

# Advent Reflection Guide

Not Your Average Joe



## **MONDAY 11.28.22~Genesis 35:16-20, 48:7**

The “little town of Bethlehem,” where Jesus was born, was a fairly small city about six miles from Jerusalem. The place had roots that ran deep in Israel’s history. The Bible story first mentioned Bethlehem when Jacob’s favorite wife, Rachel, died in childbirth. His grief at losing her was so great he mentioned it again as he neared the end of his own life. Jacob buried Rachel near Bethlehem and put up a monument to her that lasted for several hundred years.

- Jacob seemed to have loved Rachel practically from the moment he first met her (see Genesis 29:5-12, 17-18). We can imagine the sadness and loss he felt as, traveling along a desolate road, it became clear that giving birth to her second son, Benjamin, was going to cost Rachel her life. How has grief touched your life? In what ways, tangible or intangible, do you seek to preserve your memories of loved ones you have lost?
- Rachel lost her life giving birth to Benjamin, and Jacob lost the woman he loved the most. Centuries later, the infant Jesus (who would heal the world’s brokenness and open the doors of eternal life for Jacob and Rachel) traveled to his birth, probably over that same road. In what ways have you seen God bring hope and life even out of painful, heartbreaking circumstances?

**Prayer:** Lord God, while Jacob mourned his beloved wife, you were at work through him and his descendants to bring Jesus into our world. Help me, even when tears streak my face, never to lose hope in your steady redeeming work. Amen.

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## **TUESDAY 11.29.22~Ruth 1:1, 16-19, 22; 4:11-17**

The story of Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi centered in Bethlehem. (See the book of Ruth, four short chapters in length). It was a story of loyalty, devotion, and commitment with far-reaching effects. Ruth became the great-grandmother of the great King David. (You can read about the prophet Samuel going to Bethlehem to anoint the boy David as future king in 1 Samuel 16:1-13.)

- The story of Ruth told how God used Boaz, a prosperous farmer, to help Ruth, a Moabite immigrant, and her mother-in-law Naomi, by letting her glean in his fields (see Leviticus 19:9-10, 23:22). From his generosity came their marriage. From that came a line that led to King David and centuries later to Jesus. When have you seen an outwardly small act of sharing (in resources, time, or talent) launch positive results that went far beyond what the giver might have expected?
- Pastor David Jackman wrote that what Boaz did was “a reflection of the covenant-love (*hesed*) of Yahweh for His people and at the same time a very practical illustration of how the quality could be worked out in interpersonal human relationships.” In what ways have you learned to appreciate God’s steadfast love for you? How has God’s love shaped the ways you act towards other people?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, son of David, thank you for men like Boaz and women like Ruth who in long-ago Bethlehem, let their generosity and love set events in motion that led to your birth as my Savior in that same town. Amen.

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## **WEDNESDAY 11.30.22~Judges 6:11-16, Amos 1:1-2, 7:14-15**

God seeks people with receptive hearts, regardless of their earthly status. The farmer Gideon and the shepherd Amos are two examples of many we find in Scripture showing that long before Jesus' earthly father Joseph, God often called conscientious, ordinary but hard workers in addition to the likes of Moses (raised in Pharaoh's palace) and the apostle Paul (trained in the finest rabbinical school in Jerusalem).

- Gideon's story was striking. God's messenger greeted him as "mighty warrior." Gideon, not feeling like a mighty warrior, asked, "...how can I rescue Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I'm the youngest in my household." The LORD replied, 'Because I'm with you, you'll defeat the Midianites...'" *Judges 6:15-16 (CEB)* When have you seen God's power accomplish something through you or someone you know that you couldn't have done on your own?
- Like many prophets, Amos attracted some serious opposition. But he saw his message not as a cause he had invented but as a deadly serious, God-given commission, whatever the cost. So, he kept preaching even when those in authority ordered him not to. When have you had to stick with a purpose you believed was right even if you faced opposition or ridicule?

**Prayer:** Lord God, you achieve most of your work through people willing to put themselves in the service of your kingdom. Make me, like Gideon, Amos and Joseph, one of those people. Amen.

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## **THURSDAY 12.1.22~Matthew 1:16, 18-19**

The gospel of Matthew did not duplicate the gospel of Luke but rather complemented it. While Luke told the story of Jesus' birth through the eyes of Mary, Matthew told the story from the standpoint of Joseph, who was engaged to Mary when the story began. Although Mary lived in the tiny village of Nazareth, it seems from the slender evidence the gospels give us that Bethlehem was Joseph's hometown (see Luke 2:1-4). If so, that suggests that their families arranged the marriage, as was common in their time and place.

- It would be nice if there were an eloquent speech Joseph made about being Jesus' earthly father. But, as Pastor Hamilton wrote, "Unlike Mary, Joseph has no 'lines'—we don't read a single word he speaks in the Gospels.... He is the patron saint of those who serve and do the right thing without seeking any credit."<sup>2</sup> How easy or hard do you find it to be content when the spotlight falls on someone else more than on you?
- Pastor Hamilton also wrote, "Jesus likely learned from Joseph something he taught his disciples. 'Be careful not to do your acts of righteousness to be seen by others,' he said, 'so that you get credit in their eyes.... Instead, do your acts of righteousness in secret—your Father will see and will reward you.'"<sup>3</sup> Try this spiritual exercise: do something good in a way that no other human being will know about. Give yourself a chance to serve without any hope of recognition—except from God.

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, continue to teach me the lessons you learned from Joseph. Help me to value opportunities to bless and serve others more than I value applause from others. Amen.

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## FRIDAY 12.22~Matthew 13:53-57, Mark 6:1-6

In keeping with Joseph's relative obscurity, the gospel writers never specifically said what he did for a living. They never directly called him a carpenter. However, both Matthew and Mark recorded that when Jesus went to Nazareth, many of the people rejected him. In Matthew's version, they called him "the carpenter's son."<sup>4</sup> According to Mark, they identified Jesus himself as a carpenter—it seems logical that he would have learned his father's trade.

- A United Bible Societies handbook for Bible translators noted, "The noun 'carpenter' may refer to one who builds with wood or stone. Wood is somewhat rare in Palestine, and houses are most frequently constructed with stone."<sup>4</sup> Joseph and Jesus may have been stone masons or may have been "subcontractors," making wood items like doors for stone houses. People's response suggests they did not see such workers as wise or impressive. Are you open to learning from anyone who has valuable insight to offer, or do you discount those who don't have the "right" outward credentials?
- The texts mention Jesus' mother and siblings but not his father. Most scholars believe Joseph died sometime before Jesus' public ministry began. (Again, the gospels simply do not mention that.) Joseph apparently had a 12- to 30-year window to help protect and shape Jesus' growth. What opportunities do you have to serve, bless or shape people and events? Are you ever tempted to think those opportunities will last forever?

**Prayer:** Lord, the gospels suggest that you and your earthly father were carpenters. Sadly, many people in your day added the word "just" before carpenter. Help me to value all people, not only the ones who are like me or impress me. Amen.

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## SATURDAY 12.3.22~Micah 5:2-5, John 7:40-43

Bethlehem we know, but what's this "Ephrathah"? It meant "fruitful" and was the name of the district around Bethlehem. The prophet Micah preached in Jerusalem about 700 years before Christ. (Jeremiah 26:17-19 mentions him.) As the armies of the mighty Assyrian Empire threatened Jerusalem, Micah promised that God would send a deliverer born in Bethlehem. Hebrew scribes quoted Micah 5:2 to tell King Herod the Messiah's birthplace (Matthew 2:6). John recorded Jesus' enemies arguing that he couldn't possibly be God's Messiah. They used his growing up in Galilee as proof: "Didn't the scripture say that the Christ comes from David's family and from Bethlehem, David's village?" *John 7:42* (CEB) Of course, he did—if they had only paid attention to a small detail like his father's hometown.

- Micah stressed God's ability to do big things in people and settings that seemed minor. The divine ruler born in little Bethlehem, he said, would "surely become great throughout the earth." *Micah 5:4* (CEB) When have you seen God do something big through something "little"? John's symbolism underlined that Jesus, who was born in Bethlehem (which meant *house of bread*) was the bread of life, the source of living water. How will you allow him to nourish your soul this Christmas season?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, I don't live anywhere near Bethlehem, but your love and grace have touched and changed my life. Thank you for being a God who does big things even through the small things of earth. Amen.

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**What did I learn?** \_\_\_\_\_

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**How might it apply in my life?** \_\_\_\_\_

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**What is a next step I can take?** \_\_\_\_\_

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