



ADVENT

2020 DEVOTIONAL GUIDE

— *By Blake Sherman* —

FIRST WOODWAY ADVENT DEVOTIONAL

2020

Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but

**LET GOD TRANSFORM YOU
INTO A NEW PERSON
BY CHANGING THE WAY YOU THINK.**

*Then you will learn to know God's will for you,
which is good and pleasing and perfect.*

—Romans 12:2 (NLT)

Our prayer is that as you participate in these daily devotions, along with prayer, obedience, and community, you will come to know his good, pleasing, and perfect will.

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FROM DEEP DARKNESS TO LIGHT

*“The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness
a light has dawned.” – Isaiah 9:2*

In the middle of the night, you hear someone say, “I’m going to turn on a light.” What do you do? Out of anticipation, you probably clench your eyes shut. Your eyes have become adjusted to the dark and now you must brace yourself for the light about to come flooding in.

“Advent” comes from the Latin word *adventus*, which simply means *to come* or *to arrive*. During the season of Advent, we look toward the coming of Jesus Christ. This means we look, remember, and reflect upon His birth. However, we also look toward His second coming. He will return again. For this reason, Advent is a time of expectation, preparation, and wonder. Fredrick Buechner explained Advent this way: *“The extraordinary thing that is about to happen is matched only by the extraordinary moment just before it happens. Advent is the name of that moment.”*ⁱ

Advent is hearing the lights are about to turn on. You must react and prepare for the light to come pouring in. Will you clench your eyes shut to protect the darkness you’ve lived in or will you open your eyes wide, ready to receive all the light will bring?

Open your eyes to the light that God has unleashed through His son. Live – not just in this season, but your entire life – looking for the light that comes with Jesus. You were not made for the land of deep darkness. Rejoice! A light has dawned. Jesus has come and is coming again!

DWELLING WITH GOD

“So the Lord God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had taken.” – Genesis 3:23

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” – John 1:14

The Colombian government approached a marketing executive named Jose Miguel Sokoloff with an interesting assignment. They asked him to create a marketing campaign that would convince guerrilla rebels to demobilize and reenter society. The marketing firm tried several radio campaigns with recorded testimonies, but it didn't work. Distant radio campaigns won't reach the rebel, and the same is true of us.

In Genesis 3, we learn humankind was created to dwell with God, but through our rebellion we were banished from life with Him. Whether or not we know it, it's the desire of every human to live with God again. Yet, through our sin we continue to wander like restless rebels outside His presence. How can we go home to a life with God?

In 2010, Sokoloff ran a new campaign called, “Operation Christmas.” At strategic places deep in the jungle where rebels frequented, the marketing firm strung Christmas lights along 75 ft tall trees with motion sensors. When rebels walked by, the lights would turn on next to a sign that read, “If Christmas can come to the jungle, you can come home.”ⁱⁱ This campaign demobilized 331 rebels. The beauty of Christmas is that our God didn't shout at us from the Heavens to come home with a divine radio campaign – Jesus came to us. The Son of God dwelled among us. I don't know where you are or what you're experiencing. However, I know that if Jesus can come to where you are, then you can come home to God.

LEARNING TO WAIT

*“I remain confident of this:
I will see the goodness of the LORD
in the land of the living.
Wait for the LORD;
be strong and take heart
and wait for the LORD.” – Psalm 27:13-14*

We live in a society of instant gratification. We can rent movies instantaneously through our TV. Our watches vibrate to interrupt our daily lives with breaking news and sport updates. We scoff at online orders taking longer than a week. In many ways, waiting has become a lost art. Yet, waiting has been a practice of God’s people since the beginning. God has always used waiting to captivate and form our interior life. Our culture, though its pursuit of efficiency and recapturing of time, has lost the art of waiting.

One writer keenly observed, “It is a pity that we have stripped so many walls of their crucifixes and put clocks in their place. We are surely more punctual than our ancestors, but we are spiritually poorer. Contemplating a crucifix, many of our forebears had a different idea of how to make use of time. A crucifix may not tell the hour, but it offers crucial advice about what do with the moment we are living in.”ⁱⁱⁱ

In our waiting we learn to look, think, and trust toward God. Imagine the people of God as they awaited the coming of the Messiah. What joy they anticipated! Still, there were many who didn’t wait, but ran off looking to fill their time with other gods and treasure. Let us not make the same mistake. When called to wait, let’s look to Him. Anticipation is not a waste of time.

LOOKING FOR THE MESSIAH

The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. – Luke 3:15-16

Perhaps every child who has ever taken a road trip has asked his or her parents, "Are we there yet?" Savvy parents learn quickly to find a way to nip this question in the bud. As the parent, you might give your child a reference point for the journey. You tell them about a landmark or a certain street; "Once you see the ____, you will know that we have arrived."

The scripture says the people were waiting expectantly, and they were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. In other words, "Are we there yet? Are you the one we've been waiting for?" Like a parent driving in the front seat, John gives them a clue on how they know they've arrived. When the Messiah arrives, He will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. John's baptism initiated followers into a new way of thinking; but the Messiah—Jesus—will initiate people into a new life with the Holy Spirit within them.

We have now received that Spirit through Jesus, but let's not lose the posture of expectant people looking for the Messiah. He still moves in the lives of everyone around us. Fortunately, we now know what He looks like and the work He is about.

This season as you catch up with old friends over coffee, sit down for meals with your family, and rush about stores buying presents, be on the lookout for the Messiah. Wake up each day on the lookout for the work of God. Ask the question, "God, is that you at work?" If it is God at work, follow up with "How can I help?" Look for Him because He always goes ahead of us.

ALL THINGS NEW

*He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!"
Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy
and true." – Revelation 21:5*

The Greek language uses two different words for "new." One word is *neos*, which means brand new. The other word is *kainos*, which means something old that is made new. In this vision of Jesus' second coming, which word did he use? *Kainos*.^{iv}

As Jesus ushers in the Kingdom He doesn't say, "Behold, I'm getting rid of this mess of a world you've made and bringing in something completely new." He doesn't say that. Rather, Jesus arrives into our broken world and in love declares He can make something new out of this broken world. Jesus is in the business of healing and restoring the desecrated, broken, and hurt. Isn't that what His life and ministry already showed us?

Jesus didn't wipe out sinners. He offered healing and salvation. He will make people and this world *kainos*. As you look toward celebrating His birth and living in the light of His second coming, pause for a moment to consider how our wonderful King heals.

You might dismiss the existence of Christmas miracles. I understand. We've seen far too many cheesy, unrealistic Christmas movies to entertain such thoughts, but don't be too hasty to throw out miracles. During Christmas, our culture of consumerism cultivates false wonder to prey on our longing for healing, but the Messiah doesn't. He doesn't turn a blind eye to our real pain or use twinkly lights to distract us. No, He sees it, and He has the power to heal and remake it into something new. Over 2,000 years ago a baby was born that would bring about the healing of our brokenness. The original Christmas miracle is real, and you can receive it. Call upon Him. His name is Jesus.

JOINING THE UNDERCURRENT

Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him.

There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four.

She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem. – Luke 2:25; 36-38.

Before a giant ocean wave breaks and crashes down, a great undercurrent of water pulls back and gathers itself, building up immense energy. The same is true of God and His movement. Yes, He can definitely surprise us. Yet a study of scripture and church history reveals there is often a hidden build up to His arrival. In Exodus, God hears the cries coming from His people enslaved in Egypt. In Acts, earnest prayer brings about jail breaks and more. In recent times, the great Hebrides revival began with the small prayers of two eighty-year-old Scottish women.

Here in the Christmas story we encounter Simeon and Anna. They were waiting, pleading, fasting, and praying for the consolation of Israel, the arrival of the Messiah. Simeon and Anna were part of the great undercurrent that led to the arrival of the Messiah. They were in on what God was doing. Old age, cynicism, and circumstance didn't get the best of these two. Day by day they awoke in prayerful expectation that God would soon move.

What if we lifted our families, our church, our city and our nation up to God in prayer? Could we become part of the great undercurrent that precedes His arrival? Do we expect God to move in power again? Maybe God is calling you to be a Simeon or an Anna for this generation.

BEHIND THE NATIVITY SCENE

Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. – Hebrews 10:19-22

The true story of Christmas isn't one of cheap joy. The nativity scene is certainly wondrous, but the spiritual setting behind it is darker than we'd like to acknowledge. Fleming Rutledge writes, "The Advent season encourages us to resist denial and face our situation as it really is. It might be said of Advent that it is not for the faint of heart. To grasp the depth of the human predicament, one has to be willing to enter into the very worst."^v Rutledge explains that to see the true wonder and gift of the season, we must be willing to see our great need. Only when we acknowledge our need will we learn to rejoice fully for the gift. This passage reminds us where we were and what we've received.

Sinful, spiritually bankrupt, and sometimes twisted people like ourselves would not have been allowed to enter into the holy of holies in the temple. The holy of holies is where God's presence appeared. There was a veil separating people from it. To enter without being rightly cleansed would be to risk death. Through Jesus' incarnation and sacrifice He provided a way, so we can now draw near into God's presence with full assurance. He flipped the script. Where at one time we feared entering His holy presence, now we are beckoned to draw near! Remember the state we were in and the gift we've now received. What is keeping you from running to His presence? It's certainly not God – there has been a way made through Jesus.

PREPARE THE WAY

John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'" – John 1:23

John the Baptist had been causing quite a stir in the religious community. His ministry was having such an impact that people started to ask if John was the Messiah, Elijah, or the prophet that was mentioned in Deuteronomy 18. To respond to this frenzy, religious leaders sent a group of representatives to ask John who he was. He quickly dismissed any assumptions people had placed on him. Instead, he replied with a prophecy found in Isaiah 40. He was the one calling in the wilderness to make straight the way for the Lord.

In the ancient world, whenever a dignitary or royal person was about to visit a realm, a message would go out and people would begin preparing the way. They would remove all obstacles in the road and try to make the way as smooth as possible. John is, in effect, saying, "Don't get hung up on who I am, instead look at the King in which I prepare the way for." When asked to offer up his identity, John defined himself in relation to the coming Messiah.

Where are you preparing the way for the King? Too often we are preoccupied with our arrival into people's lives, so we spend our time cultivating our own honor and prestige with them. Let's not define ourselves outside of our King. Instead let's spend our days dwarfed by the true royalty that is Jesus, and invest in preparing the path between Him and all types of people and places filled with obstacles, bumps, and needs. Where is God calling you to meet those needs, to prepare the way – not for yourself, but for the King?

WAKE UP

And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh. – Romans 13:11-14

Some of us seem to have trouble waking up to our morning alarm. If I don't get up when my alarm goes off, my wife has permission to try and shove me out of bed. Though it might come as a jolt to my system, I'm thankful to be woken up. There is so much to do and prepare before the day breaks. If I don't prepare, I won't be ready for the day.

In this passage, the Apostle Paul is giving us a shove out of bed. The alarm has begun to blare. Jesus has come, and we know He will return again. So we must get ready for the day of His return. Yes, it might still be dark out – but if we don't begin to prepare, then the day of His arrival might catch us unaware. Wake up! Paul entreats the followers of Jesus. Put off the childish things of the night. Awake from your slumber. Start to live as if you are a citizen of His Kingdom. Live as if today is the day, as if now is the season of His return. You are to live the life to which He has called you.

My guess is that you've heard the alarm blaring in the background for some time. I hope you've heard that the Son of God has come, walked among us, lived a perfect life, died on the cross, and risen again. Now, for all who believe, the Holy Spirit lives within us, and we await the King's return. What's it going to take for you to get up? The night is nearly over – wake up and get dressed!

THE SACRIFICE AND REWARD OF JOSEPH

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. – Matthew 1:24

If obedience to God meant being perceived as a failure, would you still obey? If life with God meant being shamed by your neighbors and family, would you still pursue Him?

Joseph found out that his fiancée, Mary, was pregnant. They hadn't slept together, so we can only imagine how he might have felt. But surely he felt some degree of outrage, betrayal, and confusion. If Mary had committed adultery, he could either publicly shame her by bringing her before the religious authorities or he could divorce her privately. The first option would end in divorce, a return of the dowry, and diverting shame toward Mary to protect Joseph's honor. The second option was quieter but still resulted in divorce. It was a mess of a situation. Then one night in a dream, an angel commanded Joseph to care for Mary and the Messiah that she carried. To submit to God's command would mean public shame, but Joseph awoke and obeyed. Joseph accepted Jesus as his son. Daniel Darling explains, "Joseph could bear the shame in answering God's call, and we can bear the shame that sometimes comes with being a Christian because Jesus bore our shame. We can live as outcasts in a world dominated by the devil because Jesus was the ultimate outcast."^{vi}

Joseph's sacrifice was his reputation, but his reward was life with God. He accepted being an outcast to live a life with the outcast we call Jesus. Don't let the opinions of this world dictate faithfulness to God's calling. Wherever He calls you, wherever He is – join Him there.

SERIOUSLY RELIGIOUS OR SERIOUSLY JOYFUL

*The desert and the parched land will be glad;
 the wilderness will rejoice and blossom.
 Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom;
 it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy.
 The glory of Lebanon will be given to it,
 the splendor of Carmel and Sharon;
 they will see the glory of the LORD,
 the splendor of our God. – Isaiah 35:1-2*

Sometimes in our faithful pursuit of God, we can fall into the thinking that the picture of devotion is becoming seriously religious. We can become stern, laser focused workers intent upon carrying out the will of God. We think, the world is covered in darkness, so we have to get to work for God. Don't waste time laughing, joking around and singing songs! Though our effort is noble, we are in danger of missing the point. God is bringing forth His Kingdom, and this should be a cause for joy! Do you believe our God to be a stern, serious, and calloused God? Our God is definitely serious, but in a different way.

In a letter, C.S. Lewis, once remarked, "Joy is the serious business of heaven."^{vii} What a wonderful thought. The serious business of heaven is joy! Why would we expect the author of life to have any other agenda? He can bring the dead to life. He can bring blossoms out of the desert.

There is a reason we sing "Joy to the World" at Christmas. The glory of the Lord came - into a world with serious problems - and that is a cause for serious joy. We sing joy, not out of religious obligation, but because it's true. Real joy has come with Jesus. Prepare your heart for joy because that's the serious business of the Kingdom.

ALERT AND READY

Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming. – 1 Peter 1:13

During World War II, Dietrich Bonhoeffer began teaching at an underground seminary in Finkelwald. The discipleship that took place at the seminary was purposeful and intense. As Bonhoeffer's friends began to hear about the radical pursuit of Jesus coming from the seminary, they grew concerned. They worried that the seminary might be raising up fanatics. One day, Wilhelm Niesel came to visit the seminary because he was concerned about the route Bonhoeffer was taking. In response to Niesel's concerns, Bonhoeffer took Niesel on a rowing trip to the Oder Sound and a small hike up a hill. At the top of the hill, Bonhoeffer showed Niesel a large field filled with runways, fighter planes, and Nazi soldiers running hurriedly at work. Bonhoeffer explained that these Nazi soldiers were preparing for a kingdom of hardness and cruelty. In turn, Bonhoeffer told Niesel that he must prepare disciples for a different kind of kingdom, the Kingdom of God.^{viii}

Make no mistake, our King is returning. Yes, we might see the soldiers of this world preparing for their little kingdoms, but we won't get caught up in the kingdoms of this world. There is an unseen war going on. Our King has already won. Yet, as a decapitated snake head can still bite, the devil is still at work. Don't fall asleep or lean back – God is still calling on you for action. Keep your mind alert, remain fully sober, and set your hope on the grace that comes with Jesus.

THE WORK OF GRACE

For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.

But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.

– 1 Corinthians 15:9-10

Klyne Snodgrass, a New Testament scholar, reflecting on this passage wrote, “Grace is not just a feel-good word. My best definition of grace is this: grace is not something God gives, but God giving us himself. That is what changes our identity. You cannot have the gift apart from the Giver.”^{ix}

Grace is what happens to our lives when God arrives. God’s entry completely transforms our identity. The Apostle Paul had a heartbreaking past in that he was a persecutor of the Christians, but God arrived and changed everything. We learn by God’s grace that our history never has full control over our destiny.

The history of the world before Christ arrived was certainly dark. Death and sin seemed to have the final word. The birth of Christ in a manger was a moment of grace. Suddenly, light burst through the darkness, and the work of grace began. Let that work have its full effect in your life. God’s arrival in your life has changed everything. Yes, you have a history and a past, but by God’s grace you are now alive. He has arrived. He is with you. Your history matters, but it’s not defining. A God-bathed future is possible because of His arrival. And of course, His arrival is the arrival of grace.

THE MYSTERIOUS GIFT

Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure. – 1 John 3:2-3

It's that time of year when presents begin to appear underneath the tree. Think back to when you were a kid, and you saw presents placed under the tree. Certainly, there were a few presents you could safely deduce their contents (such as the one wrapped in the shape of a football.) However, other presents were harder to figure out – an utter mystery. The only insight to be gained was by studying the giver of the gift. If it was from your grandmother, for example, maybe it was a sweater. If it was from your dad, maybe it was a pocket-knife.

John doesn't know exactly what our inheritance as children of God will be like when Christ returns. Who will we be? We don't know what the gift is; however, we have somewhat of an understanding because we know the Giver. What we will be hasn't been made known – but we know we will be like Jesus.

Because Jesus is pure, whoever has this hope seeks purity. When He arrives again, we want to be fully prepared to demonstrate we've been expectantly waiting. One of the many ways we demonstrate that expectation is by becoming more like Him – by pursuing purity ourselves. Where is God inviting you to purify yourself? Take joy in knowing that as you purify yourself, you are growing in your knowledge of the Giver and His gifts.

THE MAGI BOW TO TRUE ROYALTY

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. – Matthew 2:9-11

There isn't much that we know about the Magi from the East. We often assume there were three because three gifts were given. It's possible that there was in fact an entire caravan of people because we read that all of Jerusalem was disturbed by their inquiry. They were also likely men well versed in the interpretation of dreams and astrology that served a king in a distant land. Whoever they were, when the Magi saw the star, they believed it fulfilled the prophecy in the book of Micah that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. Seeking the one true King, they first stopped by a place of earthly royalty. Much to King Herod's embarrassment and frustration, he had heard nothing of this new king. Therefore, the Magi continued their search.

At long last they found the place where the Messiah was. Yet, they didn't find what they had expected. There wasn't a groomed prince sitting on a throne surrounded by royal guard. All the pomp and fanfare one might expect for a king was absent. Instead they found a boy, a member of a poor family, living in an otherwise nondescript neighborhood. Nonetheless, these foreign dignitaries recognized true royalty when they encountered it. They lowered themselves, bowing to the ground, and offering up whatever gifts they had. As the prophecy foretold, here is the True King.

KINGDOMS TOPPLED BY A BABY

And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. – Matthew 2:12

Stop for a moment and imagine what it would have been like to be in the room when the Magi asked Herod, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” Awkward. Herod the Great, the self-proclaimed King of the Jews, would’ve no doubt felt threatened by their question. Herod was known for being a ruthless leader. He was known for stomping out any rivals and executing those who opposed him. In response to the Magi’s question, Herod cooked up a little scheme to track down this new king and kill him. He lied, telling the Magi that he too desired to worship this king, so they should report back when they find Him. We learn from the verse today that God would not allow the Magi to be tricked and He redirected their course home away from Herod.

The presence of the true King will always feel like a threat to the kings of this world. They know they only have two options: they may either worship him or kill him. We learn from this verse that the latter option isn’t a viable one. This baby King already demonstrated, through crushing Herod’s scheme, that he could topple any earthly kingdom. Too often, we respond to God’s work like a Herod. We try to manipulate and protect our makeshift kingdoms when we should be falling to our knees in worship. Surrender your personal kingdom to His rule. Dallas Willard explains the effect of our surrender, “Caught up in his active rule, our deeds become an element in God’s eternal history.”^x Let’s not cling to our reign and rule through petty schemes – let’s surrender to His active rule and become a part of God’s eternal history!

MARY'S SONG

And Mary said:

*“My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed...”*
– Luke 1:46-55

Have you ever heard something true, but the weight of it didn't register with you until later? Perhaps this is what happens with Mary. She had already heard from an angel that she would give birth to the Messiah. However, it was after a meeting with her cousin Elizabeth that she wrote a song. It's been said that Mary's song, *the Magnificat*, reads less like a Christmas poem and more like a song of revolution.^{xi} N.T. Wright said about this song, “It's the gospel before the gospel, a fierce bright shout of triumph thirty weeks before Bethlehem, thirty years before Calvary and Easter. It goes with a swing and a clap and a stamp. It's all about God, and it's all about revolution.”^{xii}

This song articulates that the coming King will usher in His Kingdom and bless the most unlikely people. We read that He's going to scatter the proud, bring down the mighty, and send the rich away empty. He will extend mercy to those who fear him, exalt the humble, and fill the hungry. He is turning the ways of the world upside down. Mary already knows this to be true because she is among those of humble estate. God is coming for those in great need, so get ready. In short, this song is singing to those who've waited for God, “Good news! Good news!” Take a moment and read over Luke 1:46-55. Celebrate in that same spirit today. Rejoice!

THE WILD, UNCONTAINABLE LOVE OF GOD

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. – John 3:16-17

One of the most well-known verses in the Bible would have to be John 3:16. It's become a global invitation to the hurting of the world. It's become a slogan of rebellion against the darkness of the world. John 3:16 has been advertised on Superbowl commercials and smuggled into countries as if it were dangerous contraband. What is it about this verse? Well, in short, this verse offers unwavering hope. It's a hope that no flashy entertainment or domineering dictator can control.

God has sent his Son into the world, so that anyone who believes in Him will not die but have life! Furthermore, God didn't send Jesus to condemn us but to save us. What is better than that? That's the type of news worth spending money to buy a Superbowl ad. That's the type of news worth risking your life to share it with others.

May we pause to reflect on why this news has come to be? It's not that God became fed up with us. It's not that God was insecure about our pain. None of that. It was, "*For God so loved...*" The reason He came was because He loved us. Brennan Manning wrote about God's love, "When I conclude that I can now cope with the awful love of God, I have headed for the shallows to avoid the deeps. I could more easily contain Niagara Falls in a teacup than I can comprehend the wild, uncontainable love of God."^{xiii} This is a challenging idea, but certainly good news! Gaze into the manger and rejoice over the wild, uncontainable love of God. Don't give up rejoicing and thinking you have a handle on the expanse of His love. It's at that moment you've headed for the shallows to avoid the deeps.

THE LORD REIGNS FOREVER

*He is the Maker of heaven and earth,
 the sea, and everything in them—
 he remains faithful forever.
 He upholds the cause of the oppressed
 and gives food to the hungry.
 The Lord sets prisoners free,
 the Lord gives sight to the blind,
 the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down,
 the Lord loves the righteous.
 The Lord watches over the foreigner
 and sustains the fatherless and the widow,
 but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.
 The Lord reigns forever,
 your God, O Zion, for all generations. – Psalm 146:6-10*

This Psalm begins in verse 6 with a grand, cosmic view of God – the Maker of heaven and earth. Images of Genesis begin to flicker in our mind as we remember that God simply spoke creation into existence with His transcendent and cosmic power. But this splendid image also raises a possible problem: If God is so grand, how could He know our small everyday concerns?

To this question, verses 7-9 fire back. The Maker of heaven and earth is also the one who upholds the oppressed, hands food to the hungry, grants sight to the blind, watches the foreigner, and takes care of the fatherless and widow. This is how our Lord forever reigns. The breadth of His power is greater than we can fathom, yet it's demonstrated among us. The Psalms spoke of this reality, and we see it confirmed through Jesus sharing our humanity. The Lord that formed the cosmos walked on this earth, placing His hands on the brokenhearted. A.W. Tozer can best summarize these thoughts, "We need never shout across the spaces to an absent God. He is nearer than our own soul, closer than our most secret thoughts."^{xiv}

THE SERVANT KING

For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. – Mark 10:45

The past several days we've reflected on the sheer power of our God. There is no earthly king or scheme that can contend with Him. Sometimes it seems Jesus wasn't very practical or efficient. If Jesus had all the power that we read about, why did He spend his time with the disinherited, the sinners, the misfits and the lowly? To be honest, it doesn't seem a wise use of His abilities. We are learning that our Divine King was born into a world of darkness to wage war in a different way – He came to serve and to give His life.

Why didn't Jesus just wipe out everyone who didn't follow His way? Henri Nouwen remarked that many leaders are tempted to demonstrate power. Nouwen reflects further, "What makes the temptation of power so seemingly irresistible? Maybe it is that power offers an easy substitute for the hard task of love."^{xv} It would've been much easier for Jesus to destroy all those who didn't walk in His way. Condemning the world would've been easier than to be condemned on a cross. Taking the life of others is easier than giving your life. Of course, none of these are options when considering the way of Jesus. Instead He chose to give His life for the salvation of those He loves.

By God's grace, Jesus was sent for the *hard task of love* so the world might be saved. If this is how our King led, why should we do any different? Wherever God has called you, don't give up on the hard task of love.

THE MOUNTAIN OF THE LORD

In the last days

*the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established
as the highest of the mountains;
it will be exalted above the hills,
and all nations will stream to it.
Many peoples will come and say,*

*"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the temple of the God of Jacob.
He will teach us his ways,
so that we may walk in his paths." – Isaiah 2:2-3*

Did you experience childlike wonder the first time you saw a magnet? Magnets seemed magical. You could drop a magnet and instead of it falling to the ground it would fly toward the nearest piece of metal. From a child's vantage point, magnets defy reality. Of course, as adults we understand better the unseen reality of electrons spinning like tops around the nucleus of an atom. The magnet flying through the air might've appeared like a contradiction of reality, but it actually pointed to a deeper unseen reality.

We read that God will establish His Kingdom as if on the highest mountain. At this point, all the nations will stream toward Him. They will seek to dwell with the Lord, to learn His ways, and walk in His paths. We will stream toward the mountain. At first, this doesn't make sense. After all, rivers don't flow upwards toward the tops of mountains. They flow downward. We could be tempted to say that when Christ arrives our hearts will begin to defy reality, because we're made to stream away from Him. Yet, that isn't the deeper *unseen reality*. In the words of Augustine, "Our heart is restless until it rests in you."^{xvi} We were made to be with Him. Come, let us go the mountain. Christ has made a way!

THE KING IS COMING!

*Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion!
Shout, Daughter Jerusalem!
See, your king comes to you,
righteous and victorious,
lowly and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.
– Zechariah 9:9*

The word “gospel” is a crucial word in our faith. The original Greek word for gospel is εὐαγγέλιον (euangelion). It’s typically translated as “good news.” Although the word gospel is most commonly associated with the New Testament, that wasn’t the original source of the word. In the time of Jesus and the apostles, gospel was a nonreligious word carrying political connotations. Typically, a gospel was a public announcement. For example, if someone had been victorious in battle, or if there was an arrival of a king, or a birth of royalty – they would send a messenger ahead to deliver the “good news.” The good news typically meant a shift or change in a kingdom. Good news would’ve spread like wildfire in a community. You would’ve gone knocking on doors, shaking people by the shoulders and hollering at the top of your lungs.

It’s no surprise that we would use the word gospel to describe Jesus, His birth, and His ministry, because He is a King and He is ushering in His Kingdom. Word has gone out ahead, “Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious.” We are days away from bursting into song at His arrival. Even before the arrival, we are to rejoice and shout. If this is truly the good news, then who do you need to tell. Surely, there is someone who needs his or her door to be knocked on, shaken by shoulders and invited to join in the song. Who is it?

A SIGN

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.
– Isaiah 7:14

The Lord will give you a sign. What does He mean by sign? There are all types of signs. There are signs that can *get you places* like, “Exit now to see the largest potato in Idaho.” There are other signs that signal you’ve *arrived at a place*, “Behold! The largest potato in Idaho.” Even still, this isn’t the end of the ways we could interpret a sign. It could be a reference to a *unique signature*, “Would you like to sign your name on the potato?” It could be a *gesture to signal* before an event, “When I give the sign, let’s steal the potato.” All jokes aside, a sign can carry a wealth of meaning.

The Lord tells us when the virgin gives birth to a son named, “Immanuel” (God with Us), that will be the sign. Which definition of sign? I’m sure we could make an argument for one definition, but to me it seems fitting to include both noun and verb definitions of the word. When God speaks things happen, move, and create. Jesus is a sign of *direction*, “I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). He is a sign that we’ve *arrived*, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father...” (John 14:9). He has also brought His *unique signature* on our lives, “For we are his workmanship created in Christ Jesus...” (Eph. 2:10). He is the *signal of the big event*, “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near” (Matt. 4:17). When Mary gave birth to Jesus it was an event chock-full of meaning. Jesus Himself is the sign: the sign of how to get to God, a sign that God has arrived, a sign that God’s work is a unique signature over our new lives, and also that God has now signaled - it’s time for action.

PODUNK BETHLEHEM?

*“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
though you are small among the clans of Judah,
out of you will come for me
one who will be ruler over Israel,
whose origins are from of old,
from ancient times.” – Micah 5:2*

We’ve had quite a buildup reflecting, celebrating and praying upon the arrival of the Messiah. On the edge of our seats we’re waiting to hear where our Savior will be born! It must be somewhere religiously relevant like Jerusalem or maybe culturally relevant like Rome. The real answer would furrow our brow. Much to our surprise, the Savior’s birthplace is almost the opposite of important, it’s Bethlehem.

Bethlehem is also known as the City of David. If you remember, King David was a Bethlehemite. Jesus being born in Bethlehem demonstrates the continuity between Himself and the line of David. However, from this prophecy we learn something else about God’s plan. God chooses Bethlehem knowing how small it would be, “...though you are small among the clans of Judah...”

To begin God’s great rescue mission, He chose what He thought was most fitting. God chose little Bethlehem. Forgive us, Lord, for how often we imagine that real Kingdom work is “out there” somewhere. Forgive us when we believe we aren’t called to cutting edge Kingdom work because we don’t live in that relevant city. Forgive us when we think we know the limit of God’s work in our cities and lives. Is Central Texas unimportant in the eyes of the world? Perhaps. But in God’s eyes? Not a chance. Jesus is still using all types of Bethlehems, Podunks, Wacos, and Woodways as launch points for His Kingdom. Dwell with us, God, we welcome you!

THE UNINVITED GUEST

And she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them. – Luke 2:7

There was no guest room available, so our Savior was born in a barn and cradled in a manger. We've often mentioned this fact as an interesting pictorial detail in the Christmas story. However, this small line fittingly characterized much of Jesus' reception into the world. He would be rejected by his hometown (Luke 4:29). Other villages would reject Him as well (Luke 9:53). He and His disciples would have no place to lay their head (Matthew 8:20). Our world in need of rescue responded to the Savior as if He were an uninvited guest. Thomas Merton offers a beautiful reflection on this,

"Into this world, this demented inn, in which there is absolutely no room for him at all, Christ comes uninvited. But because he cannot be at home in it, because he is out of place in it, and yet he must be in it, his place is with those others for whom there is no room."^{xvii}

Though this world might offer rejection to Jesus and His disciples, there is still a place of refuge. The scripture clearly articulates that security – a true family – is offered to those who receive Jesus, "Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:12). Who are we to receive the Savior? How is it my door, my heart, that He knocks on today? I should be begging Him for refuge! Still, He stands at the door and knocks. To all who receive Him, He gives the right to become children of God. In a bizarre twist of hospitality, we open our doors to invite Jesus in. In turn, He prepares a place for us with the Heavenly Father. We, deserving banishment, have been invited through Jesus.

THE NIGHT DISRUPTED

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. – Luke 2:8-11

At night, all was quiet, it's not a stretch of the imagination to assume that it was dreary. Shepherds were sitting still watching over their flocks. Maybe one shepherd, leaning on his staff, noticed how quiet everything had gotten. Suddenly, celestial fireworks shot off across the sky, bursting with an angel army singing, "Glory to God in the highest!" The Messiah had been born. The long-awaited day had come – the night disrupted.

Were the shepherds waiting for this night, or were they caught off guard? Were they expectant of God's arrival, or had they forgotten He keeps His promises? The season of Advent wakes us out of our numbness. Once Christmas season arrives, it floods the collective imagination of our culture. There is a change in the air. Alan Noble illustrates the change well, "Nothing captures this change so powerfully as Christmas lights. For about a month the night sky is lit up with color, enchanting the suburbs and hinting at a transcendent truth: *this time is not like other times.*"^{xviii}

Without a doubt, the shepherds would agree: this time is not like other times. Many families have wonderful Christmas Eve traditions. Maybe you join others at the church for worship. Perhaps, you drive around looking at Christmas lights. Extended family pours into your home - board games, laughter and hot chocolate late into the night. Whatever it is, don't miss that this time is not like other times. Join the heavenly host in song! The long night has been disrupted – the news spreads at the speed of light breaking through the dark.

A CHILD IS BORN

*For to us a child is born,
 to us a son is given,
 and the government will be on his shoulders.
 And he will be called
 Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
 Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
 Of the greatness of his government and peace
 there will be no end.
 He will reign on David's throne
 and over his kingdom,
 establishing and upholding it
 with justice and righteousness
 from that time on and forever.
 The zeal of the Lord Almighty
 will accomplish this. – Isaiah 9:6-7*

The day has come. Reflecting over this passage, two words come to mind: “given” and “forever.” This morning, while many open presents, we must keep in mind the true gift is Jesus. Please don’t glaze over this fact, because you think it an overused cliché. Jesus is the true gift.

Every single gift we open this Christmas morning, no matter how meaningful, will fade. Every gift you’ve ever received will fade. There is only one gift we may receive that is forever. Read the things listed of Jesus – “Wonderful counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace,” “His government and peace *there will be no end,*” and He will rule His Kingdom, “with justice and righteous *from that time on and forever.*”

This eternal gift has been given. Father, we celebrate today that you sent your Son so we may be saved. May we spend our day the way we should spend our lives – complete worship given to the Savior, the King, the Master, the Lord, the Word, the Christ, the Lamb, the Light of the World, the Son of David, your Son – Jesus.

INFINITE AND AN INFANT

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him.

He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

– Colossians 1:15-17

You've come to adore the newborn Son of God. You peer over the edge of the manger and see the child. Fully human yet fully God, wrapped in cloth. From the scripture, we learn that Jesus is more than just a prophet or a rabbi. He is those things and more. He is the image of the invisible God and by Him everything was created. In Him, all things hold together.

Many newborn babies spend their first few weeks with clenched fists. In some sense, it demonstrates to us that a child is new to the world. They are in need of time to develop and get used to this world. Our Savior had little hands like this once. But make no mistake about it, Jesus isn't unaware of creation. Jesus was actually there before the creation of all things. Because of Jesus— by His own hand, in fact — everything in heaven and on earth was created. Its very purpose in existence is to glorify Him. Don't believe for a second that the clenched hand of this baby is powerless. It would be more accurate to view this small clenched hand as if it were holding all things — the cosmos, the universe — together. Charles Spurgeon in a sermon beautifully remarked, "And now wonder, ye angels, the Infinite has become an infant. He, upon whose shoulders the universe doth hang, hangs at His mother's breast. He who created all things, and bears up the pillars of creation, hath now become so weak that He must be carried..."^{xix}

Jesus lived a fully human life. He had to eat, drink and sleep like the rest of us. However, let's never forget that He is also — and has been since before time began — fully God. When we come to adore Him in the manger, we come to look upon the infant and the infinite.

COME, FOLLOW ME

As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people." At once they left their nets and followed him. – Matthew 4:18-20

I'm always stirred by the simplicity of Jesus' invitation. Jesus didn't invite by issuing an exam on right doctrine and selecting the cream of the crop. He didn't try to steal away the brightest and best from other rabbi schools. Instead, Jesus walked up to a bunch of fishermen and said, "Come, follow me." Dietrich Bonhoeffer provides great insight on this invitation:

"Until that day, everything had been different. They could remain in obscurity, pursuing their work as the quiet in the land, observing the law and waiting for the coming of the Messiah. But now he has come, and his call goes forth. Faith can no longer mean sitting still and waiting - they must rise and follow him. The call frees them from all earthly ties and binds them to Jesus Christ alone. They must burn their boats and plunge into absolute insecurity in order to learn the demand and the gift of Christ."^{xx}

There was a time for living quietly in the land, but now Jesus' call goes forth. Come, follow me! Now is not the time to sit on your hands, dreaming about the arrival of the Messiah. He has come. Does your life look like one that has heard His call, or one that is still waiting for the call? I love Bonhoeffer's invitation to burn one's boats, and plunge into absolute insecurity. By doing so, you will learn the demand and the gift of Christ. Rid yourself of the false securities in your old life and cling to Christ in the new. Learn the demand and gift of His presence.

BEHOLDING AND TELLING

The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, “We have found the Messiah” (that is, the Christ). – John 1:41

What was the first thing you did when you encountered Jesus? Andrew’s response was to find his brother and tell him who he had met. In other words, Andrew encountered the good news and shared the good news immediately. He became a witness for Christ the instant he witnessed Jesus! Dr. Michael Stroope explains witness well, “Witness runs in two directions, each compounding the other. Witness is both beholding and telling.”^{xxi} Isn’t this exactly what Andrew does? He beholds the long-awaited Messiah and turns to tell.

Evangelism can definitely be assisted through a deeper knowledge of the Bible, spending more time with other believers, evangelism training and things of the like. However, the basics of being a witness are very simple. It is beholding and telling. You don’t have to know everything about what you’ve seen, but surely you have an obligation to tell others about such good news.

Stroope goes on to explain that to behold is more than just seeing, it is to be enraptured by the hopeful and transformative vision that God alone can give. Furthermore, that telling is more than just reporting, but it is to communicate with your words and your life what you’ve seen and experienced.

For this reason, there isn’t an “on” and “off” switch for those that are witnesses of the Kingdom. As you return to work, school and normal family operations, you are always bearing witness of the Kingdom that you’ve encountered. Where has God placed you as His witness?

CHILDREN OF GOD

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. – 1 John 3:1

In our anticipation of the Son's arrival, few of us considered that God was anticipating our adoption day. Here is a welcome surprise. In love, God sent his Son and now we are called his children. For those in Jesus, this adoption is sealed and assured. There is no longer a need to try to prove our worth, accumulate merit, or earn our keep. We are in the family of God. Even still, it takes a lifetime of learning to rest in our true family.

What we're describing is a grappling with our identity. At any moment, there are countless voices calling out to us with instructions on who we are. We hear it on television from the programming we choose and the advertising we endure. We measure ourselves through the false idols and images found on social media. Our world is flooded with invitations to be a certain kind of people, but who are we really? Children of God.

Dave Lomas wrote a fantastic book on identity, *The Truest Thing About You*. The point of the book is in the title. There are many things that may be true about you. You are male, or female. You've been the victim, or the perpetrator. You grew up in that city surrounded with those values. Your childhood family was wonderful, or maybe it was hurtful. These things may be true about you, but the truest thing is found through your identity in Christ. You are deeply loved by God, His child. Surrendering to your truest identity in Christ will inform everything else in your life. Lomas concludes these thoughts well, "Slowly, achingly slowly, I was learning to understand that I am deeply loved by God, and because of Jesus, God is well pleased with me. Every other identity I create for myself is an illusion."^{xxii}

PRAISE HIM

*Praise the Lord.
Praise God in his sanctuary;
praise him in his mighty heavens.
Praise him for his acts of power;
praise him for his surpassing greatness.
Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet,
praise him with the harp and lyre,
praise him with timbrel and dancing,
praise him with the strings and pipe,
praise him with the clash of cymbals,
praise him with resounding cymbals.
Let everything that has breath praise the Lord.
Praise the Lord. – Psalm 150*

My first year in ministry I attended a conference of a certain parachurch organization. The conference was fantastic. There were extended times of worship, fantastic speakers, and breakout sessions on various areas of ministry. After one particular session, I met up with a group of people in the hotel lounge. Among them was the current president of the organization. We were discussing the previous session – remarking on the profound points of the preacher. Then someone said in passing, “Yeah, the message was good. But the worship didn’t do much for me.” To which the president promptly replied, “Good, the worship wasn’t for you anyway.”

We didn’t do the rescuing. We didn’t do the delivering. We didn’t draw near to God – God dwelled with us. He is to be worshipped! Let us not choose to worship on the basis of music or circumstance. That is missing the point. God split the sea of death to bring you to the shore of eternity. Song has broken out. Will you join in the song the rescued are singing?

WHO IS HE?

Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, "Who do people say I am?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Messiah." – Mark 8:27-29

Jesus is walking with his disciples in the villages around Caesarea Philippi. He asks his disciples a question He still asks today, "Who do you say I am?" They reply with various answers they've heard, but Jesus reiterates He is asking them and not what their surrounding culture thinks. C.S. Lewis once theorized that Jesus was either a liar, a lunatic or Lord.^{xxiii} Liar doesn't seem to fit, because surely Jesus would've dropped the act when on trial. If He were a lunatic, then we would have to discount all of the profound contributions He has made to civilization through His teaching. But if He is Lord as He claimed, then surely He must be followed.

Some have argued for the addition of a fourth possibility: legend. They believe Jesus could've been real, but over time we've just built Him up a bit too much. Many people I've met in Central Texas view Jesus as either legend or Lord. Who do you say He is?

Here are some distinct differences between a legend and the Lord. While a legend only asks for remembrance, the Lord asks for obedience. When a legend's authority degrades over time, the Lord's authority stays fixed. A legend may be retold a thousand ways, and grow and change with every retelling; meanwhile the Lord still speaks today, and his message is exactly the same. In short, a legend only has symbolic power, but Jesus' power is alive and active.

Jesus turns to you this day and still asks the question, "Who do you say I am?" How would you answer? How has your life answered that question? Jesus invites you to submit to who He truly is – the Messiah. The one you've been waiting for is here.

GET BEHIND HIM

He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

– Mark 8:31-33

Yesterday, we read about how Peter correctly answered Jesus' question. Today we learn about Peter's mistake. Understanding and then misunderstanding. Surely, we can relate to Peter! In response to Peter's answer ("the Messiah"), Jesus begins to teach them about what Messiah would do. The Messiah would suffer, be rejected by the religious authorities of the time, be crucified and resurrected. At this point, Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes Him! Can you imagine?

It's likely that Peter had an imagined messiah and was struggling to surrender to the real Messiah. Peter would've likely wanted a messiah to slay his enemies and overtake the Roman empire through force. Too often, we make this mistake. We want a messiah that looks more like a self-help guru or a genie than a real Messiah. Whatever it is, we would be better served to let the Messiah inform us on who He is.

For many of us, we have looked too much like Peter. We're constantly trying to hold God's work up – taking Jesus aside and offering Him gentle rebukes on how our life is supposed to go. A.W. Tozer diagnoses this well, "The reason why many are still troubled, still seeking, still making little forward progress is because they haven't yet come to the end of themselves. We're still trying to give orders and interfering with God's work within us."^{xxiv} I invite you to stop dictating what should come next and surrender to the Messiah's leading.

THE KINGDOM OF SELF AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD

*Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said:
“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up
their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose
it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.
– Mark 8:34-35*

We can't help but wonder how awkward this moment might have been. Peter had just been rebuked by Jesus. Then Jesus called the crowd over to join His disciples to explain what being a disciple means. I am reminded of one cold and windy day in my youth when my track coach called my teammates together. He proceeded to give a speech on why it's important for us to wear the proper attire on cold days. My team listened attentively, decked out in sweat suits; meanwhile I looked on shivering in my short-sleeve shirt and shorts, feeling pretty foolish. Amid the disciples' failure to follow, Jesus teaches the crowd about what it means. Whether you are a disciple or in the crowd, Jesus has something to say to you.

If anyone desires to follow Jesus, then they must deny themselves. The only way to begin and the only way forward is denying yourself. Just like Peter had visions of what the Kingdom should like, we do as well. We must be willing to die to the kingdom of the self and surrender to the true King. It is the only way to live in the Kingdom – the only way to follow Jesus. David G. Benner explains, “The kingdom of self and the Kingdom of God are like oil and water; they do not mix.”^{xxv} It's a fool's errand to attempt maintenance on the kingdom of self and also pursue the Kingdom of God. One kingdom is always abandoned for the other. Or in the words of Jesus, “No can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other” (Matt. 6:24). To which kingdom have you sworn loyalty?

DON'T GROW WEARY

Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers. – Galatians 6:9-10

Don't grow weary in doing good. How hard that verse sounds in today's climate! The scripture says that at the proper time we will reap a harvest from the good that has been sown. The proper time is when Jesus determines it. Most likely, the Apostle Paul is referring to the second return of Jesus – that is the proper time. We sow good in this world for the arrival of a coming harvest that we can't predict. We just see opportunities. We do good and we don't give up. There is a line from a Wendell Berry poem that I think is good for us to chew on. Berry writes,

Invest in the millennium

Plant sequoias.

*Say that your main crop is the forest that you did not plant,
that you will not live to harvest ^{xxvi}*

Perhaps you have wondered what impact you've made through your relentless pursuit of doing good. Might I suggest that you were busy planting sequoias. Sequoias grow for over 3,000 years. Plant a sequoia. They might not be magnificent today, but they will one day.

Friends, do not grow weary in doing good. You might not see the harvest today, but you will one day. There is no telling how many sequoias of the faith will greet you in eternity. I imagine we will meet far more people that God used us to bless than we can fathom. Not because we're that good or influential, but because He is.

To plant a sequoia, invest in something beyond your field of vision. Sow things that are not for yourself. See opportunities. Do good and do not grow weary.

HIS GOOD WORK

Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

– Philippians 1:6

Have you ever started a project and not finished it? I'm sure that verse brings to mind several projects left unfinished. You bought the paint, but never finished the room. You bought the wood, but still haven't built the deck. You planted those vegetables, but gave up after the weather turned unfavorable. Perhaps it was a person you had committed to invest in. Yet, after repeated times of their failure, betrayal or disinterest, you gave up.

The truth is we often struggle to persevere and endure in the face of great trial. Even though this may happen, we must resist the temptation to believe that God's capacity is similar to our own. For those in Christ, your future is not up in the air. God isn't pondering whether or not to finish what He started in you. He isn't looking at your mounting failures or your repeated mistakes and wondering if He should call it quits. He who started a good work in you will see it through.

When will it be done? You may be 30, 50, 100 years old. Perhaps you feel, "Surely, things in my life should be figured out by now." We can be frustrated that we haven't yet arrived at completion. However, on the flip side there is good news. No matter your age or life experience, God isn't done with you. He still has good things prepared for you (Eph. 2:10). The good work that He started won't be completed until we see Christ again. Rejoice that He isn't giving up on you. Rejoice that He will see you through.

NEVER ALONE

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." – Matthew 28:18-20

One of the things we taught our kids early on was to ask for help. It was important to my wife and I that our kids knew they could always ask us for help. Currently, as toddlers, they use this newfound resource frequently. They are still learning about this world, so they are in regular need of assistance. Sometimes it's important things like helping them learn how to pray. Other times, it's silly things like helping them build with blocks the tallest tower ever. One day, we won't be as near. They will be out of the house and have to learn to live without our constant presence. But for now, they know we are just a shout away.

This passage is often referred to as the Great Commission. The disciples are embarking on the Kingdom life and Jesus gives them their marching orders. He tells them to make disciples of all nations, to baptize them, and to teach them to obey *everything* that He has taught them. Essentially, Jesus is commissioning them to live a life like His own. Intimidating? It should be. In fact, it's impossible without Jesus.

Thankfully for us, we are never sent out from His presence. Jesus is with us always to the very end of the age. We're never pushed out of God's house and told to be independent. As we navigate this Kingdom life, dependence is the only way forward. As you make disciples, encounter things you've never seen before, and face insurmountable problems, don't hesitate to call out to Him: help! He is with us always. We are never alone.

THERE IS MORE

Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written. – John 21:25

We began this season by waiting in expectation for the coming Messiah. We reflected on how the world received Him; how the faithful rejoiced and evil recoiled. We celebrated the arrival of our King born in a manger. We listened intently to His call into the Kingdom and rested in His eternal provision. Now what?

Is that all? Not a chance. John writes that even the gospels don't record all of the incredible things Jesus did. To illustrate his point further, John suggests that the whole world couldn't fit the wealth of books needed to record the work of Jesus. He's right. John's reflection was on the life and ministry of Jesus 2,000 years ago. We can't dream of how many books would be filled to record His ministry since then. All across this world, Jesus is still at work. His grand rescue mission, to seek and save the lost, to make all things new, is still happening. At both a cosmic and an individual level, Jesus is at work.

What else has He done since then? Look in your own life. Look in the life of your neighbor. There is a Kingdom that has been made available to you and to me. Much of our world remains cloaked in darkness, unaware of the Kingdom's advancement. Join the ranks. Follow the King. Take up the fight. Celebrate in His victory. Even death can't hold the saints back. Behold, the true King has come and is coming again!

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FIRST WOODWAY

GOD IS *good*. GRACE IS *real*. EVERYONE'S *welcome*.