

About this study:

The 12 days of Christmas begins on Christmas Day and ends on January 6, the day of Epiphany. According to the Christian calendar, Christmas begins when Jesus is born. Our celebration ends 12 days later.

Epiphany is a celebration of the day the Magi visit Jesus. It is the day when the Magi realized who the True King was.



Mt. Hebron United Methodist Church

Find us on Facebook or at www.mthebronumc.com

the 12 Days of Christmas



A STUDY FROM CHRISTMAS TO EPIPHANY
DIGGING DEEPER
FOR YOUTH AND ADULTS

2020

MT. HEBRON UMC
WEST COLUMBIA, SC

DECEMBER 25, 2020

Jesus is born!

SCRIPTURE READING: Luke 2: 1-7



By Amy Cooley

The birth story of Jesus from Luke seems like a short and sweet story at first glance. We are familiar with the beauty and calm of Christmas, so this story fits in quite nicely.

Christmas, however, is anything but calm and quiet. The story begins all the way back in Genesis when Adam and Eve were living in the Garden of Eden and God lived among them. God lived with Man, and they were able to be in His presence and live in a perfect place with him because they were free from sin.

God gave Adam and Eve one rule by which to live. He told them not to eat from the tree of good and evil. The serpent came and tempted them to eat of this fruit, promising that if they did so they would be like God. Adam and Eve ate the fruit, and that was the first sin - Original Sin. God cannot be in the presence of sin—His holiness will not permit it. Because of this, Adam and Eve were banned from the Garden. They were essentially sentenced to death.

This moment began thousands of years of a divide between God and man. Man quickly became so corrupt and evil that God sent a flood to destroy the earth and only saved one man (Noah), his family, and some animals.

God then created a group of people to be his chosen people and to carry out his plan to restore God's relationship with mankind. This race of people began with Abraham. From Abraham Isaac is born and from Isaac, Jacob. Jacob was the father of the twelve tribes of Israel. God made a covenant with Abraham that He would make his descendants many and that they would be blessed. The outward sign of this covenant was that Abraham and all Hebrew boys would be circumcised.

So, what can I give to the King? (the rest of the lyrics)

"Give Him all glory His people on earth!

Give Him all praises This time of His birth!

Give Him all honor in all that we do...as He's given His life for you!

As He's given His life for you!

Give Him all honor.

Give Him all praise.

Give His all glory."

TRUE WORSHIP!

Worship with abandon...with complete lack of inhibition or restraint...worship to honor Him and to commune with Him. Worship personally and corporately. Worship at home. Worship in your car. Worship at church. Worship wherever you are. Surrender. Praise. Celebrate. Adore. Yes, give Him everything.



JANUARY 6, 2021

True Worship



SCRIPTURE READING: Matthew 2:9-12

By Gena Turner

I love singing. It evokes great emotion. It can change my attitude. It can change the way I feel. In fact, I spent the first part of my career teaching others about music and encouraging them to read, sing and appreciate music outside of their comfort zone. (I'm sure that some of them could tell you *great* stories.)

Singing is engaging. It can be exciting. It can be humbling. It can touch the heart. It's one of the ways that I worship.

There is a song called *"What Can I Give to the King"*. The lyrics are

What can I give to the King?

Give to the One who has everything?

What can I give?

What gift can I bring?

What can I give to the King?

In Matthew 2:11, it says *"On coming to the house, they saw the child with His mother Mary, and the Magi bowed down and worshiped Him. Then they opened their treasures and presented Him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh."* WOW! What a picture!

The Magi from the East (probably modern day Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, or an area in what's now southern Turkey), who found answers in the stars, worshiped and opened their treasures to Jesus without question. (*Allow that to sink in.*) These who were *not* Jewish and who were *not* religious, but rather scholars and astronomers... worshiped with abandon. They fell prostrate in front of Jesus. And better yet?? They offered Him the very finest gold, frankincense and myrrh. The very best...

I think of how often we come to worship our Savior with so many other things than our best. But yet, God still loves us and sent His only Son for us. "Us" who don't always worship with abandon. "Us" who don't always give their best. "Us" who wonder if we are even good enough to give. US!

God eventually sent the Law through Moses—a set of rules to live by to be in harmony with God. God also created a sacrificial system in which sins could be atoned for - forgiven - by offering animal and grain sacrifices at the temple in Jerusalem. These sacrifices had to be made at least yearly. This was all hard work, and the Jewish people longed for the Messiah to come and restore their relationship with God and their place among the nations. This longing reached a fever pitch in the era of Roman rule over Israel (around the time of Jesus).

The Israelites endured many battles, kings, trials, and prophets over hundreds of years. God eventually named David king of the Israelites and promised that the Messiah would come from his lineage (which can also be traced back to Abraham). There are many Old Testament prophecies that foretold what the Messiah would be like. Despite what the Scriptures said, most envisioned a warrior King who would come in with great might and save them from foreign oppression. God's plan from the beginning of time was very different from what the Israelites thought it would look like.

This chosen race of people, the Israelites, went through a roller coaster ride of following and obeying God and then turning from Him. God is steadfast; and although He put the Jewish people through various trials, He never forgot His promise that He would send a Messiah.

What was needed was a permanent and perfect sacrifice that only God Himself could supply. God's plan was to come and live among us. God reduced Himself to the form of a helpless baby and was born to a young couple—to a virgin. There was no royal title and certainly no battle gear or marshaling of an army. Jesus Christ came to earth to be with us (Emmanuel) and to live among us. Very few recognized who He was.

Jesus was born under impossible circumstances to show that God deals in what is impossible. This baby became a sacrifice on our behalf. Because of this baby born in a barn, we have all the hope in the world. Through this baby, Jesus, Emmanuel, our relationship with God can be restored.



DECEMBER 26, 2020

Emmanuel

SCRIPTURE READING: Matthew 1:18-25

By Mary and Tom Brunson



In contrast to Luke's more familiar version of the Christmas story which includes a manger, a stable, shepherds, no room in the inn, etc. and is told through Mary's point of view, Matthew's narrative presents the Christmas story from a uniquely Jewish perspective, Joseph's, and includes magi - but no mention of a stable or shepherds. Matthew, who himself was probably one of the Jewish scribes and therefore well-versed in Jewish history and tradition, addressed his message to the Jewish people of the time. Contrary to Luke's telling which was for ALL people, Matthew's story speaks directly to the Jews.

Since the Jews were a highly patriarchal society, Matthew focuses his narrative of Jesus's birth through Joseph's actual experience. [The very first words of this gospel \("This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah ..."\) firmly establish Jesus as a Jew and trace his lineage to King David, all the way back to Abraham, via Joseph's family tree.](#) This also serves as evidence that Jesus, the "Messiah", is the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies.

The only angel visitation described here is the one involving Joseph. The Jewish people would have never contemplated that an angel would lower himself to speak directly to a woman - another difference from Luke's account of Gabriel's encounter with Mary. Joseph was "betrothed" to Mary, a betrothal being a legally-binding contract much stricter than our present-day engagement process. The only way to dissolve a betrothal was through divorce, which Joseph was prepared to do. He naturally thought Mary to be unfaithful, being with child before he had completely taken her as his wife. Jewish religious law through the Torah demanded strict punishment for those found guilty of this sin, even to the point of being stoned to death. The scriptures say that Joseph was a "righteous man" who understood that he must obey the Jewish law. However, he was not self-righteous; he had already decided to temper the law with mercy and "put her away privately", therefore preventing Mary from being subjected to public shame, ridicule, or worse.

Whatever you are doing in secret, Christmas is a great time to follow the path of the Magi and stop following the path of Herod. The Magi did not live for people's approval. They sought to honor God, no matter the cost. The Magi did not seek to impress others with their wealth. They sought to use it to worship God, no matter the cost. In the life of the Magi we see the only crown that matters, the reflection of the crown of Christ's authority as Emmanuel, God with us.

When it comes to matters of faith, being exposed is much better than being in secret. An exposed, visible faith is the legacy of the Magi. Their path was greatly superior to that followed by Herod. It is a path we can celebrate and emulate this Christmas! Will you join me and live exposed this Christmas?



JANUARY 5, 2021

Exposed at Christmas

SCRIPTURE READING: Luke 2:25-35

By Gerald Watford

Secretly. That is the word that jumps out at me from the story of Herod and the Magi. *Matt. 2:7,8, "Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."*

What we do in secret is very revealing. Herod wore a crown and had great power ... on the surface. What he did in secret exposes him as a man with deep insecurity and devastating anxiety. Deep insecurity and devastating anxiety can masquerade as unselfish interest. Herod's deep insecurity and devastating anxiety were dressed up like genuine interest in worshipping Christ. Nothing could have been further from the truth.

What is worse, Herod thought what he was doing was right. To him, any king worth his salt would do whatever was necessary to protect his throne. Make no mistake, Herod's intentions were to kill the baby Jesus. This was proven by his later actions.

Doing stuff in secret comes with the element of self-delusion. It also comes with the requirement that a vast amount of energy must be expended on trying to impress others. When our serving becomes mostly about what others think of us, see it as a warning sign that what we are doing in secret is unhealthy. Deep insecurity and devastating anxiety require time spent in secret, with only our fears and worries for company.

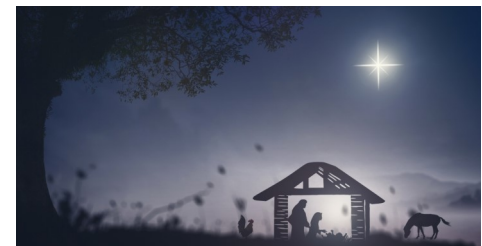
Let the story of Herod and the Magi serve as inspiration to stop living secretly in a way that seeks to cover up what needs healing. A desire for approval dressed up to look like a genuine interest in Christ, will not produce the peace and joy that are found in the acceptance of a holy God based on faith in Him as opposed to trusting in self.

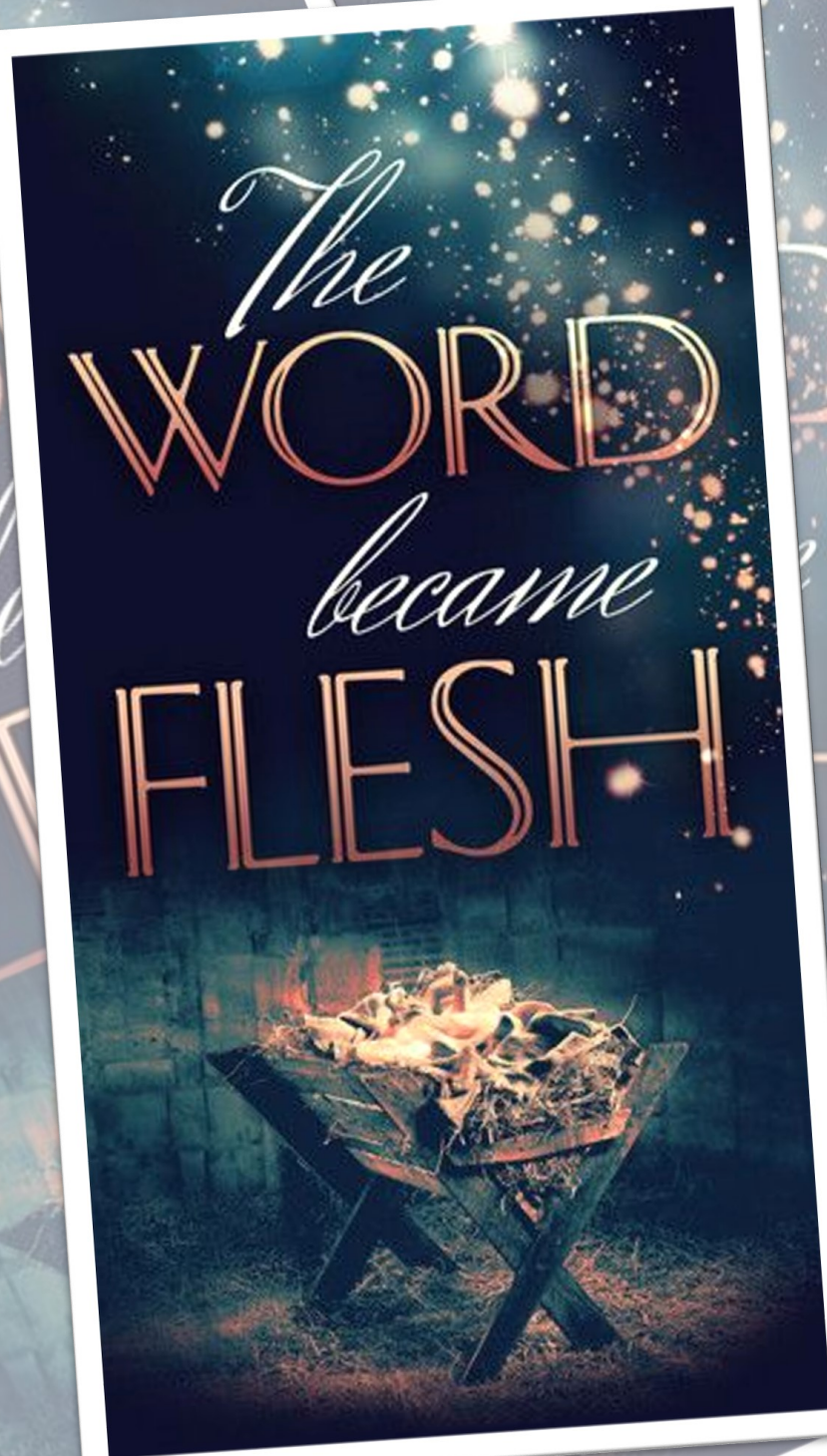
The angel's appearance to Joseph (in a dream) was to inform him that this child, Mary's baby, would be the Son of God, as promised by the prophets. The angel commanded that Joseph "not be afraid" to take Mary as his wife, and instructed him to complete the marriage process. (Interestingly, Jesus will use these words, "Be not afraid," in many instances recorded elsewhere in Matthew's gospel.) Joseph accepted this command, as would any good Jew who had just seen an angel. The angel visited Joseph twice more – once to send the new family to Egypt to escape Herod's infanticide rage, and again to inform them that it was safe to return. Joseph's role would be to raise this child in the Hebrew traditions and to provide for the child as his own. A critical responsibility was in the naming of the child, a key element in securing the patriarchal lineage back to David. The angel instructed that the child should be called "Jesus", which is translated as "Savior." Interestingly, *Jesus* is the Greek version of the Hebrew *Joshua*, the "savior" of the Hebrews in the battle of Jericho.

Finally, Matthew, well-versed in the scriptures and Jewish theology found in the Old Testament, ensures that his version of the birth story of Jesus, the Messiah, includes every possible Jewish element: David, Joseph, and Isaiah. More than any other writer, he refers to Jesus as the "culmination of God's promise". In Matthew 22 - 25, the angel quotes the greatest prophet, Isaiah, to Joseph: "Now all this has happened, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, ²³"Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son. They shall call his name **Emmanuel**," meaning "God with us". Most importantly, Matthew reminds Jews that were in times about as tough as we are now, that in EVERY time – Isaiah's, theirs, and ours – God is with us. It is certainly no coincidence that Matthew ends his gospel with the same thought, this time quoting Jesus (28:20): "And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

In the uncertain times we face today, where anger, doubt, selfishness and fear often overwhelm us, let us remember Joseph's example, and be strong.

Emmanuel. God is with us. Do not be afraid. We are never alone.





JANUARY 4, 2021

Following the Star



SCRIPTURE READING: Matthew 2:1-6

By Kevin Cooley

In classic retellings of the visit of the Magi to Jesus, we learn a great deal about these visitors – where they come from, the value of the gifts they bring, and of their avoidance of King Herod. We tend to hear less, however, about what is undoubtedly the main character of this story – the Star.

The Star itself is the manifestation of the fact that God is at work doing a mighty thing to draw nations unto Himself once more. The movement of the Star works much like the “cloud of glory” in the Exodus, directing those who would follow towards the presence of God. The path of the Magi winds over wide expanses of mountains, deserts, and rivers towards the unveiling of God’s glory in the child Jesus.

Perhaps the most important point in this focus on the Star, however, is that all of heaven and earth are at the disposal of God to proclaim the glory of His Son Jesus. God creates and moves a star to shine a path for wise men to worship Jesus. God creates and moves a star to have those men bring gifts which will carry the family of Jesus through difficult days ahead. God creates and moves a star to show the Magi, and us, that God is God OVER ALL.

Let us in the season of Epiphany look for the ways in which God is displaying His purpose and will around us. Let us focus our hearts and minds on the signs – “the Stars” – God gives us that will point us to Jesus. And let us worship the Christ anew in spirit and in truth.

Anna was ready and immediately recognized this precious 40-day old baby boy as the world's Redeemer. She had held on to hope, expecting and trusting that God would answer the prayers of His people and here she was in the presence of the One she had prayed so long for. The words of Psalm 27:14 might have been reverberating through her heart as she looked into those eyes: Wait on the Lord; be of good courage, and He shall strengthen thine heart; wait, I say, on the Lord.

Anna sends up praises to God for this tremendous honor and shares the Good News with all those she comes into contact with. Jesus and His family leave the temple and life on earth begins. But the life of Anna, and all who meet Jesus, are changed forever.

Jesus, help me to be patient, kind and loving and to wait for You to be not only my Savior, but my guide, my best friend. Amen.

DECEMBER 27, 2020

The Word

SCRIPTURE READING: John 1:1-5

By Jared Lee



The Apostle John begins his Gospel by telling his readers about the Coming of Jesus, or, "the Word", in the scope of creation and the beginning of everything. John is pointing back to creation and saying that Jesus was not only there, but he had a personal hand in creating everything that was created. The point of starting the story of the good news of Jesus in this way was to show the importance and standing that Jesus has; and yet he chose to come down and live the life that he did!

Sending Jesus was never a "back-up plan" or something that God *had* to do; John is showing us that Jesus was there with God all the way at the beginning of the world, and his choice to come to earth for our sake was one that he made willingly. As we can see in these verses in the Gospel of John, Jesus shares in God's eternity. Jesus *is* God in human form, and he calls us to be in a relationship with him. How amazing is it that we serve a God that we can have a relationship with and learn more about!

Stephen Hawking once said that, "The eventual goal of science is to provide a single theory that describes the whole universe." For Christians, John gives us that answer! John 1:3 says, "All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made." Jesus was not only present at the time of Creation, John tells us that he was the one through which everything was created!

After these verses about how important Jesus is and the role that he played in creation and bringing life to everything, we hear stories and learn more about who this Jesus really is. Jesus is the light in a world of darkness, and we get an opportunity to have a relationship with him! It is amazing to realize that this Jesus, who created everything and gave us breath, is the same Jesus that truly wants a relationship with us and allows us to speak to him on a personal level. Let's thank God for inviting us to be close to Him when we don't deserve it!



DECEMBER 28, 2020

Names and Titles for Jesus

SCRIPTURE READING: Isaiah 9:6

By Leigh Curry



Two names are given for the Holy child born to Mary and Joseph. First, in the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 1, Verse 31, an angel tells Mary to name her child, “Jesus” and in the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 1, Verse 21, an angel also tells Joseph to name the child, “Jesus.” The second name, is provided in Matthew 1:23 (“they shall call his name ‘Emmanuel’”) which means “God is with us.” The name Emmanuel fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14: “Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel.” Isaiah is known as the Hebrew prophet who predicted the birth of Jesus Christ to salvage or save mankind from sin, about 700 years before the actual birth.

The difference between a “name” and a “title” is open to interpretation, but the first index of 198 different names and titles of Jesus in the Bible are listed in Cruden’s Concordance. This index was first published in 1737, and has been in print ever since. Each name or title is highlighted with Biblical references.

The most well known titles include: Christ, Lord, Master, I Am, Logos (the Word), Son of God, Son of Man, Son of David, Lamb of God, New Adam, Second Adam, Last Adam, Light of the World, King of the Jews, Rabbi, Chosen One, Bread of Life, Apostle, High Priest, Prophet, Teacher, King, Paraclete, Mighty Counselor, Alpha and Omega, Morning Star and Redeemer.

Matthew 28:20 (“I Am with you always even unto the end of the world”) indicates Jesus will be with the faithful to the end of the age.

Time alone with God is important, it’s critical, to having a close relationship, a friendship, with God that grows deeper every day and that meets your every need – which is just what He wants. When we are spending time with God like we should, we find a peace unlike anything the world can offer, we experience freedom from worry and stress, we get to know what it feels like to be loved and accepted, we have souls which are content, we are satisfied.

Anna had been a widow a long time. She had become someone whose primary focus and the love of her life was God. The story today tells us she spent time with God, worshipping, fasting and praying constantly in His Presence. It takes something special for someone to let go of all the earthly distractions and give her heart and soul to God alone. When we are alone with God and are quiet and still, we hear things that others may not. We encounter a great and mighty God but in a very personal way. He speaks intimately with us. Anna had learned to quietly listen, watch and wait. She knew that God had a plan and was working His plan out in His perfect timing. She was well versed in Scripture, no doubt, and knew that a Messiah was coming one day. She certainly didn’t imagine that the Savior would come during her lifetime – surely she’d given up hope of that at 84 years of age. But after hundreds of years of needing help, searching for hope, looking for love in all the wrong places, God sends baby Jesus, the Christ Child, to save us all.



JANUARY 3, 2021

Anna - It was worth the wait!

SCRIPTURE READING: Luke 2:36-40

by Gerald and Debbie Watford

How can you tell when something is really valuable or important? By its cost. Sometimes the cost is financial but most often the cost is time. When we are sure about the value of something it changes our attitude about paying the price. The heroes of faith are those who did not turn aside from paying the price for following God. Consider Anna.

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. When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him.

Waiting is one of the hardest things to do. Because we consider waiting a chore, such a dreaded waste of our time, marketing firms have invested millions of dollars into finding ways to cut our wait times to a minimum. They know that when we want something, we want it now. We don't like to wait for our cheeseburgers and fries, for rollercoaster rides, for the show to return after commercials – we want to get it now. But there are some things that cannot be rushed.

One thing we can learn from Scripture is that God has a plan and His timing is perfect (often not in sync with ours). We must trust Him nonetheless. Today we read about a prophet named Anna. A prophet is someone with a special gift of declaring and interpreting God's message. A prophet is someone who must have strong faith and a tremendous amount of patience.

Anna is found today in the temple. Of course, Anna can be found in the temple every day. "She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying." Can you imagine being at church all the time – you're there for the special events like Christmas cantatas, adult fellowship luncheons, paint parties, and you're there when no one else is around – just you and God. Anna spent a lot of time alone with God.



DECEMBER 29, 2020

Glory to God in the Highest!

SCRIPTURE READING: Luke 2: 8-14

By Debbie Watford

I love the great outdoors. Camping out in the backyard under the stars, enjoying the sounds of nighttime – crickets, frogs, an owl’s hoot now and then – these are a few of my favorite things. I spend the night outdoors for fun, for my pleasure. Our scripture tells us that there were shepherds who were *living* out in the fields. That puts a whole new light on being outside under the vast night sky. These shepherds were working – watching their flocks. Watching their flocks means being vigilant and keeping a sharp eye out for lions or tigers or bears, oh my!

In the days of Mary and Joseph, being a shepherd was not a noble occupation. Shepherds were looked down upon, deprived of civil rights, belittled and treated as unimportant and certainly not trustworthy. Religious leaders banned pasturing sheep and goats in Israel except on the desert plains, labeling shepherds as “sinners.” So around the time of Jesus’ birth, shepherds were basically despised, marginalized.

Taking that into account, imagine what a wild and crazy thing it was for the shepherds to be the first to receive the Good News – *the Great News* -- that the long-awaited Messiah was born. Hanging out in the dark watching the sheep, just “nobodies” doing their job and all of a sudden, “an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them.” Wow! Talk about a moment in time and space, in the history of mankind -- this takes the cake! God’s angel comes down and acknowledges that these simple, “no good” shepherds, of all people, society’s rejects, are worthy of hearing the most amazing breaking news ever proclaimed. “HE IS HERE! THE MESSIAH HAS BEEN BORN!”

Here is this angel, a special messenger from God Himself, who stands in the Presence of God and now stands before the shepherds, with the glory of the Lord shining all around him and the shepherds, too – this is Holy Ground! This is not just a damp, dirty grassland where sheep are resting and eating. This is a sacred place! (God’s presence can make any place a sacred place, you know.) An angel of the Lord is standing here making the greatest announcement of all time:



On the day that Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to be dedicated, the Holy Spirit told Simeon to go to the Temple too. As soon as Simeon saw the child, he took him in his own arms and praised God. He knew that he was ready to die because he had seen this Messiah. He didn’t question the fact that he was a baby or that he was not born of royalty. He knew he was holding the salvation of God in his own arms and so I like to think Simeon began to sing. He praises God for allowing him to see this child and remembers before God and all those listening that God’s promises have come true in Jesus.

Simeon’s words here are sometimes called the “Nunc Dimittis” from the Latin meaning “now you dismiss.” This phrase would have used to dismiss or free a slave. Simeon knows that he himself is a slave to God and to the Messiah that has come. He also knows that this Messiah will free them all from the bonds of their slavery to sin. Simeon is ready to be freed.

Simeon then turns to Mary and blesses them and tells her that her baby will be cause of many rising and of many falling in Israel. This baby, he says, will cause the true hearts of people to be uncovered. He also warns that Mary, herself, will have great sorrow too. His words foretell of a unique, and sacrificial, path to be travelled by Jesus and those who would follow him.

This Christmas season, may we all listen for the voice of God so that we might also know Jesus when he comes to us. May we take Jesus “into our arms” and into our hearts and sing about his greatness. May we wait expectantly to the return of the Messiah so that when he comes we will be ready and know exactly who he is...and to be free indeed.

JANUARY 2, 2021

Simeon

SCRIPTURE READING: Luke 2:25-35

By Kevin and Amy Cooley

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. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

*"Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you may now dismiss your servant in peace.
For my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and the glory of your people Israel."*

The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too." -Luke 2:25-35

At the time Jesus was born, there many devout Jewish people who were waiting expectantly for the coming Messiah or for the "consolation of Israel". The prophets had foretold everything about this Messiah and many spent their lives waiting. There were some, of course who were waiting for a different kind of Messiah—a Messiah who would rule with great might, a ruler to save them from oppression, a ruler that would make them a great nation.

Simeon was one who waited and listened for the voice of God. He was faithful and devout and the "Holy Spirit was on him." Simeon knew that God would show him the Messiah when the time came. In fact, the Holy Spirit had revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah. So Simeon waited with great expectation.

The SAVIOR is born!

This is good news that will bring great joy for ALL people.

YOU (shepherds) will find Him wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.

And then, suddenly, a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

The angel (very likely Gabriel) comes with joy and great news and delivers it not to the priests, nor to other religious elites, but to a handful of humble shepherds, lifting them from the bottom rung of society to a place of honor and distinction. They were invited to go! Go and see this Savior of the world!

This angel and the mighty host of heaven dropped in on perhaps those who needed the Good News more than anyone else. The sight of them lifted their eyes, their hearts, their spirits and the shepherds quickly make their way to the manger and they themselves became messengers of this Good News.

Angels, shepherds, and baby Jesus.

Dear Lord, help us to understand that Christmas is for all people. Help us to lift our eyes and our hearts to heaven and wait for the light and love of Christ to fill us and move to be messengers of this Great News. Amen.



DECEMBER 30, 2020

Shepherds visit Baby Jesus

SCRIPTURE READING: Luke 2:15-21

By Jodie Smith and Jackie Edwards

Has anyone ever told you about something so amazing that you had to go see it for yourself? Things like concerts and sporting events that we have so much fun at, so after we go and tell everyone about how much we enjoyed it and what we saw. That's what happened to the shepherds in this story. The angels told the shepherds about the birth of baby Jesus, so they decided to go see it for themselves. When they saw the baby lying in the manger they were so excited about what they saw and all the good things God had done. The shepherds went and shared the great news with everyone around them. Everyone was so happy that they all began praising God for all the things He had done.

The shepherd's job is to watch over the sheep and make sure they are fed, watered, and safe from outside dangers. The Shepherd keeps his sheep close. That is the relationship we have with our Savior. God keeps us close, watches over us, and always protects us.

It is our job as Christians to continue to spread the good news as the shepherds did with the birth of Jesus. Especially during the Christmas season, we need to remember why we celebrate. We are celebrating the birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ! So the more we spread the word about Jesus, the more people will be excited about Heaven and Jesus' great works.

This poem below reminds us of Jesus, our Shepard, and how He was sent to watch over and care for us. Remember this poem whenever you see a Candy Cane this Christmas.

Have a Merry Christmas, and remember the reason for the season!

For us today with access to modern healthcare, the purification rules have little practical value and for us who are followers of Jesus they have little spiritual value. In the new covenant, there is no requirement of physical purity in order to have access to God's presence. However, when parents and congregation take our pledge during a baptism, we say:

*We give thanks for all that God has already given you
And we welcome you in Christian love.
As members together with you
In the body of Christ
And in this congregation
Of the United Methodist Church,
We renew our covenant
Faithfully to participate
In the ministries of the Church
By our prayers, our presence,
Our gifts, our service and our witness,
That in everything God may be glorified
Through Jesus Christ.*

So, why this big set up?

Bottom line? God loves us more than anything! He took time and paid special attention to every detail. We are not afterthoughts just as Jacob and Elizabeth are not afterthoughts for me. And likewise, all of these occurrences were designed to point God's people to the Messiah. May we all seek to do the same.



JANUARY 1, 2021

Baby Jesus brought to the temple

SCRIPTURE READING: Luke 2:21-24

By Gena Turner

Still...to this day....I remember what I had on, what I looked like, and the events that surrounded the birth of both of my children. Jacob's arrival was calm, collected, he came at his own pace, and there was time to process what was happening. Elizabeth's arrival...not so much. No one knew we were on the way to the hospital except my mom and dad. She came in a flash (almost before we got to the hospital). Both were very special times in my life. Both unique and very memorable.

Not too long after each were born, they were baptized. With family gathered around, their father and I took them before the church and promised to *nurture each of them in Christ's holy Church, that by our teaching and example they may be guided to accept God's grace for themselves, to profess their faith openly, and to lead a Christian life.* (ref. UMC Hymnal) It was a very meaningful time in our lives.

I can hardly imagine the emotions that Joseph and Mary felt as they took Jesus to be dedicated in the Temple but there were so many other things that had to happen. Going along with Jewish Law, Joseph and Mary had Jesus circumcised and gave him his name on the eighth day after he was born. When Jesus was 40 days old, they took Him to the temple in Jerusalem where Mary, after giving birth to her son, was required to present a purification offering at the temple. This fulfilled her purification requirement and allowed her to reenter society.

Leviticus 12:1-8

The LORD said to Moses, "Say to the Israelites: 'A woman who becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son will be ceremonially unclean for seven days, just as she is unclean during her monthly period. On the eighth day the boy is to be circumcised. Then the woman must wait thirty-three days to be purified from her bleeding. She must not touch anything sacred or go to the sanctuary until the days of her purification are over. If she gives birth to a daughter, for two weeks the woman will be unclean, as during her period. Then she must wait sixty-six days to be purified from her bleeding. "When the days of her purification for a son or daughter are over, she is to bring to the priest at the entrance to the tent of meeting a year-old lamb for a burnt offering and a young pigeon or a dove for a sin offering. He shall offer them before the LORD to make atonement for her, and then she will be ceremonially clean from her flow of blood. "These are the regulations for the woman who gives birth to a boy or a girl. But if she cannot afford a lamb, she is to bring two doves or two young pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering. In this way the priest will make atonement for her, and she will be clean."

Candy Cane Poem

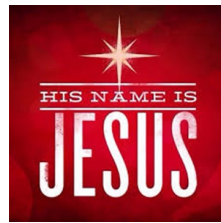
Look at a CANDY CANE, what do you see?
Stripes that are RED like the BLOOD shed for me!
WHITE for my Savior, Who's sinless and pure!
"J" is for JESUS, My Lord that's for sure!
Turn it around And a staff you will see ---
Jesus, my SHEPHERD, Is coming for me!



DECEMBER 31, 2020

Jesus is Named

SCRIPTURE READING: Luke 2:21



by Charles Gee

Names matter! Every time we hear someone's name, we make assumptions about that person. A name identifies you, but it does so much more. It's your public face. It tells everyone who you are.

In the small town I grew up in, my name also told everyone who I belonged to. I was Charles Gee, son of Gaston and Mary Lee Gee. I reaped the benefits of my parents good standing and reputation. As a young boy my parents made sure I understood the importance of our family name. The family name was important not because it made us better than anyone else, but because it had taken many years to build and maintain that good reputation. The history of my family came alive during long drives to visit relatives or while sitting around the dining room table feasting on one of my mom's delicious meals. I learned to value and respect the family name even more as I began to understand that it was my responsibility to uphold the traditions and good standing of those who came before me bearing the same name.

Why did the angel tell Mary and Joseph to name the baby "Jesus"? Why not Peter or Andrew? Is there a holy significance to the sequence of letters or sounds? Actually the letters and sounds are different in every language in which Jesus' name is translated. The name Jesus was a fairly common Jewish name and is still used today, though not in English. For example, Jesus is a fairly common name in many Hispanic countries.

"Jesus" is an English version of the ancient Hebrew name Yehoshua. This name is taken from Hebrew roots signifying "Jehovah is salvation" and is translated in the English Old Testament as "Joshua." The name of Jesus is significant because of who it represents—it means "God our Savior." Jesus Christ is Emmanuel, "God is with us". He came to earth as a man in order to die in our place and become our Savior. This is why the angel said, "You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

When we surrender to Jesus, the name above all other names, we join an amazing family. Being part of God's family gives us an identity that will last for eternity. As "children of God", we are to value and respect the family name. What a legacy we have!

