

EAST CENTRAL CONFERENCE ADVENT DEVOTIONAL 2021



INTRODUCTION

A new day begins at 12:01 a.m. on the secular calendar. However, the Jews still practice a biblical view that a new day begins at 6:00 p.m. (sundown). Genesis 1:2 indicates that there was darkness first, and God spoke light into existence. This order is reiterated in the benediction of each created day by the Genesis account, stating, “And it was evening, and there was morning (Gen. 1:5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31).” In the creation account, evening precedes morning.

Throughout the Holy Bible, darkness represents evil oppression and the absence of God, whereas God is often depicted as light. For example, God separated the Egyptians from the Israelites by the ninth plague, a “darkness to be felt” over the Egyptians while the Israelites remained in light (Exod. 10:21-29). At times darkness is used analogously to describe God’s sure judgment upon people (e.g., Isa. 13:10; Ezek. 32:7; Joel 2:10; Matt. 24:29). Paul explains to the Roman Church that people have missed God’s revelation living in absolute sin because their hearts were darkened, indicating their lack of faith and belief in God (Rom. 1:21).

In contrast to the gloom of darkness representing sin in the world and judgment from the Sovereign God, Isaiah announces a prophecy of hope in the Messiah who will be the light to the world when he says,

Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.
See, darkness covers the earth
and thick darkness is over the peoples,
but the Lord rises upon you
and his glory appears over you.
Nations will come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn (Isa. 60:1-3, NIV)

John picks up this theme of light and dark in both his Gospel and first letter. In the Gospel of John, Jesus is the (true, 1:9) light that “shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it (1:5, ESV).” In John’s first letter, he proclaims his whole ministry is based on the fact “that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all (1:5).” In John’s Gospel and First Letter, light is

typically associated and closely accompanied with (true, eternal) life (i.e., John 1:4).¹

Furthermore, in John's vision of The Revelation, the heavenly new Jerusalem has perpetual light radiating from the glory of God, and there will be no more night (Rev. 21:23, 25).

The light from God is precisely what this season of Advent is to Christianity. It is a reminder that the light of God has broken into our dark world of sin, "and the darkness has not overcome it (John 1:5)." This season of Christian preparation for Christmas is what God's people have called Advent from the Latin *adventus* which means, "coming." God's people remind themselves of their own darkened world before Christ broken into their life with saving grace illumining our hearts and minds. We celebrate the season of Advent as the four Sundays before Christmas. Advent is a season of expectation, anticipation, and preparation for the Coming of Christ. While Christians celebrate the fulfillment of the prophecy of the First Advent of Christ, we also look with anticipation for the Second Advent when Christ will return victoriously and stand as judge and king of the world for eternity.

During this season of Advent, we will decorate our homes with candles and artificial light as a reminder that Jesus Christ is the light of the world. This time of year is the darkest season for us who live in the earth's northern hemisphere as the north pole tilts away from the sun at its furthest point, called the winter solstice. In this season of darkness, we can find ourselves yearning for the light. May we seek the true light *who* has come into the world to offer light and life: Jesus Christ.

Pastors of the East Central Conference (ECC) have written the following Advent devotional. All pastors were invited to participate in writing a devotional entry. The busyness of pastoral ministry kept some from meeting the deadline. Other pastors offered several devotional entries. Nevertheless, our ECC pastors wrote this Advent devotional with love for the people of the East Central Conference of The Evangelical Church.

The format is straightforward. Each devotional is numerated and also includes the date to keep the reader on track. Scripture is provided along with the title of each devotional. We hope that the reader will pause and first read the scripture before delving into the lesson. The pastor as a writer is identified on each devotional. The ECC pastors have provided a brief lesson on the scriptural text. These lessons are intended to draw the reader into the Word of God on the theme of Advent. Finally, each daily devotional ends with some suggested readings in addition to the devotional thought. These additional scriptures provide for deeper study. We hope that these

¹ For more on the theme of light in Johannine literature see, Andreas J. Köstenberger, *A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters: Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 129, 166-167, 178-181, 200, 206, 219-220, 223, 235, 264-265, 278, 283-284, 317, 344-349. Also, Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, vol. 2 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 381-387.

devotions will not only feed the reader's soul drawing them into a deeper relationship with God through the Advent Season, but may also provide Sunday School lessons, discipleship discussions, or family bonding time around the Word of God.

May God Illuminate Your Heart,

Dr. Ronald L. Adkins II, Conference Superintendent
Editor and Contributor
Seventh Week of Pentecost
Summer 2021

ADVENT DAY 1: *Hope and Anticipation*, Zechariah 12:7-9; Mark 16:15-16

Sunday, November 28

Dr. Ron Adkins, Conference Superintendent

Have you ever anticipated something so much that it was constantly on your mind? During this time of year, children remind us of anticipation and *hope* for Christmas morning. We hear our children and grandchild's anticipation as they say, "I sure *hope* I get that for Christmas." The anticipation is accompanied by excitement and *hope*.

Zechariah's prophecy captures the Jewish anticipation and excitement as they looked with *hope* for God's salvation:

And the LORD will give salvation to the tents of Judah first, that the glory of the house of David and the glory of the inhabitants of Jerusalem may not surpass that of Judah. On that day the LORD will protect the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the feeblest among them on that day shall be like David, and the house of David shall be like God, like the angel of the LORD, going before them. And on that day I will seek to destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem.
(Zechariah 12:7-9, ESV)

We find the fulfillment of this prophecy concerning God's salvation in Mark 16:15-16:

And [Jesus] said to them, "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.

God did what He said He would do. God brought salvation to the world through Jesus Christ! The *hope* of the Jews has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ, but this is not the end of the prophecy. Jesus himself says to us today, "In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also (John 14:2-3, ESV)." Thus, the First Advent has been fulfilled by the coming of the Son of God as a baby for our salvation. Likewise, there will be a Second Advent marked by the return of Jesus when he comes again and establishes His Kingdom. We anticipate this second coming even as we celebrate the first coming of baby Jesus. Our *hope* remains in Jesus Christ.

*Our hope remains
in Jesus Christ.*

What is your biggest *hope*? How will that *hope* be fulfilled? Is your *hope* followed by anticipation? The thing that ties *hope* and anticipation together is "faith." If you are hoping for something but not anticipating it, then you lack faith. Furthermore, when hope is based on faith which leads to anticipation, we find ourselves often in line with God's will and promise.

Further Reading: Isaiah 60; Acts 15

ADVENT DAY 2: *Just a Priest Named Zechariah*, Luke 1:5-20

Monday, November 29

Dr. Bruce Moyer, Retired Elder and Associate Pastor at Ligonier Evangelical Church

If it weren't for the Advent story, we probably would never have heard of Zechariah and Elizabeth. He's just one of about 20,000 priests at that time. In fact, some translations have "a certain priest." He's not a notable priest ... not a well-known priest ... not a wealthy, upper-class priest, just a "certain" (anybody, or somebody) priest doing what all the other priests did. He taught the Scriptures and counseled people in spiritual matters in his little village in the hills of Judea (1:39). He probably only came to Jerusalem for the three major Jewish festivals each year, and his division only performed the duties of the daily sacrifices for two weeks each year. So, this event, where we find him selected to offer the incense (representing the prayers of God's people, who stood outside praying), is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and would've been the highlight of any priest's ministry.

Zechariah "was gripped with fear" when Gabriel appeared to him in the Temple. He didn't expect to see anyone in the holy place, let alone an angel! We tend to think that it would be a really cool experience if we saw an angel. But every time we read in Scripture about someone having an encounter with an angel, they basically fear for their lives. It may have been even more so when we recall biblical history.

There are several encounters with angels in the Older Testament: Abraham, Jacob, Balaam, Joshua, and Gideon, to name just a few. But the last times we read about angels showing up is in the prophetic books of Daniel (6:22; 8:16; 9:21) and Zechariah. (2:3). As far as we know, it's been five hundred years or so since angels have been appearing to people! It's been about four hundred years since God has even spoken through a prophet (Malachi). But now ... God is speaking again, and He's speaking through Gabriel, to a little-known priest named Zechariah. God is picking up where He left off. Compare Malachi 4:5-6 with what God tells Zechariah in Luke 1:14-17.

But now...

God is speaking again

Most of us are just ordinary people, like Zechariah and Elizabeth. The question is, are we willing to listen to and obey what God is saying to us? Am I willing to believe that He could even use a simple "somebody" or "anybody" like me?

Further Reading: Luke 1:57-80



ADVENT DAY 3: *Joseph: The Borrowed Father*, Matthew 1:18-25

Tuesday, November 30

Rev. John Moyer, Retired Elder and Chaplain at Heritage Pointe Retirement Center

Jesus did a lot of borrowing when He walked this earth – a borrowed barn, a little boy’s lunch, a donkey to ride into Jerusalem, and a borrowed tomb. God the Father also borrowed Jesus’ earthly father, Joseph. There are five things we can appreciate and apply from Joseph’s life.

We can appreciate his relationship to God the Father. We’re told in 1:19 that he was a “just” man. We see how just he is in the dilemma he was facing. He had no desire to disgrace Mary, so he thought of putting her away privately after discovering she was pregnant, and he knew it wasn’t his child. But his love for Mary and his faith in God led him to show mercy and grace. His righteousness before God was more important than the criticisms of those in his community.

We can appreciate Joseph’s attitude toward Mary (vv. 19-20). He had been hurt and was confused and felt betrayed. He knew immorality didn’t fit the character of this woman he had come to know and love. But Joseph, instead of asking, “how could she do this to me?” asked, “how can I protect her?” What a revelation of his heart – a heart filled with the love of God and unselfish. We are known not so much by how we act when we’re in control but by how we react when things are beyond our control.

Then I appreciate Joseph’s sensitivity to God (vv. 20-21). When God interrupted Joseph’s plans, Joseph was sensitive to God’s message. Just about the time you have your life plans all made up, your plans for the week or the day are ready to go, and your career path has been set, God comes along and says, “Uh, by the way, that’s not what I want you to do.” That’s what God was doing with Joseph, basically saying, “Skip your plans, here’s Mine.” It’s hard to be sensitive to God when risks are involved, God’s plans don’t seem to make sense, and when others don’t understand. I mean, can you imagine Joseph trying to explain this to his parents? “Uh, dad, you’re not going to believe this, but Mary is with Child by the Holy Spirit.” And dad says, “you’re right, son, I don’t believe it. Try another story.”

But the point is, Joseph was sensitive to God’s Word and said to Him, “I’ll do what you say.” That’s the kind of man God chose to be Jesus’ earthly father, a just and sensitive man.

“I’ll do what you say.”

We can also appreciate the fact that Joseph was obedient to God. He did what God said – take Mary to be your wife, move your family to Egypt, now return to Israel, and move to Nazareth to avoid the new ruler in Judea.

Finally, we appreciate his desire to glorify God (25). He abstained from “knowing” Mary so that everyone could say this was a miraculous birth.

Is our relationship to God at a place where He can call us “just” “righteous”?

Further Reading: Genesis 15:1-6; Psalm 89

ADVENT DAY 4: *Mary: The Lord's Servant*, Luke 1:26-38; 2:1-20

Wednesday, December 1

Rev. Troy Diersing, Pastor of Sturgis Evangelical Church

From the moment of Jesus' birth, we discover that people respond differently to Him and His mission. In Luke's Gospel, the shepherds came with excitement, glorifying and praising God. In Matthew's Gospel, we read of the Magi who came to present gifts for a King, but we also learn of Herod, who saw Jesus as a threat and sought to eliminate Him. Later in Jesus' ministry, the Pharisees would respond the same way. Even today, some see Jesus as a threat and want to eliminate Him not only from their own lives but from culture as well.

How a person responds to the Person of Jesus and His mission is important and has consequences both now and for eternity.

How a person responds to the Person of Jesus and His mission is important and has consequences both now and for eternity. When a person responds favorably to the Person of Jesus, they are also responding to the personal mission He is placing on their life.

In Luke Chapter 1, the angel Gabriel speaks to Mary about God's mission for her life and tells her not to be afraid. According to the Old Testament, Mary had every right to be afraid for what God was calling her to do. Who would believe a young girl that she had conceived a child through the Holy Spirit? By law, she could have been stoned to death for her actions.

Mary could have easily responded by saying that she wasn't worthy of the task before her. She might have even thought she would not be able to complete the task, or she could have simply said, "I don't want to do what God is asking of me." There are times we find ourselves faced with God's calling on our lives when we want to respond in one of these ways.

Thankfully, we find in this young girl one who was willing to risk her life and her reputation for Jesus and His mission. Mary responds to Gabriel by saying, "Behold, the bond-servant of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word (Lk. 1:38)." Mary responds by surrendering her life and trusting God completely no matter the cost.

Today, God continues to call people to trust Him completely and with His calling on their lives. We can say we trust but how we respond indicates if we are the Lord's servants.

Further Reading: Isaiah 6:8-13; 61:1-4



ADVENT DAY 5: *Back to the Basics*, 1 John 1:7

Thursday, December 2

Rev. Viktor Rózsa, Missionary to Hungary, World Gospel Mission

*Heretical teaching comes easy when there is only one letter difference
in a word about the Word.*

Athanasius,² who wrote extensively on Christ, said, “For this purpose, then, the incorporeal and incorruptible and immaterial Word of God entered our world... He entered the world in a new way, stooping to our level in his love and self-reveling to us... Thus taking a body like our own, because all our bodies were liable to the corruption of death, he surrendered his body to death in place of all, and offered it to the Father.”

Athanasius chose his words methodically to talk about the incarnation³ when heretical teachings flooded theological thinking about God the Son, Jesus Christ of Nazareth. Numerous philosophical views permeated the interpretation of scriptures that developed into false teachings by leaders and pastors. They taught their beliefs to the masses, and corruption infected the community of believers that started to cause division, and the Church struggled for years. For this reason, Athanasius took time to accurately spell out the correct interpretation behind fundamental scriptural facts that were authoritative and operative for his orthodox thinking.

One can observe in Athanasius’ words Apostle John’s teachings echoing from John 1:1-5; 14, 1 John 1:1-7. He does not shy away from tackling big concepts regarding the eternal Son of God. He agrees and further supports orthodox thought from the apostles and the 27 books of the New Testament, which was finalized around this time, regarding Jesus Christ. His teachings cut deep into the heart, and one should consider seriously and ponder upon it constantly (Psalm 1:1-2). Ultimately, Athanasius provided valuable contributions through these words to the development and finalization of Trinitarian theology. While the Arian view taught subordinationism⁴ (there was a time when Christ was not) and similar substance (*homoiousian*⁵) Christology, Athanasius represented the same substance (*homoousian*⁶) and uncreated Christology.

Why was this so important in those days, and why is this such an important issue for us today? Orthodoxy leads to the right understanding of the Godhead. If one’s understanding of the Creator God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) is faulty, it will lead to heretical teachings about salvation. This furthermore undermines putting these elements into right practice (orthopraxis). For this reason, it is imperative for all to study the scriptures and spend time with the Word of God, who shines light in people’s lives.

Further Reading: John 1:1-18; Hebrews 1:1-14; 1 John 1:1-7

² St. Athanasius (293 – May 2, 373) of Alexandria, Egypt is an early church father. Athanasius was a bishop, theologian and writer. However, he was a significant contributor to the theology and writing of the Nicene Creed (325) as an assistant to Bishop Alexander. He famously said of Christ, “He became what we are that we might become what he is.” Today as members of The Evangelical Church, who still hold to a Wesleyan-Arminian theology expressed through a Biblical-holiness hermeneutic (i.e., Biblical interpretation), we would affirm Athanasius’s words explaining that Christ came to earth to save and sanctify us so that we might become Christ-like.

³ The term “incarnation” is the theological word that is used to indicate the whole event of the divinity of Christ descending to earth and becoming completely human while simultaneously maintaining his full divinity.

⁴ The term “subordinationism” is a heretical view of the Holy Trinity that believes the Son is less than the Father, and the Holy Spirit is less than the Son. However, further theological debate breaks out as to what the “less than” refers to (i.e., will, existence, work, importance, etc.).

⁵ The term “*homoiousian*” is the Greek word that means “like or similar substance”. Notice the “i” in the middle of the word.

⁶ The term “*homoousian*” is the Greek word that means “same substance”. The Personhood of Christ and His relation to the Father was the core issue at the Council of Nicea (325). The question being, “Is the Person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, *like* the Person of God the Father or the *same* as the Person of God the Father?”

ADVENT DAY 6: *Birth and Rebirth*, John 1:1-18

Friday, December 3

Rev. Richard Blank, Penn Friends Community Church

In the great depths of His love and mercy, God the Father sent Jesus into this world to seek and save His lost children (i.e., people). The Gospel of John describes the purpose of the First Advent of Christ uniquely.

John wrote the following concerning the Incarnate Christ, “but as many as received Him He gave the right to become the children of God, to those who believed in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor by the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God (1:12-13).” When we consider these verses along with Christ’s engaging conversation with Nicodemus in Chapter 3 of John’s Gospel, we are exposed to John’s theology of being “born again.”

However, when we look at other passages in Scripture, we find that the idea of the new birth is not limited to John’s works. In his First Epistle, the apostle Peter wrote, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ (1:3).” Here we find a little different phraseology but still the same idea: being born or begotten again! Although we find the apostle John connecting this new birth to Christ’s Advent, and the Apostle Peter connecting it to Christ’s resurrection, they do not disagree with each other because the Advent of Christ is the vehicle of His atoning work. Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter are connected by a red atoning thread of God’s love and mercy toward us. Each of these events in Christ’s life bears an essential aspect of our personal salvation, but the apostle Peter points us to the final act of Christ’s atoning work: His resurrection.

... the Advent of Christ is the vehicle of His atoning work,

Our rebirth is connected to Christ’s resurrection, and the apostle Paul explains to us exactly how in Romans 8:11, “He Who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit Who dwells in you.” The same Divine action that resurrected Christ from the grave also births us again into a new life fueled and maintained by the Divine presence of the Holy Spirit. Once we believe in Christ, the Spirit fashions something in us that we have never had before: a share in the very life of Christ, granted an abundant life and the reality of true freedom; procured, implemented, and maintained by the same power that resurrected Christ from the grave. We are “begotten again” by God through the resurrection of Christ, with resurrection power, and by that power, we are made into a new creature in Christ, old things have passed away, and all things have become new (2 Cor. 5:17).

In John 10:10, we find the recorded words of Christ: “I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.” The entirety of the Divine purpose for Advent is that we might have a chance at “abundant life” a share in the very life of Christ! During this Advent, can you testify to having abundant life in Christ Jesus? If not, don’t fret about it. Abundant life is God’s will for you. As a matter of fact, it is your right in Christ Jesus! Open your heart to Christ and believe in the One who can birth you again with resurrection power!

Further Reading: 2 Corinthians 5:11-6:10; Colossians 3:1-17

ADVENT DAY 7: *The Genealogy of Grace*, Matthew 1:1-17

Saturday, December 4

Rev. John Moyer, Retired Elder and Chaplain at Heritage Pointe Retirement Center

Woodworking is one of my hobbies, but running into knots can be hard on a good saw blade.

Matthew gives us Jesus' family tree, but it's not long into this genealogy that we find some knots in the family tree. Every name in this list gives us a lesson about God's grace to each generation. Matthew's Gospel establishes Jesus' right to be Israel's King. However, this lineage is not just showing us the royalty of Christ Jesus but the grace of God.

God's grace is seen in His choice of one woman (1:16), Mary, to birth His Son. In Luke 1:46-48, Mary "rejoiced in God my Savior." Mary recognized she was a recipient of God's grace when the angel said she was a "highly favored one."

To think that God would look down upon Mary or any one of us is an amazing thought – it's what makes Christmas so unique. She became a demonstration of God's dwelling with and in humanity. He can be born in us too by His Spirit so that we can be born again.

God's grace is also seen in the character of two men (1:1). David and Abraham are the first two descendants in this genealogy, and both are examples of God's grace. Who can forget the grace God gave to David after committing adultery, lying, and murder?

Then there was Abraham, who lied about his wife twice for fear of his own life and lack of trust in God's plan, yet God chose him to be the father of the faithful. When we think of the descendants of both David and Abraham listed in this genealogy, who often were unfaithful, immoral, idolatrous, and forsook the faith, but God's grace was revealed to each life. Through these, Jesus came to forgive, cleanse, empower and overcome – to offer grace to a fallen race.

It is grace seen in three eras of history – from Abraham to David, from David to the Babylonian captivity, and from Babylon to the New Testament era. While Israel stagnated, going from glory to disgrace, and rejecting their promised Messiah, God's grace kept reaching out to each generation.

God's grace is seen in four outcasts (1:3-6). The history of these four women, Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba, is found in your Old Testament. God acted graciously upon these women and through their lives, offering grace to the world through Jesus' genealogy.

But from all the knots in this family tree, God built a beautiful family display case.

But from all the knots in this family tree, God built a beautiful family display case. It's not the people in this genealogy that are being displayed; it's God's grace that is being displayed. Grace is full of surprises, but it wouldn't be grace if it

weren't amazing grace. If God called sinners like in this genealogy, we shouldn't be surprised that He calls us to be His children and to save us from our sins.

Further Reading: Genesis 12:1-3; Acts 7

ADVENT DAY 8: *Longing for Peace*, Micah 5:2-5a; Luke 2:4-8, 13-14

Sunday, December 5

Dr. Ron Adkins, Conference Superintendent

Terrorism, war, violence, riots, looting, and protests permeate the 21st century so far. We desire *peace* and safety for ourselves and our children, yet we are inundated with news of violence, destruction, and abuse. Furthermore, much of the entertainment on television and in the movies include some type of violence.

We need *peace*, but more than external *peace* in the world and society, we need internal *peace*. While violence is happening in the world, there are also internal battles within each individual. God knew of these internal battles, which is why He spoke through the prophet Micah proclaiming He would bring *peace*. Micah prophesied,

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has given birth; then the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth. And he shall be their peace (Micah 5:2-5a).

The fulfillment of this prophecy is revealed through Luke,

And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. 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. And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

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!" (Luke 2:4-8, 13-14)

God has offered *peace* through the salvation of Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul reminds us that we have internal battles because we live according to our own desires and not by God's desires. When we live for our own desires, we are called enemies of God (Rom. 5:10; 8:7), but when we accept the salvation of Jesus Christ and live for His desires, we have internal *peace* with God.

Jesus has left us His promise of *peace* now and more profound *peace* in eternity when He said,

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. You heard me say to you, 'I am going away, and I will come to you.' If you loved me, you would have rejoiced because I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you before it takes place, so that when it does take place you may believe (John 14:27-29).

Thus, the first prophecy concerning *peace* has been fulfilled. Now we wait for the Second Advent and eternal *peace*. Do you know the *peace* of God? Despite your circumstances, do you have *peace* today and fellowship with the Holy Spirit?

Further Reading: Genesis 6:5-8:1, 20-9:1, 8-17; John 20:19-23

ADVENT DAY 9: *Trusting, When God's Ways Cost You Everything*, Luke 1:26-38

Monday, December 6

Rev. Josh Huggett, Pastor of Ligonier Evangelical Church

What is it that we know about Mary from Luke's Gospel? We know very little other than she is very much in love and she is waiting with happy anticipation for the day of her wedding.

It is at this specific point that God breaks in. He is about to ask an unknown teenage girl to take part in something shocking and totally unbelievable. What God asks Mary to do will change her life forever. We often read through the scriptures without entirely placing ourselves into an understanding of what truly is at stake. We read through the narrative of Mary receiving news that she will give birth to the Son of God, and we process it as if it is common to everyday life. It can also become easy for us to realize that all these details will work out and everything will be ok. Mary doesn't have the privilege of knowing how everything will turn out when the angel approaches her with this news. Mary knows that saying "yes" to the will of God at this moment will not only change her life but will cost her everything. I can imagine that with all of the questions on her mind, as well as the uncertainty of what the future holds, saying "yes" to God's plan had to be one of the most challenging things she would do. Mary didn't know the total cost of saying "yes," but as we see her response in Luke 1:38, having made her decision, she never looks back.

Mary knows that saying "yes" to the will of God at this moment will not only change her life but will cost her everything.

The Advent of Christ shows us that God gave everything for us. Some of you are carrying heavy burdens today, and Christmas may be a difficult season. Some of you may even be struggling to follow God's calling on your life because the future isn't clear. Mary's story is a testament that we have a trustworthy God who is working even if we can't see it or understand it.

Further Reading: 2 Corinthians 4:16-18



ADVENT DAY 10: *The Faithfulness of God*, 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Psalm 89

Tuesday, December 7

Rev. Troy Diersing, Pastor of Sturgis Evangelical Church

The beauty and power of the Advent season are found in the faithfulness of God. The word Advent is a Latin word meaning “coming.” Christians began celebrating Advent as a way to acknowledge God’s faithfulness through the fulfillment of His Word, the birth of the Christ Child, The Messiah. Early believers also celebrated Advent with the coming of Christ into their lives as Lord and Savior. Finally, they celebrated in anticipation of Christ coming again to receive His church to Himself.

In 1 Corinthians 1, the apostle Paul writes to a body of believers eagerly awaiting the revelation (Second Advent) of the Lord Jesus Christ. As the believers waited, Paul gave thanks for the gift of grace God gave them through Christ Jesus. God’s gift of grace is what opens the door for those who are undeserving to enter into fellowship with God Himself.

God who is faithful continues to pour out His grace on those with whom He has fellowship so that they may be enriched in all things. These gifts of grace are found in all speech and knowledge. Furthermore, the recipients of God’s grace will not lack any spiritual gift.

As we read through the book of 1 Corinthians, we realize that Paul placed a great emphasis upon the body of Christ, which is the church. God enriches the church with His grace so that believers may experience His grace through the church.

God is faithful to enrich our lives when the church is faithful to speak the Word of God...

God is faithful to enrich our lives when the church is faithful to speak the Word of God to one another and to those who are outside the church. The church experiences God’s grace when believers know God’s Word and apply it to their lives. Finally, believers experience God’s grace when the body of Christ uses the spiritual gifts God gives them to minister to one another.

When the church receives and lives in the reality of God’s grace, God who is faithful can do a deeper (sanctifying) work in the lives of the church. This sanctifying work is how the church will be found blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ (Second Advent).

Further Reading: Deuteronomy 29; Hebrews 12:12-17; 13:1-9



ADVENT DAY 11: *“O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,”* Isaiah 64:4-5; Matthew 1:22-23

Wednesday, December 8

Dr. Ron Adkins, Conference Superintendent

We are drawn into this Advent season by our recognition of the evasiveness of sin throughout the world. At our core, we ache for a Savior who will bring us peace. The words and the melody of the Advent hymn, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” seems to capture the thought and feeling of imploring God when we sing:

O come, O come, Emmanuel,
and ransom captive Israel,
that mourns in lonely exile here
until the Son of God appear[s].

This hymn consistently expresses the theme from the prophets in the Old Testament of the despair that results from sin. Isaiah exclaims, “Behold, you were angry, and we sinned; in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved? (Isaiah 64:5b).” The beauty is that God’s plan is for salvation, but He does not stop there. God promises salvation to all who call upon His name, “From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God besides you, who acts for those who wait for him (Isaiah 64:4).” Therefore, our Advent hymn concludes:

O come, thou Dayspring, come and cheer
our spirits by thy justice here;
disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
and death’s dark shadows put to flight.

O come, Desire of nations bind
all peoples in one heart and mind.
From dust thou brought us forth to life;
deliver us from earthly strife.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

This time of year can cause gloom for some people because of a loved-one who has died, financial burdens, the permeating long nights, or other circumstances beyond our control. Still, others find themselves entangled in sin. Do you need the presence of God? The name Emmanuel means “God is with us.” God desires for you to be with Him and He with you. He is the God of Life, and He wants to give you life. Would you give God your life today and allow for His presence?

Further Reading: Psalm 25, 27; Acts 1:4-5



ADVENT DAY 12: *“Savior of the Nations, Come,”* Isaiah 7:14

Thursday, December 9

Dr. Ron Adkins, Conference Superintendent

God’s revelation is his self-disclosure. God has disclosed himself to his people in what is the Holy Bible. One of the ways that God shows himself in the Holy Bible is through signs. Many times God will give signs to prepare His people for His self-disclosure and divine activity. God disclosed to the prophet Isaiah that he would send a Savior and signaled this event by giving a unique sign for everyone to know that this One was the Savior he sent. Isaiah tells us, “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel (7:14).” Martin Luther captured the meaning of this sign when he wrote this hymn:

*Many times God will give signs
to prepare His people for His self-
disclosure and divine activity.*

Savior of the nations, come;
Virgin’s Son, here make thy home!
Marvel now, O heaven and earth,
that the Lord chose such a birth.

God’s sign breaks natural law and human logic. God’s saving activity is too wonderful for the human mind. His love for us in this act leaves us speechless.

Not by human flesh and blood;
by the Spirit of our God
was the Word of God made flesh,
woman’s offspring, pure and fresh.

Wondrous birth! O wondrous Child
of the Virgin undefiled!
Human and divine in one,
eager now his race to run!

Reflect upon this sign of the virgin birth and the gift that God has given in the person of Jesus Christ. What are some new thoughts that God can show you? Is God trustworthy? What do you need to trust God for in these days? Is there an Advent or Christmas sign that God has given you this year? Do you believe that God is faithful to do what He said He would do?

Further Reading: Matthew 6:25-34; 24:3-51; Luke 24:44-49



ADVENT DAY 13: "People, Look East," Joel 2:28-29

Friday, December 10

Dr. Ron Adkins, Conference Superintendent

For us, who make up the Church, Advent is a time of expectation of Christ's second coming. Like the Israelites who were reminded to keep their attention on the signs of the times signaling the First Advent, so we too are to stay alert for the Second Advent. The Advent hymn, "People, Look East," reminds us to stay ready and be prepared:

People, look east. The time is near
of the crowning of the year.
Make your house fair as you are able,
trim the hearth and set the table.

*... the coming of the Lord is for
our restoration, renewal, and
spiritual vitality...*

The prophet Joel reminds us that the coming of the Lord is for our restoration, renewal, and spiritual vitality, when he announced, "And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams,

and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit (2:28-29)." Thus our hymn continues:

Furrows, be glad. Though earth is bare,
one more seed is planted there.
Give up your strength the seed to nourish,
that in course the flower may flourish.

Angels announce with shouts of mirth
him who brings new life to earth.
Set every peak and valley humming
with the word, the Lord is coming

People, look east: Love, the Lord, is on the way.

What is it in your life that needs to be refreshed, renewed, or restored? How are your relationships? Could you use the breath of God to revive some area of your life that has been lying dormant? Is there a ministry that God has called you to, but the circumstances of life have choked it out? It is time to ask God for a fresh renewal of His Holy Spirit.

Further Reading: Ezekiel 36:22-37:14; Romans 8:1-17



ADVENT DAY 14: *"Hail to the Lord's Anointed,"* Daniel 7:13-14; Isaiah 11

Saturday, December 11

Dr. Ron Adkins, Conference Superintendent

Among the contrasting themed couplets of the Advent Season like: "sin and salvation," "darkness and light," "illness and healing," "oppression and deliverance," "promise and fulfillment" is the great paradox that the Son of God comes to earth as a peasant infant, who is yet a King. Furthermore, this Anointed King who has come to earth is from King David's lineage, yet he has no beginning and no end and was worshiped by King David (Ps. 110; Matt. 22:41-45). The Advent hymn, "Hail to the Lord's Anointed," captures this divine paradox:

Hail to the Lord's Anointed,
great David's greater Son!
Hail in the time appointed
his reign on earth begun!
He comes to break oppression,
to set the captive free;
to take a way transgression,
and rule in equity.

Isaiah prophesied the Messiah who would reign as the eternal king, and yet would be a shoot from the stump of Jesse, signifying that the One to come would be both eternal and from the lineage of David (Isa. 11). Then Daniel saw this vision and recorded it, saying, "I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed (7:13-14)." Thus, the hymn guides us in our worshipful response:

He shall come down like showers
upon the fruitful earth;
love, joy, and hope, like flowers,
spring in his path to birth.
Before him on the mountains,
shall peace, the herald, go,
and righteousness, in fountains,
from hill to valley flow.

To him shall prayer unceasing
and daily vows ascend;
his kingdom still increasing,
a kingdom without end.
The tide of times shall never
his covenant remove;
his name shall stand forever;
that name to us is love.



Look again at the nativity scenes set up throughout your home. What contrasts can you find? Consider the rejection of this holy family and the purpose of God's will. What amazing work does God want to do in your life that will testify to His great power? What sin needs to be removed? What wound needs to be healed? What hurt needs love?

Further Reading: Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Mark 5:1-20

ADVENT DAY 15: *Joy*, Zechariah 9:9; Mark 11:7, 9-11a

Sunday, December 12

Dr. Ron Adkins, Conference Superintendent

Christmas in America carries with it the connotation of family and home. Joy often fills our hearts as we nostalgically think of going back to the old homestead and being surrounded by family. We all seem to have that special place in our minds and memory where the joy of conversation and laughter fill the air at a Christmas gathering.

Zechariah prophesied that joy and gladness would mark the time when the coming of the Messiah. “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey (Zechariah 9:9).”

The fulfillment of this prophecy is found in Mark 11: “And they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it, and he sat on it. And those who went before and those who followed were shouting, ‘Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!’ And he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple (Mark 11:7, 9-11a).”

Advent and Christmas are times of great joy as we, who believe in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, worship God because He sent His Son into the world as a baby just as He promised He would. Furthermore, the Psalms teach us that joy is the proper attitude of worship.

We are also promised joy in the return of Jesus Christ in the Second Advent when Jesus said, “Is this what you are asking yourselves, what I meant by saying, ‘A little while and you will not see me, and again a little while and you will see me’? Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. In that day you will ask nothing of me. Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full (John 16:19b-24).”

“You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy.”

What brings you joy? Is it a person, an activity, a hobby, or a feeling that brings you joy? What about answered prayer? Christmas is a time to reflect upon answered prayer in the person of Jesus Christ. Are you praying for Jesus’ second return? When that day comes, it will be a day of rejoicing! How has God answered your prayers lately? Reflect on those answered prayers. In the same way, God will answer the prayer for the return of Jesus Christ to make all things new.

Further Reading: Psalm 51:7-12; Revelation 5:1-14; 21:1-27; 22:20

ADVENT DAY 16: *“Joy to the World,”* Luke 1:46-55

Monday, December 13

Dr. Ron Adkins, Conference Superintendent

The purpose of the Advent Season with its analogies of shadows, gloom, and despair is to keep us focused on the joy of the coming of a Savior, Jesus Christ. Many churches gather on Christmas Eve to celebrate the fulfillment of God’s promise to send a Savior to the world, and His perpetual light broke into our dark world! Therefore, the Church’s tradition is to sing Advent hymns

Joy to the world, the Lord is come!

during the four weeks leading up to Christmas. Church history also established that beginning on Christmas Eve, and for the following 12 days, a celebration of Christmas carols was to be sung! Hear again, the celebration from those who were spiritually imprisoned, now set free on that first Christmas night:

Joy to the world, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King;
let every heart prepare him room,
and heaven and nature sing,

Luke’s Gospel records this celebration through the heart-felt joy of many different people. Mary exclaimed, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” The angels from heaven announced, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” We are told that the shepherds outside of Bethlehem responded by leaving everything when they said, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.” When Simeon held the baby Jesus, he declared, “my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples.” And Anna, the prophetess, when she beheld the baby Jesus, gave thanks to God for his redemption of Jerusalem. Thus the Christmas carol continues:

No more let sins and sorrows grow,
nor thorns infest the ground;
he comes to make his blessings flow
far as the curse is found,

He rules the world with truth and grace,
and makes the nations prove
the glories of his righteousness,
and wonders of his love,

Reflect for a moment on the time when you repented of your sins, asking for forgiveness from Jesus, and placed your belief and trust in Him. Do you recall the joy? Can you recall the peace? What about the sense of cleansing freedom that came over you at that moment, do you remember? Is there someone near you who needs to know the saving work of Jesus in their life? Have you shared your joy with someone during this Christmas season? If not, why do you hold this gift to yourself? This joy is for the world!

Further Reading: Isaiah 42:1-17; 60:1-22; 66:18-19; Acts 9:15; 10:45-11:1; 14:27; Revelation 19:6-8

ADVENT DAY 17: *From Ordinary to Extraordinary*, Luke 1:26-56

Tuesday, December 14

Rev. John Moyer, Retired Elder and Chaplain at Heritage Pointe Retirement Center

Luke tells us how God set up the Christmas story. God used two ordinary but righteous people. Ordinary Mary and ordinary Joseph lived ordinary lives and would have been happy to do so. But at Christmas, God interrupted the ordinary and made it *extraordinary*.

...at Christmas, God interrupted the ordinary and made it extraordinary.

First, there was an extraordinary announcement (vv. 31-37). Just about the time, we have become confident about who God is, and His system of nature and how reliable it is, God in His sovereignty decides to interrupt the routine and the natural. “Follow the science,” we’re told, but then there’s God interrupting science with the miraculous and the extraordinary. And so it was with the birth of Jesus with Mary.

Second, Gabriel comes out of nowhere and tells Zacharias (v. 12) and Mary (v. 30) not to be afraid. Gabriel announces that something will take place beyond the boundaries of biology, physics, the natural, and the rational. It’s an extraordinary announcement.

Third, look at the extraordinary assignment that Gabriel gives Mary. God gave a teenage girl an important role in His plan of redemption. You would think that God would have chosen a thirty-something at least. But Mary became the “highly favored one.” Through Mary, the Messiah, the Savior, the Son of God, came into the world. Jesus left all the riches and glories of heaven to come *to* and *through* ordinary but righteous people. Mary lived a holy and righteous life because she loved God and knew He was her Savior. Mary, Elizabeth, and Zacharias were righteous, not to get something from God because they wanted to be something for God. Nothing is impossible with God, even this assignment He gives Mary.

Fourth, notice the extraordinary acceptance (v. 38) of this assignment by Mary. At first, Mary was troubled and was pondering all this in her mind (v. 29), but then she accepted the Word from the Lord with these extraordinary words “let it be to me according to Your Word.” She risked a lot when she accepted this assignment. There was the risk of family rejection and disapproval by her parents as their unmarried daughter. There was the risk of public disapproval and disgrace. Mary risked losing her fiancé and the opportunity for marriage and family. Finally, Mary risked losing economic support and even the risk of being stoned to death. However, Mary responded, “so be it according to Your Word, Lord.”

Finally, there is the extraordinary adoration (vv. 46-56) in this story. Along with the Shepherds, the Gentile foreign scholars from the East, and two senior citizens (Simeon and Anna), Mary adored the Lord.

Christmas is extraordinary because God came to us by way of an ordinary manger. As Mary says in verses 51-52, “He came to scatter the proud, humble the mighty, and empty the full. He chose the foolish things of this world to confound the wise, to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.” As we reflect on these words, they call us to meekness, self-sacrifice, vulnerability, and to humility – just like Jesus. Without Christmas, Mary nor any of us would matter much. Christmas is God’s response to rebellion and sin, to our ignoring Him and being indifferent to Him. God can take the ordinary and make it extra-ordinary. And along with Mary, we can sing “O Come let us adore Him!”

Further Reading: Ruth 1:1-18, 20; 4:11-21

ADVENT DAY 18: *The Signs of Advent*, Isaiah 7:14; 9:6-7

Wednesday, December 15

Rev. John Moyer, Retired Elder and Chaplain at Heritage Pointe Retirement Center

Christmas anticipation and expectation started way earlier than the Angel that came to Mary and Joseph. One of the Scriptures that has become a centerpiece of Old Testament prophecies is in Isaiah 9:6-7. Isaiah says, “For unto us a Child is born, unto a Son is given.” That prophecy of the coming Messiah is given during some very tough current events, much like we face in our day and age.

The context of Isaiah, Chapters 7-8 is when King Ahaz disrespectfully denounced the Lord’s “sign” for Israel’s defeat. But the Lord declared that whether you want a sign or not, you’re going to get one. And the sign will be a virgin conceiving a child, a Son, whose name will

God is still on the throne, even in days of darkness and disillusionment and boastfulness from the enemy – we must rest in that truth.

be Immanuel. However, God foretells that Assyria will steamroll the nation; furthermore, Israel will blame it as a conspiracy of nations against Israel (8:11-12). In this prophecy, God lets them know He allows it to happen because He is the Sovereign King of kings. Even though these events will happen, God lets them know He is still in charge and that He is a

sanctuary for all who will believe Him (8:13-15). For those who won’t believe and reverence Him, God will be a stone of stumbling. God is still on the throne, even in days of darkness and disillusionment and boastfulness from the enemy – we must rest in that truth. He is Immanuel, God with us. If He knows when a sparrow falls, then He hasn’t deleted or lost my file. He knows what we’re in the midst of, and He can be our sanctuary, which is God’s Presence in us, God with us. Isaiah says he will fly to the Lord of hosts in the midst of all this (8:16-18), not anyone else (8:19-22).

Then we read in Chapter 9 that those who have walked in darkness have seen a great light (9:2). People who had walked in darkness so that they couldn’t move have seen a great light – that’s what Christmas is all about. When we’re in the dark, we long to have light, and someone has to bring light to me. That’s what God sent to us when He sent His Son, Light in our darkness.

Lastly, Israel expected a military conqueror to deal with all these surrounding nations, but Isaiah says “A Child is born” (9:6). What’s God going to do with all these threats from all these powerful nations? Send a Child! God says a Baby is going to be born. God is always doing that throughout the Bible and history – He’s always using the foolish things to confound the wise, weak things to triumph over the strong. God won’t march to our drumbeat of how we think He should run things. We too often expect God to operate through the spectacular and sensational, but He uses mustard seeds, silent things, the small things to exalt Himself as God. Assyria had an army numbering 250,000, and God responds that He will have a Child born for us.

What’s God going to do with all these threats from all these powerful nations? Send a Child!

Further Reading: Genesis 24:42-44; Exodus 2:8-10; Matthew 1:20-24

ADVENT DAY 19: *A Son is Given*, Isaiah 9:6; Luke 1:67-79

Thursday, December 16

Rev. John Moyer, Retired Elder and Chaplain at Heritage Pointe Retirement Center

While the promise of a Child being born speaks to the humanity of the coming Messiah, the phrase that promises “a Son is given” speaks to us about the coming Messiah’s divinity. He will be “given,” not just “born.” This “givenness” reveals the Messiah’s pre-existence. He is the Son of God as well as the Son of Man. The existence of the Son of God did begin with His birth in Bethlehem but being the Son of God before He became man.

He will be “given,” not just “born.”

He was “given” to us because we needed a Savior. This given Savior is what the apostle Paul was telling us in Philippians 2:6-7: “Although He existed as God, Jesus did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bondservant...being made in the likeness of men.” Jesus is God in a human body to conquer (save from) sin and death.

We see it in Zacharias’ *benedictus*, the Latin word for the first word that came out of his mouth after being without a voice until his son, John, was born... “Blessed...” As soon as his son was born, this hymn of praise came through Zacharias’ lips. Zacharias’ *benedictus* also proved to be a prophecy of what Jesus, the Savior, would do and the purpose of His coming.

Zacharias says, “God has come and visited His people and to accomplish redemption for His people.” First of all, this implies that there is a separation or gulf between God and us. God has given us His Son with the mission of hope and help, grace and deliverance. He spanned the gap that is between Him and us. This separation began clear back in Genesis when our Creator, who made us for fellowship with Him, came and talked to Adam in the cool of the day. But separation came about by subversion of man’s heart from their loyalty and love and trust of God, to where the heart of man became a fortress toward God that has a fundamental suspicion of God’s motives for us.

God has come to “redeem” us from this suspicion, to save us from the slavery that this suspicion brings to a faith that will trust Him with our life. So this implies a selection. God has come to visit the carnal-mindedness, the enmity, and the rebellion that causes us to be un-hospitable to God’s visits. I’m so glad that the day of His visitation isn’t over, that He has “given” us His only begotten Son. In fact, God hunts for me. He knows where I’m at, and He has come to visit me. And the Father selected His Anointed One, the One He called His “beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased...listen to Him.”

Since Jesus has come to redeem us, Zacharias tells us the reason for God’s visit and our redemption – service (1:74-75). I owe the One who saved me and paid my debt. I’m redeemed to serve a new Master and serve Him without fear and with great joy, love, and gratefulness.

Further Reading: Philippians 1:27-2:18; Colossians 1:15-23

ADVENT DAY 20: *The Glory of God*, Luke 2:8-20

Friday, December 17

Dr. Bruce Moyer, Retired Elder and Associate Pastor at Ligonier Evangelical Church

“An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.” (v. 9)

Exodus 24:17 tells us that God’s glory “settled” on Mount Sinai and appeared to them as “a consuming fire!” In Exodus 40:34-35, we find the glory of God filling and overshadowing the tabernacle. The experience is so intense that “Moses could not enter.” Years later, after the Temple is built, Solomon, the priests, and the people are dedicating it, the glory falls again (2 Chron 5-7). Again, it is an amazing experience. Fire falls from heaven and consumes the sacrifices. The glory is so thick that the priests cannot perform their duties. And the people bow low to the ground and worship God! The glory of God is an amazing thing!

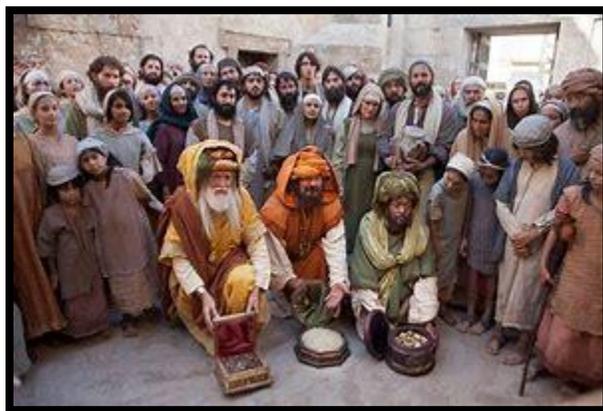
We read about it again as Ezekiel begins his ministry (Ezekiel 1:28). Like the others, he, too, fell on his face. Because God’s people had turned away from Him, we find the glory of the Lord departing in Ezekiel 8-11. Ezekiel watches it as it slowly slips away from the Temple, up over the hills, and then it’s gone. We don’t see the glory return until Chapters 43-44.

God’s glory shows up throughout the Older Testament and, when it does, people are always awestruck. But it’s been a LONG time since we’ve seen “the glory of the Lord” show up in Scripture! About 500 years have slipped by without any recorded instances of God’s glory settling over someone or something. It’s been a LONG time since people have seen His glory in all its radiance. Then, on a quiet night somewhere near Bethlehem, a bunch of ordinary guys out guarding their sheep at night are visited by an angel, “and the glory of the Lord shone around them!” Some translations express it as “radiance” or “splendor” and say it “blazed” around them. It was an amazing thing. Their reaction was typical – “they were terrified” (literally: “feared a great fear”).

The coming of Jesus is a return of God’s glory! Somehow, in all the contemporary trappings of Christmas celebrations, we must keep our focus on what God has done and is doing. He is revealing His glory by sending a Savior! Our response ought to be to fall on our knees and worship!

He is revealing His glory by sending a Savior!

Further Reading: 2 Chronicles 7:1-3



ADVENT DAY 21: *The Extent of Christmas-Love*, Psalm 2:7, 12; Matthew 3:16-17

Saturday, December 18

Dr. Ron Adkins, Conference Superintendent

The parent-child relationship is a beautifully profound theme found in the Bible. God reveals the relationship of the First and Second Persons of the Trinity like a Father-Son relationship. There is no doubt our world has skewed this beautiful model of love by all sorts of abuses, but this was never the intention of God. The Father-Son relationship of the Trinity is motivated by love. Hear this prophecy of the love the Father has for the Son, “I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, ‘You are my Son; today I have begotten you. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him (Psalm 2:7, 12).’”

The fulfillment of the Son’s first Advent and the expression of the Father’s love for Him is found in Matthew 3:16-17: “And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.’”

The very core of our Christmas celebration is the amazement we express in knowing that God’s Son, Jesus Christ, has come into our world to save us from our sins. How can this love be measured? Furthermore, when Jesus promised that a Second Advent would come, He said this, “the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God. I came from the Father and have come into the world, and now I am leaving the world and going to the Father (John 16:27-28).”

Did you catch the inclusion of the relationship? We, who love Jesus Christ and believe that He is the Son of God, are included in the Parent-child relationship! The Apostle Paul describes our new relationship with God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son in this way: “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.

We, who love Jesus Christ and believe that He is the Son of God, are included in the Parent-child relationship!

For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him (Romans 8:14-17).”

Did you realize that God’s love for you includes your adoption into His eternal family? May each of us know the love of the Father and the Son this Christmas. May each of us have the assurance that we are loved by God through Jesus Christ and have the witness of the Holy Spirit with our spirit. Now, go and love others that they too may have a chance at being adopted into the family of God.

Further Reading: Song of Solomon 1:2-4; 2:1-2; *5:6-8; *John 13:31-35; 17:1-26

ADVENT DAY 22: *Supporting Cast: John the Baptist*, John 1:6-8, 19-34; 3:22-36

Sunday, December 19

Dr. Ron Adkins, Conference Superintendent

John the Baptist plays a significant role in the Advent Story. His life and ministry were the preparation for the coming of the Messiah, the Son of God, Jesus Christ!

John's appearance was one of a wild man who lived in the wilderness of Israel, resembling that of the prophet Elijah from the Old Testament with a garment made from camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist. His diet was that of a poor nomad, gathering wild honey and locusts to eat. However, we remember this obscure character today for two reasons: 1) he is a sign of fulfilled prophecy, and 2) his message was from God.

First, writing about 725 years earlier, the prophet Isaiah foresaw the arrival of the Son of God to earth, but how could a people group prepare for such a visitor? And, how would they recognize him? Isaiah says, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord make his paths straight." "And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." John is this forerunner to the coming of Jesus Christ.

Second, John the Baptist spoke a message from God on repentance. This message was twofold. First, he preached confession and repentance of sins. This message was demonstrated by the outward sign of a water baptism for which he received the name John the Baptist. Second, he prepared the way for Jesus Christ as a result of the people turning to righteousness. Furthermore, he proclaimed that when Jesus would come, he would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. This baptism is the sign of true salvation and holiness.

*Let us also prepare our hearts
through confession and repentance*

Let us remember the significance of John the Baptist during the Advent Season as the fulfillment of prophecy with the message of Jesus' coming. Let us also prepare our hearts through confession and repentance with this exact message because Jesus Christ will come again.

Like those who stood along the banks of the Jordan River hearing the message of confession and repentance in preparation for the Lord's coming, we too confess our sins to the Lord God and beg for forgiveness. May God baptize us again with His Holy Spirit and with fire.

Is there something that you need to confess to God and ask for His forgiveness today? Do you have a deep yearning for the purification that comes by the fire of the Holy Spirit? If so, don't let this moment slip by without knowing the purity that God can do in your life.

Further Reading: Psalm 79:8-9; Malachi 3:1-5; 4:1-6



ADVENT DAY 23: *Supporting Cast: Joseph and Mary*, Matthew 1:1-25; Luke 1:26-45
Monday, December 20
Dr. Ron Adkins, Conference Superintendent

Joseph and Mary, the earthly parents of Jesus Christ, have a momentous role in the Advent Story. They faithfully received the odd message that they were chosen to receive God's gift to the world. Joseph and Mary opened their lives to God despite this strange news that Mary would bear God's Son by the Holy Spirit for the salvation of the world.

Joseph and Mary serve as a great lesson on God's will in that they are not who we would expect God to use to bring His Son into the world. They are poor who are simply common in their culture. They do not come from prominent families, and they live in a suppressed region. However, a closer look at their lives reveals that they were precisely the kind of people God was looking for: 1) while Joseph is poor, his lineage is traced back to King David, and 2) Mary is faithful to God, no matter how bizarre the message might be.

First, in Matthew's Gospel, the angel refers to Joseph as "Joseph, Son of David." This title is significant because God promised King David that his kingdom would be forever (1 Samuel 7:16). While Joseph is not the biological father of Jesus Christ, He is born under the household of Joseph, the Son of David, and is adopted into the lineage. Joseph fills the role of a kinsman-redeemer for God's Son, which echoes the faithfulness of Boaz to Ruth in the Old Testament.

Second, Mary, who was soon to marry Joseph, received an unexpected visit from the angel Gabriel who said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" The message was that she would conceive a son by the Holy Spirit in her present state of virginity, and she was to name him "Jesus." The angel continued by saying, "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." Mary believed it would happen just as the angel said, and it would.

Let us remember today the faithfulness of Joseph and Mary. God the Father entrusted into their care, His One and only Son. They fulfilled God's mission by their simple obedience. It was under their love and care that our Savior was nurtured.

God the Father entrusted into their care, His One and only Son.

Today, God has entrusted you with his precious gift to the world of salvation. Have you shared the gift? Do you resemble Joseph and Mary, whose lives exemplified obedience with God's gift? What will you do with the gift of salvation this Christmas?

Further Reading: Acts 26:1-29



ADVENT DAY 24: *Supporting Cast: The Maji*, Matthew 2:1-12

Tuesday, December 21

Dr. Ron Adkins, Conference Superintendent

The Maji, who we often call wise men, act as significant supporting cast members in the story of Advent and Christmas. Their arrival and announcement signaled that Jesus Christ is the King of the Jews, the promised Messiah!

Their arrival and announcement signaled that Jesus Christ is the King of the Jews

Maji were a unique fraternity. They were a combination of astrologers, magicians, philosophers, lawgivers, politicians, pagan priests, theologians, and prophets. These teachers of knowledge resided in modern-day Iraq and Iran. They were pagan scientists doing their work when a sign was given to them. A new star blazed brightly in the night sky. Their research led them through the annals of ancient history to discover the meaning of this new star. What they uncovered excited them, terrified King Herod, and troubled the citizen of Jerusalem. We learn two important truths as we study the maji: 1) God speaks to people in their particular language and in their own way of understanding, even using science to point to Him, and 2) the maji teach us reverent worship.

First, consider how great it is to hear the announcement of the arrival of God's Son, the King of the Jews, by the mouths of none other than Gentiles in the heart of the Jewish capital city, Jerusalem. These maji had left their home and vocation to see the result of their research discovery. Therefore they ask King Herod, "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." What led these wise men to Jesus Christ? God revealed Himself and His plan to them right where they were, and by means, they could understand. God used Gentiles and their knowledge of secular science to point to Himself.

Second, we learn from the maji, reverent worship. In full expectation of standing before the King of all kings, these wise men brought gifts worthy of a king: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. We are given this scene from Matthew's Gospel, "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."

Let us remember that God went far outside the boundaries of Israel and used secular scientists to announce the arrival of the Son of God, the King of the Jews. These foreign maji recognized the sign of their time and that it pointed to the Messiah. In response, before the child, Jesus, they prostrated themselves in reverent worship. They then offered gifts of worship. What gifts do you bring to the King of all kings? In what way do you show reverence to Jesus?

Further Reading: Daniel 2:1-49; Psalm 72:9-11

ADVENT DAY 25: *Supporting Cast: The Shepherds*, Luke 2:8-21

Wednesday, December 22

Dr. Ron Adkins, Conference Superintendent

Today we recall the lowly messengers, those shepherds of the flocks, who arrive onto the scene with a message given to them by none other than heavenly angels saying, “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.”

Imagine the scene from Joseph and Mary’s perspective. It had been a long journey from their home in Nazareth to Bethlehem. Mary was in her last weeks of pregnancy. Upon arrival, there was nowhere in town to stay. Bethlehem was overcrowded with people who had traveled there under compulsion of the Roman government’s decree to fulfill a census. Mary’s

It seems to have been a time of heightened stress, frustration, and anxiety.

contractions had begun, and she had to deliver the Son of God in the stables where the animals lived. This scene was doubtfully one of tranquility and quietness. It seems to have been a time of heightened stress, frustration, and anxiety. If that is not enough, shepherds burst onto the scene

with the announcement that angels had visited them outside of town and told them that the Messiah, the Holy One of Israel, had been born in Bethlehem! The angels had given them signs so that they could identify this newborn infant. The signs of identification were that he would be wrapped in strips of rags and lying in a feeding trough. We can learn two lessons from the shepherds: 1) They came to Jesus just as they were, and 2) they were the first evangelist, proclaiming not that Jesus Christ would come but that Jesus Christ had, in fact, arrived!

First, unlike the maji from the East who arrived bearing gifts fit for a king, the shepherds arrived in their work clothes. These shepherds had been working the night shift when the angelic choir burst onto the scene announcing the arrival of the Savior. The news was so exciting that they came to find Jesus immediately. They arrived just as they were. We, too, can come to Jesus today, just as we are, but we should always leave changed.

Second, the shepherds were the first evangelists. They did not keep this message from the angels to themselves. They announced it to everyone they met! Have you ever reported to others the salvation that Jesus Christ has given you?

Let us remember the shepherds today and the fact that God the Father chose to announce His gift of Salvation to the world through them. This message was so vitally important that they came quickly to Jesus just as they were. They also demonstrated an evangelistic zeal. They announced to everyone they met that the Savior of the World had come, just as God had promised.

Further Reading: Matthew 28:18-20; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

ADVENT DAY 26: *Main Character: Jesus Christ*, Genesis 3; Luke 2:3-7; 23:33-34, 44-48;
24:5-6a, 44-49

Thursday, December 23
Dr. Ron Adkins, Conference Superintendent

We have considered the “Supporting Cast” who surrounded the nativity scene. First, John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus Christ’s ministry. Second, Joseph and Mary quietly and humbly entered the scene in righteous obedience. Third, the intellectual maji from the East presented themselves before Jesus in reverent worship. Fourth, the nativity scene became more ruckus as the shepherds burst from the darkness with news that heavenly angels had visited and pointed them to the Savior born in Bethlehem! However, on Christmas Eve, the “Main Character,” the Son of God, is correctly portrayed in the center of the nativity as the One who has come to earth born of a virgin to set people free from sin.

... the Son of God, is correctly portrayed in the center of the nativity...

Remember the will and plan of God the Father, who set this gift in motion beginning in Genesis Chapter 3, when Adam and Eve rebelled against God’s law and desired to live by their own desires. Their selfish act brought sin, death, rot, and destruction into God’s beautiful world. On that fateful day, God declared to the serpent, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” God’s plan of salvation was so great and perfect that it would take thousands of earthly years to complete, but on that day, God’s plan of salvation was set in motion. We learn two lessons from the Christ-centered nativity scene, 1) God keeps His promises, and 2) God the Father is motivated by immeasurable love.

First, the Holy Bible is not meant to be a history book, nor is it a book of science. It is not a study in sociology, psychology, or philosophy. The Holy Bible is the story of God’s salvation of human sin and the eventual eradication of evil. The world was created “good,” as we see in Genesis Chapter 1. God created humans in His image and likeness. They were given the freedom to rationalize, think, make decisions and move about their environment. When temptation led Adam and Eve astray, drawing them to rationalize God’s commands and eventually sin, the relationship between Creator and creation was severed, and the communion they once shared became ex-communication. Throughout the rest of the Old Testament, life-blood was the solution for sin, and God promised that there was coming a time that He, Himself, would provide the solution for sin. God always keeps His promises. We celebrate the coming of Jesus Christ because He is the answer for our deepest human need, salvation from sin and death.

The second lesson we learn tonight is that God’s plan of salvation is motivated by love. God had promised Adam and Eve that on the day they disobeyed, they would die. This command reveals God’s holiness. However, God desires that humans will turn to him for their needs. In love, God provided a sacrifice once and for all as a solution to human sin. Jesus Christ is the only begotten Son of God the Father. He came to earth not to punish but to offer up His life for our life. He came to earth born of a virgin. Jesus’ birth is God’s symbol of love. Jesus Christ was born over two thousand years ago celebrated on Christmas Eve. God keeps His promises, and He loves us very much.

Do you know the love of God wrapped in rags and lying in a feed trough? Have you thought about the extent of God’s grace that has been extended to love you? Take time to silence yourself and look again in a fresh way at the holy nativity scene. Look at each figure and remember the role they played in God’s plan of salvation. What role do you have in God’s plan of salvation?

Further Reading: Hebrews 1-2

ADVENT DAY 27: *Silence Is Golden*, Luke 2:1-20

Friday, December 24

Rev. William Carter, Retired Elder

Let us take a moment to think about the FIRST Christmas.

What comes to mind when you think about the Christmas Story? You might recall:

1. Gabriel's news to Mary about Jesus -The Incarnation
2. Joseph's dream about Mary
3. Bethlehem
4. The Manger, no room in the inn
5. The Shepherds
6. The Magi and their gifts

However, there is one more part of the story that is usually not considered. It was when Jesus was born in the manger. There was with the animals silence (Silent Night - read lyrics). There was no music nor singing, just silence before the Shepherds came. You can picture the joy of Mary and Joseph as they looked at their baby, giving thanks to God. There was silence wondering how this child was going to change their lives and change the world.

There was silence wondering how this child was going to change their lives and change the world.

There was silence as they each considered the future.

Beloved, during this Christmas Season, may we be silent and remember Christmas. May we remember how Jesus changed and is continuing to change our lives!

SILENCE IS GOLDEN!!!

Merry Christmas

Further Reading: Habakkuk 2:20; Revelation 7:17-8:1

