”

No one did it for him. If the writer of this passage was going to get calm and quiet before the Lord, he had to do whatever it took to get still.

I am often troubled by how many women I

encounter who have little or no time set aside for quiet prayer and Bible study. To be honest, I struggle to make time to be quiet with the Lord, too. As I read the psalmist's words, I wonder if too many of us are waiting for someone else to carve out quiet time for us. We want someone to say to us, "You seem stressed. Your life looks busy. Let me clear your calendar so you can read your Bible and pray."

That doesn't happen in my world. My guess is that it doesn't happen in yours either. Carving out regular time to be in God's presence is hard. There are always things to do, people to interact with, and responsibilities tugging at our attention. So what's the payoff for taking regular time to be quiet with the Lord?

If we keep reading Psalm 131 we find the simple, life-changing answer.

O Israel, hope in the LORD from this time forth and forevermore (Ps. 131:3).

In one verse the writer talks about how he forces his soul to get quiet. In the very next verse he declares that God is his source of hope. He wants everyone to know it and everyone to put their hope in God, too.

Here's the simple truth.

When we force our spirits to get quiet, we will

discover over and over and over again that God is our source of hope. When we keep running to other things for satisfaction (to-do lists, busyness, gold stars), we will find our deepest needs unmet.

I likely don't have to tell you that December can be an especially hectic month. There are parties to attend, programs to watch, parties to go to, and gifts to buy. But what a tragedy it would be for any of us to miss out on time with the God whose birth we celebrate because we refuse to take the time to get quiet.

We'll be visiting every character of the Christmas story together in this devotional. My goal is for us to arrive in the manger together with soft hearts and renewed wonder for all that Christ's arrival means.

But you've got to do your part.

You've got to tell your spirit to shut up. Get quiet. Tell the to-do list to take chill. Be still before God. Read and re-read the Christmas story (found in Matthew 1-2 and Luke 1-2).

When we force our spirits to get quiet, we will discover over and over and over again that God is our source of hope.

No one is going to do it for you. The people in your world are going to ask for more and more of

you and your time. But we all need reminded that our hope is in the Lord. That reminder will always come when we follow the psalmist's example.

“But I have calmed and quieted my soul.”

What can you do to calm and quiet your soul this week?

How can you make sure you have time to be with the Lord during the busy month ahead?

2

Lean In. Look Closely.

While time has added livestock and hay and a sweet momma in a blue dress, God's Word doesn't give us these details. Instead, here is the simple birth announcement of Jesus.

And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn (Luke 2:6-7).

Does your heart feel the same sense of letdown that mine does when I read those two verses? Something

is missing. Mainly, the details! What did Jesus look like? Was there something different about Him? Did He cry like a regular baby? How was Mary? Where was Joseph? What color were those swaddling clothes anyway?

But the Bible doesn't go there. We just get the facts—that Jesus was born, wrapped up by His momma, and placed in a manger because the inn was packed.

We tend to embellish the story at Christmas time, but maybe Luke kept it simple because he didn't want us to miss the most important thing—that our Savior arrived on earth as a baby in a manger. Perhaps the details simply don't matter.

So don't worry about what was happening in the background. Feel free to ignore whoever was or was not present at Jesus' birth. Lean in and look closely at Jesus, wrapped in human skin, and let the wonder of Him eclipse your craving for more information. Don't let today whizz by without looking closely into the crib. Don't forget to remember the spectacular event that happened without a spectacle.

1. Is Jesus' arrival meaningful to you this year?

Lean in and look closely at Jesus, wrapped in human skin, and let the wonder of Him eclipse your craving for more information.

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2. What is one thing you can do today to focus on Jesus' birth?
3. Why do you think Jesus' birth is described so simply?

3

Be a Shepherd

When the shepherds heard that Jesus had been born, they immediately left their flocks and searched for Him (Luke 2:8–18). When the magi saw Jesus' star in the east, they traveled a great distance to find Him. When they did, they bowed down and worshiped Him (Matthew 2:1–12).

Cute stories, huh?

We love to hear stories about how all eyes were on Jesus while we are trimming the tree or frosting a stack of Christmas cookies (yum!). But the reality is that Jesus didn't stay in the manger for long. He is the King of Kings, Prince of Peace, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, and Savior.

And our focus became a little blurry.

It is so difficult to keep Jesus as the focus of our lives. Even in December, when all signs *should* point back to our King, we get wrapped up in a million other things and forget to make Jesus the center of our celebrating.

I wish something different for you this Christmas. I want you to become shepherds. I want you be reminded of the arrival of our King and then drop everything and pursue Him. I want you to be magi. Realize anew that all signs point to Jesus, and then worship Him and give Him your very best.

I'm not talking about theory here. This isn't just a cute idea for a Christmas card. I'd like you to brainstorm practical ways to make Jesus the focus in the coming weeks and then commit to putting those ideas into practice.

Here are a few ideas to
get you started:

1. Commit to spending an extra hour in prayer every day.

2. Use the Christmas season as an opportunity to share your faith with at least one lost friend.

3. Ask for a few less presents this year (or no presents at all) and then give the money

It is so difficult to
keep Jesus as the focus
of our lives.

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they would have used on your gifts to your favorite ministry.

4. Spend half an hour worshiping Jesus every morning during Advent. Crank up your favorite worship CD, and start your days making it all about Him.

You probably have some even better ideas about how to make Jesus the focus this season. I'd love to hear about them. Tweet me @ErinGraffiti, and let me know how you'll be living out the call to be a shepherd and magi this year.

4

Christmas quiz time!

True or False?

1. Jesus was born in a barn.
2. There were livestock (as in cows, goats, maybe even a chicken or two) present at Jesus' birth.
3. Jesus' first bed was made of hay.

The answer for all three, despite the adorable children's Christmas programs you've probably seen at church lately, is likely **false**. Much of the folklore of Christmas is an addition to the simple description of Jesus' birth we find in Luke 2:7.

And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

The Bible never says that Jesus was born in a barn or a stable or that cows were among the first to welcome Him to the world. No innkeeper is ever mentioned and neither is a bed of hay. Sure, there was a manger, which might have been used as a feeding trough before Jesus arrived. But I've got to tell ya, as a momma of three babies myself, when you're away from home, you improvise. (My babies have slept in a hotel drawer or two). There weren't exactly portable cribs in those days. A manger would have kept Baby Jesus safe and snug as He slept.

Luke simply tells us that the inn (possible the guest room of a family member) was full. What jumps out at me is that from the very beginning, Jesus didn't fit in.

In fact from the moment He arrived, Jesus would always stick out like a sore thumb. After His birth, angels would announce His arrival to a group of shepherds, a star would hover over His house like a spotlight for three wise men to find Him, word about His arrival would send shock waves out from Bethlehem and into the rest of the world. He may have arrived humbly, but it was never about flying under the radar. He did not come to tow the line, fit in with the crowd, or maintain the status quo.

Guess what? If you're His follower, you likely won't fit in either. There won't be room for you in the usual places doing the same things as the rest of the world. By His example and through His Word He has called you to live like a salmon swimming upstream, more interested in being Christ-like than being like everyone else.

What jumps out at me is that from the very beginning, Jesus didn't fit in.

More than thirty years after that much talked about birth in Bethlehem, Jesus said these words:

"If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember that word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me" (John 15:19–21).

Jesus was literally out of this world! Because of that, many would not recognize Him as God. There was no place for Him to fit comfortably as a tiny babe,

and He would never fit comfortably into a world obsessed with business as usual.

But notice His promise! He chose you out of the world. As His follower, you won't fit in either. The world that did not recognize Jesus as Savior may not accept you as His follower. The God who could never fit into the world has called you to a life built on more than simply fitting in.

There may not have been a stable. That cattle may not have been lowing nearby, but that doesn't change the fact that there was not room for Jesus. That's okay. That was never His plan. He invites us to stand out with Him. Will you?

5

Pick Me, Pick Me!

There isn't much about the Christmas story that makes sense from a human perspective.

- God chose a young unmarried girl to be His mother.
- He chose a manger for His bed.
- He chose to be born under a hostile, power hungry ruler.

Add to the list of strange but true facts about the Christmas story, that He picked shepherds (as in guys who heard sheep for a living) to be His first missionaries. The guys who everyone else saw as nobod-

ies, God picked to tell everybody that He had arrived.

You can read all of the shepherds' story in Luke 2:8–21, but let me give you the Wikipedia version.

- It was nighttime.
- Shepherds were out in the field watching the flock in the dark.
- Suddenly an angel appeared out of nowhere. It was a bright, shining angel.
- The shepherds were scared. (I'm guessing they'd never seen a bright, shining angel before).
- The angel told them not to be afraid, because that very day a baby had been born in Bethlehem that would bring "good news of great joy that will be for all the people." The angel also told them that the baby would be the Savior.
- The angel told the shepherds where to find the baby and then sent them on a supernatural scavenger hunt to find Jesus.
- For added affect, the one angel was joined by a choir of angels singing worship songs to Jesus at the top of their lungs. (Kind of like church camp, only with lots more singers that glow in the night sky!)

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I love how the shepherds respond:

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord had made known to us" (v. 15).

And then, check this out ...

And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger (v. 16, emphasis added).

With haste!

They didn't wait around and didn't mess around.

They didn't dawdle or dilly-dally.

They put some hustle in their step and went where the angels told them to go.

Then the Bible tells us that they got busy telling anyone who would listen about the message God entrusted to them.

Do you ever feel like the shepherds may have before that close encounter with a choir of angels? Like a nobody? An outcast? Like somebody with nothing to offer? Do you ever think there's no way God could ever call you to something big because you don't have the skill set to carry it out anyway?

God uses all kinds of people in His Word to carry out His mission, but they all had one thing in common (and it wasn't superior looks, social skills, talents, or connections).

The thread that connects every hero in the Bible is simply this—a willingness to obey.

In fact, the shepherds remind me of the calling of the prophet Isaiah. We don't know much about Isaiah except that God called him to point out sin, preach the good news, and share God's plan with the people of Israel. Isaiah 6 records Isaiah's vision of God in heaven. Isaiah wrote,

“And I heard the voice of the LORD saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ Then I said, ‘Here I am! Send me’” (v. 8).

Those five words, “Here I am! Send me,” are jam-packed with meaning. Isaiah was telling God, “Pick me! Pick me! I will go.”

If we want God to pick us for a big mission, we need to have the same attitude as Isaiah and the shepherds. We need to be willing to go where God wants us to go, to do what God wants us to do, and to move when God calls us to move. We can't wait around until it all makes sense. We must be willing to obey “with haste.”

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God didn't send an angel to the shepherds that first Christmas because they were the best and the brightest. He sent one because they had hearts that were willing to respond quickly when He gave them an assignment.

The thread that connects every hero in the Bible is simply this—a willingness to obey.

Do you want to make a difference? Do you want to be used by God to do something big? You don't have to make it happen or worry that you're not the kind of person God wants to use. If He can use a Jewish teenager to deliver the Messiah and a bunch of smelly shepherders to deliver the Good News, He can use you!

But you have to listen to His voice and be willing to follow God wherever He leads.

With that attitude in mind, let's repeat Isaiah's words together.

“Here I am! Send me.”

6

Letting Mary's Story Read You

It's likely all so familiar. We've heard it all before. We know the major players. We've heard how the story ends.

So sometimes ... we lose the wonder.

But just because we've	_____
heard the Christmas story	I'm asking for new
doesn't mean we've got it	eyes to see the
all figured out. Just	Christmas story this
because it's familiar	year.
doesn't mean it's not spec-	_____
tacular. Just because we've read the story of Jesus'	
arrival a hundred times before, it doesn't mean that	

the story can't still read us and show us something about our own hearts and lives.

The goal of this book is to help you see the story differently this year. Some days, I'll just pull out a section of Scripture and ask you some questions. Don't think of these posts like pop quizzes, where your goal is to get the right answer. Think of these posts more like a pebble in a river. Turn them over and over in your mind. Smooth them out with your thoughts. Roll them around until a new shape starts to form.

I'm asking for new eyes to see the Christmas story this year. The story has not changed in more than 2000 years, but that doesn't mean that God can't change me with it. Wanna join me in that prayer?

Let's start at the beginning. With an angel and a girl.

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

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greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end...."

"For nothing will be impossible with God." And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her (Luke 1:26–33,37–38).

1. Why did God choose Mary for this mission?
2. Is God calling you to a difficult mission this year?
3. Why did Mary say "yes"?
4. Do you have the same attitude as Mary when it comes to obeying God? "I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."
5. What else jumps out at you about this part of the Christmas story?

7

Joseph Avoided the Trap

Joseph doesn't get much real estate in the Bible. We know very little about him. But we know that Joseph was a man of integrity.

Matthew 1:18–25 records:

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold an angel of the Lord

appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by a prophet:

"Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel"

(which means God with us). When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

Integrity simply means doing the right thing. Here is how Joseph demonstrates integrity in these verses.

- The Bible says that Joseph was a just man (v. 19). He did what was fair.
- He didn't want to publically humiliate Mary, even though based on the information he had at the time he would have assumed she had cheated on him.
- He "resolved to divorce her quietly." He made up his mind that he would not make a spectacle or cause drama.

- Verse 20 tells us that Joseph “considered these things.” He thought it through. He took his time. He didn’t make a rash decision.
- In verse 23 the angel quotes a prophecy found in Isaiah 7:14 as evidence that Joseph should go ahead and marry Mary. What the Bible said mattered to Joseph.
- Joseph obeyed God. Verse 24 says, “When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took his wife.”

Having integrity would come at a high cost for Joseph. Rumors would swirl. His honor would be called into question. He would trade in his time as a newlywed for becoming the stepdad of a child he had not planned for. But Joseph did what was right anyway.

Joseph knew a secret I’m still trying to unwrap in my own life. He flat refused to live his life for the applause or acceptance of others. His life hammers Proverbs 29:25 home for me.

“The fear of man lays a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is safe”

Fear of man simply means living our lives for others. If you’re like me, fear of man rears it’s ugly

head big time this time of year. I want to spend money we don't have so I can have happy children (and post pics of their smiling faces online, of course). I want to say yes to every invitation because I don't want to hurt any feelings. I want to give, and give and give even when my Spirit starts to limp with exhaustion. I want to give the appearance of a family who loves Jesus without doing the countercultural work to actually focus on Him. I want to point my kids to Jesus but feel the pressure to conform in making it about something else.

But fear of man is a nasty trap. When I live my life for others I find myself all tangled up in things that don't matter.

Joseph's story inspires me to do things differently. He did what was right and focused the baby who's birth we are preparing to celebrate. Sure, people talked. He didn't meet everyone's expectations. But as a result he had a ringside seat to the arrival of Immanuel.

Are any of your plans for the coming season rooted in "fear of man?" Ask God to help you focus on Him instead of what others think.

8

The Reason For All Those Twinkly Lights

Check out what the prophet Isaiah predicted about Jesus' birth more than 600 years before that first Christmas.

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in the land of deep darkness, on them a light has shined... For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father,

Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish and uphold it (Isaiah 9:2, 6–7).

Isaiah was prophesying about Jesus' arrival. For generations, the people of God would wait with expectation for Isaiah's words to come true. He describes lots of amazing things about the coming Christ, but the first thing he mentions is that the coming Savior would be a "great light."

We are familiar with light. We have it at our fingertips with the flip of a switch. We spend very little (if any) time in total darkness. But the people in Isaiah's day would have had a different relationship with light and darkness. There was no electricity. Surely there were moments when the lamps went out and the candles burned down to the bottom and true darkness settled in.

True darkness is oppressive. It is scary. It forces our deepest, darkest fears to come bubbling up to the surface. And yet Isaiah describes us as a "people who walked in darkness."

He's not talking about physical darkness. He's talking about the darkness of our sin—the dark shadow of death that each of us were under because of that sin. The darkness that creeps into our hearts

because of the hopelessness and fear and shame that this world serves up to us so often.

Isaiah wasn't the only one to connect Christmas to light. In Zechariah's prophesy about Jesus, he said that the Savior would come to "give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of

Yes, Christmas is a time of peace and joy, light and life. But it is wise to remember what life can be like the rest of year.

death" (Luke 1:79). When the shepherds heard the news that Jesus had been born a great light shone around them (2:9). The wise men followed a star to where it shined like a white-hot spotlight over Jesus' house (Matt. 2:1-2).

The light theme continued long after Jesus was born.

John 1:4 calls Him "the light of men." In John 8:12, Jesus called Himself the "light of the world." First John 1:5 tells us that in him is "no darkness at all." Revelation 21:23 tells us that when we get to heaven lamps will be obsolete. Jesus will be the source of light!

Yes, Christmas is a time of peace and joy, light and life. But it is wise to remember what life can be like the rest of year. There are often moments of darkness. That's why Jesus' birth matters so much,

because by coming to live among us, He rescued us from a lifetime of hopeless darkness and an eternity spent without Him.

Those twinkly lights on your Christmas tree? They can be a reminder of a deeper truth if you'll let them.

You were once among the people walking in darkness. There may even be dark days ahead.

But a great light dawned when Jesus was born. No one can snuff it out. Nothing can dim its brightness. Jesus came to pull each of us from the fear and hopelessness that accompanies the dark. Are you living like a child of the light (Eph. 5:8)?

"I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness" (John 12:46).

9

Sinking Your Teeth Into the Promises of God

The Christmas story isn't really as simple as just a baby in a manger. The Bible tells the stories of many characters (Mary, Joseph, the wise men, Herod) whose lives all intersect at Jesus' birth.

But there is also a parallel plot line—a story that happens alongside Jesus' arrival with striking similarities and its own lessons to teach. It is the story of the arrival of Jesus' cousin, John (later known as John the Baptist). It was a birth filled with miracles and wonder, much like Jesus'. And it was a birth with

lessons to teach all of us about sinking our teeth into the promises of God.

Luke 1:5-7 describes Elizabeth and her husband, Zechariah. Zechariah was a priest. The Bible describes the couple this way:

And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord (v. 6).

But righteous living did not lead to an easy life for Zechariah and Elizabeth. Verse 7 tells us that the couple had no child because Elizabeth was barren. This is especially bad news because they were “advanced in years.” That’s a nice way of saying they were old.

Zechariah was minding his own business, serving in the temple, when everything changed in an instant.

And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and

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gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared" (Lk. 1:11-17).

Did you notice all of the parallels between the angel's announcement that John was on his way and his announcement that Jesus was coming?

Here's a recap. The angel Gabriel delivered both messages. Both Mary and Zechariah were troubled when the angel appeared. Gabriel gave both Mary and Zechariah the news that a baby was on the way and gave them specific instructions on what they should name their child. Both births would be miraculous. Elizabeth was barren and way past the childbearing years. Mary was a virgin. In both stories, Gabriel shared exciting news about how the coming baby would change everything for God's people. But that is where these two stories diverge.

Remember that when Mary got the news, she surrendered to God's plan.

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

Zechariah didn't jump on the bandwagon quite as quickly.

And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years" (v. 18).

Zechariah wanted to know the details, and he wanted to remind the angel of the challenges. I can picture myself in those very shoes. Here he was faced with an angel of God bringing the most amazing news Zechariah could have asked for, and he can't see past the status quo. Even though Zechariah had been praying for a baby, clearly he had lost the faith that God would actually deliver. He had become comfortable with his disappointment. It had been a constant companion for so long that he couldn't fathom that God would remove it.

Gabriel responds this way to Zechariah's unbelief.

And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel. I stand

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in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time” (vv. 19–20).

Zechariah’s story is proof that God is serious about our response to His promises.

Fortunately, Zechariah’s story has a very happy ending.

But for now, let’s zero in on the lesson that Zechariah’s response has to teach.

If God promises something, He will do it. No matter how impossible it seems. No matter what obstacles must be scaled. No matter if it makes sense to us or not.

No, an angel may not appear to you with the promise of a miraculous birth, but God has promised you so much. His Word is rich with promises for your life. They are as real as the angel’s word to Zechariah in the temple.

When you encounter a promise from God, there are two ways you can respond. You can react like Zechariah, out of disappointment, disbelief, and the need to know every detail. Or you can sink your

teeth into His promises and respond like Mary, “Let it be to me according to your word.”

What has God promised you today? How will you respond?

10

What Should We Do For Jesus?

As Christmas draws near, life seems to be picking up speed. There are still presents to buy, cookies to bake, parties to attend... In the midst of it all, my heart keeps bringing up this question, *But what should I do for Jesus?*

The most important part of Christmas is the celebration of His birth, after all. Should I throw Him a birthday party? Buy goats for the needy in His honor? Sing “Away In a Manger” at the top of my lungs? Make a point to frown upon the commercialization of Christmas?

What's the best way to honor Jesus this Christmas?

The answer comes from three guys so wise they've gone down in history as the Wise Men. Let's revisit their story told in Matthew 2:1-2:

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

If you were reading this post on paper, I would ask you to take out a red pen and underline those last three words (to worship him). It's probably not a good idea to mark all over your computer screen, but take note and pay attention. The wise men hold the key to unlocking what Jesus wants from us this Christmas.

The next few verses of the story talk about how enraged Herod (the king of Isreal) becomes by the wise men's arrival, because it alerts him to the fact that a new king has been born. We'll look at Herod's story in depth in tomorrow's devotion. For now you should know that after a short detour talking to Herod, the wise men got back down to the business they had traveled so far to attend to.

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After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy (Matt. 2:9–10).

Pause again. Take note.

What did the wise men do when they realized that Jesus had been born? They made plans to worship Him! Nothing could stop them. They could not be deterred. They would do whatever it took to worship the new king. And when their long journey came to an end and Jesus was finally close enough to touch, they rejoiced with great joy.

Keep reading.

And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh (Matt. 2:11).

They made plans to worship Jesus.

They rejoiced when they found him.

They fell down and worshiped in His presence.

They gave Him their very best.

What can you do for Jesus this Christmas?

You can worship Him.

Erin Davis

You can refuse to let anything (parties, plans, presents) prevent you from rejoicing with great joy about the wonder of His birth.

You can give Him your best, not the stuff that's left over after the bustle of this season.

How will you worship Jesus this Christmas?

11

The Original Grinch

Did you know that the furry green character with the tiny heart who scorned the Christmas spirit found in Whoville is not the original Grinch? Nope. Not even close. The original Grinch was there at the very first Christmas. He didn't have green skin (that I know of). He didn't whip up a plan to steal presents from the good citizens of Whoville, but he did try to sabotage Christmas.

Remember that Matthew 2:1-2 says:

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying "Where is he who has

been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”

King Herod was among the very first to hear that Jesus had been born, but he didn't take the news very well.

Verse 3 tells us, “When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.”

What was it about the news of Jesus' birth that rubbed Herod the wrong way? The wise men referred to Jesus as the “king of the Jews.” That was a problem for Herod because he was the reigning king of the Jews. He did not want to be overruled, overshadowed, or overtaken.

You see, Christmas brought Herod the news that he was not really in charge, that his circumstances were not under his control, that the universe was not orbiting around him. And this made Herod very mad indeed. Just like the green Grinch created by Dr. Seuss, Herod got busy doing everything he could to erase the true spirit of Christmas.

Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you

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have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him” (vv. 7–8).

Herod didn't really plan to worship; he planned to destroy. But nothing can stop the plans of God, not even a powerful king with a pride problem.

Nope, the original Grinch didn't manage to steal the very first Christmas. No one could stop Jesus from coming to dwell among us. Just like no one would be able to stop Him from dying for us. The next time it feels like Jesus might not come through on all He has promised you, remember Herod—a powerful king who was powerless to stop the plan God set into motion.

There will always be those who are threatened by Jesus. There will be those who miss the significance of His arrival and those who try to make it about something other than the Savior's birth. But their song will never drown Him out. Herod learned the hard way that Christmas cannot be stolen.

Do you have any grinch-like tendencies? Here's a prompt to help you think that through.

I rob others of the joy of Christmas by . . .

Thank God that nothing can stop the message of Christmas, not even griches. Ask Him to help you focus less on yourself and more on His miraculous arrival.

Erin Davis

12

Because Immanuel Changes Everything

The book of 1 Samuel records a great battle between the people of God, the Israelites, and one of their fiercest enemies, the Philistines. Israel lost 4,000 men on the battlefield in a single day. In the face of such crushing defeat, the elders of Israel called for the Ark of the Covenant to be brought into the camp to rally the troops and boost morale.

First Samuel 4:5–7 reports, “As soon as the ark of the covenant of the LORD came into the camp, all Israel gave a mighty shout, so that the earth resounded. And when the Philistines heard the noise of the shouting they said, ‘What does this

great shouting in the camp of the Hebrews mean?' And when they learned that the ark of the LORD had come to the camp, the Philistines were afraid, for they said, 'A god has come into the camp.' And they said, 'Woe to us! For nothing like this has happened before.'"

The Ark of the Covenant was a visible sign of the holy presence of God. God didn't live in that box, of course, but it was a reminder God was alive and well and involved in the lives of His people.

Because of this, when the Ark came into the camp, the Bible tells us the people of God celebrated so loudly the earth shook.

Talk about a celebration!

But what caused much rejoicing among the people of God caused much fear among their enemies.

The Philistines said three things we need to pay attention to:

1. A god has come into the camp.
2. Woe to us!
3. Nothing like this has happened before.

Hold that thought. We'll come back to it.

Fast-forward to the Christmas story recorded in the first few chapters of Matthew and Luke.

"Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,

and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us) (Matt. 1:23).

Of course, this passage is talking about the birth of Jesus, but don't miss one of the other names for Jesus—Immanuel. The prophets had foretold that people would refer to Him in this way all the way back in Isaiah 7:14:

“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.”

God wanted His people to know and to wait with expectation for the day He would dwell among them. Pause for a moment. Let your mind be blown.

God among us.

The God who created all things, among us.

The God who knows all things, among us.

The God who reigns. The God who rules. The God whose power knows no limits, among us.

Immanuel is a very big deal.

As we celebrate Christmas this year, we need to take a minute to hone in on Immanuel. God left heaven and came to earth to be with us. To rescue us. But when He ascended into heaven, He did not leave us alone.

In Matthew 28:20, Jesus said, “And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

No matter what, He remains “God with us.”

And if we’re telling the whole story, we see this radical reality still has the same effect on God’s enemies.

Remember what the Philistines said?

1. A god has come into the camp.
2. Woe to us!
3. Nothing like this has happened before.

You better believe God’s enemy, Satan, is still singing that tune this Christmas.

1. God is with them!
2. Woe to me! Translation: I’m ruined.
3. Nothing like this has ever happened before.

You see, Christmas is about so much more than the Babe in the manger. He didn’t come to be with us so that we could look over the edge of His crib and ooh and ah. He came to be with us, to die for our sins ... to rise from the grave ... to deal a fatal blow to our shared enemy. He came to be with us to save us from sin and death. He came to be with us because we so desperately need to be rescued.

So celebrate that this Christmas. Celebrate so loudly that others notice. Take a cue from the people

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of Israel, and dance until the earth shakes. Because Immanuel changes everything.

“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us) (Matt. 1:23).

13

The Bravest Sentence in the Bible

Mary bursts onto the scene of Christ's coming birth in Luke 1:26–39. Here's a quick rundown of what this passage tells us about her.

- Mary lived in Nazareth.
- She was a virgin.
- She was betrothed to Joseph.
- The Bible doesn't tell us Mary's age. Most Bible scholars agree she was likely young, possibly a teenager, due to the fact that she wasn't yet married.

Mary is minding her own business when the angel Gabriel appears to her. Here is part of the dialogue

the Bible records between Mary and Gabriel in Luke 1:28–35.

Gabriel: “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!”

Note: The Bible says that the angel’s words troubled Mary. I’d be troubled if an angel showed up in the middle of my day, too!

Gabriel goes on to explain that Mary will conceive through the Holy Spirit and then lets the secret slip that Mary’s cousin Elizabeth is also pregnant, even though she has been barren.

Then the angel declares these powerful words: “For nothing will be impossible with God.”

Nothing is impossible with God.

Let that soak into your heart.

Churn it around over and over in your mind until a gem emerges.

Nothing is impossible with God.

There is no challenge you will ever face that is too big for Him.

There is no calling He will ever give you that you cannot carry out.

There is no mission too huge for Him.

There is no obstacle that He cannot obliterate.

That is the message of Christmas, really. As the story draws us in, we look past Jesus lying in that manger and see the miraculous sinless life He lived.

If we keep looking, we see the cross He died on to pay for our sins. If we squint and look a little harder, we see the grave that He rose from three days later.

Nothing can stop Him.

Death cannot hold Him.

Nothing will ever prevent Him from demonstrating His love for us and doing His part to reconcile us to the Father.

When Mary heard that nothing was impossible with God, she said one of the bravest sentences in the whole Bible.

Nothing is impossible with God. Let that soak into your heart.

And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38).

Here's the Erin Davis paraphrase:

"I belong to God. I will do whatever He asks me to."

Why were those words so brave? Think for a minute about what Gabriel was really calling Mary to.

Though young and unmarried, Mary was going to be a momma. Not just any momma, but the momma of the Savior of the whole world. There is no parenting manual for that. The angel neglected

to stick around to tell Mary's parents the news and wouldn't tell her beloved, Joseph, until after Mary had to tell him herself. Mary would face rumors swirling around her little town. (Immaculate conception?! Yeah, right!) She would have to deal with embarrassment and public humiliation at the same time the pregnancy hormones hit. Then she would have to raise Jesus. (If you think that was always an easy task, check out Luke 2:41-52). Then Mary would watch as her son was put on trial, accused, publicly beaten, and hung on a cross. The Bible says that Mary stood nearby as He died there (John 19:25).

Sometimes the Lord's favor feels like watching your boy die an unjust and agonizing death.

Mary didn't know what was down the road, of course. But she didn't press Gabriel for the deets.

She simply said, "I belong to God. I will do what He says."

How about you?

When God calls you to big things (and little things!), do you want assurance that everything will be okay (and *feel* okay) before you step out in faith? If you feel ill-equipped or insecure, do you disobey or delay?

The next time God asks you to obey, let me encourage you to simply repeat Mary's very brave words:

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“Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.”

14

Not Feeling It

Some years I get all caught up in the warm fuzzies of Christmas. My eyes tear up during candlelight service on Christmas Eve. I read the Christmas story with wonder. I am inspired to share the gospel with friends and neighbors after remembering that my God chose to take on human flesh. But some years the story seems too familiar. My to-do list seems too important. I want to get caught up in Christmas cheer, but I find myself thinking, *I'm just not feeling it.*

Does that ever happen to you? Are there times when you feel like you should be having an emotional response to Jesus, but your feelings don't seem to have gotten the memo? As I've spent time reading the Christmas story this year, I've been struck by the

fact that the major players in the greatest event in history didn't respond to Jesus out of pure emotion.

Mary's introduction to motherhood likely wasn't filled with the warm fuzzies that most new mommas have. She was unmarried. She hadn't planned this baby. And yet she obeyed the instructions given to her by the angel Gabriel.

If Joseph had let his feelings be his guide, he might have let anger or shame or fear of man keep him from being Jesus' dad. He chose to play a major part in Jesus' life regardless of his emotions.

The wise men took a very long trek to worship Jesus. They didn't even know exactly who they were looking for. They didn't see Baby Jesus and get all wrapped up in the emotion of the moment. They knew a Savior was coming, and they made the decision to respond.

And there are times when we should worship Him simply because He is so worthy instead of because we are caught up in the emotions of the moment.

I don't doubt that there was plenty of emotion in the manger on the day of Jesus' birth. But I am also struck by all of the players in this story who responded to Jesus because He is worthy, not just

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because they were caught up in the emotion of the day.

There's a lesson there for each of us. Following Jesus doesn't always feel just right. There are times He asks us to do things that our emotions will never confirm. And there are times when we should worship Him simply because He is so worthy instead of because we are caught up in the emotions of the moment.

Will you choose to worship Jesus this Christmas? Even if the holiday cheer evades you, will you make the decision to turn your heart toward Him because He is worthy? Will you love Him out of awe for who He is and what's He's done even if you're not feeling it?

15

How Would Jesus Celebrate Christmas?

Most years I tend to lose sight of Jesus somewhere between the deals of Black Friday and the dawn of a new year. Of course I understand that Jesus is the real reason for the season, but the frantic pace I usually set to celebrate Christmas isn't very conducive to focusing on Him. Between Christmas parties and presents to buy and hope for, I think most of us struggle to keep our attention focused on the baby in the manger. I've worked hard to make this a Christmas where I had time to consider the sacred. That's

why I keep wondering how Jesus would celebrate His birth.

It's true that Christmas is a holiday created by the church long after Jesus ascended into heaven. He never had the chance to partake in Christmas as we know it. But I think the Scriptures give us plenty of information to consider how He would spend this season. His example is always a lead we should follow.

If Jesus were still walking the earth, what would He be doing this Christmas? Here's my best guess.

Jesus would celebrate Christmas.

There are many places throughout the Gospels that record Jesus participating in the holidays of His culture. He ate holiday feasts with His family and friends (Matt. 26:18–19). John 7 shows Him attending church with His brothers during the Festival of the Tabernacle.

Jesus wasn't a stick-His-head-in-the-sand kind of guy. He didn't sequester Himself away from His culture. While there are plenty of elements of our traditional Christmas celebrations that don't focus on Him, I doubt Jesus would ask us to ditch the entire celebration based on principle. I believe He would join us at our church Christmas pageants and family dinners and would accept an invitation to join us in our decorated homes.

Jesus wouldn't focus _____
on presents.

Jesus' teachings make it pretty clear that He wasn't into stuff. _____
If Jesus were still walking the earth, what would He be doing this Christmas?

In Matthew 6:19, He said, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal."

In Luke 12:15, He said, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions."

He never said possessions are bad. I don't see any evidence in Scripture that He would say giving each other gifts is wrong. But He did warn us that our stuff isn't as important as we think it is. This anti-materialism message is certainly worth noting at Christmastime.

Jesus would serve others.

Jesus repeatedly asks us to live our lives in service to others. I don't believe He'd use His birthday as a vacation from serving others. Specifically Jesus asked us to make an extra effort to meet the needs of the poor (Luke 11:41), the hungry and thirsty (Matt. 25:35), those in need of clothing (Matt. 25:36), the sick (Matt. 25:36), and those in prison (Matt. 25:36).

I think it's great to spend Christmas with the

people we cherish, including family and friends. But I don't think Jesus' Christmas celebrations would only include the people He is most familiar with. I believe He would spend His birthday in service to others. Can you think of one way you can reach out to the poor, the hungry, the thirsty, the needy, the sick, or the imprisoned this Christmas?

Jesus would take the opportunity to teach the Good News.

In John 7:14 and John 7:37, we see Jesus using a festival as an opportunity to teach truth. As I read these passages, I am reminded of the simple fact that not everyone knows about the true meaning of Christmas. Not everyone understands that Jesus didn't stay in a manger but went on to die to pay the price for our sin. Not everyone has peace that passes understanding and the hope that this life is not all there is.

Jesus took advantage of those times when many people were gathered to celebrate a festival to reveal truth about God. We can do the same thing. Who will be at your Christmas party who doesn't know Him? Who will sit at your Christmas table who doesn't have the hope that only He can give? Follow Jesus' lead, and take the unique opportunity that Christmas provides to teach others about Him.

During this time of year, it's common to get

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caught up in wondering how Christmas is best celebrated. Clearly, this season isn't really about Santas and wreaths, presents and bows. It's about Him. He shows us how His miracle is best celebrated. Don't get too hung up on what's right or wrong about Christmas. Look to Jesus' example, and then bow your heart to the miracle in the manger.

When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ (Col. 2:13–17).

16

They Really Were Wise

As we've looked at the pieces of the Christmas story, I've been reminded how beautifully ordinary Jesus' arrival on earth was. I'm sure glad He can use the ordinary to do extraordinary things, aren't you?

But we can't close the book on the Christmas story or turn the page on a new year without looking at the wise men. Our Christmas pageants give them funny hats and camels, but, the Bible doesn't provide these details.

No doubt, the wise men are one of the most mysterious parts of Christmas story. Were they kings? Were they rich? What are magi anyway? The Bible

doesn't fill in all of those blanks, but their story does have a thing or two to show us about what it means to be truly wise. Check it out.

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

"And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel."

Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that

they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way” (Matt. 2:1-12).

- This passage gives us _____
six clues about what it The Bible doesn't fill in
takes to be wise. all of those blanks, but
their story does have a
thing to show us about
what it means to be
truly wise.
-
1. The wise men paid attention. When a strange star rose, they studied it.
 2. The wise men moved. They wanted to be where God was stirring.
 3. The wise men had joy. They could rejoice because they knew God was greater than the king who wanted to stand in their way.
 4. The wise men worshiped.
 5. The wise men gave Jesus their best. This

came in the form of elaborate gifts for them. It might mean giving Jesus the best part of your day, your talents, or the biggest part of your heart for you.

6. They didn't try to camp out with Jesus. They took what they learned about Him back to their normal lives.

Maybe part of the wise men's role in the Christmas story is to act as mirrors, revealing whether or not we have a wise reaction to the Savior. Based on that list, are you wise? Do you react to the good news that Jesus lives with the same perspective as the wise men?

I've heard it said often that wise men (and women) still seek Him. Are you living like a wise woman this year?

17

Interrupted

The day after Christmas will be kind of a bummer. The presents, unwrapped. Extended family, gone, and we'll have eaten so much sugar we can't bear the thought of another cookie. Every year that stuff comes and goes, but the best stuff keeps coming. The Christmas story doesn't end when Jesus is placed in a manger. As we ask God to show us the story with new eyes, it's worth taking a look at what happened *after* Jesus arrived.

Today we take a look
at the shepherds.

*And in the same region
there were shepherds out in*

But from this
passage it's clear that
they were just people,
minding their own

the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them (Luke 2:8–18).

Our Christmas pageants and stories tend to read into this passage. I've often heard that shepherds were low on the totem pole of society in Jesus' day. (And that they were often stinky.) We're made to think of them as average Joes or even social outcasts. I don't know if any of that is true. But from this passage it's clear that they were just people, minding their own business, when God interrupted their lives.

They were simply tending sheep when first one angel and then a bunch of angels appeared with news about a baby Savior.

I can also tell from this passage that they weren't too busy with business as usual to get up and move when God showed up. "They went with haste" to find the baby the angels told them about.

They also seemed to be blabbermouths of the best kind. They told everyone who would listen what they saw and heard. They were the first evangelists to tell about Jesus.

Of all of the people in the Christmas story, perhaps we should most try to be like the shepherds. With that in mind, here are some questions to ponder today.

1. Do you allow God to interrupt your life/day or do you only respond to Him when it's convenient or scheduled?

2. When God prompts you to move, change, or listen, do you obey “with haste” or drag your feet?
3. When was the last time you told others about Jesus?

18

Where To Sit At A Wedding

Imagine this.

You are invited to the wedding of a friend. You arrive (in an adorable dress, of course) and find a scene straight out of Pinterest. The tables are decorated beautifully with candles and fresh flowers. The smell of the food makes your mouth water. The room is crowded. Most of the seats are full. But you do notice two available spots. One is near the bride and groom. There is no indication that it's reserved. The other seat is at the kids' table, practically in the coat closet, far away from all of the festivities.

Choose your own adventure.

Do you sit in the choice spot, near the action? Or at the kids' table, where you will have to strain to hear what's happening with the bride and groom above the sound of screaming children?

It's the question Jesus asks in one my favorite stories He tells in the New Testament. It's a short story (a.k.a. parable). Check it out.

Now he told a parable to those who were invited, when he noticed how they chose the places of honor, saying to them, "When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in a place of honor, lest someone more distinguished than you be invited by him, and he who invited you both will come and say to you, 'Give your place to this person,' and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 14:7-11).

Jesus' story is loaded with Jewish traditions that may cause it to zoom right above our heads, but we don't

have to be in New Testament Palestine to grasp the moral. In fact, like all good storytellers, Jesus sums it up for us.

“For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (v. 11).

He’s saying that those of us who fight for position or power or attention or recognition are bound to be put in our place.

But those of us who put others first will be noticed and honored by God.

Humility is tough. Just when we think we’re humble, wham! We find ourselves fighting to sit at the head of the table again (figuratively, of course). Just when we commit to put others above ourselves, we start wrestling with our own desire to make it all about us.

Maybe that’s why Jesus addressed humility in this way. When He saw selfishness and pride (humility’s mortal enemies) in the lives of the people He was teaching, He didn’t blast them or chew them out. Instead, He told a simple story of a wedding feast and gave us an image of what humility should look like.

Christmas is right around the corner. It sure can be a season of me-first living. I'd like you to imagine your Christmas festivities like the wedding feast Jesus described. Instead of ripping into presents or scarfing that last piece of pie, how can you take the lowly seat at the table so to

Do you sit in the choice spot, near the action? Or at the kids' table, where you will have to strain to hear what's happening with the bride and groom above the sound of screaming children?

Speak and put other's needs ahead of your own?

Speaking of Christmas, it's really Jesus' first story about humility. The carpenter. The shepherds. The young momma. They're all folks who would be asked to sit at the lowly end of the wedding table, and yet Jesus showed Himself to them first. It's the beginning of the greatest story ever told. If He can choose humble beginnings, you and I can choose humble living.

Think back to the wedding I described. Which seat did you choose? Are you enjoying the view from the head table or playing tic tac toe with a four year old in the back? It's just an example of course. Simply a story, but it may reveal something about your heart.

Where do you see yourself at the banquet table?

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Do you tend to push to the front to see and be seen or are you okay with putting others first? Either way, let Jesus' story remind you of the power of humility. How can you put His story into practice this week?

19

A Different Kind of Kingdom

Soon we will worship our baby King. We will celebrate the fact that He was born of a virgin and born in a manger. We will reflect on the fact that His birth was announced by a host of angels and a bright shining star that only add to the mystery of wonder of His humble arrival. When we think about Jesus' birth, one thing is clear—we don't serve an ordinary King.

Jesus frequently described His kingdom in parables while He preached.

In Matthew 13:31-32 He _____
said, "The kingdom of _____ It makes sense that _____

heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches.”

In Matthew 13:33 He said, “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough.”

In Matthew 13:44 we read, “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought the field.”

Matthew 13:47–48 says, “Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away.”

Mustard seeds? Yeast? Hidden treasure? Fishing nets? Clearly the kingdom Jesus is describing is unlike any other kingdom we’ve ever known. And so it’s fitting that our King isn’t like other kings. It makes sense that His arrival didn’t look like we’d expect it to.

Perhaps that is why so many people miss the point. We are looking for a certain kind of king. We

expect him to be in charge of a certain kind of kingdom. But this Christmas, don't miss the point. Jesus is the King of Kings. He came to earth under humble circumstances, and He came to usher in a different kind of kingdom. How should we respond?

“Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe” (Hebrews 12:28).

I wonder if we tend to miss the Christ of Christmas because we are so focused on our little kingdoms. We worry about clean houses, happy children, and satisfied guests. These are good things, but ultimately it's not our “kingdom” that matters.

You can push your mind beyond the four walls of your “castle” by worshipping the king who came in a way no one expected.

Take a minute to read Revelation 19:11-16 for a powerful description of our coming king. Respond with worship and thanksgiving.

20

Remembering the Good News

Read Luke 2:1–20.

Go ahead. I know you've read this passage before. You may think you've memorized every detail of the Christmas story. But since we know God's Word is a living book (Hebrews 4:12), I think He can show us this passage with new eyes and teach us something new about His birth.

So . . . go ahead. Dig out your Bible, and read the story of Jesus' birth. I'll wait.

A long trip. A manger. A crowded city. Visitors who came directly from fields filled with sheep. These are the familiar images of Christmas. But this

is not just a cute script written for children's choirs. This is the way that the King of Kings and Lord of Lords (Revelation 19:16) *chose* to begin His rescue mission for us.

In Luke 2:10–11 the angel put it this way, “But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.’”

Our King didn't just come to rescue a few. News of His arrival didn't stop with the shepherds. Jesus came to bring *good* news to *all* people. That includes you and me.

What is the good news? That Jesus was willing to do whatever it took to become our Savior. What did He save us from? That is the question you should be asking this Christmas season.

Matthew 1:21 says, “She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

Romans 3:23 says, “For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.”

Second Timothy 1:9–10 says, “He has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed

through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.”

Weave these passages	_____
into the story of Christ’s	Jesus came to bring
birth and be reminded of	<i>good</i> news to <i>all</i> people.
the state of the kingdom	That includes you and
before Jesus came. Every-	me.
one needed a permanent	_____

remedy for their sin problem. And we needed to be saved from the spiritual death that sin inevitably leads to. When things were getting bad in the kingdom, God didn’t just sent a message. He didn’t use couriers to announce a royal edict. He came himself with a message of hope. He was the message we needed.

This doesn’t make for a cute Christmas card, but I want to remind you that you are a sinner. Because of your sin you deserve death, but Jesus chose to wrap Himself in humility, in weakness, and in humanity to save you. That’s what Christmas is really about.

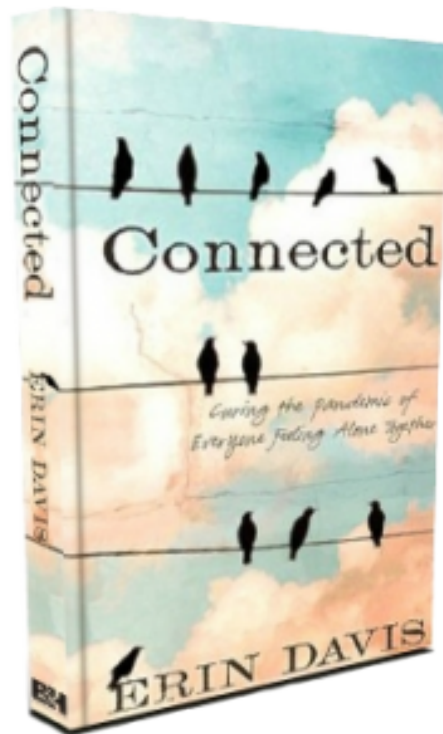
This week, will you take some time to reflect on the state of your life without Jesus? What has He already saved you from? In what corners of your heart do you still need Him to work?

In fact, I’d like to encourage you to start a new

Christmas tradition. Take some time to write Jesus a letter thanking Him for saving you from your sin. Confess sin to Him, and ask Him to give you victory over it in the coming year. Reflect on what your life was like before you acknowledged Him as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

The Bible teaches that God wants to forgive you, even at the cost of His only Son. Now that's good news.

Other Books by Erin



Connected – *Curing the Pandemic of Everyone Feeling Alone Together*

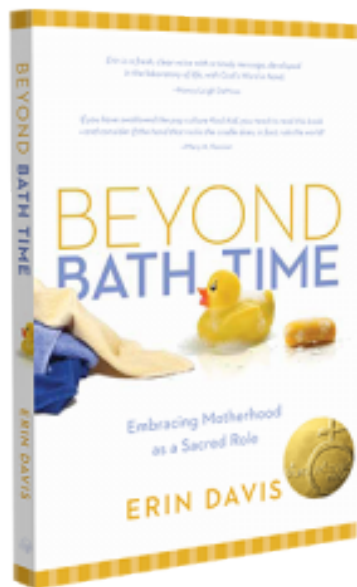
Technology has allowed us to connect with more people in more places than ever before yet, a silent epidemic is sending shock waves straight into our living rooms. What is this hidden disease? Loneliness.

What is causing the pain of loneliness to gnaw at our hearts? What does God know about feeling alone? While swimming in a sea of people, what's a lonely girl to do? Where should she turn for a life raft?

Erin Davis

Come along in *Connected* to learn about her journey as well as the stories of women who are probably a lot like you!

*Beyond
Bath*



Time – Embracing Motherhood as a Sacred Role

Erin Davis was a young Christian wife who had made the decision to not have children. She had multiple degrees, a great husband, a promising career — she had it all — at least according to cultural standards. But most days she felt anything but fulfilled. In *Beyond Bath Time* Erin shares her journey

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to the place of true fulfillment in responding to the call of motherhood. Women will be challenged, convicted, and wonderfully encouraged by Erin's honest and provocative look at motherhood and its divine call.