

Advent Reflection Guide

Not Your Average Joe



MONDAY 12.12.22~Luke 1:36-45

Elizabeth's young, unmarried relative, Mary, came to her home unexpectedly. Elizabeth's baby "leaped in her womb," (Luke 1:41) and she welcomed Mary with God-given insight, offering her affirmation and encouragement. What an amazing atmosphere of support and faith must have enveloped Elizabeth and Mary as they compared notes about their unexpected pregnancies! Elizabeth summed it all up, saying, "Happy is she who believed that the Lord would fulfill the promises he made to her." (Luke 1:45)

- Elizabeth knew God was at work, and that Mary's child was uniquely wonderful. In fact, Elizabeth was, it seems, the first person to call Jesus "Lord": "Why do I have this honor, that the mother of MY LORD should come to me?" (Luke 1:43) In what ways does calling Jesus "Lord" involve surrendering the right to live your life any way you please? In what ways has Jesus' lordship changed your way of life?
- Notice how fully Elizabeth gave Mary "the spotlight," despite her joy about her own amazing pregnancy, saying, "God has blessed you above all women, and he has blessed the child you carry." (Luke 1:45) How easy or hard is it for you to give the spotlight to someone else, rather than drawing it back to yourself? Who can you affirm and encourage today?

Prayer: O God, what wonderful models Elizabeth and Mary are for me! Keep reminding me that you kept your promises to Elizabeth and Mary and that you still do that today. Amen.

TUESDAY 12.13.22~Psalm 121:1-8

Psalm 121 was in a collection of psalms closely linked to a journey all devout Hebrews often made or aspired to make. "Most likely Psalms 120-134 were collected as a songbook or prayer book for travelers on the journey to and from Jerusalem."¹ It seems likely that this song promising God's protection would have been on Mary's mind (and perhaps her lips) as she went to see Elizabeth.

- Sometimes, when life got difficult, even psalmists were tempted to think that maybe God had dozed off (see Psalm 44:23). But although God does not always prevent situations that we find hard, Psalm 121:3 carried the assurance that "...your protector won't fall asleep on the job." In what parts of your life has that promise especially mattered for you?
- For many years, shrines to Canaanite idols were built on hilltops and mountaintops, but those gods were no real protection or help for travelers. "I raise my eyes toward the mountains... help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth." (Psalm 121:1-2) The God who made the mountains is the only dependable source of help and strength for life. What are some of the "gods" our culture today tells us to look to for security, strength and safety? What helps you to remember that in the end "The Lord will protect you from all evil; God will protect your very life." (Psalm 121:7)?

Prayer: Lord God, Hold me safely in your hands on my journey, as you did Mary and the people of Israel long ago. Help me to find rest in the assurance of your loving care. Amen.

* The CEB Study Bible J. Clinton McCann, Jr. Sidebar note on "The Pilgrimage Songs" in (Nashville: Common English Bible, 2013), p. 980 OT.

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WEDNESDAY 12.14.22~Psalm 130:1-8

As we saw on Monday, Elizabeth praised Mary for trusting that God would keep God's promises. One of those promises was that even when we had strayed from the path, God would forgive and show mercy. Trust and hope in that promise was the central theme of Psalm 130, another of the "journey songs" or "psalms of ascent." This resilient, persistent hope is one reason we light the candle of hope every year on the first Sunday of Advent.

- In Psalm 130:6, the psalmist repeated for emphasis the image of a watchman in a dark, dark night (there were no electric streetlights!) waiting, hoping, for the morning. Then he said, "Israel, wait for the Lord!" (Psalm 130:7) A spiritually dark world waited for the arrival of a Redeemer. Jesus' birth made that hope a reality. Where do you see "darkness" in your life, in your world? How can Jesus still bring the light of hope into darkness?
- There was a historical basis for the psalmist's hope. "[Faithful love] is one of the fundamental qualities of God revealed shortly after God had forgiven Israel for the sin of the gold calf (see Exodus 34:6). This was indeed a *great redemption*, and serves as the foundation for the confidence stated in Psalm 130:8."² In what ways does the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus give you an even stronger historical basis for trusting in God's forgiveness?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, this world waited centuries for you. Now, too often, I take you for granted. This Advent season remind me that living in hope and trust, even when I have to wait, is one key to the good life you have for me. Amen.

THURSDAY 12.15.22~Matthew 1:18-23

The birth of Jesus would bring the everlasting presence of God to earth. Joseph's righteous and merciful treatment of Mary is an example to us all of how our obedience can play a part in making God known to others. His kind, caring response to a challenging situation meant the protection of Mary and Jesus.

- Matthew, quoting Isaiah, linked Jesus with the name "Immanuel," (Isaiah 7:14) which meant "God with us." (Matthew 1:23) Matthew 18:20 quoted Jesus as saying, "...where two or three are gathered in my name, I'm there with them." And in the gospel's final verse, Matthew 28:20, Jesus pledged "...I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age." What practices in your life help make God's presence real to you?
- Scholar William Barclay summed up Matthew's message: "Jesus is the one person who can tell us what God is like and what God means us to be. In him alone we see what God is and what man ought to be."³ In what ways have you made Jesus central to your understanding of what God is like? Has that helped you to avoid some of the negative, frightening images of God some people have? If so, how?

Prayer: O Lord, on that first Christmas you came into our midst. You were human, but you were also more. Give me insight and humility as I grapple to take in the divine mystery that you were Emmanuel, "God with us." Amen.

1 J. Clinton McCann, Jr. Study note on Psalm 130:7 in The CEB Study Bible (Nashville: Common English Bible, 2013), p. 986 OT. Adam Hamilton, The Journey: Walking the Road to Bethlehem. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011, p. 48. (Pages 46-50 of the book offer a more complete explanation of Isaiah's prophecy and the way Matthew applied it.)
2,3 William Barclay, The Gospel of Matthew—Volume 1, Chapters 1-10 in The Daily Study Bible Series. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1976, p. 21.

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FRIDAY 12.16.22-Matthew 1:24-25

Whether because he told the story from a man's point of view or perhaps simply because his sources gave little information, Matthew wrote almost no details about Jesus' actual birth. His succinct account didn't identify where the birth took place until after the fact in Matthew 2:1. He did, however, report two key facts: despite his earlier reluctance, Joseph did wed the pregnant Mary (Matthew 1:24), and he named the child she bore "Jesus"--the Greek form of Joshua, which meant "God saves" (Matthew 1:25).

- Luke 1:38 showed Mary saying, "I am the Lord's servant. Let it be with me just as you have said." Matthew 1:24 said Joseph "did just as an angel from God commanded." Neither of them could see it at the time, but today millions, perhaps billions, of people worship during Advent because two humble Hebrew peasants listened, believed and obeyed. What is God calling you to listen to, to believe, and then to do or be this Advent season?
- Does thinking about the human side of the Christmas story--the confused feelings Joseph and Mary must have been experiencing--deepen your appreciation for the Christmas story or detract from it? What did it mean for the ruler of the universe to enter so fully into the difficult as well as the beautiful dimensions of being human?

Prayer: Lord God, give me a spirit like Joseph's and Mary's, willing to obey you not only in the easy times but all of the time. Amen.

SATURDAY 12.17.22~Luke 2:1-8

Caesar Augustus' purpose was straightforward. He wanted to collect more taxes for his far-flung empire. God "bent" Caesar's decree to divine purposes, using it to bring Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem (a difficult trip for pregnant Mary). There the baby Jesus was born, as Micah 5:2 had prophesied. There, only a few miles from where Herod feverishly plotted and schemed as to how he might deserve the title "the Great," the truly great God-man who would reshape all of human history was born in a humble setting.

- Pastor Hamilton wrote, "This was not a journey Mary wanted to take.... Of course, this was not to be the last of Mary's unwanted journeys. A short time after Jesus' birth, Herod would try to kill the child, and she and Joseph would take the infant Jesus and flee to Egypt as refugees. Thirty-three years later, there would be another journey she would take with her son, this time down the *Via Dolorosa* as she followed him to Calvary.... All of us take unwanted journeys, but God always walks with us on these journeys. God works through them and redeems them, and these difficult journeys will never be the end of our story!"⁴ What unwanted journeys have you faced or are you facing right now? How can Mary's story bring you hope that beyond what we see or imagine God is at work even during those unwanted journeys?

Prayer: Be near me, Lord Jesus. I ask you to stay close by me and love me forever. Amen.

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What did I learn? _____



How might it apply in my life? _____



What is a next step I can take? _____
