The Summit Church

DIVINE INTERRUPTION

Encountering God This Advent

Day 1

Invitation to an Interruption

Christy Thornton

“A voice cries: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.’” - Isaiah 40:3–4 (ESV)

At Christmas, we celebrate God sending his Son to be the Savior of the world. In some ways, this earthshaking, history-splitting event was long expected. Prophets had been telling the story for centuries that one day God would come for us. He would rend the heavens and enter his creation to save us. In other ways, though, it came out of the blue with surprise visits from angels, bright stars lighting the way for unexpected visitors, and the regular lives of regular people being interrupted by dramatic encounters with God.

That same God is still interrupting the regular lives of regular people in incredible ways today.

This Advent, we’re going to walk through the ancient prophecies from Isaiah foretelling the coming of God into the world. As we read his words by faith in Christ, who was born to Mary and Joseph so long ago in Bethlehem, we will discover God interrupting our lives as we encounter him all over again.

And we will find that God is sending us to tell the good news of Jesus to our neighbors, coworkers, family members, and friends. God wants to use us to interrupt the lives of the people around us, that they might have a life-changing encounter with him.

Consider this your invitation to an interruption. That may sound odd, because interruptions are usually unexpected. We don’t plan for them; they just happen. At the same time, in the Bible, God often interrupts those who are already seeking him. He tells us he’ll come near to us, and yet, still surprises us when he does.

This Christmas we say to each other and to the world in the words of Isaiah, “Prepare the way of the LORD” (Isaiah 40:3). God is true to his promises. He has come to us in Christ. He is with us now by his Spirit.

So we embark on our Advent journey in hushed expectation, awaiting a divine interruption.

Next Steps: Does God want to use you to interrupt someone around you? Invite them to an interruption by asking them to do this Advent devotional with you.

Day 2

Remember Whose You Are

Katelyn Byram

“Who has performed and done this, calling the generations from the beginning? I, the LORD, the first, and with the last; I am he.” - Isaiah 41:4 (ESV)

In Isaiah 41, we find Israel exiled from the Promised Land and oppressed by wicked kings. I just imagine they wondered if God truly still cared for them; had their God been defeated by the conquering armies? Had God left them?

What would you say to a frightened Israel? Would you say, “Fear not!”? Would you encourage them to fight stronger or plan better?

God’s address to exiled Israel doesn’t begin with “Fear not.” Before anything else, God comforts Israel with a reminder of who he is and whose they are. He says that Israel is his chosen servant—his friend (vv. 8–10). And then, only after he’s called to mind his enduring commitment to them comes the declaration to “fear not.”

Because God is who he says he is and because Israel is his people, they don’t have to be afraid. Not because they can control their circumstances or an outcome, and not because they are strong or intelligent. No, because God is, and he loves them.

Reread verses 17–20. God did not and would not leave Israel in their desperation. At their weakest, most helpless moment, God promises to answer and keep his people (v. 17). He transforms dry and barren spaces into ones with flowing rivers and lush trees that resist drought and wind. Why? For his glory. And one day, this will be our reality too.

Like Israel, God won’t leave us in our desperation. God sent his one and only Son, Jesus, to be the Suffering Savior who would take the dry and barren spaces of our lives and transform them into lush, eternal gardens full of life, hope, and joy, for his glory.

What dry and barren spaces have you yet to see God transform? What seems completely hopeless or broken? Bring them before him again and again and again, because you know “he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep” (Psalm 121:4). Take heart, friend. God’s redemption and restoration are sure and certain, even if we don’t see it this side of heaven.

This Christmas, we can face the brokenness around us and declare “Fear not,” not because we can fix it, but because we know who God is, and we are his.

Next Steps: Confess your fears to God. Ask God to meet you in your fears and remind you who he is. As God responds, ask a Christian friend to pray for you to trust God and fear not.

Day 3

A Score for the Savior

Aaron Conley

“Behold, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth I tell you of them. Sing to the LORD a new song, his praise from the end of the earth.” - Isaiah 42:9–10 (ESV)

Songs activate our imaginations. John Williams’ twinkle tones take us to the McCallister residence, where we worry for Kevin (or maybe Marv and Harry); or two bass notes and suddenly, we’re terrified of sharks in the water. Missions become possible, Rocky wins in the final round, and we all wish upon a star with the scores we hear. Songs activate our imaginations.

So it’s no surprise that God uses songs in the same way all throughout Scripture. He uses them in his people to activate the wonder of praise, to look ahead in faith, to look back in victory, and to look up in worship. That is what we find in Isaiah.

Isaiah 42 begins a series of four “Servant Songs.” The “Servant” across all these Servant Songs refers to the Messiah, or Christ (same word, different languages). God’s plan to redeem and restore the world comes through this very special Servant.

The song in chapter 42 crescendos into verse 9: “Behold, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth I tell you of them.” God is changing something. What’s done is done, and now something new is coming—God’s saving faithfulness, signaled by the blasting brass of his promise. The Messiah is coming, not just to rescue a people from captivity, but to redeem all of creation to the Creator.

The score carries us to Bethlehem centuries later on a holy night. Can you hear the song of the angels? “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” (Luke 2:14). This song carries through time to ring in our ears today as we continue

to sing at this thrill of hope, rejoicing even in our weariness: “For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn!”

So rejoice! God is heralding his promise of salvation with the birth of his Son, Jesus. He’s interrupting your song with redemption, and how will you respond? Isaiah 42:10 says, “Sing to the LORD a new song, his praise from the end of the earth.” What’s done is done, and now something new is coming. There is hope composed into your life’s score, all because of God’s special servant, Jesus Christ. Move forward in your next measure in faith that is anchored in God’s faithfulness.

Next Steps: Spend some time today in worship for what God has made new in your life. Through Jesus, he will make all things new. As you worship, write down what you see God making new even now. Let “O Holy Night” be the soundtrack to your day.

Day 4

A New Thing Is Coming

Sarah Posey

“Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.” - Isaiah 43:18–19 (ESV)

In these verses, Isaiah declares hope to the discouraged and desperate people of God. They’re stuck in captivity and exile with a desert of wilderness separating them from their home in the Promised Land, living the consequences of their sinful idolatry and rebellion against God.

Throughout the Old Testament, authors bring to mind the glorious works of the Lord in the past in order to revive faithfulness to the one true God in the present. But this passage is different. Isaiah doesn’t say to ponder things of the past. He points to the future works God has yet to do.

God was just about to interrupt his people’s circumstances with a new thing, and it was crucial they didn’t miss it. God was on the cusp of finally fulfilling the promises he made in ages past.

But God’s plan was much bigger than his people realized. He was looking ahead to an earth-shaking, eon-splitting new thing—the restoration of all of humanity back to him, where God himself would rend the heavens and come down to be born as a baby in Bethlehem. His people couldn’t be so focused on their past that they would miss the new thing that was to come.

The birth of Jesus fundamentally interrupted the course of human history. While we were discouraged and desperate in our sin, our holy God took on flesh and lived human life in our place, in order to make a way in the wilderness so that we could return home to him.

Do you ever get stuck looking back at your past? Have you ever struggled with continuing to punish yourself over sin that's already been forgiven? Instead of walking in the grace and forgiveness already available to you through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, do you live in bondage and cling to the guilt of having "messed up" back then?

This Advent, we look to God's new work as we celebrate the birth of Jesus, knowing he is "the way" (John 14:6) in the wilderness, and the way back to a right relationship with God. We don't ponder our desperate circumstances, but we anticipate with joy and hope the new things of restoration and provision that the Lord has for us in Christ.

Next Steps: Is there anything from the past that has you living in bondage? Ask for help to walk in the freedom of Christ and for eyes to see the new things that God may be wanting to do in your life. Tell a close Christian friend what God is showing you, and remind each other of the gospel.

Day 5

Refreshing Rain

Lauren Thompson

“For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants.” - Isaiah 44:3 (ESV)

Have you ever been outside when it is hot and dry, and then a deluge of rain comes out of nowhere?

I had this happen once when walking my cocker spaniel, Parker. It seemed nice out, so I took him on a long walk. As we got farther from my house, the heat overwhelmed us. We started shriveling up in the summer sun. I was concerned we might overheat, so we started back home. Then, out of nowhere, a dark cloud opened a downpour of rain right on top of us. We were soaked to the bone. After the shock and frustration wore off, I realized he and I both were actually enjoying the rain: It was rejuvenating, and so my furrowed brow morphed into a radiant smile.

Because when you feel dry, there is nothing more refreshing than a rainfall.

This verse from Isaiah was a hopeful reminder to the people of Israel. It is to us as well. God’s people then were living in exile, experiencing literal droughts with little rainfall, and the spiritual drought of being separated from the temple, the place they could commune with God. But God did not leave them without hope. He promised to provide the refreshment of water on dry land, and more importantly, the Holy Spirit on his people.

The way he did this was evident in the incarnation of Jesus. As we see in Luke 1:35, the Holy Spirit came upon Mary: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.” The conception and birth of Jesus is the start of Christ’s church and the relationship we have with God now—a story that ends with that same Holy Spirit dwelling in us.

Right now, we can trust Jesus in our dry seasons because he is still pouring out the living water of his Spirit on us (see John 4:1–30; 7:37–39). A sudden downpour of rain can interrupt even the driest day, and a sudden outpouring of the Holy Spirit can interrupt even the driest seasons of our lives with renewal and refreshment.

Maybe you're in a season of drought in your spiritual life. Maybe your life circumstances are difficult. Don't despair! God pours out his Spirit to make streams on dry ground. Or maybe you have a loved one, a friend, or a coworker who you are praying will come to know Jesus. Don't give up! Just like a pop-up rainstorm, the Holy Spirit can interrupt their lives at any moment. As we look to the hope that Jesus' birth gives us, let's remind ourselves of how much God loves to pour out his blessing, his love, and his Holy Spirit.

Next Steps: Are you going through a season of dryness, either spiritually or in other areas? Or is there someone in your life that you want to trust in Jesus but feel discouraged about where they are? Memorize Isaiah 44:3 today, and pray that we would be satisfied in Christ by the Spirit.

Day 6

The Carrier Carried

Patrick Downing

“Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel, who have been borne by me from before your birth, carried from the womb; even to your old age I am he, and to gray hairs I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save.” - Isaiah 46:3–4 (ESV)

There is nothing like carrying a sleeping two-year-old. I can remember doing this with each one of my four kids. You pick them up off the floor to carry them to bed. Limp limbs. Slack jaws. Gaping mouths. Their eyes might open halfway for a split second, but they have absolutely no idea where you are taking them or what is going on. And that’s just fine. They don’t have to. They just rest, and you carry them where they need to go. They don’t even have to hold on.

God carries his people like that. Like the prophet Isaiah reminds us, “Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel, who have been borne by me from before your birth, carried from the womb; even to your old age I am he, and to gray hairs I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save.”

God reminds his people that he has been carrying them from the very beginning of their nation. Before they could sit up, stand up, speak, or do anything for themselves, he was there. And now centuries later, with their gray hairs peeking through, he has not and will not stop carrying them.

And that’s part of what makes Christmas so astonishing. At Christmas, we remember that the Almighty God, who carries his people from the womb, entered one. Mary carried God in her womb. The Carrier was carried.

Maybe that’s part of what you need to remember this Christmas. The God who carries you is not distant from you. He is familiar with your weakness. He knows it well. He knows what it

is to be tired, weak, and vulnerable, and to need someone to carry you. So Jesus can empathize with us (Hebrews 4:15). He carried our weakness all the way to the grave, where he rose again in power so that we might have life eternal in him. So we can trust him to carry our weakness still.

What do you carry that God never asked you to? Your family? future? finances? your reputation?

Name it. And then, just for a moment, imagine yourself like that sleeping two-year-old. You don't have to figure it all out, or know where you are going, or even hold on. Rest. The God who has carried you from before you were born is carrying you still. And now? Let the God who has carried you from the womb carry you again.

Next Steps: Tell God the things you are carrying. Maybe even write them down, and one by one, entrust them to God. Then, tell a trusted Christian friend who can pray for you and remind you that God is trustworthy.

Day 7

Don't Hand Jesus Back

Katherine Doyle

"Oh that you had paid attention to my commandments! Then your peace would have been like a river, and your righteousness like the waves of the sea." - Isaiah 48:18 (ESV)

I love to hold other people's babies and have them snuggle against me. It fills me with joy to rock a sleeping baby, closing my eyes while I calmly rest and contemplate the hope and promise they represent. Inevitably, my calm repose is then interrupted by a dirty diaper or a hungry cry, at which time I really love handing the baby back to his parents. Because that interruption indicates something is about to be demanded of me, and I am resistant. Can you relate?

We approach Jesus that way sometimes. We look at baby Jesus in the manger and feel the warm fuzzies, wishing that feeling would last all year long. Then, our serenity is interrupted as we remember that little baby is "Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11). He is God, the King. And the interruption of his divine authority demands something from us that we may be unwilling to give, and so we try to give him back or busy ourselves with more pleasant distractions in an attempt to avoid him entirely.

If we look closely at the heart of God, we see that he is not mainly trying to demand something from us. He wants to give something to us. In Isaiah 48 he says, "Oh that you had paid attention to my commandments! Then your peace would have been like a river, and your righteousness like the waves of the sea." We sometimes get stuck at the first part of the verse and think God just demands obedience because he likes to be the boss. But if we keep reading, we see that God wants to give us real peace and righteousness that can only come from him.

When we gaze on baby Jesus and consider his kingship an unwelcome interruption, we miss out on so much, just like we miss out when we return a crying baby. For the parent, denying oneself to care for another life brings intimacy and a lasting relationship with their child. When they look back, they understand they gained far more than they gave up to love their kids. So

much deeper is the truth that denying self to follow Jesus leads to abiding intimacy with our heavenly Father. When we draw near to Jesus during the times we are tempted to push him away, we understand that he wants to give us far more than what we are giving up.

This Christmas, let the fullness of God interrupt your plans. Take some time to adore the baby in the manager. See that his commands lead to his blessing for you. Embrace him and deny yourself. Experience peace with God and the righteousness only found in him, not just at Christmastime but for all eternity!

Next Steps: Are you trying to give Jesus back? Are you avoiding God's call for you to obey? Embrace Jesus. Deny yourself. Do what he asks. Tell a friend what God is asking you to do, and make a plan for when and how you will take your next step in following him.

Day 8

Interrupting the Gloom

Julia Cáceres

“It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth. … Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are continually before me.” - Isaiah 49:6, 16 (ESV)

As the winter gloom stretches on, I delight in the cheerful Christmas lights that interrupt the darkness. God’s chosen people were slogging through the gloomy desolation of captivity and exile when God interrupted their misery with the promise to restore them and make them a light for all nations.

The people of Israel cried out for deliverance, and God answered their prayers much more abundantly than they had dared dream with three-fold salvation and restoration. First, he ended their captivity and restored them to the Promised Land.

Secondly, he sent Jesus to be born in humble circumstances that belied his glory as the light of the world who would bring salvation and establish the church to make that salvation known to the ends of the earth. Lastly, when Christ returns, he will restore creation in the new heavens and the new earth, and we will delight in our salvation, basking in the light of his glory.

When these words were first prophesied, Israel felt forsaken and without a future as they endured the harsh consequences of past sin. God assured them that he could not forget his children, for he had engraved them on the palms of his hands (49:16). The Hebrew word for “engraved” means to chisel, using a hammer and spike in order to pierce and leave a permanent mark. Centuries later, a hammer and nails pierced the hands of our Lord as he sacrificed himself to save us from sin and make his glory known to the nations. Even after his resurrection, he still bears the saving scars on his palms (John 20:27).

Whenever God interrupts history, be it of an individual, a family, a nation, or the entire world, his glory shines forth. We're all tempted to despair while living in the pain and crushing sorrow of this broken world. But the light of God's glorious salvation breaks in to interrupt our gloom, free us, and use us as a light to the nations so that his salvation reaches the ends of the earth.

Next Steps: What situation or past experience tempts you to feel hopeless, mired in gloom and despair? How would your perspective be different if you remembered that God engraved you on the palms of his hands? Choose to worship God, trusting his greatness over your limited perspective, and tell someone your hope in God today.

Day 9

His Presence Made Clear in the Wilderness

Esther Mununga

“For the Lord comforts Zion; he comforts all her waste places and makes her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song.” - Isaiah 51:3 (ESV)

Do you ever feel weary or alone? Like you are carrying the weight of the world, pressed on all sides and sensing no relief in sight? You may find yourself in a season like that right now. In the wilderness—in the midst of suffering—our souls yearn for peace and restoration. In Isaiah, the Lord declares over his children that, as they turn their gaze back to him amid their season of despair, he will comfort them, restore them, and heal their brokenness. The dry and parched places that once surrounded them would be transformed from desolation to abundance, from a desert of death to a garden overflowing with life.

When we find ourselves in a season of hardship, as we turn our eyes upon Jesus, we experience comfort and renewal the world cannot offer. The desert cultivates thirst and desire for the Lord. David, in his own season of suffering, says in Psalm 63:1, “O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.”

In the desert, with no other distractions in sight, we shift our gaze upward and give the Lord all our attention. As we look to him, he transforms our heart by his grace and mercy. We experience his presence and comfort in a deeper way that changes us from the inside out so that we overflow with joy, praise, and gratitude.

This Christmas, as we behold and bask in the incarnation of Christ, we remember that in our deepest despair, when we were bound by our sin, he came to bring the greatest restoration. He humbled himself, taking on human form, and went through the darkest wilderness, the driest desert of death, for our sake.

Because of his suffering, we can rejoice and be glad! The Redeemer of our souls has pulled us out of the pit, and we get to be with him forever. God will deliver us from the wilderness of weariness to his garden overflowing with abundant life, and his presence with us. And so we have hope in every season!

Next Steps: Christmas is a season of great joy and cheer, but take a minute to be truly honest with the Lord. Tell him the struggles or difficulty in your life—through journaling or out loud. He can handle it. Don't hold anything back. Then, remember God's presence and faithfulness by listening to and singing along with the rendition of the hymn "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" by Carrie Underwood and CeCe Winans.

Day 10

Go Tell It on the Mountain!

Emylee Barjuca

“How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns.’ The voice of your watchmen—they lift up their voice; together they sing for joy; for eye to eye they see the return of the LORD to Zion.” - Isaiah 52:7–8 (ESV)

When was the last time you had good news to deliver? Maybe it was an engagement, the birth of a child, or a new job. How did you deliver that good news? Where on your list of priorities did it fall? Was it text message material, or did it warrant an in-person announcement? Did you drop everything and tell everyone who crossed your path? If the news is that good, would you delay, or would you run to share it?

In Isaiah 52, the people of God had been waiting for good news for a long time. They were enduring oppression under the hand of a wicked kingdom. The Israelites longed for a divine interruption—for salvation. After an extended season of grief and sorrow, they finally received a word of encouragement: Awake, put on new strength, for redemption is coming. The people of God would at last get to see him, so everyone needed to get ready.

Centuries later, on the night of Christ’s birth, the shepherds hadn’t the slightest idea they would experience that prophecy fulfilled. It seemed to be just another night on the job, watching their flock. Then came the divine interruption—the angel of the Lord appeared and declared good news of great joy for all people (Luke 2:10). Then, the heavenly hosts instructed them where to see for themselves the coming of the Lord, the salvation everyone had been waiting for.

How awe-inspiring for them to experience the angels, but even more beautiful was their obedience to drop everything, go see our God and Savior, and then bring the good news to others with shouts of joy.

The beauty in bringing good news doesn't stop with the shepherds. Paul encourages his readers in Romans 10:15 with the truth of how beautiful it is for all of us to go and preach the good news. What a joy it is to be among those who hear the gospel, lift up our voice, and tell the whole world. Let us be like the shepherds, who saw Jesus and ran to tell the world. The news was so good it couldn't wait. The Savior has come, which is still the good news for all people!

This week, I challenge you to actively share the good news about Jesus with one person (it could be your friend, a barista, a store clerk, or even the Amazon delivery driver). Jesus our Savior came, lived the perfect life we couldn't live, and died the death that we deserved, all because of his love for us. It's the best news ever!

Next Steps: Pray and ask the Holy Spirit to pique your curiosity in every conversation. Whether you're out purchasing last-minute Christmas gifts, attending your work holiday parties, or waiting in line at the donation center, ask God to help you seek out conversations with those around you, and use it to "tell it on the mountain" that Jesus is our Savior!

Day 11

A Root Out of Dry Ground

Jessica Williams

“For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him.” - Isaiah 53:2 (ESV)

We may expect to find scouts in sporting arenas, but believe it or not, a whole scouting process takes place behind the scenes each year to find the Rockefeller Center Christmas tree. The head gardener takes care to select the perfect tree, a Norway spruce that’s at least 75 feet tall and dense enough that you can’t see through its branches. And when it’s fully decorated, topped with a 900-pound star covered in 3 million Swarovski crystals? It’s breathtaking. Majestic. Glorious, even.

So why does Isaiah 53:2 (and 11:1, for that matter) compare Jesus to a mere branch, an unassuming root springing up from “dry ground”? Wouldn’t a more apt comparison be a stately, resplendent tree, perhaps not unlike the one that adorns Rockefeller Center each December? Tucked away almost exactly in the middle of the Psalter is a short collection of verses that helps shed some light on this. The author of Psalm 80, Asaph, reminds his readers that when the Lord brought the Israelites out of Egypt, they were like a small, delicate vine. And after tenderly cultivating the soil, he planted this precious vine and cared for it as it grew into a vineyard.

Sadly, as we turn page after page of the Old Testament, we read how God’s people rebelled, turning aside to their own way and reaping the consequences. The vineyard, once beautiful, was now in shambles—no more than a collection of pitiful stumps, really. But then, at just the right time, came a divine interruption. A “young plant … like a root out of dry ground” would spring up from that ravaged soil, from those felled stumps, bringing the hope of restoration to all who would believe.

What Isaiah, this long-ago prophet, wants to convey is just how profoundly good this news really is: It's not just that there is new life in a vineyard where previously only death and destruction reigned. It's that this living branch, this "true vine," is the promised Messiah, the Lord Jesus—and his birth would pave the way for a coming kingdom, a kingdom whose roots would reach into eternity. So let's rejoice in his birth, giving thanks for light breaking through the darkness, for a life that would one day conquer death.

Next Steps: Listen to the song "We Wait for You," by Caroline Cobb, and reflect on the lyrics as they relate to Isaiah 53 and Isaiah 11, paying particular attention to how despair gives way to hope and joy as the song progresses. Write down any thoughts that come to mind as you meditate on the "seed of hope in the eleventh hour," the joy of our Savior's birth.

Day 12

The Christmas That Cannot Be Taken Away

Nathan Rostampour

“For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you.” - Isaiah 54:10 (ESV)

Christmas looks different where the church is persecuted. Jesus saved me while I was living in Iran, and I still remember my first Christmas as a believer. I walked into an apartment where a few believers quietly gathered. Everything I knew about Christmas had come from movies, so I expected decorations, music, gifts, and the things I thought made Christmas feel like Christmas. But there was none of that. Nothing that would draw attention and put believers at risk. Yet, I discovered that you can remove almost everything associated with Christmas and still have Christmas—because you still have Christ.

Decades later, that night remains one of the most powerful and Christ-centered Christmas gatherings I have ever experienced. One of the gifts the persecuted church can give the rest of us is that they remind us what remains when everything else is stripped away. We enjoy so many beautiful gifts at Christmas—family gatherings, food, music, decorations, presents, traditions, and wonderful worship services. These are good gifts, and we should receive them with gratitude. But none of them is the treasure of Christmas—Jesus is.

Isaiah 54 speaks to God’s people in a place of pain, shame, uncertainty, and loss. Into that reality, God says: “Fear not” (Isaiah 54:4). Similar words echo throughout the Christmas story to Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds. For persecuted Christians, “fear not” is not sentimental language. It is something they must actually live. Some gather knowing that discovery could cost them their freedom. Some have been rejected by their families because of Jesus. Some worship quietly because singing loudly could attract unwanted attention. Yet, into fear, God speaks his presence.

Then, to our fear, God gives an extraordinary promise: “For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you” (Isaiah 54:10).

That is Christmas. The manger reminds us God hasn’t abandoned us. He came to us. Emmanuel: God with us. So Christmas can be celebrated in a secret apartment in Iran. It can be celebrated without trees, presents, lights, or even the freedom to sing loudly. Because Christmas doesn’t depend on our surroundings. Christmas rests upon the One who came to us.

Sometimes, simplicity reveals what abundance hides. When there are no decorations to admire, our eyes are drawn to Jesus. When there are few gifts to open, we remember the greatest Gift ever given. When believers cannot worship loudly, every whispered song becomes precious. When gathering together carries a cost, Christian fellowship is no longer taken for granted.

So this Christmas, enjoy the gifts God has given you. Decorate your homes. Gather around the table. Sing the songs. Give gifts. Celebrate with joy. But don’t allow the celebration of Christmas to distract you from the Christ of Christmas. Before you ask, “Do we have everything we need for a perfect Christmas?” ask a deeper question: Even if everything around Christmas was stripped from me—would Jesus still be enough?

Our persecuted brothers and sisters would remind us that mountains may move, circumstances may change, freedom may disappear, church buildings may close, and families may be separated, but Christ remains.

He is the treasure of Christmas. And he is more than enough.

Next Steps: Imagine a Christmas without trees, lights, decorations, or big worship gatherings. Would you still celebrate? Tell God (and yourself) that he will always be enough. Then, pray for God to give strength, hope, and joy to our brothers and sisters who are being persecuted in Iran and around the world.

Day 13

Longing for More

Elijah Cody

“Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.” - Isaiah 55:1–2 (ESV)

Come, everyone who thirsts! Advent can be a season that reveals how thirsty we really are. Christmas is filled with always wanting more: the next big present, a new house, a new job, the family finally being together, or catching up with old friends. Not all of those things are bad in themselves, but they become a problem when we chase after them instead of the Lord.

Isaiah 55 is clear: We often put material or relational things ahead of the Lord, when he’s the one we should be longing for.

Isaiah speaks to both our thirst and our hunger. Long before Jesus entered the world, Isaiah was already telling us that material things will not satisfy us. When Jesus came, he said that whoever drinks the living water will never thirst again (John 4:14). This is the divine interruption of Advent: God interrupts our thirst after material, temporary things and says, “Drink the living water.”

Our hunger this season should be focused on the Lord too. How can we who have no money come buy and eat? Because God has provided in the form of a baby placed in a feeding trough. Jesus came into a broken, hunger-panged world to save all who would believe in him. He said, “I am the bread of life” (John 6:35). So when we feel the hunger in our hearts for more, let it lead us to Christ, for he alone can satisfy. May we long for his grace and love this Advent more than we hunger for approval, acceptance, money, or friends—things that can never bring the satisfaction we crave.

This season, you may be longing for one thing, or you may be longing for many things. So how do we manage the tension of wanting good things while also longing for Jesus this Christmas? The question isn't, what should we long for? The question is, what are we longing for more than Jesus right now?

When God interrupts our lives, he calls us to live differently. He calls us to reframe our eyes, our hearts, our thirst, and our hunger. Instead of chasing the things of this world, we look to Christ and the deep satisfaction only he can bring. We drink the living water. We hunger for the bread of life, and as we do, we will encounter God this Advent.

Next Steps: Acknowledge your need for Christ. Where are you in life right now? Are you thirsting for his satisfaction or longing for something else? Ask God to interrupt your heart and reveal the areas where you're trying to find satisfaction apart from him. Tell a trusted friend what he reveals. Ask the Lord to be the living water in your life, and beg for a hunger for him that you haven't experienced yet. Listen to the song "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" and praise God that he came, asking him to help you long after King Jesus more than anything else this Christmas season.

Day 14

Christ Came for All of Us!

Ben Barnett

“Thus says the Lord: ‘Keep justice, and do righteousness, for soon my salvation will come, and my righteousness be revealed.’” - Isaiah 56:1 (ESV)

In Isaiah 56, God gives a surprising message of hope: Everyone who genuinely turns to him is welcome in his house. He names foreigners and eunuchs who had been excluded from Israel’s worship and then declares, “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (56:7).

This is the heart of the message Jesus would later preach. Jesus did not come only for the people who seemed to have everything spiritually together. He came to seek and save the lost, welcoming sinners, outsiders, and all who humbly come to him in faith. God’s invitation extends to each and every one of us today. Christ came for all of us—that means you and me.

Yet, Isaiah 56 contains an uncomfortable contrast. While God welcomes those who humbly seek him, he condemns Israel’s leaders for being spiritually blind and self-serving. In Isaiah 57, God’s condemnation extends to all his chosen people because of their idolatry and unfaithfulness. Their heritage did not guarantee they truly belonged to God. Being part of God’s people outwardly was not enough: God desired their innermost hearts to be humble, faithful, and repentant.

But don’t miss it—these two chapters offer a love sandwich. They read: love, rebuke, love. God surrounds his rebuke of sin with his steadfast love.

Let us meditate on that message during Advent. We can become so dulled by the commercialized celebration of Christmas that we miss the spiritual significance. The birth of Jesus was God entering his creation to rescue people who could not save themselves from their debt of sin. In Christ, the promise Isaiah proclaimed became reality: “Soon my salvation will come, and my righteousness be revealed” (Isaiah 56:1). Through Jesus, God’s righteousness was

revealed. The Savior entered the world not because we had earned it, but because he loves us. Jesus came to invite people to leave behind their idols, sin, and self-reliance to simply follow him.

Advent reminds us that just as Jesus interrupted this world by taking the punishment for our sins, God still interrupts our lives with his invitation. He calls us to look honestly at our hearts and recognize the things that compete for our worship. What idols have we allowed to take God's place, and where have we become spiritually blind? Are we relying on our identity as proclaimed Christians, the fact that we attend church, or our good works for salvation instead of humbly trusting Christ? The good news of Isaiah 56–57 is that God's confrontation is not the end of the story. He promises healing and restoration to the humble and repentant. The God who exposes our sin is also the God who loves us and invites all who would believe in him to call his house our home.

Next Steps: Take time today to ask God to reveal the idols and spiritual blind spots in your life, and then bring them to him with humility and repentance. Then, ask God to show you someone in your life who needs to hear that invitation to trust Christ and come home to God. Then, tell them: The Savior has come, and his house is open. Christ came for all of us!

Day 15

There Was No Man to Intercede

David Parisher

“Truth is lacking, and he who departs from evil makes himself a prey. The Lord saw it, and it displeased him that there was no justice. He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no one to intercede; then his own arm brought him salvation, and his righteousness upheld him.” - Isaiah 59:15–16 (ESV)

As a child I often felt that “interruption” was a negative word. I can remember being told to “stop interrupting” during a conversation or in a classroom while growing up. Interruptions were bad things that messed up the course of a normal day or situation.

The first Christmas arrived as an interruption. Jesus’ birth tore into the normal fabric of the world and into the lives of those around him in shocking ways. Born of a virgin, born in a manger, the world was turned on its head by Jesus coming into it. But what a blessed interruption! Isaiah 59 paints a picture of why Jesus had to come and interrupt the world. Because there was no justice and “no man” could do anything about it, there was not an intercessor for us among men. God had to interrupt us because we could not save ourselves. Paul describes this when he says, “For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (Romans 8:3–4).

There was no man able to intercede, because we all stood condemned before a just and righteous God. God himself had to bring salvation to us by sending his own Son as a baby, born into a broken and fallen world. Jesus arrived as an interruption, the best kind of interruption, and he did what we could not. He lived a life without sin and took our sins on the cross, thereby bringing about justice and satisfying God’s wrath.

When God came into each of our lives, he almost certainly came as an interruption, just like Jesus did that first Christmas. Maybe your parents dragged you away from your video games to a church service; maybe someone on a college campus knocked on your door; maybe a neighbor told you about this guy named Jesus.

The Bible tells us that it is now our job to take this interruption to others and tell them about Jesus. We may hesitate to bring interruption into the lives of those around us because we don't want to be a bother. But our unbelieving neighbors will not meet Jesus without a gospel interruption. They're wrapped up in the normal course of a world that believes human power can accomplish justice and righteousness.

However, only one man has ever been able to bring about justice and salvation: Jesus Christ, the one and only Savior. This Christmas, our neighbors need to be interrupted by Jesus, and he wants to use us to do it.

Next Steps: Who is someone in your life who needs to hear about Jesus this Christmas? Write down their name and spend some time praying for them. Then, invite them to a Christmas service this year.

Day 16

Rise and Shine

Ethan Lee

“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.” - Isaiah 60:1–3 (ESV)

In 1847, while riding in a carriage on a bumpy French road, Placide Cappeau penned the beginnings of a poem that would become one of our most recognized songs of the Advent season. He had been commissioned by the local priest to write a poem for the Christmas mass. There in that carriage, he penned the words that would later become the famous song “O Holy Night”:

> O holy night, the stars are brightly shining;
> it is the night of the dear Savior’s birth.
> Long lay the world in sin and error pining,
> till He appeared and the soul felt its worth.
> A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices,
> for yonder breaks a new and glorious morn!

These words remind us of God’s great divine interruption, shining his light into the world’s darkness. The prophet Isaiah points out in verse two that the darkness of sin covers the earth. Apart from God, a “thick darkness” surrounds us, the kind of darkness that leaves us blinded, without even the tiniest glimmer of light—which should sober all of us this Advent. All people have been stained by the darkness of our sin, and we are in desperate need of help.

But as the world lay in darkness, God sent his light to shine upon us. He sent his Son, Jesus, like the breaking of the dawn after a long winter night. God would not allow the darkness to

remain. He came to shine his light into our lives. This is the interruption. This is the gospel, that God shone his light in the darkness we could not escape. God came to us as a baby born in Bethlehem!

Now God sends us to bring the light of Christ to a dark and dying world. Jesus tells us in Matthew 5:16, “Let your light shine before others, so that they may … give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” To everyone who has encountered the gospel light shining into the darkness of our lives, God calls us to rise and shine his glory to those around us!

Next Steps: Whose darkness does Jesus want to interrupt today through you? Pray and ask the Holy Spirit where he wants to use your light today, and then, obey what he tells you to do.

Day 17

The Year of the Lord's Favor

Lesley Hildreth

"The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn." - Isaiah 61:1–2 (ESV)

Right now, we are living in the year of the Lord's favor. Today is the day of salvation! But I know that may be hard for us to believe. There is so much brokenness, pain, and death in the world. Even in the middle of Christmas, when all seems merry and bright, we still can't shake the sense that the world isn't what it should be.

However, in Isaiah 61, we find that Christ brings good news of great joy for all nations, just like the angels told the shepherds at his birth. Jesus came to bring good news to the poor, heal the brokenhearted, proclaim liberty to the captives and freedom to prisoners, and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

In Luke 4, Jesus reads these very words from the prophet Isaiah in the synagogue in Nazareth. He says: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18–19).

On that Sabbath day, Jesus introduced his ministry. He was the Messiah, offering the year of the Lord's favor to his people. He offered salvation, the kingdom of heaven. This is good news! The people were waiting for the Messiah, the only one who could grant the forgiveness of sin and reconcile them back to God. The one that brought healing, freedom, and comfort, making beauty out of ashes. The Messiah had come and proclaimed the good news!

And now, after we receive the good news, we go and tell the whole world about Jesus, the Messiah. Isaiah 61:6 says, “But you shall be called the priests of the LORD; they shall speak of you as the ministers of our God.” Christ’s mission is our mission. We are sent to proclaim the gospel to a dying and broken people, to offer abundant, eternal life with God. We offer forgiveness of sin, healing, comfort, freedom, joy, and peace—all through the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are ministers of reconciliation, and through us God restores his people to himself.

We don’t know when Jesus will return and bring his justice to the world. So we must not delay in getting this good news to the nations. Let our lives be lived in such a way that those around us will ask us to show them the way!

Next Steps: Name one person you know who needs to hear this good news of great joy. Tell them. Invite them to a Christmas service, and plan to have a meal with them afterward!

Day 18

Years of Silence Interrupted by One Night

Raven Fox

“Behold, the Lord has proclaimed to the end of the earth: Say to the daughter of Zion, ‘Behold, your salvation comes; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.’” - Isaiah 62:11 (ESV)

There are so many things we don’t know about the birth of Christ. How much did he weigh? Was he fuzzy headed or bald? How long was he? But the Bible gives plenty of information about that sweet little bundle. This is not a “Mary, did you know?” situation. (Spoiler alert: Mary did know all the things in the song.) What we see in the prophet Isaiah’s writing, specifically in chapters 62–63, tells us a lot about who this divine interruption wrapped up in swaddling clothes really is.

The very first verse of chapter 62 informs us that God will not keep silent, and the salvation of his church will be a bright and burning torch. God will restore glory to his people. Isaiah lays out for us the reaction to Christ and his coming, and the change it will bring. It refers to God’s might and the comfort he will bring his people.

In Isaiah 62:11 it says: “Behold, the LORD has proclaimed to the end of the earth: Say to the daughter of Zion, ‘Behold, your salvation comes; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.’” God promises salvation will come. There will be a Savior, even if we have to wait for him.

And salvation has come.

That first Christmas night, sweet baby Jesus (shoutout to Ricky Bobby) burst onto the world’s stage with the fanfare of angels. The reverent posture of the stunned shepherds represented

the faithful people of God who lived their lives with a quiet yearning for the prophecy to be fulfilled and shock when it actually happened.

I pray that we delight in the miracle of baby Jesus, who is our salvation. Let's savor the Savior as we remember when the world exhaled as the infant cried, when brilliant light flooded our darkest night. In the words of John Piper, "Gather 'round that fire this Advent season. It is warm. It is sparkling with colors of grace. It is healing for a thousand hurts. It is light for dark nights."

Next Steps: Listen to "O Come, All Ye Faithful," and sing your adoration to God throughout your day.

Day 19

The Ultimate Answer to Our Ultimate Need

Mike Calhoun

“Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down …” - Isaiah 64:1 (ESV)

What’s on your Christmas wish list this year? If you are like most of us, your wish list is more about “desires” than “needs.” I can make a great case that I really need the items on my list, but generally, my wife sees right through me and calls my bluff. Most of us are blessed to already have our needs met, and the gifts we seek are a bonus.

Isaiah was not making a “Christmas wish list” when he asked for God to “rend the heavens and come down” (Isaiah 64:1). He was begging God to rip open the sky and break into human history. If Isaiah didn’t get his wish, all of mankind would be left hopeless. Isaiah voices humanity’s ultimate plea.

Just a few verses later, he explains why God’s coming is necessary. Sin had separated humanity from God, including for each of us. The only way we could be saved was for God himself to come down to earth. The good news of Christmas is that God heard our cries and answered our plea by sending his Son to be born as a baby, our Savior swaddled in a manger.

This Christmas, you’ll see Nativity scenes on display, perhaps even in your home. Those little figures are far more than seasonal props. They represent the fulfillment of our most desperate prayer to God. Jesus not only came to be born for us but also to die for us. His cradle points us to his cross.

In 1 Corinthians 15:3–4, the Apostle Paul reminds us that this same Jesus who was born in a manger would die on a cross. But Paul explains that this is not the end of the story. He says the gospel is that Jesus was born, died, and rose again from the dead. Jesus is the ultimate

answer to our ultimate need. We asked God to save us, and Jesus did, for all who would believe. What an amazing gift!

Next Steps: Have you said yes to receiving this gift of salvation? If not, why not pray right now, asking God to forgive your sin and thanking him for providing this gift of salvation? If you have a personal relationship with Jesus, tell someone else!

Day 20

A Christmas Between Bookends

Caleb Martin

“For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind.” - Isaiah 65:17 (ESV)

Christmas has a way of turning up the volume on both joy and grief. The twinkling lights on the tree bring joy, but empty seats at the table remind you of someone you lost or a relationship you always hoped would be different. We sing about peace even though our hearts are riddled with worry and anxiety.

If you feel that tension this Christmas, that’s OK. It’s not ungrateful. You are being honest about your reality. And really, it’s our reality. Isaiah understood this tension too. He spoke to a people who knew the pain of exile, the burdens of injustice, and the reality of their own sin.

We share a reality with Isaiah’s audience. Why? Because like them, we live between two divine bookends.

The first is God’s good creation. When he finished making the world, he declared it “very good.” The second is his promise to make all things new. Isaiah 65 gives us a glimpse of that day: where joy comes to the world, and “no more [do] sins and sorrows grow.” Where “fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains repeat the sounding joy” (like we sing at Christmas, though “Joy to the World” was written about the new world that’s still to come).

The story of Scripture begins with a good creation and moves toward a renewed creation, where sin, suffering, and death are undone, banished from God’s world forever.

But what about the time between the bookends? What do we do here in the middle of the story? We know the goodness God intended, yet we still experience the brokenness of our sin-stained world. This is why Christmas matters. God did not just leave us be. In Jesus, the

Creator entered our broken world to rescue us from sin and defeat death. The child in the manger is the risen King who is already making all things new and will one day return to bring his work to its completion.

Until then, we celebrate what God has done while longing for what he has promised. We can grieve honestly without surrendering hope, because the God who came near in Jesus has not abandoned his creation or his people. The world is not yet as it should be, but because Jesus has come, we know how the story ends, and so we can have hope, no matter what.

Next Steps: Where are you tempted to lose hope this Christmas? Take a moment to remember God's goodness in creation, his faithfulness in sending Jesus, and his promise to make all things new. Listen to "Joy to the World," and imagine the new world that's coming!

Day 21

The Father's Gaze

Trevor Forbis

"All these things my hand has made, and so all these things came to be, declares the Lord. But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word." - Isaiah 66:2 (ESV)

I know it's not Christmas yet, but I celebrate every December 21 as one of the most exciting days of my life. On that day six years ago, our first child was born. I remember the sheer weight of humility as I stood in that hospital room, now the father of a beautiful baby girl. In an instant, every responsibility, achievement, and experience in my life fell by the wayside. My gaze was fixed.

In Isaiah 66:2, the prophet shows us who holds the gaze of God. It reads: "But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word." God looks on the humble.

And we see God's gaze of blessing show up right in the middle of Luke's Christmas story. When the angel tells Mary that she will conceive a son, Jesus, the Son of the Most High, she replies, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). Her humble submission soon gives way to praise echoing with the language of Isaiah 66: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant" (Luke 1:46–48).

Mary sings her joy to be in God's gracious gaze, to be his child who will give birth to his Son. If a father's eyes can be so captured by his child, how much more does our heavenly Father delight to look upon his children? Isaiah and Mary show us that God loves to look upon his people, and we receive his affectionate gaze only through his one and only Son. Jesus is

both the one upon whom God looks and the God who looks upon us with lovingkindness. So we place all our hope in him: the humble Servant who perfectly holds the Father's gaze as he invites us to receive the secure affection from the eyes of our good God in him.

Next Steps: Where are you striving to be seen by God? Humble yourself, bow before his Word, and receive afresh today the one who invites you in to be seen by God. What shame or guilt are you holding onto that makes you hide from God? Bring it before him, and take hold of the steadfast love and mercy available to you through the cross.

Day 22

The Place Where Fear and Joy Meet

Chris Pappalardo

“And the angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.’”
- Luke 1:30–31 (ESV)

Have you ever been excited and scared and happy all at once? I certainly have. My earliest memories of this emotional blender involve sports. I’m a 7-year-old Duke fan, watching Christian Laettner make “the shot” against Kentucky—then recreating it for an hour in my room. I’m a 17-year-old cross country runner, waiting for the official announcement that I’ve qualified for the state championship. In both instances, part of me wants to dance for joy, while another part of me feels like throwing up.

As I got older, this scared-and-happy combination changed venues. I’m fumbling with my rented tie as I pace the hallway outside the sanctuary, preparing to say “I do.” I’m putting on blue scrubs as my wife is rushed into an operating room for an emergency C-section—then moments later, I’m holding my daughter. Fear and joy, both coursing through my overwhelmed heart.

I believe this fusion of feelings is the product of two realities: (1) What is happening matters, and (2) I legitimately don’t know how it’s going to turn out.

That’s where we find Mary in Luke 1. Gabriel shows up with a wild announcement: She is going to have a miracle baby. And not just any baby. This child would be the Messiah Israel had waited centuries to see, the chosen servant who would take all of the wrongs and set them right again. This child would be the Son of God.

To her credit, Mary believed God. But there's no way she knew how it would play out. How could she? Jesus' suffering, his betrayal, his resurrection—it surprised everyone, Mary included.

But here's what Mary did know: She knew that God was using her to make good on his promises made long ago. She knew that the long years of silence were coming to an end. She knew that her helpless baby was somehow God and somehow her little boy.

No wonder, then, that we find Mary with those two paradoxical feelings—troubled yet favored, touched by fear but surrounded by joy. Because that's how divine interruptions work. They create a reality that terrifies us, only to reveal that behind the fear, a life of endless joy awaits.

None of us knows what tomorrow will bring. But because of Jesus, we don't have to. We can embrace the uncertainty, knowing that whatever happens tomorrow, the Lord of tomorrow is already there.

Next Steps: What aspect of your life feels uncertain right now? What would it look like to offer that uncertainty to the strong hands and tender heart of God? Pray with a friend for God to help you both trust Jesus in every area of your life right now.

Day 23

A Bigger Story

Kyle Wilkinson

“But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’” - Matthew 1:20–21 (ESV)

A pregnant teenager.

A fiancé planning to leave.

An angel appearing in a dream.

Imagine hearing the beginning of this unfolding drama for the first time. We often read Matthew 1 with familiarity, knowing, as the writer knew, that Mary conceived a child through the power of the Holy Spirit (v. 18). But what if you didn’t have that knowledge? What if you were Joseph?

Imagine for a moment: Mary is pregnant. She tries to explain that it was the work of God, but you can’t help but feel an overwhelming sense of betrayal. She is unfaithful. And to say it was an act of God. Mary is insane! It’s so hard to think clearly, so you leave for a walk.

“God, what are you doing? What is happening? I was ready to begin my life with Mary! This woman you gave me has betrayed me! How could this happen? How could you let this happen, Lord?”

And yet, “being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame” (v. 19), you resolve to divorce her quietly. This is not what you want. This is not the story you would write for yourself. But that evening you lay your head down and sleep, knowing you have a plan to quietly leave Mary.

Then, an angel of the Lord appears to you in a dream: “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (vv. 20–21).

As you wake, you begin to make sense of God’s plan. Somehow, Mary has actually conceived by the Holy Spirit, and she will bear a son. But not just any son. Jesus will save his people from their sins. The prophecies spoken centuries ago were coming true. God was coming to earth!

Now, back to your life, to the present day. What if God is writing a bigger story than you can see? What if there is an unfolding story you can’t quite understand yet? God is at work, fulfilling his purposes in ways we often cannot see. What would it look like for you to believe that, to trust him, and to wait on him?

Next Steps: What is one area or situation in your life that you are struggling to trust God with? Take a moment to bring it to him in prayer, and ask him to help you trust that he is writing a bigger story, even if you can’t see it yet.

Day 24

’Twas a Night After Christmas

Christy Thornton

“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.” - Matthew 2:10–11 (ESV)

’Twas a night after Christmas at hard journey’s end,
Those long-seeking sojourners, but now resting wise men.
They left their country far away, long ago
To seek out the Christ Child, and to bask in his glow.

You see, ages before, God’s people had come
To their country in exile from Jerusalem,
And though the people returned, their stories remained
Of a Savior who would come, and of a King who would reign.

Heard the Word, saw the star, the wise men they knew
When God interrupts, there’s just one thing to do:
Leave all and follow the way that he leads,
He’ll give light in the darkness, and by faith we proceed.

When they came to the city, King Herod they asked,
“Have you seen the baby? Has the Christ come at last?!”
But Herod was wicked, so he set a trap
To find the wee infant, and for them to draw him a map.

The wise men unknowing, they followed the trail
To finish their journey, Christ Jesus to hail

And just like start, the star lit the way
To the small house of Joseph, where on Mary's lap he lay.

That bundle of joy, all their hope in a child,
God in his fullness as a babe, meek and mild.
Struck down with awe, they fell to their knees,
And worshiped the Savior, laying gifts at his feet.

They brought the best from their land in the East,
But now that they've found him, it seemed only the least.
In the presence of Jesus, all we give feels so small
For he's the true Christmas present, the best gift of them all.

Now that they'd seen him, their joy made complete,
The sojourning wise men fin'lly resting asleep.
That eve after Christmas, God sent a dream
To go back the long way and block Herod's scheme.

Their story ends there, but what about you?
Are you still seeking? What will you do?
For wise men still seek him and follow his light,
And all who seek him will find him, their faith will be sight.

So press on to Jesus no matter the cost,
For he gives in abundance, and in him nothing is lost,
Trust him for your journey, through trials and stress,
'Til the day that we see him and enter his rest.

Next Steps: Remember of all the presents you've ever received, Jesus is the best one. Tell someone today why Jesus is your true gift this Christmas.