

Brian Bill-Sermons-Luke

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Matthew 1-2, Luke 1-2 Advent Conspiracy: Worship Fully

Summary: When we understand Christmas more deeply, we will worship Christ more fully. 11/29/09

Note: The idea for this series and some content comes from a book by Rick McKinley, Chris Seay, and Greg Holder called, "Advent

Conspiracy: Can Christmas Still Change the World?"

Doesn't it seem like there's some "Christmas creep" going on in our culture? There have been Christmas commercials on TV for weeks and it seems like we went right from Labor Day to lights downtown. Normally our family decorates the tree after Thanksgiving but this year we did it last weekend because Emily was home and we knew she wouldn't be around this weekend.

We started by pulling out all the boxes in the basement and began putting up the decorations and Nativity set in the front yard. We then all piled in the van to find the perfect Christmas tree. Because we were kicking off our Christmas season early, it was a bit of a challenge but we found some trees at a local store. We waited for someone to help us and even went inside to see if a worker could come out to assist us, but no one came. Realizing it was self-serve; we pulled off the netting holding the trees together and picked out the perfect one, paid for it, threw it on top of the van and drove home.

When we got home I remembered that the bottom of the tree needed to be cut off so it would be able to drink the water in the tree stand so we made our cut. Then we tried to get the tree in the tree stand but it wouldn't fit. Beth and I aren't the sharpest knives in the drawer so we whacked off some branches and made another cut. It still wouldn't fit so we cut off some more branches and quickly realized that no matter how many cuts we made it wasn't going to fit in our stand. We were almost ready to call it quits on Christmas.

Beth and I both had a brief pity party and thought about throwing the tree on the curb and buying an artificial one but then we remembered that we had another stand and tried that one. It seemed to work well but we had to cut off some more branches in order to get the tree to fit. In the process our full-length tree shrunk considerably and we lost 14 branches off the bottom. We then brought the tree into the house, filled the stand with water, and started putting the ornaments on.

When we got up on Sunday we admired our tiny tree and went off to church. We hung out in the afternoon, watched the Packers win (again) and then had our small group. Later that night, I had just walked into the kitchen when I heard a scream and a loud crashing sound. I rushed back into the Living Room and saw that our Charlie Brown tree was on its side, with broken ornaments everywhere. On top of that, there was brown sappy water all over our white carpeting. We thought again about throwing this cursed tree on the curb but instead just put it out on the porch until we cooled down. On Monday we purchased tree stand #3, an industrial strength model, put the lights and ornaments back on and it's still standing - at least it was when I left this morning.

The Advantages of Advent

While our Christmas season started with chaos and near catastrophe, we're a lot calmer now. Against our culture's call to consume the clutter of Christmas, stands the simple yet profound season of Advent. This word means "coming" and refers to a four week period of time set aside for prayer, penitence and preparation to help us slow down enough to savor the Savior's birth. I see Advent as a spiritual journey that helps us focus on the greatest gift of all so that we can worship the Word made flesh with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength. As we experience Advent, it strikes me that one can never start too early when getting ready for something really big.

We'll be using an Advent Wreath with four candles, thought by some to represent the four centuries of waiting between Malachi and Matthew. We'll light a different candle each week and hear different readings from families in our church to help us reflect on His first coming and prepare for His second. We want the beauty of Jesus to shine bright in the busyness of our lives. And that can only happen when we slow down.

We're beginning a new series today called, "Advent Conspiracy." The basic idea is that we want to take back the story of the Savior's birth as we fight against the spirit of consumerism that has stolen the soul of Christmas. We want to substitute consumption with compassion by practicing four simple, but powerful, countercultural concepts – worship fully, spend less, give more, and receive love. This video explains more about where we're headed.

Play Video: www.youtube.com/watch?v=eVqqj1v-ZBU&feature=related.

I love that last phrase, "you are free to conspire." We're going to have to work at it if we don't want our Christmas to crash. To say that we are celebrating a conspiracy means that we're conspiring against our cultural tendency to worship consumerism and instead to turn our hearts toward Christ. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the word "conspire" refers "to joining in a secret agreement to do an unlawful or wrongful act." While it's not illegal to celebrate Christmas (yet), and I'm certainly not advocating doing something unlawful, we do need to join together to reclaim Christmas from the snares of our society. Interestingly, "conspire" also means "to act in harmony toward a common end."

Since the things we desire are the things we end up worshipping, during this time of conspicuous consumption, we must take a fresh look at what really matters. I'm mindful of the fact that many of us sit in church disconnected from the story because we're so far removed from the original events. One pastor puts it this way: "The story of Christ's birth is a subversive story of an upside-down

kingdom. It's a story of promise, hope and revolutionary love that is still changing the world to this day. So, what happened? What was once a time to celebrate the birth of the Savior has somehow turned into a season of stress, traffic jams and shopping lists. And when it's all over, many of us are left with presents to return, looming debt that will take months to pay off, and this empty feeling that we somehow missed its purpose. What if Christmas became a world-changing event again by turning our focus back to the birth of Christ? What could happen to your family if this focus was celebrated in loud, bold and unexpected ways?"

Do you remember the tree that Charlie Brown ended up with and how he expressed his great frustration? In the midst of all the stress and the disappointment he yells out, "Does anybody remember what Christmas is all about?" Linus comes over to Charlie Brown and says, "I know what it is all about" and then he quotes the Christmas narrative from Luke 2. The lights go down and the simplicity of the Savior-story takes center stage.

How do we recalibrate our souls? How do we get back to the real reason for the season? Why is it that the time of the year when worshipping Jesus should be the easiest is often the hardest? What is Christmas all about? Let's not allow another Christmas to pass us by like a blizzard, leaving us to shovel through shattered ornaments, dead tree branches, and broken dreams.

What would happen if instead of acting like bystanders to the nativity, we would enter the story as participants? Here's what I think: When we understand Christmas more deeply, we will worship Christ more fully. We see this in how the Christmas characters responded when they encountered Immanuel. Their worship sprang from deep places of the heart that were touched for the first time by God-in-the-flesh. If you have your Bibles with you, please open them up to Matthew 1. Keep one finger there and then turn over to Luke 1-2.

O Worship the King

Worship is at the heart of Christmas and as we study these responses we'll see a compelling picture of praise because when we understand Christmas more deeply, we will worship Christ more fully. The birth of Jesus is not on par with Rudolph and Frosty and Santa. This is not just a time of fuzzy sentimentality, as we sing about a "wonderful Christmas time." It's a time of wonder and awe and worship. Since worship is what we all long for, let's take a look with fresh eyes at the Christmas characters to see how they responded to the birth of the Savior. After we look at each individual and how they responded I'll ask a probing question that will help us apply the Incarnation to our lives.

1. Mary offered. Chosen to be the mother of the Messiah, Mary was a teenage girl engaged to marry a poor carpenter named Joseph. I love how God uses nobodies to do something great. When the angel Gabriel appeared to her, she was troubled and afraid but as she listened to an explanation of what was going to happen to her, she responded with words of surrender in Luke 1:38: "I am the Lord's servant...may it be to me as you have said."

Q: Have you ever offered yourself in surrender to the Lord as His servant?

2. John jumped. When Mary went and stayed with her cousin Elizabeth, who was pregnant with John the Baptist, Elizabeth exclaimed in Luke 1:44: "As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy." There's something about being in the presence of Jesus that should cause us to jump for joy, isn't there? May I point out that Elizabeth refers to John as "the baby" even before he is born? That's just one of the many texts in the Bible that speak of the preborn as alive and active.

Q: What's holding you back from jumping with joy just to be in the presence of Jesus?

3. Mary magnified. Joining the rich tradition of poets and prophets, Mary composes a song of devotion to her Lord in Luke 1:46-55. Let's look at just the first two verses: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." Mary's song is known as "The Magnificat," which is Latin for magnify. Like a magnifying glass that helps us see what is often unseen, Mary bursts out into praise, extolling God's attributes and His concern for the humble, helpless and hungry. Before we think more of Mary than we should, let me point out that she refers to God as her "Savior," meaning that she was a sinner just like us in need of the salvation that only the Savior can provide.

Q: In what ways does your life magnify the Lord so that people can see Him?

4. Joseph obeyed. Joseph has a problem. His fiancée is pregnant, and the baby isn't his. Though he could have flipped out and exposed Mary to public shame and punishment, his plan was to end things quietly. And that's when the angel appears to him in a dream and tells Joseph to not break his pledge to Mary, because her baby was conceived by the Holy Spirit. He's told in Matthew 1:21 that she will have a son and that Joseph is to give him the name Jesus, "because He will save His people from their sins." I admire Joseph for his immediate obedience as stated in verse 24: "When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife." Joseph reminds us that the call of God isn't always easy or conventional, but it is always right – and God will give us the courage to follow if we're willing to obey. When we understand Christmas more deeply, we

will worship Christ more fully.

Q: In what ways is the Lord calling you to obey Him this Christmas season?

5. Angels adored. Let's go back to the narrative in Luke 2:13-14. After giving the good news of great joy to the shepherds, we read this: "Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom His favor rests.'" The angels explode with praise as they contemplate how peace will now be given to people who were previously at war with God. We're planning to pick up on what the interaction might have been like among the angels during our Christmas Outreach service at PTHS in three weeks.

Q: If the angels adored and gave glory to God, in what specific way can you do the same?

6. Shepherds hurried. Despised as thieves unfit for polite society, the shepherds lived on the outskirts of towns and were shunned by most people. Don't miss this – God loves the overlooked! Choosing them to celebrate the good news of the Savior's birth, we read in Luke 2:15 that they are very eager to see the Savior: "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." These slow-moving men, who were used to lazily walking with their sheep, put it in high gear and scurry off to the stable in verse 16: "So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger." And then, after seeing the Savior, verse 17 tells us that they "spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child."

Q: In what ways do you need to confess your hesitancy and instead be in a hurry to worship?

7. Simeon praised. Some days after Jesus was born Joseph and Mary took Him to the Temple to present Him to the Lord. A man named Simeon had been waiting for a long time for the Savior to be born and Luke 2:26 tells us that the Holy Spirit had revealed to him that he wouldn't die before seeing the Lord's Christ. Moved by the Spirit, he comes face-to-face with Jesus in the Temple and verses 28-30 say that "Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: 'Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation...'"

It's not easy to wait, is it? Simeon waited a long time for God to show up. It's when we wait, that we can be moved to worship. I've been struck by how our missionary Gary Varner is praising, even though he is facing some serious health problems. Listen to what he wrote in an email this past Wednesday: "I have more strength today. The pain is lessening. I have many doctors' visits and a minor surgery to put in a port (for chemotherapy) over the next few days. We hope to start chemo soon. The doctors say that the lung cancer is 'well advanced.' But I can already feel the power of many prayers. God is so good and He is holding me as a daddy would a young son. I have no questions about God's goodness or care for me. He is so good -- he is my joy, my strength and my daddy. He gives peace that surpasses all understanding. This is not the path I would've chosen, but the choice is not mine. If He deems me worthy to represent Him through this ordeal -- then I will to His glory.

Q: When we see God's salvation unleashed in our own lives, how can we not praise God, even in the midst of our problems? Think right now of one of your problems. Can you say, "God, I will praise you in and through this problem?"

8. Joseph and Mary marveled. After hearing what Simeon said we read in verse 33 that "The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about Him." Though they had both been told that their son was the Savior, I'm sure they had a difficult time comprehending everything. The word "marvel" means "to admire" or "wonder." Every parent is pleased when someone says something nice about their child but this was much more than that. Perhaps they understood that Jesus was the Savior for Israel but when Simeon stated that He was also "a light for revelation to the Gentiles" in verse 32, it took awhile for them to fully understand that He is the Savior of the whole world. What Simeon said went way beyond what the angel had outlined.

Q: What will you do differently to make sure you spend time marveling this Christmas?

9. Anna witnessed. As Joseph and Mary continue to wonder and marvel, they then encounter an elderly widow named Anna. I love how God orchestrates the timing of everything in life. Check out verse 38: "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." She had waited a long time to see the Savior and now she couldn't help but thank God and speak about Jesus to everyone in Jerusalem. I recognize that Thanksgiving is over, but we should never stop thanking or stop telling people about Jesus.

Q: Our Christmas outreach at PTHS will be in three weeks. Think of three people right now who don't yet know Christ. Will you make the 'ask' as you speak about the Savior?

10. Wise men worshipped. Many months later, perhaps up to two years, we read about some scholarly astronomers coming from Persia to worship the one born King of the Jews. When they finally find Jesus we know that they gave expensive gifts to Him but I want you to notice what they do before they give their gifts. Turn back to Matthew 2:11: "On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped Him. Then they opened their treasures..." God is more interested in our bowing than with the bows we put on our gifts. He wants us before He wants what we have. Or to say it another way, He wants to

own us before we give Him what we own. He wants our hearts before He wants what's in our hands; He wants our presence, more than our presents. The word "worship" here means "having fallen, they prostrated themselves and intensely adored Him."

Q: How would you rate your worship? Have you ever fallen before Him in faith and received Him into your life?

Words of Worship

When we understand Christmas more deeply, we will worship Christ more fully. Let me put these top ten words of worship together because I think it will help us see in what areas we need to increase our adoration. These Christmas characters Offered...Jumped...Magnified...Obeyed... Adored...Hurried...Praised...Marveled...Witnessed and Worshipped.

Those Who Refuse to Worship

As I read through the nativity narrative, I see two groups who won't worship. I wonder if you find yourself in one of them.

1. The Intolerant. That would be hateful Herod. He goes crazy in his attempts to kill the Christ of Christmas. Maybe that describes you. Frankly, you don't care for Christmas and you're not all that crazy about Christians either.

2. The Indifferent. Or maybe you're more like the religious guys who totally missed the coming of the Messiah. They were so caught up in their rituals and routines that they missed Christmas. Sadly, they even knew the right answers about where the Messiah was to be born but resisted being born again themselves.

It's easy for religious people to take Jesus for granted. At the first Christmas, the ritually religious are nowhere to be found because they misunderstood, miscalculated and underestimated God's simple plan of salvation.

Action Flows from Adoration

As I read the Christmas narrative again this week, it struck me that it's impossible to stay the same when we encounter the Savior because adoration always leads to action. Worship leads to work. The story of Christmas is still unfolding and it still inspires action. Here are some ways we can choose to enter the story.

1. Tell the story of Christmas because it's our story to tell. Instead of getting all bent out of shape when a store employee says, "Happy Holidays," let's remember that Christmas is our story to tell. We've been talking in our small group about how we can answer people's questions when they ask, "Are you ready for Christmas?" In our culture that means, "Is your shopping done?" We want to recapture what Christmas really means so we can leverage our conversations for Christ. One person suggested we say something like, "I'm trying to get my heart ready..." Someone else is responding by saying, "I'm preparing myself for worship."

2. Sit down with your family and discuss how you can approach Christmas differently this year. Manage your schedule coming into the Christmas season in a way in which worship is front and center for your family. Here's an idea. Ask each member of your family which Christmas Character they most want to model – Mary who offered and magnified, John who jumped, Joseph who obeyed, the angels who adored, the shepherds who hurried, Simeon who praised, Joseph and Mary who marveled, Anna who witnessed, or the wise men who worshipped. Another idea is to use an Advent Wreath and read part of the Christmas story from Scripture every day.

3. As you strive to worship fully this Advent, be thinking of ways you can spend less so that you can give more. This quote by Eric Hoffer has really messed with me: "You can never get enough of what you don't need to make you happy." Instead of buying what people don't need with money you don't have to impress people you don't like, here are some worthy ways to give this season.

- Christmas Baskets. Last year we helped over 50 families in the community. If you want to give to this simply make a note on your check indicating that it is for Christmas Baskets.

- Participate in a special offering for the unemployed in our church on Christmas Eve.

- Orphan Care. Check out this online catalog that lists practical ways to care for orphans: www.lifesongfororphans.org.

- Project Angel Tree. We've participated in this ministry that provides gifts for children of prisoners in past years but this year we were not given any names for children. If you'd still like to participate, you can do so online: www.angeltree.org.

- Other ideas. For more ideas on how to give your "presence" this season, visit: www.adventconspiracy.org.

4. Invite at least three people to our Christmas service at PTHS on December 20th.

5. Let's sing in response to what we've learned together this morning. When we understand Christmas more deeply, we will worship Christ more fully. Psalm 71:25 says, "My lips will shout for joy when I sing praises to you." Sing along with the Christ-centered Christmas music this season.

Where do you stand this morning (hold up Christmas tree stand)? This is not just a story or a fable or a tradition. Just as these Christmas characters worshipped when they witnessed the Word becoming flesh, so too, we are invited into the story, to worship fully with our lives. Don't let our cultural chaos cause you to crash this Christmas.

We're going to conclude our service with a time of singing. If you sense a need for prayer, we're going to invite you to come up front where one of the pastors or elders will pray with you.

Luke 1:5-25 God Uses Ordinary People: Elizabeth

Summary: While you wait for something new, God is working on you. 6/29/08

One day a man passed by a farm and saw a beautiful horse. Hoping to buy the animal, he said to the farmer: "I think your horse looks pretty good, so I'll give you \$500 for him." "He doesn't look good, and he's not for sale," the farmer said. The man insisted, "I think he looks good and I'll up the price to \$1000!" "He doesn't look so good," the farmer said, "but if you want him that much, he's yours." The next day the man came back raging mad. He went up to the farmer and screamed, "You sold me a blind horse! You cheated me!" The farmer calmly replied, "I told you he didn't look so good, didn't I?"

This man was disappointed because his expectations evaporated as soon as he got the horse home. I wonder how many of you feel disappointed by something that's happened. Or maybe you feel cheated because something that you've expected to happen hasn't happened yet.

This past week results from a national survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life appeared on the front page of the Pantagraph and became the lead story on TV newscasts around the country. According to this survey, in the state of Illinois, almost 80% of the respondents pray a few times a month, but only about 25% say they receive any answers. We're going to see today that it is not uncommon to have to wait on the Lord when we pray.

The characters in Scripture are very similar to you and me. Each one has a mixture of beautiful and bad, of faith and fear. They are commonplace people and when we study their lives we find out how much they are just like us and how we are just like them. James 5:17 says, "Elijah was a man just like us." I'm confident that we'll learn a lot in our summer survey of the ordinary people that God used.

The study of Bible biographies can help us in one of two ways:

* Examples to avoid. Sometimes when we read the Bible we come across people like Jonah who said "no" when God said "go." This kind of behavior serves as a warning for us as stated in 1 Corinthians 10:6-11: "Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did...Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come."

* Examples to emulate. When we read about what happened in the past, we can also find models to mimic and examples to emulate like Elizabeth, the woman we'll be studying today. Romans 15:4: "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope."

Please turn in your Bibles to Luke 1. When I told a couple different people this week that we would be focusing on Elizabeth today, they had a quizzical look on their faces as they tried to place who she was. While there is actually quite a bit of Scripture devoted to her, she sort of gets lost in the nativity narrative. We tend to skip over her role as the mother of John the Baptist in our eagerness to magnify Mary's significance.

Let's begin in verse 5: "In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron." Zechariah and Elizabeth lived when wicked Herod was on the throne. He was the guy who not only killed members of his family but also ordered the extermination of all male babies under the age of two. Zechariah was a priest and Elizabeth was also from a family of priests. Even before eHarmony, their backgrounds were quite compatible.

Verse 6 tells us about their character: "Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly." In short, they walked with God and took their faith seriously. They lived in an unnamed village in the hill country of Judea, obscure and ordinary, yet upright before God.

As we take a look at Elizabeth's life, I want to draw out six practical truths that will help us persevere in our prayers and deal with disappointment. If you're looking for one statement that summarizes what I want us to learn, here it is: While you wait for something

new, God is working on you.

1. Describe your disappointment. As devoted as Elizabeth was, she was also deeply disappointed. Notice how verse 7 begins: "But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years." Some of you couples may be experiencing this kind of pain as well. In that culture barrenness was considered to be a sign of God's disfavor so this couple would have lived with some shame and the knowledge that while they were devoted to God, others probably thought they had done something wrong.

Let's begin by declaring some of our disappointments. In what area of life are you experiencing unmet expectations? What prayers have been met with silence? As I walk over to the white board, could you shout out some of these things?

2. Pray for God's provision. Twice a year, Zechariah would leave home for a week while his division served at the Temple. It was similar to being in the Reserves. Some of you are separated from a spouse who is serving our country. This had to be difficult for Elizabeth but she also knew that it was an honor for her husband to serve in this way. Verse 9 tells us that Zechariah was chosen by lot to go into the Holy Place and burn incense. This was a once-in-a-lifetime privilege and was the greatest moment in the life of any priest. As a thousand priests stand outside and thousands of worshippers have gathered in the Court of Israel, Zechariah stands alone in the holy place. Only he's not alone because an angel of the Lord suddenly appears and announces in verse 13: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John." The little verb phrase "has been heard" can be literally translated "was heard and is being heard."

This is amazing because Zechariah and Elizabeth are quite old and past the normal age to have children. It's quite possible that they had been praying for 40 years or more but nothing had happened. Or maybe they had given up much earlier. And now they were too old. And yet here's an angel saying: "Your prayer has been heard." That reminds me of the passage in Daniel 10:12-13 that explains that Daniel's prayer was heard right when he prayed but the answer was delayed for three weeks.

There's no doubt that Zechariah and Elizabeth had an ache in their heart for many years but they kept praying. 1 Thessalonians 5:17 says: "Pray continually." They also kept serving and worshipping. I've seen too many people get so disappointed that they end up bitter toward God and then they drop out of church. I've said this before but it's so true: If you unplug, you'll unravel. God often puts us in hopeless situations so we'll turn to Him.

Instead of trusting God, Zechariah wants some assurance that this will really happen. Look at verse 18: "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." Because he doubted, he was given a sign, only not one he wanted. He would not be able to speak until John was born.

I'm often the same way. I pray for something then lose heart and then when the answer comes I'm often skeptical that it is really happening. I wish I wasn't so surprised when God answers my prayers. Do you ever feel that way? Let's be reminded of Ephesians 3:20: "Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us..."

Friend, have you stopped praying for something because there's been no answer? Don't give up because when you pray God hears it. A young girl once wrote to a missionary to let him know that she was keeping him in her prayers. She had been told to not expect a response to her letter because the missionary was very busy, so she began with these words: "Dear Mr. Missionary, I am praying for you, but don't worry, I'm not expecting an answer."

In what area do you need to begin interceding again? Do you need to start praying again for that person who doesn't yet know Jesus? For a relationship that will honor Christ? For your spouse? For a prodigal child? For your parents? For that impossible financial situation? Let's pause right now and pray silently.

3. Trust God's timing. One of the hardest things to do when we pray is to wait for God's answers. I'm intrigued by God's sense of timing in Luke 1.

Lk 1:5 "In the time of Herod..."

Lk 1:10 "And when the time for the burning of incense came..."

Lk 1:20 "...my words, which will come true at their proper time."

Lk 1:23 "When his time of service was completed..."

Lk 1:24 "After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion."

Lk 1:26 "In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth..."

Lk 1:39 "At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea."

Lk 1:57 "When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son."

When God used Gabriel to speak to Zechariah, He was breaking 400 years of silence. But now the time was right for something new. The last words in Malachi speak of the promise of a prophet who would come in the spirit of Elijah: "Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord."

God answers prayer according to His timing and His delays are not the same thing as His denials. Isaiah 55:8-9: "'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,' declares the LORD. 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.'"

God often waits until things are humanly impossible and then He does what only He can do:

- * Abraham waited 25 years for the son that was promised to him.
- * Jacob was not given prosperity until after he became a fugitive.
- * Joseph was ruler of Egypt only after he was in prison.
- * Gideon had victory only when his army was taken down in size to 300.

God waits in order to display His glory, to dispense His grace and to grow our character. I like how one author puts it.

When we pray a prayer that is not right, God will say, "NO."

When we pray a prayer and we are not right, God will say, "GROW."

When we pray a prayer and the timing is not right, God will say, "SLOW."

But, when we pray a prayer and all is right, God will say, "GO."

In what area do you need to trust God's timing? Related to this, do you need to confess any anger you have toward God for not answering according to your timetable? Zechariah and Elizabeth didn't know it, but God had been planning this from the very beginning. What seemed like unexplainable silence was really God working to prepare them to be part of His plan to offer salvation to the world. Friend, it's time to let God do His perfect work in His perfect time and stop trying to push Him to fit our imperfect schedules. Remember: Before God does something new, He's working on you!

4. Look for ways to encourage others. When you're going through something, look for ways that God wants to use you to encourage someone else. Most of us get so wrapped up in our own worries that we forget that there are people around us who need encouragement. In fact, one reason God ministers to us is so that we'll minister to others. Check out 2 Corinthians 1:3-4: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God."

Elizabeth was a huge encouragement to Mary. In fact, Elizabeth's pregnancy was used as an example by the angel when he spoke to Mary in verses 36-37: "Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God." Elizabeth and Mary now had something in common because both of their pregnancies were miraculous. When they met, Elizabeth's baby leaped in her womb and then in a loud voice she exclaimed in verse 42: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!" I love this about Elizabeth – her focus is on Mary, not on herself. And, these words were further confirmation to her about what Gabriel had told her.

Learn from Elizabeth and look around and see who needs some encouragement today. It's likely that God wants to use you to help someone who is going through something you have already experienced.

5. Enjoy the blessing of believing. Every member of Elizabeth's family was impacted by the announcement of the Lord's salvation. You might be the only one in your family who has come to faith in Christ but God wants to use you to reach them. I love the story in Acts 16 where we read that the Philippian jailer believed...and then his whole family did as well.

Would you notice that Elizabeth called Jesus "my Lord" even before He was born in verse 43? "But why I am I so favored that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" She then blesses Mary by affirming her for her acceptance of the Lord's will in her life in verse 45: "Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished." One commentator aptly points out: "An aged priest has less faith than a young peasant girl, and thus Elizabeth's blessing of Mary for her faith in God's promise contains a mild rebuke for her doubting husband, who did not believe Gabriel's words."

May I suggest that Elizabeth seems to have had much deeper spiritual and scriptural insight than Zechariah did? She speaks of much more than she would have learned from what the angel said to her husband – not just that their son would be the forerunner, but that the son of Mary is Lord and Savior. Elizabeth had no doubt that Jesus was the Lord and the only way to salvation.

I read something this week and perhaps you did as well, that troubled me so deeply that I wrote a post on my blog (www.pontiacbible.org). I'd like to share just part of it because I think it's so important. This quote from the Pew study I referenced earlier is quite unsettling: "Among the more startling numbers in the survey, conducted last year by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life: 57 percent of evangelical church attendees said they believe many religions can lead to eternal life, in conflict with traditional evangelical teaching."

While we live in a pluralistic country, as believers in Jesus we must teach what Jesus himself taught. He is the only way to heaven: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6)

Jesus is the only way, the only truth, and the only life. There is no other plan but the person of Jesus. There is no way to get to heaven unless we go through Him. Jesus is very inclusive in the sense that everyone is invited to a relationship with Him as John 6:37 states: "...whoever comes to me I will never drive away." But, His claims are very exclusive in the sense that there is no other way to Heaven except through Him. The exclusivity of Immanuel is emphatic.

How does this mesh in a pluralistic society like ours that values variety and excludes exclusive truth claims? Though Christianity still dominates by sheer numbers, the U.S. now has a greater diversity of religious groups than any country in recorded history. Did you know that there are now more Muslims in America than there are Methodists? It's helpful to remember that the world of the biblical authors was filled with paganism and pluralism as well. In the midst of all this doctrinal diversity, the Bible makes some rather startling claims that run counter-cultural to the mantra of religious tolerance.

In Matthew 7:13-14, Jesus made it clear that the way to heaven is pretty restrictive: "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."

Peter boldly states in Acts 4:12: "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."

1 Timothy 2:5-6: "For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all men..."

1 John 5:12: "He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life."

These passages are extremely exclusive and overwhelmingly clear: Jesus is the only way to heaven. His statements of divine authority are incompatible with the homogenizing views of religious pluralists.

As you can tell, I'm a bit worked up about this. As one of your pastors I want you to hear it straight. It may be true that more than half of American evangelicals believe there are other ways to get to heaven but I'm committed to making sure that 100% of the people of PBC know that Jesus is the only way to get there!

6. Speak up when the time's right. Can you imagine what it must have been like for Elizabeth when she was pregnant? We know from verse 24 that she was in seclusion for five months. We don't know why she did this but it could have been to meditate on the angel's prophecy and get prepared for what was to come. Or maybe she was waiting until she "showed more" so that people who doubted she was pregnant could see the evidence. This time of solitude was no doubt good for her.

Zechariah couldn't speak at all for these months and verse 60 tells us that eight days after the baby was born when it came time to name him everyone thought he would be named after Zechariah but Elizabeth spoke up and said, "No! He is to be called John!" This probably got everyone talking and so they made signs to his father (which shows that he was not only dumb but deaf as well) and he wrote out these words: "His name is John." At that moment he was finally able to speak and his first words were in praise of God and then he breaks out into some lengthy lyrics in verses 67-80.

I love how Elizabeth speaks up and speaks out. She was not afraid to say what she knew to be true, no matter what others thought of her. Friend, in what ways do you need to speak up? Have you been holding your faith in? One of my favorite verses is found in Jeremiah 20:9: "But if I say I will not remember Him or speak anymore in His name, then in my heart it becomes like a burning fire shut up in my bones and I am weary of holding it in and I cannot endure it."

I'd like to introduce you to two women who are very much like Elizabeth in this way. They are not afraid to speak up. Kathy Marley and Sue Shavers returned from a week of ministry in Kenya and I want to give them an opportunity to share what God did while they were there.

I'm going to ask just two questions.

1. What did you do?

2. What did God do?

Luke 1:26:35 The Christmas Collision

Summary: I don't know what kind of calamity you've experienced but I do know the words "Christmas" and "collision" go together.

During the summer of 1977 I was in the front seat of my friend's car as we were out for a drive, listening to some music at a pretty high volume. My job was to keep the tunes coming and his job was to drive. As I was bending over to search for another 8-track tape (I told you it was the 70s!), the car jumped the curb and collided with a telephone pole. I woke up with a very fat lip, a couple loose teeth, and 18 stitches in my chin. It was a collision I will never forget.

Some of you have experienced some crashes in your life, perhaps even this year. I recognize that Christmas can be a difficult time for those of you who are going through this season without a loved one. I don't know what kind of calamity you've experienced but I do know the words "Christmas" and "collision" go together.

Mary wasn't planning to have her life interrupted by the announcement that she was going to be pregnant with the Light of the world. Her dreams were of a nice wedding with Joseph and now they were in serious jeopardy as people wondered how a virgin could be expecting a child. She needed a breath from heaven. I love the words to the song we just heard: "I'm frightened by the load I bear, in a world as cold as stone. Must I walk this path alone? Be with me now. Hold me together and lighten my darkness. Pour over me your holiness, for you are holy."

We pick up the narrative in Luke 1:26-35: "In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.'

'How will this be,' Mary asked the angel, 'since I am a virgin?' The angel answered, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.'

Joseph also had a collision that first Christmas. Listen to Matthew 1:18-25: "This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.'

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel' -which means, 'God with us.'

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus."

I want us to focus on just one verse tonight from the Gospel of John. At first glance you may wonder why I've chosen this particular passage instead of the more traditional Christmas message from Luke or Matthew. While the Gospels of Luke and Matthew give the details surrounding the birth of Jesus, John provides us with the meaning, or explanation. John does not use a narrative but instead gives us the theology behind the nativity.

John 1:14 is one of the most startling verses in the Bible because it describes another Christmas collision. Word for word, I can't think of a better explanation of what happened "Away in the Manger" in the "Little Town of Bethlehem": "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."

The Collision of Deity and Humanity

A grandfather was visiting his grandson one Christmas when he walked into the family room and saw the toddler standing up in his playpen, crying. His face was red and tear-stained. When little Jeffy saw his granddad, his face lit up and his hands reached out for help as he pleaded, "Out, papa, out!" What grandfather could resist this plea? And so he walked over to the playpen and reached down to lift his little buddy out of captivity.

Just then, however, "Law and Order" stepped into the room with a dishtowel in her hand and spoke sternly, "Jeffy, you know better. You're being punished. Leave him right there, dad." And she marched back out of the room.

The grandfather didn't know what to do. Jeffy's tears and outstretched hands tugged at his heart, but he didn't want to interfere with a mother's discipline either. He couldn't stand being in the same room and not being able to do anything but he couldn't leave without feeling like a traitor.

Grandpa then had an idea. Since he couldn't take Jeffy out of the playpen, he decided to climb in with him. That's a pretty good picture of what Jesus did for us...He climbed in with us.

The first part of verse 14 says that the "Word became flesh..." This is the single, most unique quality of Christianity that makes it different from any other religion: God became flesh. Jesus is the visible word of God. Theologians call this truth the Incarnation. The infinite second person of the Trinity, who created all things according to John 1:1, became a soft baby. That's a staggering thought. The Son did not cease to be God when He became a man. He added manhood but He did not subtract deity. He was fully God and fully man. He was the God-man. The collision of deity and humanity had its full expression in Jesus.

Do you remember the movie "O God!" starring George Burns and John Denver? The movie was theologically distorted and irreverent in parts. But there's one section that stood out to me. In the scene, George Burns makes an appearance to the supermarket manager, dressed as an old man, wearing tennis shoes and a fishing hat. When asked why he looks the way he does, Burns answers, "I picked a look you could understand." That's a pretty good description of the birth at Bethlehem. God picked a look we could understand by having His Son born as a human being.

While Jesus probably didn't wear a fishing cap, he hung around a group of men that may have. He no doubt smelled of fish. His hands were calloused from years of handling rough lumber. His skin was tanned from the Middle Eastern sun. He was human in every way we are and yet was without sin. The Incarnation not only means that we can understand God better but God understands us, because He became one of us.

The Message translation renders the first part of John 1:14 this way: "The word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood." For 33 years God moved into our neighborhood. The NIV says that Jesus "made his dwelling among us," which literally means, "to make one's tent." When we would camp at campsites growing up, we would always get to know the other campers around us. In fact, it's difficult to be private when you're camping. Everyone can see what you're doing. To say that Jesus pitched a tent implies that He wants to be on familiar terms with us. He wants to be close. He wants a lot of interaction.

"Dwelling" is the same word used for "tabernacle" in the Old Testament. The tabernacle was a portable tent where the glory of God dwelt in the days before the Temple was built in Jerusalem. The tabernacle was called the tent of meeting in Exodus 33:7: "Now Moses used to take a tent and pitch it outside the camp some distance away, calling it the 'tent of meeting.'"

There are at least three ways that the tent of meeting corresponds to Jesus "dwelling among us."

1. The tabernacle was God's dwelling place. God lived in the midst of Israel's camp, making His throne between the cherubim on the mercy seat. Likewise, God had his dwelling place in the body of Jesus.
2. The tabernacle was the place where God met with His people. In the same way, but in a much deeper sense, Jesus is the place where we meet God today.
3. The tabernacle was the place where sacrifice was made. The animals were killed and their blood became atonement for sin. So it is with Jesus. His cross became the altar where Mary's little lamb was slain, where His blood was shed, and where complete atonement was made for sin.

The Collision of Grace and Truth

The first collision is between deity and humanity and is expressed precisely in Jesus. The second collision is between grace and truth and is exhibited perfectly in Jesus. Take a look at the last part of John 1:14: "...who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." The apostle John knew Jesus just about as well as anyone. When groping for words to describe Him, John said, "I'll tell you this, He's full of grace and truth." One translation puts it this way: "He is generous inside and out, true from start to finish."

Grace and truth are two concepts that don't often appear together. As humans we tend to err on one side or the other. If we stress grace, we can be too quick to forgive and cut slack. If we judge too harshly, we make forgiveness impossible. Jesus was...

1. Full of grace. Jesus dealt graciously with people He met, especially those who were reeling from moral or physical train wrecks. Grace is overwhelming kindness, good will and favor. It's a special kind of tenderness. Parents brought children to Him and He blessed them. The leper came wanting to be healed and Jesus made him clean. The woman caught in adultery was not condemned but was instead given grace as she was told to "go and sin no more." The disabled, the discouraged, the disenfranchised, and the down-and-outers grabbed every chance to be near Him.

2. Full of truth. Jesus was truth personified because He fully permeated perfection, knowledge, wisdom and excellence. All that He spoke was truth. All that He did was truth. All that He thought was truth. He is the way, the truth and the life. And, because He is full of truth, He spoke truth to those who needed to hear it. To the religious people who reacted angrily to His grace, there was nothing left but hard truth in Matthew 23:33: "You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?" He delivered truth to those who had turned His father's house into a den of thieves, overturning their tables and benches.

Listen carefully. With Jesus you can always count on both truth and grace. He tells the truth about your life and your situation, and then His grace causes Him to stick with you all the way. Jesus loves me enough to spell out my sinfulness. I love what Max Lucado says: "God loves me just the way I am (that's grace), but He loves me too much to let me stay that way (that's truth).

Through no merit of my own, He offers His incomparable kindness and forgiveness by sacrificing Himself as the penalty for my rebellion. Because He was full of grace, He died for you and me while we were yet sinners. Because He was full of truth, He was able to pay for our sins completely.

Larry Libby puts it this way: "He is truth. He is grace. In His truth, Jesus tells me the real story about my life and where I stand. He tells me I am spiritually dead, booked on a one-way flight to hell, incapable of achieving heaven on my own power, incapable of lifting myself out of the despair of an empty life or releasing myself from the iron chains of habitual sin. In His grace, Jesus loves me, seeks me, calls me, redeems me, walks with me through the hours of the day, and stands guard over my slumbers at night." (Discipleship Journal, Issue 126, 2001)

At Christmas we're reminded of the Word that became flesh and made His dwelling among us. Jesus has the perfect ability to tell us the awful truth about ourselves while holding us up by His grace. The manger is filled with the awesomeness of God's grace but we're also reminded of a terrible truth: because of our sin, Jesus Christ came to die for us. Because He is full of grace, you can come to Him just as you are, without having to clean up your act first. And because He is full of truth, you can come in complete confidence knowing that He will keep His promise to forgive you and grant you eternal life.

That's grace and that's truth. Without both working together, we would have neither. Because He's God in the flesh, there's no conflict in this collision.

The Collision Between Self and the Savior

The final collision is found in the middle section of John 1:14: "We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only." John is here using the third person pronoun, "we" to show that the disciples had the privilege of seeing the glory of God as exhibited in Jesus. The word "seen" is a rich word, which means, "to carefully scrutinize." It's the idea of scanning, or examining, in order to understand.

On this Christmas Eve 2001, you're invited to consider the Christ of Christmas, to study the Savior of the world, to deliberate about the Deity, and to come to some conclusions. You can only learn by looking. John became a witness because he allowed himself to be wowed by the incarnation.

No one ever met the Savior and stayed the same. This Christmas you're faced with a collision. It's the collision between yourself and the Savior. What do you see when you look at the Christmas cradle? Do you see His glory? Do you see tenderness and truth? Do you see the deity in diapers?

The real conflict is one that is deeply personal. Some of you have been hit with some pretty bad stuff this year and you're still reeling. Maybe you've been keeping Christ at arm's length. Others of you know what you need to do, but you don't want to surrender yourself to the Savior. You're still trying to do it all by yourself. The message of Christmas is that you don't have to any longer. Jesus is here. He's God in flesh. He's pitched His tent among us so that we can get to know Him and forever be changed by Him.

The events of September 11, 2001 have taught us that we better not presume that we will even see tomorrow. As such, we should live differently. Jim Cymbala, in his recent book about the World Trade Center disaster, puts it this way: "The only day we really have is today. Yesterday is gone, and we have no guarantee of a tomorrow...but today is the day of salvation. Today is the only day when a person can trust Christ to be his or her Savior and Lord" ("God's Grace From Ground Zero," 55-57).

There are some differences between this Christmas and last Christmas, aren't there?

Last Christmas we thought it was enough to celebrate the holidays; this Christmas we know that we must also find ways to consecrate them.

Last year we were thinking about the madness of Christmas; this year we're thinking about its meaning.

Last Christmas we were getting on each other's nerves; this Christmas we're getting on our knees.

When the pressures of life, health, family, or your job come crashing in on you, where will you turn? When you collide into life's telephone poles, what will you come away with?

My collision in 1977 slowed me down a bit. In 1978, one of my friends drowned in front of my eyes. That sobered me up a bit. The next year I collided with the Cross of Christ and became a Christian.

On this "Silent Night, Holy Night," let's remember that Jesus is always ready for us to receive Him. What are you running into today? What have you been hitting that you can't move? Jesus is deity and humanity wrapped into one; in Him grace and truth are fully synthesized so that you and I can respond and submit to Him this Christmas.

Luke 1:25-38 A God Who Gives

Summary: The Christmas narrative is in danger of being relegated to a sweet story that is just read once a year. Some of us have heard it so much that we're no longer moved by the magnitude of the Majesty becoming a man.

A God Who Gives

As we prepare for Christmas, sometimes I wonder if we have allowed the Savior to be stolen from our celebrations. We've sterilized the spiritual and been inoculated by the familiarity of the nativity. "Merry Christmas" has been replaced with "Happy Holidays." Have you noticed that, "Are you ready for Christmas?" is often code for, "Do you have all your shopping done?" It's so easy to walk right past the manger with our arms full of gifts, isn't it?

Did you hear about the middle school in New Jersey that canceled a field trip to a performance of "A Christmas Carol" because some might be offended by the play's Christian themes? As columnist Cal Thomas points out, this is not really even a Christian story, though it does contain elements of charity, kindness and good will. Amazingly, instead of allowing the students to see this classic Dickens' presentation, they went to the "Great Railroad Race," a play that promotes diversity. Thomas writes, "Does it teach tolerance if we melt down Christmas...into a single meaningless 'holiday'?" (www.tmsfeatures.com: 12/9/02).

Related to this, an editorial appeared in Tuesday's Chicago Tribune which sums up how our culture's obsession with political correctness has gutted the greatness of Christmas: "Now that December is here, I'm reminded [that] the most taboo word in our country is... 'Christmas.' It's amusing watching people on the TV news shows talking about Christmas but going through verbal gymnastics to avoid saying the word...even the Santa's with kettles greet you with 'Happy Holidays.' When they say, 'Merry Christmas,' I'll give a donation" (Chicago Tribune, 12/12/02).

I want to suggest this morning that if we want to have a Merry Christmas, we must first understand Mary's Christmas. If you have your Bible, please turn to Luke 1, beginning in verse 26. We're going to walk through a few verses on our way to the manger and then we're going to unwrap some of the words of Christmas by focusing on God's gifts to Mary.

During this three-part series that will conclude on Christmas Eve, I want us to rediscover the reverence of the Incarnation because the whole superstructure of Christianity rests on the reality of Christmas. The word "incarnation" literally means the act of assuming flesh, whereby the Son of God voluntarily assumed a human body and nature. Don Skinner put it this way: "God did not send Christ to us; God came to us in Christ." Jesus is fully God and fully man, as we will see in our passage today. A theologian described the incarnation with these words: "...God must be able to come over to our side without leaving his own 'side.'"

Let's see how God came over to our side. Let me say at the beginning that the Christmas narrative is in danger of being relegated to a sweet story that is just read once a year. Some of us have heard it so much that we're no longer moved by the magnitude of the Majesty becoming a man. We must never forget that this is holy history that should be approached with awe and astonishment. The astronaut James Erwin, who traveled to the moon, experienced things that you and I never will. And yet, he never got over the crux of Christmas when he said, "There's something more important than man walking on the moon, and that is God, walking on the earth."

The Birth Announcement

As we pick up the story in verses 26-30, we're let in on an angelic encounter between Mary and the angel Gabriel as she receives a birth announcement that will rock her life and change the trajectory of human history.

· "In the sixth month..." refers to Elizabeth being six months pregnant with John the Baptist.

· "...God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee..." Gabriel was a "big gun" angel, sent by God to make life-changing announcements. The region of Galilee was not a politically correct choice. Judea was in the heart of Israel, while Galilee was up in the hills, and a bit backward. Nazareth was a surprising choice because it was filled with corruption and immorality. In John 1:46, Nathaniel summed up its reputation: "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?"

"...To a virgin..." The town of Nazareth was small and the womb that was to carry the greatest of all treasures was not that of a princess but of a young peasant virgin. Verse 27 mentions that fact twice. In verse 34, after hearing what was going to happen to her, Mary herself poses the question, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" The Greek word means that she had never had sexual relations with anyone.

Talk show host Larry King was once asked the question, "If you could select any one person across all of history to interview, who would it be?" King answered by saying that he would like to sit down and talk with Jesus Christ: "I would like to ask him if he was indeed virgin-born. The answer to that question would define history for me." There is no doubt that Jesus was born of a virgin and that He alone has defined history. And this was not just something thought of at the last minute. It was prophesied over 500 years earlier in Isaiah 7:14: "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel." We'll talk more about the implications of "Immanuel" next week.

"...Pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David." Mary was about to be married to Joseph, who was in the legal family line of David. Joseph became the husband of Mary, though not without some agonizing doubt when he found out she was pregnant, because it is clear throughout Scripture that he is not the father. Matthew 1:16 is careful to specify that Jesus was born of Mary, and was not the son of Joseph. Listen to this summary statement that appears right at the end of the Savior's family tree: "...Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ."

About six weeks ago I wrote an article in the Leader about a limestone burial box that was found in a Jerusalem cave. We made some copies and put them in the hallway if you'd like one. [Show Picture] If this is authentic, like scholars think it is, it's an unbelievable treasure because on one side of the box is an extraordinary inscription that has the whole world talking: "James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus." Scholars believe that this is an ossuary, which was a box used to hold the bones of someone who had died. According to Biblical Archaeology Review, "This container provides the only New Testament-era mention of the central figure of Christianity and is the first-ever archaeological discovery to corroborate Biblical references to Jesus."

I see at least three biblical assertions that are affirmed by this ossuary:

1. Jesus was fully human. He lived in an ordinary family.
2. Jesus was fully divine. He was the "brother" of James, but not the son of Joseph. This inscription goes out of the way to say that James is the son of Joseph, but doesn't refer to Jesus that way.
3. Mary was a virgin when she was pregnant with Jesus but she had other children after Jesus was born. See Matthew 13:55; Mark 3:31-35; and John 7:5, among other passages.

By the way, an interesting event happened last month when this box was shipped from Tel Aviv to Toronto. Apparently, while in transit, this archaeological treasure was damaged. Because it got cracked, officials at the Royal Ontario Museum discovered fossils of plant roots and bacterial staining within the limestone that allowed them to verify the date of the ossuary. In addition, they found a carved funeral rosette with flecks of red paint, common on bone boxes in the First Century! Isn't that cool?

"The angel went to her and said, 'Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.'" This greeting is beautiful, powerful, and personal. The word for "favored" here is used one other time in the New Testament in Ephesians 1:6, where it means the free bestowal of grace. The angel recognizes Mary's God-developed character as a young teenager who has accepted God's grace and has been living it out in quietness, peace, and purity. Gabriel tells her that she is about to receive a free bestowal of God's unmerited favor. This salutation does not mean that Mary is so full of grace that she can forever bestow grace on others. The context here is that because the Lord is with her, she is favored. That's what grace is all about.

"Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be." Mary was troubled because she did not think of herself as one who was highly favored. She, more than anyone, knew all about her shortcomings.

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Jesus, Jesus, Jesus

There's just something about that name

Master, Savior, Jesus

Like the fragrance after the rain

Jesus, Jesus, Jesus

Let all Heaven and Earth proclaim

Kings and kingdoms

Will all pass away

But there's something about that Name.

There's just something about that name, isn't there? I'm so thankful for Kent's sensitivity to the Spirit in choosing that song. When things are tough, whisper His name. When you need forgiveness, call on Jesus. If you want salvation, only Jesus can give it to you. Acts 4:12: "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."

4. He will be great. The word "great" means "exceedingly mighty," "extraordinary," and "splendid," and echoes back to Psalm 47:2: "How awesome is the LORD Most High, the great King over all the earth!" The infant to be born is the awesome Lord. The one who will be held by His mother is the same one who holds everything together by the word of His power. The star that eventually led the

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Jesus would be great in His love, great in His compassion, and great in His sacrifice. He would live a great life, teach great parables and give great sermons. He would heal with great power and be a great example. He would die a great death and would be resurrected in great power. He would give the great commission and ascend to a great height. He will come again in great glory. And He longs to make great changes in your life and in mine, if we will but let Him.

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The title "Most High" in the Old Testament is *el elyon* in the Hebrew and is a statement of God's surpassing supremacy. There is no one higher than He is. He is sovereign in every dimension possible. To say that Jesus is the Son of the Highest is to say that He bears the character and nature of the highest.

6. His kingdom will never end. Mary is probably still trying to gulp down the fact that she is going to be pregnant, have a great boy named Jesus, who will Himself be the Son of the Most High God. Gabriel's not done yet because now he tells her that Jesus will fulfill the prophecy given to David that someone will sit on his throne forever. Verse 33: "And he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; His kingdom will never end." This prophecy was given by the prophet Nathan in 2 Samuel 7:12-13: "When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever."

Jesus has no term limits and has an unlimited monarchy with an absolute reign. This promise means that Jesus is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. This rule of grace and truth is established in the hearts and lives of those who have the God of Jacob as their refuge. He is King and is enthroned as Lord and Leader in many lives today. Are you in His kingdom? If so, are you bowing before His supremacy and obeying His rightful rule?

When we come to verse 34, I get the sense that Mary can't process any more data and so she verbalizes a question that has now hit a crescendo: "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" She's not really mocking the impossible, but instead is asking a very practical question. If you think about it, her response is really pretty amazing. She could have just run away, told Gabriel that he had the wrong address, or that he was just mistaken.

She could have responded with a lack of faith like Zechariah did when he was told by Gabriel that he was going to be a father in Luke 1:18: "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." Zechariah was really saying, "I can't believe it." According to verse 45, Mary believed but we find her now to be befuddled and bewildered. Her question had to do with "how," not "whether" it was possible. Zechariah wanted proof; Mary wanted to know the process. If God was going to squeeze His awesome greatness into human flesh, it's no wonder that she was filled with some questions.

7. He will be the Holy One. Gabriel's answer makes it clear that the Holy Spirit will bring about this wonder in Mary's womb. Look at verse 35: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you..." This answers the biological question. The word "overshadow" carries the sense of the holy, powerful presence of God and was used of the Shekinah glory. This was a cloud of light by which God manifested His presence from a position above the Ark of the Covenant. Exodus 40:34: "Then the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle." This word is used in reference to the Transfiguration to describe the overshadowing of the cloud. Interestingly, the voice that comes out of the cloud identifies Jesus as God's Son: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!" (Mark 9:7).

Verse 35 continues, "...So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God." As a result of His supernatural conception, Jesus will be called, "holy," perfect, free from all taint of sin. This verse declares three things about the Savior, all of which are absolutely necessary for salvation to happen.

- He was Man – "to be born"
- He was Sinless – "the holy one"

- He was God – “the Son of God”

Jesus had to be born of a woman so that He would be the same nature as those whom He came to save. He had to be free from sin in order to make sacrifice for our sins. And, He had to be God in order for the sacrifice to be accepted. His deity asserts that God Himself has come to save us. This is the conundrum of Christmas, the intrigue of the Incarnation – the sinless man who is God has come to reveal who He is and reconcile lost sinners to Himself.

After pointing Mary to the miracle that took place in the life of Elizabeth in verse 37, we hear a verse that each one of us should memorize: “For nothing is impossible with God.” Some of you are in an impossible situation right now. Mary’s Christmas demonstrates what God can do...

- You may be in an impossible job situation
- You may be faced with a pile of debt
- You may be worried about a child or a parent
- You may be longing for courage to face some trial
- You may be overwhelmed by life

Whatever it is, nothing is impossible with God. Are you afraid? Nothing is impossible with God.

Do you feel lost and lonely? Nothing is impossible with God. Is your marriage melting down? Nothing is impossible with God.

Are you too tired to go on? Nothing is impossible with God. Do you wonder if you can ever get over your anger? Nothing is impossible with God.

Ever wish you could just be happy? Nothing is impossible with God. Do you feel unloved? Nothing is impossible with God.

If God can reach all the way down from the throne of Heaven to the body of a teenage virgin, if He can enter time from eternity, if the infinite can become an infant...what can He not do for you? What will He do in your life? Can you imagine what He wants to do with you?

Mary’s Gifts to God

For that first Christmas, God gave Mary seven gifts – a pregnancy, the promise of a son, a Savior named Jesus, He will be great, He will be the Son of the Most High God, His kingdom will never end, and He will be the Holy One. Mary didn’t really have much she could give to God, but what she did have, she gave. The only thing she had was her life. Look at verse 38: “I am the Lord’s servant...May it be to me as you said.” Her gift giving involved two things:

- Voluntary servanthood. A servant knows no rights of ownership. Mary is saying that she is the property of God.
- Submissive obedience. This is radical commitment. Whatever God wants her to do, she is willing to do.

Someone has said that there are only two types of Christmas presents—those you don’t want and those you don’t get. Actually there are two other gifts this Christmas—the gift of Jesus packaged for you that you must receive and the gift of yourself that God is waiting for you to give. One gift has your name on it but it must be accepted in order to make it your own. The other is a bit harder to give because it involves surrender. It’s really a gift exchange. He gave to you and now He waits for you to give yourself to Him. Jesus exchanged His life for yours but this transaction is only activated if you accept what He has done.

Friend, Christmas isn’t so much what you get, but what you give. Have you ever given yourself to Him? That’s the only present you can offer, and it’s the only one He wants. Are you ready to give yourself into God’s hands to serve and obey Him the rest of your life? Share the gift of yourself with the One who created you, who was born for you, and who died for you. Can you say, “Do with me as you please because I am your slave. Use your omnipotent power to put me where you want me, when you want me there, doing what you want me to do?” He is the everlasting King. Are you in His kingdom? If you are, then live under His loving leadership.

What makes Christmas is God’s desire to enter into the lives of ordinary people who are willing to let Him in. Mary’s Christmas means Merry Christmas to you and me because she believed the impossible and committed herself to voluntary servanthood and submissive obedience. Will you make it your Christmas? It’s for you! Will you receive what He’s done and then give yourself to Him?

Conclusion

In this age of political correctness I read a story about a kindergarten pageant that took place recently. A mother positioned herself so she could watch her son in the holiday play. She didn't expect much depth from the production because everything biblical about Christmas had been replaced with reindeer, snowflakes, and good cheer. But then her son's class rose to sing a song called, "Christmas Love." The kids were adorned with fuzzy mittens, red sweaters and bright snowcaps.

Those in the front held up large letters one by one, to spell out the title of the song. As the class sang, "C is for Christmas," a child would hold up the letter "C." Then, "H is for Happy" and so on, until the completed message read, "Christmas Love." Everything was going smoothly, until suddenly they noticed her...a small quiet, girl in the front row holding the letter "M" upside down. She was totally aware that her letter "M" appeared as "W."

The kids started snickering and making fun of the girl. She had no idea they were laughing at her and so she stood tall, proudly holding her "W." The teachers tried to keep the kids quiet but the laughter actually increased in volume, until the last letter was raised. Everyone saw it at the same time. A hush came over the audience and eyes began to widen as parents and kids alike understood the reason they were there. The message rang out loud and clear that night: CHRIST WAS LOVE.

In our upside down world, don't let anyone steal Christ from your Christmas. He loves you more than you can imagine, whether you have a broken shoe or a broken heart. I love what Vivian told Barb in the drama: "If you should just happen to come across Jesus out there on your way home, why don't you take Him in?" Are you ready to take Him in?

At the Birthday Party for Jesus yesterday, 130 children sang "Happy Birthday" to Jesus to celebrate His birth. Will you allow yourself to have a birthday party this Christmas by giving yourself to Him and experiencing the new birth? Jesus still enters ordinary lives today. Will you let Him in yours?

Luke 1:26-38 What are you waiting for?

Summary: The Christmas narrative is in danger of being relegated to a sweet story that is just read once a year. Some of us have heard it so much that we're no longer moved by the magnitude of the Majesty becoming a man. We must never forget that this is holy hi

As we prepare for Christmas, sometimes I wonder if we have allowed the Savior to be stolen from our celebrations. We've sterilized the spiritual and been inoculated by the familiarity of the nativity. "Merry Christmas" has been replaced with "Happy Holidays." Have you noticed that, "Are you ready for Christmas?" is often code for, "Do you have all your shopping done?" It's so easy to walk right past the manger with our arms full of gifts, isn't it?

Did you hear about the middle school in New Jersey that canceled a field trip to a performance of "A Christmas Carol" because some might be offended by the play's Christian themes? As columnist Cal Thomas points out, this is not really even a Christian story, though it does contain elements of charity, kindness and good will. Amazingly, instead of allowing the students to see this classic Dickens' presentation, they went to the "Great Railroad Race," a play that promotes diversity. Thomas writes, "Does it teach tolerance if we melt down Christmas...into a single meaningless 'holiday'?" (www.tmsfeatures.com: 12/9/02).

Related to this, an editorial appeared in Tuesday's Chicago Tribune which sums up how our culture's obsession with political correctness has gutted the greatness of Christmas: "Now that December is here, I'm reminded [that] the most taboo word in our country is... 'Christmas.' It's amusing watching people on the TV news shows talking about Christmas but going through verbal gymnastics to avoid saying the word...even the Santa's with kettles greet you with 'Happy Holidays.' When they say, 'Merry Christmas,' I'll give a donation" (Chicago Tribune, 12/12/02).

I want to suggest this morning that if we want to have a Merry Christmas, we must first understand Mary's Christmas. If you have your Bible, please turn to Luke 1, beginning in verse 26. We're going to walk through a few verses on our way to the manger and then we're going to unwrap some of the words of Christmas by focusing on God's gifts to Mary.

During this three-part series that will conclude on Christmas Eve, I want us to rediscover the reverence of the Incarnation because the whole superstructure of Christianity rests on the reality of Christmas. The word "incarnation" literally means the act of assuming flesh, whereby the Son of God voluntarily assumed a human body and nature. Don Skinner put it this way: "God did not send Christ to us; God came to us in Christ." Jesus is fully God and fully man, as we will see in our passage today. A theologian described the incarnation with these words: "...God must be able to come over to our side without leaving his own 'side.'"

Let's see how God came over to our side. Let me say at the beginning that the Christmas narrative is in danger of being relegated to a sweet story that is just read once a year. Some of us have heard it so much that we're no longer moved by the magnitude of the

Majesty becoming a man. We must never forget that this is holy history that should be approached with awe and astonishment. The astronaut James Erwin, who traveled to the moon, experienced things that you and I never will. And yet, he never got over the crux of Christmas when he said, "There's something more important than man walking on the moon, and that is God, walking on the earth."

The Birth Announcement

As we pick up the story in verses 26-30, we're let in on an angelic encounter between Mary and the angel Gabriel as she receives a birth announcement that will rock her life and change the trajectory of human history.

· "In the sixth month..." refers to Elizabeth being six months pregnant with John the Baptist.

· "...God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee..." Gabriel was a "big gun" angel, sent by God to make life-changing announcements. The region of Galilee was not a politically correct choice. Judea was in the heart of Israel, while Galilee was up in the hills, and a bit backward. Nazareth was a surprising choice because it was filled with corruption and immorality. In John 1:46, Nathaniel summed up its reputation: "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?"

"...To a virgin..." The town of Nazareth was small and the womb that was to carry the greatest of all treasures was not that of a princess but of a young peasant virgin. Verse 27 mentions that fact twice. In verse 34, after hearing what was going to happen to her, Mary herself poses the question, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" The Greek word means that she had never had sexual relations with anyone.

Talk show host Larry King was once asked the question, "If you could select any one person across all of history to interview, who would it be?" King answered by saying that he would like to sit down and talk with Jesus Christ: "I would like to ask him if he was indeed virgin-born. The answer to that question would define history for me." There is no doubt that Jesus was born of a virgin and that He alone has defined history. And this was not just something thought of at the last minute. It was prophesied over 500 years earlier in Isaiah 7:14: "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel." We'll talk more about the implications of "Immanuel" next week.

"...Pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David." Mary was about to be married to Joseph, who was in the legal family line of David. Joseph became the husband of Mary, though not without some agonizing doubt when he found out she was pregnant, because it is clear throughout Scripture that he is not the father. Matthew 1:16 is careful to specify that Jesus was born of Mary, and was not the son of Joseph. Listen to this summary statement that appears right at the end of the Savior's family tree: "...Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ."

About six weeks ago I wrote an article in the Leader about a limestone burial box that was found in a Jerusalem cave. We made some copies and put them in the hallway if you'd like one. [Show Picture] If this is authentic, like scholars think it is, it's an unbelievable treasure because on one side of the box is an extraordinary inscription that has the whole world talking: "James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus." Scholars believe that this is an ossuary, which was a box used to hold the bones of someone who had died. According to Biblical Archaeology Review, "This container provides the only New Testament-era mention of the central figure of Christianity and is the first-ever archaeological discovery to corroborate Biblical references to Jesus."

I see at least three biblical assertions that are affirmed by this ossuary:

1. Jesus was fully human. He lived in an ordinary family.
2. Jesus was fully divine. He was the "brother" of James, but not the son of Joseph. This inscription goes out of the way to say that James is the son of Joseph, but doesn't refer to Jesus that way.
3. Mary was a virgin when she was pregnant with Jesus but she had other children after Jesus was born. See Matthew 13:55; Mark 3:31-35; and John 7:5, among other passages.

By the way, an interesting event happened last month when this box was shipped from Tel Aviv to Toronto. Apparently, while in transit, this archaeological treasure was damaged. Because it got cracked, officials at the Royal Ontario Museum discovered fossils of plant roots and bacterial staining within the limestone that allowed them to verify the date of the ossuary. In addition, they found a carved funeral rosette with flecks of red paint, common on bone boxes in the First Century! Isn't that cool?

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6. His kingdom will never end. Mary is probably still trying to gulp down the fact that she is going to be pregnant, have a great boy named Jesus, who will Himself be the Son of the Most High God. Gabriel's not done yet because now he tells her that Jesus will fulfill the prophecy given to David that someone will sit on his throne forever. Verse 33: "And he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; His kingdom will never end." This prophecy was given by the prophet Nathan in 2 Samuel 7:12-13: "When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever."

Jesus has no term limits and has an unlimited monarchy with an absolute reign. This promise means that Jesus is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. This rule of grace and truth is established in the hearts and lives of those who have the God of Jacob as their refuge. He is King and is enthroned as Lord and Leader in many lives today. Are you in His kingdom? If so, are you bowing before His supremacy and obeying His rightful rule?

When we come to verse 34, I get the sense that Mary can't process any more data and so she verbalizes a question that has now hit a crescendo: "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" She's not really mocking the impossible, but instead is asking a very practical question. If you think about it, her response is really pretty amazing. She could have just run away, told Gabriel that he had the wrong address, or that he was just mistaken.

She could have responded with a lack of faith like Zechariah did when he was told by Gabriel that he was going to be a father in Luke 1:18: "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." Zechariah was really saying, "I can't believe it." According to verse 45, Mary believed but we find her now to be befuddled and bewildered. Her question had to do with "how," not "whether" it was possible. Zechariah wanted proof; Mary wanted to know the process. If God was going to squeeze His awesome greatness into human flesh, it's no wonder that she was filled with some questions.

7. He will be the Holy One. Gabriel's answer makes it clear that the Holy Spirit will bring about this wonder in Mary's womb. Look at verse 35: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you..." This answers the biological question. The word "overshadow" carries the sense of the holy, powerful presence of God and was used of the *Shekinah* glory. This was a cloud of light by which God manifested His presence from a position above the Ark of the Covenant. Exodus 40:34: "Then the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle." This word is used in reference to the Transfiguration to describe the overshadowing of the cloud. Interestingly, the voice that comes out of the cloud identifies Jesus as God's Son: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!" (Mark 9:7).

Verse 35 continues, "...So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God." As a result of His supernatural conception, Jesus

will be called, “holy,” perfect, free from all taint of sin. This verse declares three things about the Savior, all of which are absolutely necessary for salvation to happen.

- He was Man – “to be born”
- He was Sinless – “the holy one”
- He was God – “the Son of God”

Jesus had to be born of a woman so that He would be the same nature as those whom He came to save. He had to be free from sin in order to make sacrifice for our sins. And, He had to be God in order for the sacrifice to be accepted. His deity asserts that God Himself has come to save us. This is the conundrum of Christmas, the intrigue of the Incarnation – the sinless man who is God has come to reveal who He is and reconcile lost sinners to Himself.

After pointing Mary to the miracle that took place in the life of Elizabeth in verse 37, we hear a verse that each one of us should memorize: “For nothing is impossible with God.” Some of you are in an impossible situation right now. Mary’s Christmas demonstrates what God can do...

- You may be in an impossible job situation
- You may be faced with a pile of debt
- You may be worried about a child or a parent
- You may be longing for courage to face some trial
- You may be overwhelmed by life

Whatever it is, nothing is impossible with God. Are you afraid? Nothing is impossible with God.

Do you feel lost and lonely? Nothing is impossible with God. Is your marriage melting down? Nothing is impossible with God.

Are you too tired to go on? Nothing is impossible with God. Do you wonder if you can ever get over your anger? Nothing is impossible with God.

Ever wish you could just be happy? Nothing is impossible with God. Do you feel unloved? Nothing is impossible with God.

If God can reach all the way down from the throne of Heaven to the body of a teenage virgin, if He can enter time from eternity, if the infinite can become an infant...what can He not do for you? What will He do in your life? Can you imagine what He wants to do with you?

Mary’s Gifts to God

For that first Christmas, God gave Mary seven gifts – a pregnancy, the promise of a son, a Savior named Jesus, He will be great, He will be the Son of the Most High God, His kingdom will never end, and He will be the Holy One. Mary didn’t really have much she could give to God, but what she did have, she gave. The only thing she had was her life. Look at verse 38: “I am the Lord’s servant...May it be to me as you said.” Her gift giving involved two things:

- Voluntary servanthood. A servant knows no rights of ownership. Mary is saying that she is the property of God.
- Submissive obedience. This is radical commitment. Whatever God wants her to do, she is willing to do.

Someone has said that there are only two types of Christmas presents—those you don’t want and those you don’t get. Actually there are two other gifts this Christmas—the gift of Jesus packaged for you that you must receive and the gift of yourself that God is waiting for you to give. One gift has your name on it but it must be accepted in order to make it your own. The other is a bit harder to give because it involves surrender. It’s really a gift exchange. He gave to you and now He waits for you to give yourself to Him. Jesus exchanged His life for yours but this transaction is only activated if you accept what He has done.

Friend, Christmas isn’t so much what you get, but what you give. Have you ever given yourself to Him? That’s the only present you can offer, and it’s the only one He wants. Are you ready to give yourself into God’s hands to serve and obey Him the rest of your life? Share the gift of yourself with the One who created you, who was born for you, and who died for you. Can you say, “Do with me as you please because I am your slave. Use your omnipotent power to put me where you want me, when you want me there, doing what you want me to do?” He is the everlasting King. Are you in His kingdom? If you are, then live under His loving leadership.

What makes Christmas is God’s desire to enter into the lives of ordinary people who are willing to let Him in. Mary’s Christmas means

Merry Christmas to you and me because she believed the impossible and committed herself to voluntary servanthood and submissive obedience. Will you make it your Christmas? It's for you! Will you receive what He's done and then give yourself to Him?

Conclusion

In this age of political correctness I read a story about a kindergarten pageant that took place recently. A mother positioned herself so she could watch her son in the holiday play. She didn't expect much depth from the production because everything biblical about Christmas had been replaced with reindeer, snowflakes, and good cheer. But then her son's class rose to sing a song called, "Christmas Love." The kids were adorned with fuzzy mittens, red sweaters and bright snowcaps.

Those in the front held up large letters one by one, to spell out the title of the song. As the class sang, "C is for Christmas," a child would hold up the letter "C." Then, "H is for Happy" and so on, until the completed message read, "Christmas Love." Everything was going smoothly, until suddenly they noticed her...a small quiet, girl in the front row holding the letter "M" upside down. She was totally aware that her letter "M" appeared as "W."

The kids started snickering and making fun of the girl. She had no idea they were laughing at her and so she stood tall, proudly holding her "W." The teachers tried to keep the kids quiet but the laughter actually increased in volume, until the last letter was raised. Everyone saw it at the same time. A hush came over the audience and eyes began to widen as parents and kids alike understood the reason they were there. The message rang out loud and clear that night: CHRIST WAS LOVE.

In our upside down world, don't let anyone steal Christ from your Christmas. He loves you more than you can imagine, whether you have a broken shoe or a broken heart. I love what Vivian told Barb in the drama: "If you should just happen to come across Jesus out there on your way home, why don't you take Him in?" Are you ready to take Him in?

At the Birthday Party for Jesus yesterday, 130 children sang "Happy Birthday" to Jesus to celebrate His birth. Will you allow yourself to have a birthday party this Christmas by giving yourself to Him and experiencing the new birth? Jesus still enters ordinary lives today. Will you let Him in yours?

Luke 1:26-38 Misunderstood Mary

Summary: Many times we can misunderstand Mary's role in the redemption story. Let's look at how God used Mary to bring His salvation to His people.

It's not easy to be politically correct during the Christmas season. I recently came across a 90's version of "The Night Before Christmas." Let me read just part of it to you:

Twas the night before Christmas and Santa's a wreck...

How to live in a world that's politically correct?

His workers no longer want to be called "Elves."

"Vertically Challenged" they were calling themselves.

Four reindeer had vanished, without much propriety,

Released to the wilds by the humane society.

The runners had been removed from his sleigh;

the ruts were termed dangerous by the E.P.A.

And to show you the strangeness of life's ebbs and flows,

Rudolf was suing over the misuse of his nose

And had gone on Geraldo, in front of the nation,

Demanding millions in over-due compensation.

Before we look at the misunderstanding surrounding Mary, I want to clear up some misconceptions that may be circulating in this community about Pontiac Bible Church. As you may know, several months ago, we had the honor of hosting the groundbreaking ceremony for OSF St. James hospital right here in this room. I'm sure it probably created quite a stir when about 10 nuns were seen leaving the Bible Church that morning! People may be wondering if our new annex plans include space for a convent...

But, something else happened more recently, which needs to be cleared up. Did you notice in last Saturday's paper that Pontiac Bible Church is hosting a fiesta in honor of the Virgin of Guadalupe today? Actually, this was a misprint though it would have been fun to have a piñata.

Misunderstandings are everywhere, aren't they?

The Overestimated Mary

The often misunderstood Mary was a major character in the divine drama that first Christmas. Mary plays two widely differing roles among Catholics and Protestants. In fact, I've been in both camps I was raised Catholic and now I'm a Protestant.

From my perspective, it seems to me that many Catholics overestimate the role of Mary. According to Catholic teaching, "God has committed to Mary the treasury of all good things, in order that through her are obtained every hope, every grace, and all salvation." (Pope Pius, IX) Another Pope has put it this way: "It is the will of God that we should have nothing which has not passed through the hands of Mary." (Pius, XII).

Recently, there has been a push among many Catholics for the present Pope to declare Mary the "Co-Redeemer, Mediator of All Graces, and Advocate for the People of God." (Christianity Today, 12/8/97).

While we were living in Mexico for three years, we were amazed and grieved by all the attention given to the Virgin. In fact, today is the Day of the Virgin in Mexico, and millions of people will pay homage to her. Hundreds of thousands will make a pilgrimage to the Basilica in Mexico City from all over the country; many of them will walk on their knees. Beth and I have been to this shrine on several occasions and have observed people climbing the rough cement stairs on their knees, leaving bloodstains behind them.

I'll never forget an experience Beth and I had shortly after we arrived in Mexico. As part of our attempt to understand the culture, we made it a practice to visit different churches. If we were out walking, and came across a church, we would try to at least look inside. One day, we found an open church and walked in. It was a fairly large building, but pretty plain on the inside. As we walked toward the front, we couldn't help but see a huge statue of the virgin, hung prominently right in the middle of the wall, directly above the altar. This image was probably 30 or 40-feet high! As we got closer, we then saw a small statue of Jesus, only about two feet high, placed at the feet of Mary. We just stared with our mouths open in disbelief, while our eyes flooded with tears. There's something wrong with that picture, isn't there?

Before I say what I want to say next, please understand that I am not a Catholic-basher. I care deeply for those who are Catholic. However, it must be clearly taught Mary has no place in our redemption. It is only by the shed blood of Jesus that you and I can have forgiveness of sin and open access to God the Father. Mary is not a co-redemptorist or a mediator. She needed to have her sins forgiven, just like we do. Don't give to Mary that which belongs only to Jesus.

The Underestimated Mary

Now, let me be quick to add that while many Catholics overestimate Mary's importance and attribute things to her that are not taught in the Bible, most Protestants underestimate her importance. Many of us allow her a cameo appearance in Christmas cards, carols, and nativity scenes during this time of the year, but then we tuck her away like a Christmas ornament, out of sight, out of mind, until her reappearance next December. Mary is often the victim of simple neglect, having been abandoned to a kind of evangelical limbo. Some of us have consigned her to virtual oblivion.

As we will see this morning, Mary did play a crucial role in God's plan, and we will be spiritually impoverished if we ignore her.

My goal this morning is not to bash Catholics or Protestants. If you're itching for a theological gunfight, you'll be disappointed. Put your pistols back in their holsters. My goal is simply this: Based upon what the Bible teaches, what relevance does Mary's faith have for us today?

The birth of Mary's child radically altered the course of human history. So much so that people around the world divide history into two parts -- B.C. and A.D. -- Before the birth of Christ and after the birth of Christ. I want to use the letters "A.D." this morning to describe what impact Mary can have on our lives today. First, for the "A" Mary was Available.

A Teenager in Love

Let me give you some background. We know at least four things about Mary. She is a teenager, she is poor, she is a devout believer in God, and she is very much in love. When the story opens Mary is pledged or engaged to Joseph. Between the pledge and the wedding feast was a period usually lasting six months to a year. During that period the couple was considered to be married and were called husband and wife but they did not live together or have marital relations.

Like brides-to-be everywhere, she can hardly think of anything but their wedding -- the guest list, the decorations, the food, the

music, and her dress. Mary had never been happier. This was the most exciting time of her life.

It's right at this point that God enters the scene. He is about to ask an unknown teenage girl to take part in something that is so shocking that it's almost unbelievable. What God asks Mary to do will change her life -- and the course of history forever.

Gone are the happy dreams of a beautiful wedding; gone are the days of sweet anticipation; gone are the carefully thought out plans for the wedding feast. She will be married, but not before rumors spread through the countryside. There will be a wedding feast, but not the way she planned. It will all happen, but not the way she expected.

Gabriel's Message

Luke 1:26-38 tells us how it all began. Let's look at verses 26-27: "In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary."

These two verses set the historical framework. They let us know that what is about to happen really happened, that this episode is not the figment of some writer's imagination or some kind of religious hallucination.

These verses stress two facts about Mary. First, she is a virgin. Verse 27 mentions that fact twice. The Greek word means that she had never had sexual relations with anyone. Second, she has no idea what is about to happen. Mary is completely in the dark, without a clue that her life is about to be changed forever.

Let's see if we can't use our imagination to reset the scene. Let's suppose that Gabriel first appeared to Mary one day when she was out in the backyard in the middle of the afternoon, getting ready to go to the well to draw out some water. She looks up and sees a tall man. Then he spoke and she got spooked: "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." (28)

This greeting is both beautiful and powerful. The angel recognizes Mary's God-developed character as a young teenager who has accepted God's grace and has been living it out in quietness, peace, and purity. This greeting does not mean that Mary is so full of grace that she can forever bestow grace on others. The context here is that because the Lord is with her, she is favored. That's what grace is all about.

Verse 29 tells us "Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be."

Mary was troubled because she did not think of herself as one who was highly favored. She, more than anyone, knew all about her shortcomings.

But that's not the half of it. Without a pause, Gabriel proceeds to tell her something that blows her mind. He tells her that she's going to have a baby. And not just any baby. She's going to give birth to the Son of God.

What He Will Be Called

Listen again to these words in verses 30-33. But this time, put yourself in the sandals of a teenager in love: "But the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.'"

The first time Gabriel spoke to Mary, he said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored!" This time he tells her again that she has found favor with God and adds that she does not need to be afraid. This phrase does not so much describe her character as it describes how God's grace is going to affect her and work through her to impact all of human history. The preposition with, literally means that she has found grace by the side of God, in the fellowship of God.

Did you catch the emphasis here? It's not on Mary -- it's on her son. Gabriel uses beautiful poetic language to recount the Messianic prophecy from the Old Testament, which is fulfilled in Jesus. Gabriel is saying, "Your baby boy will incarnate all of the godly Messianic personhood foretold for hundreds of years. This is the one. He is the savior of the world and Lord of life."

Let's look at what the angel said to Mary.

She will be pregnant a fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14

The angel names the boy Jesus which means Jehovah-Salvation. In Matthew 1:21, this name is explained: "for he will save his people from their sins."

He will be great a fulfillment of Isaiah 9:6 "For to us a child is born...and he will be called...mighty God..."

- He will be called the Son of the Most High

- He will be given the throne of his father David fulfillment of prophecy of 2 Samuel 7
- He will reign forever not an earthly kingdom, but rather the rule of grace and truth established in the hearts and lives of all those who have the God of Jacob as their refuge.

With these bold declarations, Mary could have responded in a variety of ways and asked numerous questions. But she has only one concern, it's a technical matter that she would like cleared up: "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" (34) This is a perfectly natural question. Mary is engaged but not formally married. She has saved herself for her husband. How then can she become pregnant and have a son?

In verses 35-37, the angel answers Mary's question. First he deals with the biological issue by saying that the power of the Holy Spirit of God will overcome Mary and this divine activity will result in conception. The last phrase of verse 35 deals with something that Mary did not ask, "...So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God."

There are two important truths held in tension in verse 35.

1. It was necessary for the Savior of the World to be born of a woman, so that he would be of the same nature as those whom he came to save (c.f. Galatians 4:4-5)
2. It was just as imperative that he should be holy, sinless, and blameless.

In this one verse Gabriel is making clear the glorious fact that both of these requirements are fulfilled in the life of Jesus. He is fully man, yet fully God. Here the mystery of the incarnation and the virgin birth are held in tension. As C.S. Lewis has said with penetrating insight, "The Son of God became a man to enable men to become sons of God."

In verse 36, the angel explains that God's power has already impacted Mary's elderly cousin Elizabeth, who is already 6 months pregnant. God is not restricted to the natural order.

Verse 37 is really a summary, a benediction, the bottom line, if you will, of all that he has been saying to Mary, "For nothing is impossible with God." This literally means, "For no word from God shall be void of power." God can and will do anything that He determines.

I think there should be a long pause between verses 37 and 38. In his powerful book called, *Peculiar Treasures*, Frederick Buechner describes the moment between these two verses as the angel Gabriel waits for the answer of Mary:

Mary struck the angel Gabriel as hardly old enough to have a child at all, let alone this child, but he'd been entrusted with a message to give her, and he gave it. He told her what the child was to be named, and who he was to be, and something about the mystery that was to come upon her. "You mustn't be afraid, Mary," he said. And as he said it, he only hoped she wouldn't notice that beneath his great, golden wings he himself was trembling with fear to think that the whole future of creation now hung on the answer of a teenager.

Mary's Response

It's interesting to note that Mary does not doubt the angel's word, even though it must have sounded incredible. She believed what the angel said. Her only question had to do with how it would happen. In essence she says to Gabriel, "All right. I'm willing to do my part, but you need to explain how we'll handle this one little problem." That's real faith. That's believing the impossible. That's trusting God even when the facts argue against it.

In the history of the church Mary has often been portrayed as a kind of misty, otherworldly figure. If you look at some of the great paintings of Mary, they make her look so peaceful that you almost forget she was a real person. That's a shame because the Bible makes it clear that she was very real, with very real doubts, very real questions and very real faith. Nowhere is this seen with more clarity than in verse 38: "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her.

Her answer establishes two things:

- She is accepting voluntary slavery. She recognizes she is the property of God.
- Her answer shows obedience to revealed truth.
- **Without exaggeration, we may call this one of the greatest statements of faith in the entire Bible.**
- Mary said that she was Available. She said YES to the impossible, and YES to the plan of God.

Did her heart skip a beat when she said YES? You bet it did -- but she said it. It is not the experience of seeing an angel that gripped Mary. There was no spiritual rush, no emotional ecstasy because she was in the presence of an angel. Her response is a thoughtful, obedient response to God's revelation. Mary believed God, with a single-minded, unwavering commitment. She was Available. With

her head tilted high, her hands trembling just a bit, wide-eyed, nervous, open-mouthed, questioning but not afraid, wondering but not terrified, unsure but not uncertain...when the angel said, "Nothing is impossible with God," Mary took a deep breath and said, "May it be to me as you have said." And with those words Christmas came to the world.

Friend, are you available to God this Christmas? Are you ready to say "yes" to Him? Or, are you holding back? Don't be afraid to make yourself available to Him -- your life will never be the same!

The Cost of Christmas

Let's not underestimate what it cost Mary to become available to God. Mary knew--or would soon realize--that saying YES to God meant misunderstanding and public shame. Gone was her pure reputation and with it her dreams of a quiet, happy life in Nazareth. In the future, her life would at times be happy but it would never again be quiet.

And Mary had no way of knowing how Joseph would respond to her pregnancy. Would he blow his top and walk out on her? Would he humiliate her publicly? Would he dump her? After all, he knew he wasn't the father. As the story turned out, Mary had every reason to worry about Joseph because he was planning to break up with her -- I'm sure his friends thought he was codependent. Maybe they thought Mary and Joseph were even dysfunctional -- she's pregnant and neither one of them will own up to it!

And all these things were just the beginning. Mary could not know what the future would hold. Before it was all over, she would experience heartache, opposition, slander, confusion, anguish, despair and loneliness. In the end she would face the greatest pain a mother can endure when she would watch her son die on a cross.

When God said, "Are you available and willing to believe the impossible?" Mary said, "YES I am!" Without that YES, there would be no Christmas -- and there would be no A.D.

A Woman God Could Trust

I have no doubt that Mary asked, "Why me?" Why would God choose an obscure peasant girl in some out-of-the-way village as the chosen vehicle to bring his son into the world? There are many answers that have nothing to do with Mary, but there is one answer that has everything to do with her. God chose her because he trusted her. He knew she was willing to believe the impossible. He also knew she was willing to pay the price for that belief. He knew she was willing to bear a child out of wedlock in order to bring God's Son into the world.

That leads to the "D" of A.D. Not only was Mary Available, she was also a Disciple. The word disciple literally means that she was a follower of Jesus.

Mary, then, stands as a model for all of us.

1. She was available to God.
2. She modeled what being a disciple of Christ is all about.

Friends, it's still true that "Nothing is impossible with God." That's as true today as it was 2,000 years ago. You have to make yourself available and follow Him or else the impossible will never happen in your life.

That's good news this Christmas. Some of you are carrying heavy burdens today. For some of you Christmas will be lonely this year. Some of you are facing a financial crisis that looks hopeless to you right now. Some of you are out of work and don't have a single lead on a good job. Some of you are looking at a marriage that seems worse than hopeless. Some of you are estranged from members of your own family. Some of you have children who are far away from God. Some of you feel empty and far away from God yourselves.

The list goes on and on. But all these things have this in common: They seem impossible to solve by any human means. And for the most part they are. After all, if human means could have solved your problems, they would have been solved long ago. Remember this: Christmas is all about miracles. They happened 2,000 years ago; they can still happen today.

What is it that God wants from us? Total comprehension about the future before we will trust him? No. That's impossible. And besides, it's better that we don't know what the future holds. Do we have to be spiritually advanced to the point of sainthood? Thank God the answer is No. Very few of us would ever meet that qualification.

What does God want from you? The same thing he wanted from Mary. He wants you to be an available disciple.

You see, even though Mary was favored by God, she also needed to be forgiven by God. And it gradually began to dawn on her that God's plan of forgiveness was wrapped up in her unusual son.

The final appearance of Mary in the 4 Gospels occurs in a violent scene that she did not want to witness -- on a hill outside Jerusalem, watching helplessly as her first-born son who was once treated like a king, now hung on a cross like a criminal. Like many of the other available disciples of that time, Mary must have realized the wisdom of God's perfect plan.

A Christmas Savior

I like how a Christmas card puts it: God knew our greatest need. If our greatest need had been information, He would have sent us an educator. If our greatest need had been technology, God would have sent us a scientist. If our greatest need had been money, God would have sent us an economist. If our greatest need had been pleasure, God would have sent an entertainer. But our greatest need was forgiveness, so God sent us a Savior.

And not just any Savior. Because Jesus was born of Mary, he was fully human, and therefore could identify with our condition. Because he was conceived by God's power apart from an earthly father, he was fully divine, and so could satisfy God's holy demands. No other sacrifice could fulfill God's desire for mercy without compromising his demand for justice.

The choir's song this morning asks the question, Mary did you know that your baby boy has come to make you new? This child that you delivered will soon deliver you. At some point in her life, Mary made a decision to become available and to become a disciple. After giving birth to Jesus, she then needed to be born again herself. Even though she had close contact with her Son for many years, she ends up at the Cross -- just like we need to.

Sometimes people are surprised when they find out what I was like before I became a Christian. Actually, I'm not real proud of some of the things I used to do. When I'm asked about this time in my life, I like to make a distinction. Here's what I tell people: "Those were my B.C. Days -- before I surrendered my life to Christ. I'm now an A.D. man."

Friends, some of you are still leading a B.C. kind-of-life. I encourage you this Christmas to forget about being politically correct -- instead focus on what it will take for you to be spiritually correct -- that's exactly what Mary did. Just as the history of the world is divided into B.C. and A.D., this Christmas can be a defining moment for you. You can become an A.D. Man or an A.D. Woman.

You Snooze, You Lose

I wonder how many of you this morning are just kind of going through the motions. Sure, it's almost Christmas, but its no big deal to you. Maybe you've just been living your life without much thought about the future.

Maybe you're a bit like two robins who were sitting in a tree. One of the robins turned to his buddy and announced that he was hungry. The other robin said that he was hungry too so they flew down to find some lunch. As they came down, they saw an entire field full of worms. They ate and ate until they could eat no more.

"I'm so full I don't think I can fly back up to the tree," said the first robin. The second one agreed so they just plopped down and basked in the sun. No sooner had they fallen asleep than a big fat tomcat snuck up and gobbled them both up. As he sat washing his face after his meal, he grinned, "I love baskin' robins."

Anyone here today just baskin' through life? Friends, life is too important to miss out on what Mary discovered. Thankfully, she didn't put her decision off. She responded right away before it was too late. She made herself available and she became a disciple.

What about you?

Luke 1:34 Christmas Questions: Doubt

Summary: When you have a bout with doubt, remember that doubt doesn't disqualify you. Christmas Questions: Doubt 12/7/08

Can you tell me who said the following?

This person was asked if he believes that after he dies, he will hear God say to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant.' After a long pause, he responded, 'I hope so.' (Billy Graham)

"Jesus has a very special love for you. As for me, the silence and the emptiness is so great that I look and do not see, listen and do not hear." (Mother Teresa)

"How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." (Zechariah)

"How will this be?" (Mary)

Last week we looked at the topic of discovery and learned that...

* Until you go, you'll never know

* Until you know, you'll never show

* Until you show, you'll never glow

Once you head out on the road to discovery, sooner or later you will encounter some doubts. In his book called "Confessions of a Pastor," Craig Groeschel writes this: "My first memorable spiritual hiccup was a time I doubted the existence of God. It happened, oddly enough, in church. I was probably seven or eight years old. The minister was preaching...and I was bored. Without warning, the question dropped into my mind: 'Is God real? Or is He just something we made up?' Fear and guilt overwhelmed me immediately. I tried to ignore the question and listen to the rest of the boring sermon."

You know you have some doubts when your prayer sounds something like this: "O God, if there is a God, save my soul, if I have a soul, so I can go to heaven, if there is a heaven." Here's what I want to say right up front: When you have a bout with doubt, remember that doubt doesn't disqualify you.

Definitions of Doubt

The New Unger's Bible Dictionary defines doubt this way: "The state of mind that hesitates between two contradictory conclusions." The Greek word literally means "to go two ways." It's the idea of wavering between two positions. In that sense then, doubt is not the opposite of faith; unbelief is. Unbelief refers to a willful refusal to believe, while doubt describes inner uncertainty. This is described clearly in James 1:6: "But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind."

We are so fortunate in this church to have such a wonderful student ministry. A month ago, Pastor Jeff and his team took the high schoolers on a retreat. One of the sessions dealt with doubt. Here's the "Big Idea" or summary statement: "It is normal to doubt. What you do with those doubts makes all the difference." Pastor Jeff then said this: "God is less threatened by doubt than His church is." God can handle whatever doubt you are dealing with today.

I'm glad we have such a sharp church sign and that it has been recently repainted. We also have new signage inside the church to help people find the various rooms. I think we missed one though. There should be a big and bold sign over each entrance with the words, "Doubters Welcome!"

One of the hidden secrets in the church is that many Christians deal with doubt. While this topic is often not addressed, we want to establish that doubt doesn't disqualify you. In fact, doubt can even lead one to deeper faith. Instead of throwing daggers at doubters, we're called to be compassionate towards those who have questions. We see God's heart in Jude 22: "Be merciful to those who doubt." Entire books of the Bible delineate issues of doubt – Ecclesiastes, Job, Lamentations and Habakkuk come to mind. In addition, many of the psalms deal with doubt.

Elie Wiesel, when asked to describe his faith, uses the adjective wounded. "My tradition teaches that no heart is as whole as a broken heart, and I would say that no faith is as solid as a wounded faith." Pastor Rodney Buchanan hits it on the head: "Doubting is a common experience among Christians. If you have never doubted anything, it may mean that you have never thought seriously about anything. The only way to never doubt is to never use your mind to question and try to figure anything out. So, not only can you be a Christian and still have some doubts, but you can hardly be a Christian without doubting at times. After all, if doubting was not possible, faith would not be possible either...doubting does not mean that your faith stops, it means you are trying to understand your faith at a deeper level" (www.sermoncentral.com). Another honest believer writes: "It's is not as a child that I believe and confess Jesus Christ. My hosanna is born of a furnace of doubt."

Please turn in your Bible to Luke 1. I want us to look at two characters, a man and a woman, who both had angelic encounters with Gabriel. They both had some doubts. One was unwilling to believe; the other wanted desperately to believe. When you go below the surface there is either a will to believe or a will not to believe. One pastor declares that there are really two kinds of doubters – seeking doubters or smokescreen doubters. Let's look first at Zechariah.

Zechariah's Unbelief

When Gabriel tells him that he is going to be a father in Luke 1:18, Zechariah immediately asks for some sort of sign: "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." Zechariah was really saying, "I can't believe it." The phrase, "I am an old man" is a very emphatic statement. In verse 19 Gabriel responds by using the same emphatic expression: "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God." The angel's name means "the power of God." He was making a contrast between Zechariah's faltering faith and God's unfailing faithfulness. It's as if Gabriel were saying, "You might be an old geezer, unable to have children,

but I am Gabriel, and I stand in the presence of God. I'm the messenger of good news sent straight from God. Don't you think God can handle this?"

On one hand Zechariah's question seems valid (he and his wife really were well past normal childbearing ages); on the other hand he should have known better. He was too busy asking questions and focusing on problems to really hear God. Now he would have nine months to listen. It's okay to ask God questions if we're simply wanting more understanding of what God is calling us to do but if our motivation is unbelief rather than doubt, we are on shaky ground.

Unbelief is a willful refusal to trust God or take Him at his word; doubt is honest misgiving or reservation, but also a willingness to be shown otherwise. Interestingly, Zechariah had asked for a sign; for nine months he had to use sign language!

Mary's Doubt

Some say the tradition of gift giving started in Europe and eventually came to our country with the immigrants. Others propose that it goes back to the Magi, who gave gifts to Jesus after He was born. I'd like to suggest that it goes back a bit further. The first instance of gift giving took place between Mary and God. One came ready to give and was loaded down with presents. The other was caught off guard and had to make do with what she had. As we come to Luke 1:31-35, God gives 7 gifts to Mary through the angel Gabriel. Let's see if we can unwrap each of them.

1. She will become pregnant. The first present God will give to Mary is a miracle. Though she is a virgin, she will "be with child." This has to blow her mind. She was going to become pregnant outside the normal process of conception.
2. She will give birth to a son. While the conception was miraculous, Mary was going to have a normal pregnancy and give birth to a baby boy.
3. His name will be Jesus. The birth announcement is being dictated to Mary even before she is pregnant! The Hebrew here is "Joshua," which means "Jehovah-Salvation." In Matthew's Gospel, when Gabriel appeared to Joseph to clear up some of his confusion, the meaning of Jesus' name and His mission is clarified: "She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21).
4. He will be great. The word "great" means "exceedingly mighty," "extraordinary," and "splendid." The one who will be held by His mother is the same one who holds everything together by the word of His power. The star that eventually led the wise men to Jesus was hurled into the heavens by His holy hands.
5. He will be the Son of the Most High God. Verse 32 refers to Jesus as the "Son of the Most High." Verse 35 calls Him the "Son of God." Here's the mystery of the Incarnation. Jesus is the son of Mary and the Son of the Most High God. The title "Most High" in the Old Testament is *el elyon* in the Hebrew and refers to God's surpassing supremacy.
6. His kingdom will never end. Mary is probably still trying to gulp down the fact that she is going to be pregnant, have a great boy named Jesus, who will Himself be the Son of the Most High God. Gabriel's not done yet because now he tells her that Jesus will fulfill the prophecy given to David that someone will sit on his throne forever. Verse 33: "And he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; His kingdom will never end."

When we come to verse 34, we get the sense that Mary can't process any more data and so she verbalizes a question that has now hit a crescendo: "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" She's not really mocking the impossible, but instead is asking a very practical question. If you think about it, her response is really pretty amazing. According to verse 45, Mary believed but we find her now to be befuddled and bewildered. Her question had to do with "how," not "whether" it was possible. With these bold declarations, Mary could have responded in a variety of ways and asked numerous questions. But she has only one concern, it's a technical matter that she would like cleared up. Mary is engaged but not formally married. She has saved herself for her husband. How then can she become pregnant and have a son?

Zechariah wanted proof; Mary wanted to know the process. It's interesting to note that Mary does not doubt the angel's word, even though it must have sounded incredible. She believed what the angel said. Her only question has to do with how it would happen. In essence she says to Gabriel, "All right. I'm willing to do my part, but you need to explain how we'll handle this one little problem."

Let me say again that there's a difference between doubt and unbelief. Doubt is can't believe; unbelief is won't believe. Doubt is honesty; unbelief is obstinacy. Doubt is looking for light; unbelief is content with darkness.

7. He will be the Holy One. Gabriel's answer makes it clear that the Holy Spirit will bring about this wonder in Mary's womb. Look at verse 35: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you..." This answers the biological question. The word "overshadow" carries the sense of the holy, powerful presence of God and was used of the Shekinah glory.

After pointing Mary to the miracle that took place in the lives of Zechariah and Elizabeth in verse 37, we hear a verse that each one of us should memorize: "For nothing is impossible with God."

- * Are you in an impossible job situation? Nothing is impossible with God.
- * Is the friction in your family ever going to end? Nothing is impossible with God.
- * Are you afraid? Nothing is impossible with God.
- * Do you feel lost and lonely? Nothing is impossible with God.
- * Is your marriage melting down? Nothing is impossible with God.
- * Are you too tired to go on? Nothing is impossible with God.
- * Do you wonder if you can ever get over your anger? Nothing is impossible with God.
- * Ever wish you could just be happy? Nothing is impossible with God.
- * Do you feel unloved? Nothing is impossible with God.

If God can reach all the way down from the throne of Heaven to the body of a teenage virgin, if He can enter time from eternity, if the infinite can become an infant...what can He not do for you? What will He do in your life? Can you imagine what He wants to do with you?

Mary's Gifts to God

For that first Christmas, God gave Mary seven gifts. Mary didn't really have much she could give to God, but what she did have, she gave. The only thing she had was her life. Look at verse 38: "I am the Lord's servant...May it be to me as you said." Her gift giving involved two things:

- * Voluntary servanthood. A servant has no rights of ownership. Mary is saying that she is the property of God.
- * Submissive obedience. This is radical commitment. Whatever God wants her to do, she is willing to do.

Are you ready to give yourself into God's hands to serve and obey Him the rest of your life? Share the gift of yourself with the One who created you, who was born for you, and who died for you. Can you say, "Do with me as you please because I am your slave? Use your omnipotent power to put me where you want me, when you want me there, doing what you want me to do?"

It's been said that for many of us the great danger is not that we will renounce our faith. It is that we will become so distracted and rushed and preoccupied that we will settle for a mediocre version of it. Christmas is all about God entering into the lives of ordinary people who are willing to let Him enter.

When you have a bout with doubt, remember that doubt doesn't disqualify you.

John Ortberg has written a new book called Faith and Doubt. I really like the subtitle: "What if the most important word is the one in the middle?" Check out this insight: "I marvel at the last words to describe the disciples in the gospel of Matthew – our last glimpse of the men who followed Jesus for three years, learned from him, and saw him crucified and resurrected: "Then the eleven disciples went to...the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted" (Matthew 28:16-17). This is an amazing picture. They have seen him, listened to him, followed him, studied him, and seen him crucified and resurrected – and the last thing we read about them is 'and some doubted.'"

Biblical scholar Frederick Dale Bruner says, "The Christian faith is bi-polar. Disciples live their life between worship and doubt, trusting and questioning, hoping and worrying." Then Jesus gives the disciples what is called the Great Commission...Jesus looks at these worshiping doubters and says: "You go! You doubters, go. You risk your lives for me. You change the world for me..." Disciples are not people who never doubt. They doubt and worship. They doubt and serve. They doubt and help each other with their doubts. They doubt and practice faithfulness. They doubt and wait for their doubt one day to be turned to knowing (page 176).

Check out this statement and see if it resonates in your heart: "One who has never doubted has only half believed." If you're having a bout with doubt, let me mention seven ways to move from doubt to faith (from Ray Pritchard).

Dealing With Doubt

1. Admit your doubts and ask for help. I love Mark 9:24: "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"
2. Recognize that faith is a choice, not a feeling. When Jesus recognized that his disciples were faltering because of their feelings, He asked this question in Luke 24:38: "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds?"
3. Don't be afraid to "borrow" some faith. When you're struggling ask someone if you can borrow some of their faith. I'm reminded of the man who was paralyzed and was brought to Jesus by his friends who lowered him through the roof. I love Mark 2:5: "When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.'"
4. Act on your faith, not your doubts. As Jesus turned to Thomas, he turns to each of us today and says, "Stop doubting and believe" (John 20:27).
5. Doubt your doubts, not your faith. Someone said it this way: Believe your beliefs and doubt your doubts.
6. Understand that there are some things you will never understand until heaven. It's important to struggle with God and seek answers but if you are waiting until you have everything figured out before you'll put your faith in Him, you'll be waiting forever. One courageous pastor said it like this: "God is bigger than you, so get over it!" Hebrews 11:6: "And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to Him must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him."
7. Keep going back to what you know to be true. Don't doubt in the darkness what you know to be true in the sunshine.

God never turns an honest doubter away. It's a wonderful truth that the greatest doubters often become the strongest believers. I like what Hudson Taylor said: "God isn't looking for people of great faith, but for individuals ready to follow Him." Henry Nouwen captures it better than I can: "So I'm praying while not knowing how to pray. I am resting while feeling restless, at peace while tempted, safe while still anxious, surrounded by a cloud of light while still in darkness, in love while still doubting."

One of the most helpful things I have heard in this regard is this: Biblical faith is belief plus doubt and then acting on the belief part. I want to end by sharing something that you can be totally confident about. If you receive Jesus Christ into your life by faith, you can know for sure that your sins will be forgiven and that you'll go to heaven when you die.

This past Wednesday we had a funeral service for Scott Rutledge. I've been so impressed with how tightly Marvin and Rosie are holding on to the Lord and I was moved to tears (again) after the service when just Marvin and Rosie and Suzie and her husband Joe were gathered around the casket. I was standing about 10 feet away when I heard Marvin begin to pray. His first words were: "God, thank you for this day...and thank you for giving Scottie to us." When he finished then Rosie started praying. This is what I heard: "There is no doubt, Lord that Scottie is with you..." There is no doubt. There is no doubt. There is no doubt.

If you have put your faith and trust in Jesus for forgiveness of sins, you can know without a shadow of a doubt that you will go to heaven when you die. 1 John 5:13: "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life."

Are you trying to go two ways today? There's only one way and His name is Jesus. Let's lock into the certainty of our salvation right now as we celebrate communion.

Luke 1:46-55 Mary's Music

Summary: When we are humble the Holy One can use us. 12/11/11

I had the joy on Friday of being one of the chaperones for some of the junior highers at Pontiac Christian School while they rang bells for the Salvation Army at County Market. Joy is the right word because for 2 ½ hours this group of girls, along with Barbara Billerbeck, sang every Christmas carol they knew.

It was fun watching people come out of the store with no smile on their faces but when they heard the carols of Christmas, they immediately started smiling. One commented, "This is the best thing I've seen today." Another said, "This makes me happy." At least three individuals started dancing. Many sang along with the songs.

One woman came out of the store and immediately started crying. She came over and put some money in the bucket and thanked the girls. She then moved about 10 yards away and kept crying. She came up again and put some more money in. Now she was

smiling ear to ear. When we found out it was her birthday, the girls serenaded her with “Happy Birthday.” She cried some more and put some more money in.

During this entire time, the girls only took one five-minute break. When they were gone, I rang the bell and all the people went back to not smiling and being Grinch-like with their money. Of course, I was too self-conscious to sing. The girls came back and told me that they had been asked to sing inside the store! As soon as they came out the smiles came back and the money started flowing again. I just slithered into the background.

I was reminded again of the power of music...especially at Christmas time!

Last week we began with some music clips and had you guess the name of some popular Christmas songs. Since you didn't do very well with that, I came up with an easier Christmas Carol quiz.

1. What's the most-often played and best-selling Christmas song of all time? *White Christmas*.
2. Of the top-ten most popular Christmas songs in our culture, which one has a spiritual theme? According to worldofchristmas.net, there's just one. Here's their list:

1. *White Christmas*
2. *Last Christmas*
3. *Rudolph*
4. *I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus*
5. *Jingle Bell Rock*
6. *The Christmas Song*
7. *Snoopy's Christmas*
8. *Here Comes Santa Claus*
9. *Little Drummer Boy*
10. *Donde Esta Santa Claus*

That's right. It's the *Little Drummer Boy*. Amidst all the pa rum pum pums, we hear about honoring the King with our finest gifts and Mary nodding while the drummer boy plays his best for Him.

I read this week that more and more radio stations have been switching their formats to all-Christmas, all the time. According to Arbitron, it's not unusual for ratings to double once a station makes the switch. The *Hollywood Reporter*, in its December 9th issue, said that it makes a lot of sense because “People who find the station often stick around after the holidays and discover a new favorite station.”

Music about Christ's birth should be much more than just a clever marketing scheme during the holiday season. By the way, I had lunch with Willard Baker this week and he pulled a card out of his pocket that he made up to give to people when they say, “Happy Holidays.” Here's what it says: “Don't you mean, ‘Merry Christmas’? ‘Tis the season to celebrate the birth of our Savior Jesus Christ.”

Can you imagine Christmas without carols? What a tragedy it would be if there were no songs to announce the Savior's coming or if they were all just about snow or reindeer or jingle bells. As we continue in our series called, “The Songs of Christmas,” today we're going to listen in to the lyrics of *Mary's Music*, which is perhaps the most well-known song of Christmas in Luke's gospel. It's my hope that after hearing her music, you'll stick with the Scriptures and discover some other favorites. But before we do that, let's just admit that Mary is often misunderstood.

The Overestimated Mary

Mary plays two widely divergent roles among Catholics and Protestants. Some of you know that I've been in both camps – I was raised Catholic and now I'm a Protestant.

It seems to me that many Catholics overestimate the role of Mary. According to Pope Pius, IX, “God has committed to Mary the treasury of all good things, in order that through her are obtained every hope, every grace, and all salvation.” Another Pope put it this way: “It is the will of God that we should have nothing which has not passed through the hands of Mary...The Blessed Virgin Mary is to be called Queen not only on account of her divine motherhood but also because by the will of God she had a great part in the work of our salvation...she co-operated in our redemption.” (Pius, XII).

And there has been a recent push among many Catholics to declare Mary the “Co-Redeemer, Mediator of All Graces, and Advocate for the People of God.” (Christianity Today, 12/8/97). In one Catholic Forum I read this week, I came across these words: “Jesus is obscured because Mary is kept in the background. Thousands of souls perish because Mary is withheld from them.” It was Jerome, an early church father, who said this: “Death through Eve, life through Mary.”

When we lived in Mexico for three years, we were astounded and grieved by all the attention given to Mary. In fact, tomorrow is the Virgin of Guadalupe Day in Mexico, what some call their most important holiday, and millions of people will pay homage to her. Hundreds of thousands will make a pilgrimage to the Basilica in Mexico City from all over the country; many of them will walk on their knees. Beth and I have been to this shrine on several occasions and have observed people climbing the rough brick stairs on their knees, leaving bloodstains behind.

I'll never forget an experience we had shortly after we arrived in Mexico. As part of our attempt to understand the culture, we made it a practice to visit different churches. If we were out walking, and came across a church, we would try to at least look inside. One day, we found an open church and walked in. It was a fairly large building, but pretty plain on the inside. As we walked toward the front, we couldn't help but see a huge statue of Mary, hung prominently right in the middle of the wall, directly above the altar. This image was probably 30 or 40-feet high! As we got closer, we then saw a small statue of Jesus, only about two feet high, placed at the feet of Mary. We just stared with our mouths open in disbelief, while our eyes flooded with tears. There's something wrong with that picture, isn't there?

Before I say what I want to say next, please understand that I am not a Catholic-basher. I care deeply for those who are Catholic. However, it must be clearly taught – Mary has no place in our redemption. It is only by the shed blood of Jesus that you and I can have forgiveness of sin and open access to God the Father. Mary is not a co-redemptorist, an advocate, the dispenser of all grace, or our mediator. She needed to have her sins forgiven, just like we do.

Friends, there is no biblical basis that she lived a sinless life, for her perpetual virginity or for her bodily assumption into heaven. Don't give to Mary that which belongs only to Jesus and that which she never asked for herself.

By the way, Jesus deflected deference from Mary in Luke 11:27-28: “As Jesus was saying these things, a woman in the crowd called out, ‘Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you.’” Jesus is rather blunt with his answer: “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.” One other point to consider is that the Apostle Paul's only reference to her is in Galatians 4:4 when he writes: “But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman...” He doesn't even use her name.

The Underestimated Mary

Now, let me be quick to add that while many Catholics overestimate Mary's importance and attribute things to her that are not taught in the Bible, most Protestants underestimate her importance. Many of us allow her a cameo appearance in Christmas cards, carols, and nativity scenes during this time of the year, but then we tuck her away like a Christmas ornament, out of sight, out of mind, until her reappearance next December. Mary is often the victim of simple neglect, having been abandoned to a kind of evangelical limbo. Some of us have consigned her to virtual oblivion.

As we will see this morning, Mary did play a crucial role in God's plan, and we will be spiritually impoverished if we ignore her. Let's not let the excesses of the Catholic tradition keep us from admiring her and learning from her example. Here's the sermon in a sentence today: When we are humble the Holy One can use us. Before getting into the meat of Mary's music, I want to list three impressions of Mary from Dr. Robert Rayburn that helped me to better understand the depth of her devotion. There is much here that we can apply to our own lives.

1. Mary immediately interprets her circumstances biblically. She strings together at least 15 Old Testament quotes or allusions, especially from the Psalms and from Hannah's hymn of praise found in 1 Samuel 2. As a young woman she was probably drawn to women of faith like Sarah, Deborah, Hannah, Ruth and Abigail. It's as if she tried to fit the whole Bible into her song. It's amazing that such a young teenager was such a master of the Scriptures. She clearly had been taught the Bible at home and had studied it at great length.

2. Mary saw everything in terms of God reaching out to people through His Son. She starts by praising God for what He has done for her, but then focuses on what God has done and will do, for others. I count 9 different times that she refers to what God has done, not what she has done. Like John the Baptist, she deflects attention from herself to her Savior. In Luke 1:47 she calls God her Savior, meaning she was a sinner in need of forgiveness.

3. Mary was in awe of God's greatness, not her own goodness. She saw herself as a humble servant because she saw the Lord as a great King. What God had done for her, as marvelous as it was, was part and parcel of what He always does. In Luke 1:49 she doesn't declare that she was a doer of good things; but rather one for whom great things were done.

In Luke 1:28, when Gabriel appears to Mary and says, "Greetings you who are highly favored; the Lord is with you" we need to be clear on what he really said. This is where the song "Ave Maria" or "Hail Mary, full of grace" comes from. The Greek literally reads, "Grace, oh Graced One!" Let's be clear. Gabriel was not referring to Mary bestowing grace on others but instead was focusing on how much grace she has been given. She is not the dispenser of divine grace; only God is.

Let's set the scene... Mary traveled a great distance to be with Elizabeth. She needed someone who would understand her situation and that was certainly her cousin Elizabeth because she was pregnant and well past child-bearing years. When Mary arrives, little John gives an extra hard kick while still in utero. He was already doing the job that God gave him which was to announce the arrival of the Messiah. By the way, this is strong evidence that life begins at conception!

This was an outburst of joy, as the old covenant greeted the new. Luci Shaw describes the scene like this: "Framed in light, Mary sings through the doorway. Elizabeth's six month boy jumps, a palpable greeting, a hidden first encounter between son and Son."

Mary's music is in response to Elizabeth calling the unborn Christ "my Lord." In the verse immediately preceding Mary's song of praise she says this: "Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!" God used Elizabeth to calm Mary's questions and her doubts disappeared. Praise erupted from within like an overflowing fountain. This Scripture song is like Mary saying, "Aha!!!" as she glimpses God's great work through the years, and her place in His plan.

Mary's music is spontaneous, poetical and profoundly theological. Since poetry is a heightened form of expression, it causes us to slow down. I came across this statement this week: "Let's approach Christmas with an expectant hush, rather than a last minute rush."

Let's take a breath and listen as I read straight from her lyrics as found in Luke 1:46-55. Follow along in your Bible or on your app: "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, for the Mighty One has done great things for me – holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers.'"

As I meditated on her music this week, I saw three main movements.

- 1. Mary's Adoration (46-47)**
- 2. God's Attributes (48-51)**
- 3. God's Actions (52-55)**

Let's use this outline to help us better understand what it was that so moved Mary to sing this song from her soul.

Mary's Adoration

1. Magnifies the Lord.

This song has been known for hundreds of years as the Magnificat, which is Latin for the word "to magnify." The NIV uses the word "glorify" in verse 46: "And Mary said, 'My soul glorifies the Lord.'" We should point out that it doesn't say that she "sang" but rather that she "said." When speaking of her soul, Mary is saying that this poetry comes from the depth of her being. To "magnify" means to declare as great, to enlarge or to increase in one's estimation. My mind goes to Psalm 34:3: "O magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt His name together."

I'm reading a book called, *Preaching to Yourself*. In it, Joe Thorn writes this: "Take note – your view of Jesus tends to shrink over time...and as your shrinking Jesus becomes small Jesus, He is easily eclipsed by your idols and ego. The bigger and more biblical your understanding of who Jesus is, the more likely He is to be such an object of love and adoration that the idols that aim at capturing your attention and swaying your allegiance will lose their power...because small Jesus does not inspire awe, command respect, lead to worship, or compel us to talk of Him...so please remember – Jesus is bigger than you tend to think."

Many songs start softly and then crescendo at the end. Not so with Mary's music. She busted out with a song of praise extolling the immensity of the Almighty. She begins with reverence and then moves to rejoicing.

2. Rejoices in God her Savior.

Because Mary magnifies the Lord, she can't help but find joy in Him in verse 47: "And my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." The word for rejoice here means to "jump for joy" and "to be exceedingly glad."

God's Attributes

For this section, I'm going to borrow three words that I heard Pastor Alistair Begg use in a sermon on this passage – mindful, mighty and merciful. Specifically, this is what Mary worships God for.

1. He is Mindful.

Check out verse 48: "For he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed." The word "mindful" means "to look upon, to regard with affection and to gaze at with favor." God sees all that you're going through right now and the Almighty is mindful of your misery. Psalm 34:15: "The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their cry."

Mary refers to herself as being of a low and humble state, which likely refers to her social position in the Jewish culture. The word "humble" references the fact that she was young and poor. I wonder if she had Psalm 136:23 in her mind: "He remembered us in our low estate." She sees herself as a subservient handmaiden. She takes the position of subordination and absolute submission.

She can't get over the fact that God would choose a sinner to bring forth the Savior. And yet she also marvels that the course of human history will be changed, as all generations will remember how blessed she was to be used by God.

2. He is Mighty.

We see this in verse 49: "For the Mighty One has done great things for me – holy is his name" and in the first part of verse 51: "He has performed mighty deeds with his arm..." God is all-powerful and she makes Him the subject of the rest of the song. The next phrase literally reads, "He has done to me great things." The word "great" means, "big and exceedingly great."

He is holy and separate from sin and everything else. Mary is turning all attention away from herself and putting it all on Him. She may have been meditating on Psalm 24:8: "Who is this King of glory? The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle."

3. He is Merciful.

We see this in verse 50 and again in verse 54: "His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation... remembering to be merciful." The word "mercy" refers to God's faithful love towards those who deserve punishment. If grace is getting what we don't deserve then mercy is not getting what we do deserve.

"Fearing" God has to do with having a reverential respect for Him. And notice that God's intention is for His mercy to pass from one generation to the next, from parents to children to their children and on and on. That means that we as parents have a huge responsibility and opportunity to affect the formulation of faith for the next one hundred years or more!

God's Action

Mary moves from adoring God to celebrating His attributes and now she lists three types of people that God acts on behalf of.

1. The Humble.

Look at the last part of verse 51 and verse 52: "...He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble." This is powerful language and quite revolutionary. God has no tolerance for the proud. The phrase "brought down" means to demolish or destroy, to pull or throw down. Think about all the rulers who recently have gone off the scene around the world. It's always been the case because the kingdoms of this world are temporary and transitory.

God lifts the humble and humbles the proud. James 4:10: "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up." God is the lover of the lowly. I've been drawn to Isaiah 66:2 recently: "This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word." God has always undertaken for the underdog. God hates the haughty, but honors the humble. In Daniel 4:37 we read how Nebuchadnezzar learned his lesson about pride, "And those who walk in pride he is able to humble." Proverbs 3:34 adds, "He mocks proud mockers, but gives grace to the humble." We tend to focus on beauty, bucks and brains. Philip Ryken writes: "This is the way God operates: The humble are shown mercy, while the proud receive justice. The lowly are lifted and the lofty are brought low."

2. The Hungry.

Before you can be fed, you must first be hungry. Look at verse 53: "He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty." The idea behind "filled" is to be fully satisfied. And the meaning of "hungry" is not to just have a little rumble in the tummy but "to be famished and to crave." By the way, a practical way to satisfy some hunger in our community this month is to give towards our Christmas basket ministry or to come out on December 21st to put some food together and deliver meals to the hungry

and hurting.

Some of us are not spiritually satisfied simply because we're not famished enough for God to fill us. We've gorged on so many other things that we have no appetite for spiritual matters. Again Ryken nails it: "When we get stuffed on the pleasures of this life, we do not feel our need for God, and then he has nothing more to give us. If we are too proud to admit that we need God the way a beggar needs bread, he will send us away empty." Matthew 5:6: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."

Do you recognize that Christmas in our culture counts on our discontentment? That's why all the commercials and ads focus on what we think we need and we'll be happy when we get what we can't live without. These two verses from Proverbs 30:8-9 have been helpful to me: "Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, 'Who is the Lord?' Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God."

3. The Helpless.

We've mentioned this before but God doesn't help those who help themselves; He helps those who are helpless. Look at the closing lines of her song in verses 54-55: "He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers." I love the picture behind the word for "helped." It means "to take hold of, to embrace and hug, to support and help." That's how God treats us when we're helpless.

Mary is remembering God's covenant to Abraham and marvels that God's mercy is now coming to fulfillment through her Son. Mary was well-versed in Genesis 12:2: "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing."

God is always on the side of the humble, the hurting and the hungry. He's cheering on the orphan and the widow. He's for the preborn and the elderly, the poor, the disabled, the deaf, the blind and the feeble. God cares for those who can't care for themselves. Listen, if Christmas teaches us anything, it's this: When we are humble the Holy One can use us.

People are listening to the lyrics of your life. I wonder what they're hearing. I heard about a little girl who watched her mom and dad get ready for Christmas. Her dad seemed preoccupied with burdens and bundles. Her mom was caught up in parties and presents. Neither had any time for her and she felt like she was being ignored, especially after hearing one of her parents say, "Would you please get out of the way?"

One night before going to sleep, she knelt by her bed and prayed this prayer: "Our Father, who art in heaven, please forgive our Christmases as we forgive those who Christmas against us."

Would you notice how abruptly Mary's music ends? All of a sudden, it just stops. I think it's because the song is not over. As we allow the words of Scripture to penetrate our souls, we too will sing. And each of us can add our own verse. Let me ask you some questions. Is the music of your life secular or is it spiritual? Is it worldly or worshipful? If someone hung out with you for a day, would they hear a hymn of humility or would they want to puke because of your pride? Would they be drawn to the Lord by the lyrics of your life?

The key to Mary's music was the fact that she believed and she obeyed.

- She believed. Luke 1:45: "Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished."
- She obeyed. Luke 1:38: "I am the Lord's servant...May it be done to me as you have said..."

What about you? Are you ready to believe? After you believe, will you obey? Are you ready to make these words your music today?

Whatever you want...do it, Lord.

Whatever you need...take it, Lord.

Wherever you lead...I'll follow, Lord.

We're going to end with a song that has no fluffy lyrics. It's called, "Come Thou Long Expected Jesus."

Come, thou long expected Jesus,

Born to set thy people free;

From our fears and sins release us,

Let us find our rest in thee.

Luke 1:67-79 Zechariah's Christmas Chorus

Summary: We can't help but sing when we see God's plan of salvation. 12/4/11

[Play a few notes and lyrics from popular Christmas Carols and have people guess the song]

We're kicking off a seasonal sermon series today by focusing on the very first Christmas carols. The tradition of singing at Christmastime is as old as Christmas itself. We'll see that the central characters in the Christmas story respond instantly to their part in God's plan with expressions of praise and worship. All of these original lyrics are recorded in Luke's Gospel. Here's an assignment right at the beginning of the message today – read the first two chapters of Luke as many times as you can between now and Christmas.

These four songs, which make up our Christmas concert series, are often known by their Latin titles which are simply taken from the first word or two from the song.

- Today we'll listen to Zechariah's Christmas Chorus, known as the Benedictus. I actually worked on pronouncing the first five words of the song in Latin but needed some help so I called two of my Catholic priest friends to help me get it right: Benedictus esto Dominus Deus Israelis. I guess my time as an altar boy in the 60s was not in vain.
- Next week we'll tune into Mary's Music, called the Magnificat.
- In two weeks, we'll worship along with Simeon's Salvation Song. This has the best title because it's fun to say: Nunc Dimittis. When I asked Pastor Andy if he knew what this meant he thought it was something from Monty Python!
- And on Christmas Day we'll hear the Angel's Alleluia, commonly referred to as the Gloria in Excelsis.

These pieces of prophetic poetry have survived for over 2,000 years. Philip Ryken refers to them as “the last of the Hebrew psalms and the first of the Christian hymns...the gospel is and must be musical...what He has done must be celebrated in song.” For those who know me, the whole idea of a series about songs probably makes you smile because I am not musical at all. While I've been listening to Christmas music on my Pandora playlist every day, because I don't have a good voice, I don't sing very much.

Earlier this week, when we were doing our Advent reading as a family, the resource we're using suggested a song for us to sing. None of us recognized the tune and then Becca said, “Daddy, I've never heard you sing except at church.” Beth replied, “I think it's because he doesn't have a song in his heart.” She was kidding (I hope). She knows that I'm actually too shy to sing most of the time so she said, “Just let your inhibitions go and sing...take a deep breath and belt it out.” To which Becca said, “I don't want to be here when he does that!” Well, don't worry. I'm done quoting Latin and I'm not planning to chant or rap the sermon. And I am working on singing more, just not around people I know.

Before we look at the lyrics, let's go BTM (Behind the Music) for a few minutes to get the back-story on our Christmas composer for today.

Behind the Music

Imagine if we lived without any message from God...no Bible, no preaching, only silence from above. Between the Old and New Testaments God's people waited four hundred years to hear from Him. On top of that, the gap between earth and heaven seemed insurmountable. During these “silent years,” some of God's people were holding on to hope, others were stuck in ritual and routine, and still others were not even thinking about God and His promises anymore. King Herod had built idols, immorality was rampant and spiritual life among God's people had lost its vitality. Kind of sounds like our country today, doesn't it?

If you'd like to follow along, I'm going to retell the story as found in Luke 1:5-25. A priest named Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth lived during this time of deep darkness and despair. If we could color their lives, it would be gray and gloomy and the sky would be cloudy, much like a dull and dreary December day. They had another silence in their life because they had no children. In that time, to not have a kid was considered a curse. Every couple had hopes that the Messiah would come through them. They felt left out of the loop. Their unmet desires had led to unspoken despair.

Perhaps you're living with some silent pain right now as you struggle with infertility or with a miscarriage. You are not alone and there are others here at PBC who can help you with your pain. Maybe you're grieving the loss of a son or daughter, or grandchild, or

a parent or grandparent or a friend or a sibling. Maybe you wonder how your teenager could turn out to be so rebellious or how your finances went south so quickly or why your marriage ended up in such a mess. Or maybe you're single and ache to be married. Like Zechariah you've been waiting for something to change or for an answer you're not sure will ever come. Heaven is silent. But then, humiliated and hopeless, Zechariah was about to hear some words that he could hardly believe.

He was a priest, one of twenty thousand, and two weeks out of the year when his division was on duty, he would travel to Jerusalem for his Temple responsibilities. This time he was chosen by lot to be the one to enter the Holy Place and burn incense outside the curtain to the Holy of Holies. This was an once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and a huge privilege! Jewish tradition taught that the priest who offered this incense would be "rich and holy" for the rest of his life.

Zechariah arranges the incense and offers prayers of intercession for the people. While he's doing that, a multitude is out in the courtyard praying as well. They're waiting for him to come back and pronounce the Aaronic blessing: "The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make His face shine upon you; the Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace."

But Zechariah is delayed. As the smoke from the incense shielded his eyes, he thought he saw someone, and then he realized he was face-to-face with an angel and became afraid. Actually, the text says that he was "gripped with fear." Zechariah was afraid because there was supposed to be no one else in this Holy Place with him. Perhaps he was thinking about what happened to Nadab and Abihu when they carried out this ritual in a wrong way and were vaporized by God (see Leviticus 10). The dangers of his duty were well known to everyone. The idea was to get in, offer incense and prayer, and get out as soon as possible.

And then, on the right side of the altar, which was considered the side of favor, the angel Gabriel appears. His initial message has two parts. First, "Do not be afraid." And then, "Your prayer has been heard." They were going to have a son! Verses 14-15 explain what kind of man he would turn out to be and verses 16-17 describe the message he would preach. Among the jobs he would have would be to bring people back to the Lord and to "turn the hearts of the fathers to their children," which we so desperately need in our culture today.

When Gabriel tells him that he is going to be a father in Luke 1:18, Zechariah immediately asks for some sort of sign: "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." Zechariah was really saying, "I can't believe it." The phrase, "I am an old man" is a very emphatic statement. In verse 19 Gabriel responds by using the same emphatic expression: "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God." He was no ordinary angel – he was God's top gun, appearing earlier to Daniel and later to Mary. It's as if Gabriel was saying, "You might be an old geezer and in AARP, but I am Gabriel, and I stand in the presence of God. Don't you think God can handle this?"

On one hand Zechariah's question seems valid (he and his wife really were well past normal childbearing ages); on the other hand he should have known better. He was too busy asking questions and focusing on problems to really hear God. Now he would have nine months to listen. We see this in verse 20: "And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time."

Interestingly, Zechariah had asked for a sign; for nine months he had to use sign language to communicate. Someone has wondered what the greater miracle is here – Elizabeth having a baby in her old age or a preacher keeping silent for nine months! The people now wonder what happened to him because he can't talk or hear (see verse 62). He's going to be a new father and he can't tell anyone!

By the way, in the din of the Christmas madness, don't let the cacophony of competing sounds and voices keep you from hearing the true music of the season. We need to figure out a way to slow down and be quiet. If we don't we'll miss the message of Christmas because God speaks in the silence. What do you think you would learn if you couldn't speak or hear anything for 9 months? Or how about 9 weeks? Or 9 days? 9 hours? 9 minutes? For some of us, it would be tough to be silent for 9 seconds.

We pick up the story in 1:57. About nine months later, their baby is born. Notice that Zechariah is still deaf and dumb. Eight days later, the whole town comes out to the circumcision ceremony because it's the baby's big day where he enters the covenant community and is given his name. Everyone assumes it will be Zech, Jr. Elizabeth insists that he is to be called John. The people get all worked up because the firstborn son was almost always named after the father or a relative. John asks for an iPad (it does say a "tablet"), and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, "His name is John." Actually, in the Greek New Testament, Zechariah wrote: "John is his name."

Inside the Music

I love what happens next. The song in his heart explodes with pent-up praise. The first words he says are not directed to his wife or to his family, nor does he talk about sports or shopping. His first response is an exuberant eruption of adoration! And all the neighbors are filled with awe. By the way, this is a perfect example of how God's discipline does not disqualify us. His time of silence was really an act of mercy, not judgment.

Filled with the Holy Spirit, Zechariah breaks out in prophetic praise. Let's look at the opening stanza of the song in verse 68 and also the next to the last-verse: "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people...because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven." Zechariah is blessing God for blessing him. These verses capture the main theme of this Christmas chorus.

Do you see that the word "come" is used twice? This word originates from a root that means, "To visit personally" and was used by Jesus in Matthew 25:36 when He said, "I was sick and you visited me." God saw us in our sin-sick state and sent His Son to come and visit us. This word was used of seeing someone in a bad situation and then intervening personally in order to provide a solution.

I should move on but I can't because there's another nuance that is so meaningful. The word "come" can also be translated as "to tent upon." That's exactly what's behind John 1:14: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." Friends, that's what happened at Christmas! Jesus came to save us from our sins.

I like the passage that was read last week for our Advent reading from Isaiah 64:1 because it captures the longing that God's people had for God to come down to our world: "Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down..." It's hard for us to fully comprehend this because we live on this side of Christmas. The prophets predicted His coming but nothing was happening. Almost 1,000 years had passed since King David ruled and four centuries after Malachi's last message. While some had lost hope, others held on, longing for a visitation from God.

As Zechariah looks down at his baby boy, he knows that help is on the way. Somehow his son would help prepare the way for the One who is the Way. The long wait is now over! The song, "O Come, O Come Immanuel" sums it up well. The Benedictus is all about God's coming to earth. Nearly every phrase in this Christmas Chorus is filled with biblical references, especially from the Prophets. Ray Pritchard has pointed out five specific facts about the Divine Visitation. I'm going to rephrase them as an outline for us to walk through quickly.

1. Christ's coming provides salvation. Zechariah mentions God's saving purpose in four different ways:

- Redemption: "He has come and redeemed his people." (68) To "redeem" means to release from bondage through the payment of a price.
- Salvation: "He has raised up a horn of salvation for us." (69) The horn is not a musical instrument but the deadly weapon of a wild animal. It symbolized both strength and victory as the animal's strength was concentrated in the horn. Likewise, the Father's divine strength is concentrated in Christ, who has gored Satan, pierced death and gutted sin. This power saves us and protects us.
- Rescue: "Salvation from our enemies." (71) "To rescue us from the hand of our enemies." (74)
- Forgiveness: "To give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins." (77)

Zechariah is telling us that Jesus did not visit this planet simply to see how we were doing. He knew how we were doing. That's why He came! We were in trouble and he came to save us. That's what Christmas is all about.

2. Christ's coming fulfills prophecy. As a godly Jew, Zechariah can't get over the fact that God has at long last kept his promises. Zechariah sings three stanzas extolling fulfilled prophecy:

- Promised by the prophets. "As he said through his holy prophets of long ago." (70)
- Cherished by the fathers. "To show mercy to our fathers." (72)
- Guaranteed by oath to Abraham. "To remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham." (72-73)

The point is clear: God is now doing what He promised He would do. The prophets saw it coming. Micah spoke of it, and so did Isaiah and Jeremiah. Even old Abraham looked forward to this day, as did Isaac, Jacob, Moses and David. They all saw it coming; they just didn't know exactly when it would happen. Zechariah is telling us something very crucial: God has visited the world in the person of Jesus Christ and nothing will ever be the same again.

3. Christ's coming gives us purpose. In verses 74 and 75 Zechariah speaks of the total transformation Jesus will make in the lives of those who follow him. Salvation leads to sanctification which always leads to service:

- Sanctification. "In holiness and righteousness all our days."
- Serving. "To enable us to serve him." I love how salvation leads us to live lives of serving. He saved you so that you might fulfill the highest calling in the universe – serving God without fear in righteousness and holiness forever! Can I encourage you to consider partnering with us as we seek to meet people's need for a

meal this Christmas? We're looking for both donations and servants who will pack the food and deliver it. We are saved to serve. There's a sign-up sheet in the lobby.

God gives us grace so that we can live for His glory.

4. Christ's coming will be prepared by John. Now Zechariah considers the significance of the infant son he holds in his arms. In verses 76 and 77 he sings joyfully to John and utters three specific predictions about his future:

- He will be a prophet of God. "You, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High."
- He will prepare the way of the Lord. "You will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him."
- He will preach forgiveness. "To give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins."

This is exactly what John the Baptist did. His whole mission was to make the nation ready for the coming of Messiah. He was a prophet, a preparer and a preacher of salvation. John began his ministry by going out to the desert region around the Jordan River and preaching repentance. He baptized many people and so helped prepare the way for the coming of the Lord. When John saw Jesus, he cried out, "Behold the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." (John 1:29)

Did you notice that there are only two verses in this entire song that have to do with Zechariah's own son? The rest of this chorus has to do with the Savior because this dad recognized the subordinate position of his own son. Parents, this is a good challenge for us. Zechariah was good with John being second to Jesus (for more about this, see www.iamsecond.com). We need to train our kids to be servants and not to think that they're the best or the brightest, entitled to a life focused only on fulfilling their own needs. We need to teach and model that they were created to put Christ first, deflecting attention from themselves to the Savior. One of the purposes of our parenting is to help our kids see their role in preparing others to come to Jesus.

John was all about putting Jesus first and pointing people away from himself so that they would see the Savior. We would do well to mimic his life mission as found in John 3:30: "He must become greater; I must become less." John was focused on being second, not first. He prepared people for Jesus' first coming; as we become less, we have the privilege of helping people get ready to meet Him at His Second Coming.

5. Christ's coming brings blessings. In one final burst of praise Zechariah speaks of three great benefits:

- Light to those who are in darkness. "The rising sun will come to us from heaven." (78) I like how the King James translates this: "The Dayspring from on high," which refers to a new day and a fresh start. Above all, it speaks of hope to the hurting.
- Pardon to those condemned to death. "To shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death." (79) We're all sitting in the darkness of our sin, waiting for death to devour us.
- Guidance to those who have lost their way. "To guide our feet into the path of peace." (78)

Nothing like this has ever happened before. God has visited his people and nothing will ever be the same again. Christmas is only 21 days away. What songs will you sing in honor of the One who has come? Will it be "Deck the halls with boughs of holly?" Or, "Jingle Bell Rock?" Or, "I'm dreaming of a white Christmas?" If Christmas is only cute carols on the radio or tinsel on a tree or gifts and parties and food, then we've missed the real musical message of Christmas. Christmas is about the transcendent truth that God has at last visited his people. All the rest is window dressing.

God has visited his people in the person of Jesus Christ. Now that same Divine Visitor comes and knocks at the door of your heart. Will you open the door and let him in? The visitor from heaven is here at last! Will you, like Zechariah of old, drop everything and welcome him into your world? Or are you too busy this year to be bothered with Jesus?

There are three words that capture the essence of Christmas.

- Sin. That's how we come.
- Savior. He has come to our world.
- Salvation. He came willingly as our Sacrifice and we must come to Him in submission.

I've been reading a book by Philip Ryken called, "The Incarnation in the Gospels." I like how he summarizes salvation: "Salvation is not a human invention, but a divine visitation. It is not something we achieve by going to God, but something God has done by coming to us in Christ."

Would you also notice that Zechariah didn't get his voice back until he acted in faith...until he wrote out his son's name? In a similar

way, we won't be saved until we scribble out the Son's name. Will you write the name "Jesus" as your Savior?

I have one final Christmas Carol quiz. What famous song did Phillip Brooks write? That's right, "O Little Town of Bethlehem." Check out these tremendous lyrics.

How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given.

So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven.

No ear may hear his coming but in this world of sin,

Where meek souls will receive him still, the dear Christ enters in.

O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray;

Cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us to-day.

We hear the Christmas angels, the great glad tidings tell;

O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel.

Genuine faith must result in rejoicing. Before we transition to communion, let's stand and sing, "Here I am to worship." If you have a salvation song in your heart today, please sing loudly so I'll have the courage to belt it out with you.

Communion

The word "covenant" is used in Luke 1:72: "...to remember his holy covenant" and is used only one other time in Luke. Check out what Jesus said in Luke 22:20: "In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.'"

The Old Covenant pointed to the coming of Christ. When He came at Christmas and then died on the cross, He inaugurated the New Covenant. Let's celebrate that right now.

Digging Deeper

1. What kind of man was Zechariah? How would you characterize his spiritual life before the angel appeared to him?
 2. In view of all that, why did he doubt Gabriel's message? How could he doubt? Why do we? Do you think this was a temporary lapse or was it more permanent?
 3. Why did God make the priest unable to speak until John was born? How do God's holiness and compassion work together in his chastening of his children?
 4. What promises of God do you have a hard time believing? Look up the following verses and ask yourself, "Do I fully believe this promise?" If not, identify what is holding you back (Proverbs 3:5-6; 1 John 5:11-13; 1 Corinthians 10:13; John 16:24; Romans 8:38-39). How do you think the story would have been different had Zechariah verbalized the words found in Mark 9:24? What could Zechariah have learned from Abraham's example in Romans 4:19?
 5. Zechariah had nine months to ponder his lack of faith and to use this time of silence to grow in his knowledge of God. What evidence from this chapter do you see that indicates that he had not become bitter during this time? In what ways do you think he grew during this time of silence? (See Luke 1:68-79). Psalm 46:10 tells us to be still and know that He is God. How can you benefit from times of silence in your life? What can you do to schedule some solitude this week? Here's an idea. Why not take a night and turn off your TV? If you don't take time for solitude and silence, your faith will remain superficial.
 6. Describe a time when you received an answer to a prayer you had been praying for a long time. Were you surprised when the answer came? If so, should you have been? If you can't think of a time, what are you praying about right now? What principles did you learn in this chapter that will help you pray and "faint not?"
 7. Go on a "God Hunt" today and ask the Lord to show you where He is at work. Determine to slow down so that you can see Him and throughout the day look for ways to be used by Him. Be careful...you just may be surprised and come across an angel unawares (see Hebrews 13:2).
 8. When Mary received her message from Gabriel, she asked for an explanation while Zechariah wanted more evidence (see Luke 1:34). What's the main difference between their responses? Do you think it's possible to demand too much evidence? Why or why not?
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Luke 2:1-7 The Mystery Man With No Room

Summary: Today we move to an unnamed mystery man. We established that the first verses in Matthew's gospel are perhaps the most neglected in the New Testament; and this morning we're going to look at one of the most widely known sections of Scripture.

Three years ago I began a message with a Christmas Quiz. I recently came across some additional questions to test our knowledge of the Nativity.

1. Jesus was born in what town?
 - a. Jerusalem
 - b. Nazareth
 - c. Bethlehem
 - d. Milwaukee
2. Why didn't Joseph and Mary stay at the inn?
 - a. It was too expensive
 - b. There was no inn
 - c. There was no room
 - d. None of the above
3. How did Joseph and Mary get to Bethlehem?
 - a. Colt
 - b. Mary rode a donkey and Joseph walked
 - c. Wagon
 - d. Who knows?
4. After being born, Jesus was placed in a:
 - a. Basket
 - b. Manger
 - c. Pile of hay
 - d. On the back of a donkey
5. A manger is a:
 - a. Stable
 - b. Feeding trough
 - c. Wooden table
 - d. Barn
6. Which animals does the Bible say were housed in the stable?
 - a. Cows, donkeys, sheep
 - b. Lions, tigers and bears
 - c. Goats, sheep and cows
 - d. The Bible doesn't say.
7. Who told Joseph and Mary to go to Bethlehem?
 - a. An angel
 - b. Caesar Augustus.
 - c. Herod

d. No one told them to go.

8. What did the innkeeper say to Mary and Joseph?

a. "I have a stable out back."

b. "Come back after the holidays."

c. "There's no room in the inn."

d. Both a and c

e. None of the above

(Answers: 1-C; 2-C; 3-D; 4-B; 5-B; 6-D; 7-B; 8-E)

How'd you do? Anyone have a perfect score? It's interesting how the traditions and tales concerning Christmas are often not correct. Christmas cards and even Christmas carols can reinforce a kind of sloppy seasonal sentimentality, in which "Merry Christmas" becomes "Happy Holidays." I came across a brand new word this week in an article I read in the Chicago Sun Times (12/10/04). I'm not sure if it's much better than "Season's Greetings" or not: "Chrismahanukwanzakah." Weekly magazines like Newsweek run cover stories on Christmas, but seldom get things right either. Although the magazine did report in a poll that 93% of Americans believe that Jesus really lived and almost 80% believe in the Virgin Birth (12/13/04, www.msnbc.msn.com).

Last Sunday we looked at a list of over 40 names from Jesus' Forgotten Family Tree to see that God uses the faithful, those who are failures, and those who feel forgotten. Today we move to an unnamed mystery man. We established that the first verses in Matthew's gospel are perhaps the most neglected in the New Testament; and this morning we're going to look at one of the most widely known sections of Scripture.

While this is such a familiar story for many of us; it's my prayer that we will linger long enough to allow this simple and straightforward account to impact us like never before. Please turn in your copy of the Scriptures to Luke 2:1-7. By the way, if you're still looking for a Christmas present to give this year, why not give someone a Bible? If you don't have a Bible, put it at the top of your list. And then, why not start bringing it with you each week to church? That would be a great gift to give to God that will benefit you greatly. More and more I've been convicted of the importance of each of you following along in your own Bibles during the preaching time. We'll continue to put some helpful notes up on the screen but I don't ever want this to become a substitute for your own study of the Scriptures. Let's stand in honor of God's Word as I read:

"In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn."

Let's make some preliminary observations.

1. God used pagan rulers to get Jesus to Bethlehem.

It was said that when Caesar started his reign that Rome was built out of bricks; when he ended everything was made out of marble. In order for Rome to know how much money they could collect, they needed people to register. The government learns a lot about its people through taking a census. As a result of our last national count, our government now knows that Americans consume almost 31 pounds of cheese a year (that's good for Wisconsin); and that on average, drivers put on almost 22,000 miles in 2001 ("The Pantagraph," 12/9/04). In order to register for the census, since Joseph's family was from Bethlehem, he had to make a long trip of 90 miles. This trip took about five days from the northern town of Nazareth.

2. Christianity is an historical faith.

Our faith is based on fact, not fable or fiction. We know precisely when Jesus was born because we're introduced to historical characters and events. Luke was a very careful historian. Both the birth and death of Christ can be established at a pinpointed time in world history. Christianity is tied to real people and real political situations because it is really real. John MacArthur writes: "This wasn't a child like any other child. This child was the Lord Jesus Christ, God and man fused together in indivisible oneness. This birth was so monumental that it became the high point of history, the peak, the apex. All history before this birth is B.C., Before Christ. All history since is A.D., Anno Domini, Latin for 'the year of the Lord.'"

3. Jesus had to be born in Bethlehem to fulfill Scripture.

Listen to Micah 5:2: “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.” 700 years go by until one day God explodes into human history by sending His Son to be carried in the womb of a woman named Mary. God then moves in the heart of a pagan Roman emperor, who lived 1500 miles from Israel, to declare that a census had to be taken of the entire world. Joseph was from the family of David and that meant he had to go to Bethlehem.

Notice how precisely God orchestrated everything that first Christmas. Mary was close to her delivery date and so Joseph decided to bring her along on the long journey. In his sovereignty, God made sure that they were in the right place at just the right time, to fulfill the Scriptures. Friends, God’s sweet sovereignty is stamped all over the nativity narrative as He weaves His eternal ways through individuals and events to accomplish His purposes. And, He still does that today, doesn’t He?

4. Bethlehem literally means, “The House of Bread.”

What better place for the bread of life to be born than in Bethlehem? Don’t miss the symbolism of the Bread of Heaven being born in a feeding trough. Jesus later said this about Himself in John 6:51: “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.”

5. Sacrificial sheep grazed on the hills of Bethlehem.

In the next section of Luke, which we will not get into this morning, an angel gave the first announcement of the Messiah’s birth to some anonymous shepherds. Warren Wiersbe points out that it is quite possible that that these shepherds were really priests who were caring for the flocks that provided sacrifices for the temple services. Since Bethlehem was only five miles from Jerusalem, the hills were perfect for raising sacrificial sheep. They had to have a “perfect” lamb ready at all times. The shepherds spent their lives caring for sheep and now they have the privilege of meeting the Lamb born in a stable, who will later die as their sin substitute and care for them for eternity.

Now, let’s focus on verse 7: “And she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.”

- An Ordinary birth. Isn’t it interesting how Luke describes the birth so matter-of-factly? He doesn’t use any superlatives; doesn’t describe the labor; doesn’t spice it up at all. There’s no exaggeration or embellishment. Mary just gave birth as women do.
- A Firstborn son. She gave birth to her firstborn, a son. We know from Scripture that Mary had other children later and that’s why Luke says that Jesus was the “firstborn” (see Matthew 12:46-47; 13:55; Mark 3:31-33; Luke 8:19-20; John 2:12; 7:3-10).

Wrapped in cloths. Babies were commonly wrapped tightly in strips of cloth to keep them warm and protected. This was a loving thing to do by a mother and shows us right from the beginning that Jesus was just like us. One other point to this is that the baby wrapped in “cloths” was to be a sign to the shepherds that they found the right baby. The king was not robed in royalty but in torn strips of tattered cloth. He is a present not with pretty wrappings but instead appears in plain brown paper. Fred McCain shared some interesting information with me when he returned from his tour in Israel. He learned that the shepherds would often wrap baby lambs in swaddling clothes and that the place where Jesus was born was well-known to them. They were used to seeing lambs wrapped up. This reminds us of what John said when he saw Jesus in John 1:29: “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”

Placed in a manger. This was a rough-hewn feeding trough, showing us again his humble birth. This was not made out of wood like our nativity sets depict, but was an indentation in the rock that was used for holding animal food. It was probably not very clean either; in contrast to our sanitized scenes it would have been dirty and smelly. By the way, the Bible never says that Jesus was born in a stable – only that he was placed in a manger after he was born. We can deduce that it was in a stable because stables had mangers.

No Room in the Inn

As a typical man, Joseph did not call ahead for reservations, so they were forced to make some other arrangements. While this was his hometown he hadn’t been back in a long time and likely didn’t know many people anymore. On top of that, Mary needed a place quickly. And so they tried an inn. There are differences of opinion regarding what this inn actually looked like. Whatever the case, try to get the idea of a modern-day-motel out of your mind. These places of lodging were more like campgrounds for weary travelers, where they would spread out mats on the floor. The word for “inn” in Luke 2:7 refers to a “place of lodging” or “guest quarters.” The word literally means, “The breaking up of a journey.” This inn was likely a two story structure where overnight guests would sleep on the upper level while their animals rested underneath or in another adjacent building in the “ancient parking lot.”

Only travelers, sojourners, and aliens used these kinds of inns. If Joseph and Mary had stayed in an inn, it would have meant that

they were just transients. In Jeremiah 14:8, the prophet complains that the Lord is like a stranger: “O Hope of Israel, its Savior in times of distress, why are you like a stranger in the land, like a traveler who stays only a night?” Jeremiah is lamenting that the Lord is just passing through. Because of their sin, God does not take up residence with them. Stay with me on this because there’s a cool connection to Jesus. Adrian Dieleman put it this way: “God did not want Jesus staying in Bethlehem’s inn like a stranger, an alien, a sojourner. Rather, He was to stay in the local stable as a resident. Jesus came to earth not as an alien, but as a resident; not as someone simply passing through, but as the Immanuel – God with us in the flesh” (www.trinitycrc.org). God planned that there would be no room in the inn because in Jesus He is no longer absent from and alien to His people. This was God’s way of saying that He was no longer like a stranger. In Christ, He has drawn near. John 1:14: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”

The innkeeper gets a lot of bad press for someone who’s not even mentioned in the Bible. He’s the scapegoat of the Christmas story and depicted as either the vicious villain or the busy businessman. If there even was an innkeeper, it stands to reason that there was no vacancy. Since Bethlehem at the time was not a tourist attraction, and was so close to Jerusalem, there would not have been a lot of places to stay. On top of that, since the census was going on, there would have been a lot of people in town, not to mention the Roman officials who were conducting the census, who no doubt had grabbed all the best rooms. Remember too that Joseph and Mary would have arrived after most everyone else because they would have been traveling slowly to make it as easy as possible for Mary. There really may have not been any place for them to stay.

Having said that, the innkeeper may have experienced some reactions that are sadly, still very common today. He could have been...

Too indifferent. Most people don’t have animosity toward Christ; they just don’t have any room for Him. They might even sing Christmas carols and go to church. Maybe you just don’t care that much about Christ. Perhaps the routine of religion bores you. Don’t be like those who say about the things of God in Malachi 1:13, “What a burden!” and you sniff at it contemptuously.”

Too ignorant. Some people miss the message of Christmas simply because they don’t know. Perhaps they’ve never really been told. Or maybe they know a few things but have never investigated it for themselves. The innkeeper should have known that one day the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem but he missed it, even though he was so close to Christ. I talked to someone recently who said he just didn’t know about Jesus. I gave him a Bible and another book and he’s reading and investigating. Jeremiah 29:13 provides a promise to those who search for Him: “You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.”

Too involved. The innkeeper might simply have been too busy. In the midst of his frantic activity, he missed that which is most important. That’s a good word for us today. We get pulled in by the urgent and then find ourselves ignoring the important. Some of us need to unplug and slow down, especially this time of the year. Psalm 46:10: “Be still, and know that I am God...”

Too indulgent. The innkeeper may have been overly focused on building his business. And business was booming that night. Maybe he was chasing that ever elusive shekel and he didn’t think peasants from the backwaters of Nazareth could help his bottom line. We need to be careful about this as well. 1 Timothy 6:10: “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.” Remember what Jesus called the man who wanted to continue constructing bigger and better things in Luke 12:20: “You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?”

While we don’t know if there even was an innkeeper and if there was, we’re not sure if he was indifferent, ignorant, involved, or indulgent...but you know if you are.

Conclusion

Mrs. Lombard’s Sunday School class performed an unforgettable Christmas pageant one year. She had worked for weeks to cast all of the children in the appropriate roles. Wallace Pernel wanted to be a shepherd but he was selected to be the innkeeper instead. Wally was nine years old and He was much bigger than all of the other nine-year-olds. Mrs. Lombard thought that Wally’s size would add forcefulness to the innkeeper.

The night of the pageant arrived. The predictable audience was there, parents, loved ones, and no one was more into the Christmas story as it unfolded than Wally. In fact, he was so excited that he twice almost walked out onto the stage before he was supposed to.

And then it was his turn. As Mary and Joseph made their way slowly up to the inn, Joseph knocked on the door. Wally came to the door and bellowed, “Who’s there?” Joseph softly said, “I am looking for shelter for me and my wife.” Wally opened the door, walked out and said, “You’ll have to look elsewhere.” Joseph then pleaded, “We have looked everywhere, and there is nowhere for us to stay. Please, can we stay in your inn?” To which Wally replied, “There is no room in the inn for you.” Joseph tried another approach,

“But you don’t understand. We have traveled so far, and my wife is heavy with child, and she needs to rest.”

At that point, Wally just stood there intently staring at Mary. During this long pause, the audience grew a little bit tense and embarrassed. The prompter off stage began to whisper loudly, “Wally, say ‘no be gone!’ ‘No, be gone!’” Finally Wally looked at Joseph and Mary, took a deep breath and said, “No, be gone!” And sadly Mary and Joseph turned away. Joseph put his arm around Mary as she put her head on his shoulder and they shuffled off. At that point the innkeeper was supposed to shut the door and go back into the inn. But Wally didn’t do that. He just stood there and watched the forlorn couple walk away.

And then the pageant ended as no pageant ever had. Wally’s mouth dropped open. His brow creased. And his eyes began to fill with tears as he blurted out, “Joseph, wait a minute. Come back. Bring Mary with you!” And then a smile beamed across Wally’s face as he blurted out, “You can have my room.” Mary and Joseph didn’t know what to do and the audience got nervous again. This boy had ruined the whole story line. How can you have Christmas without a stable? The quick-thinking Joseph saved the program by replying, “Oh no, the stable would be just fine, really.”

Actually, Christ is still looking for space today. Our world seems to be too crowded for Him, just as it was in the first century. The only space found for Him was on a Cross. Do you know where He wants to live today? In your heart. Do you have room for Him?

In the 19th Century, Phillips Brooks, who wrote O Little Town of Bethlehem, was also a great preacher. Here’s a sample of his sermon based on Luke 2:7: “Nowadays, when the new stranger comes up to the doors, the opposition is just the great, impenetrable, passive fullness of the house he tries to enter. Christ comes with his truth to the intellect. What is the answer? Every chamber of the intellect, from garret to cellar, is pre-engaged...and must be royally fed and lodged. For this new applicant ‘there is no room in the inn.’ Christ comes with His work to the will. But what chance for quarters here when the very entry-ways of the human will are packed to stagnation with a thousand little ephemeral plans making their flying visits, and a hundred great absorbing schemes that have taken up their permanent abode? What answer but again, that this great inn is full? Christ comes with His love to the great, roomy, hospitable human heart. But the hospitality-not so wise as lavish-has it not been already more than wasted on a host of beggardly and ill-worthy claimants, so that when the heart’s Master comes there is no room to spare? Thus daily is the scene of Bethlehem repeated. He comes unto His own; but his own receive Him not. The world is too full for Christ, and the heart too crowded for its Savior” (Quoted from a sermon by Leonard Vander Zee, www.sbcr.org).

We sing the words to “Joy to the World” so easily, “Let every heart prepare him room.” They put us into the Christmas spirit. But let’s stop and think. Have we prepared him room? Jesus is seeking entry into your life. Is your intellect too inundated with worldly philosophies? Is your will too weighed down with selfish pursuits? Is your heart so heavy with other pleasures that you don’t have room for the king?

Making Room

MSNBC did a story a couple weeks ago about a British hotel chain that is offering married couples with the names, “Mary and Joseph” a free night’s stay over Christmas. The manager of one of the hotels explained why they’re doing this: “We’re trying to make up for the hotel industry not having any rooms left on Christmas Eve 2004 years ago. Our hotel is definitely more comfortable than a stable. I just hope they don’t bring their donkey” (11/26/04, www.msnbc.msn.com). That’s a great idea! It’s kind of like a “do-over.” Would you like a “do-over” this morning? You have a chance right now to prepare room for the Redeemer in your heart.

1. Giving Him First Place Again. Do you remember what Jesus said to a church that was crammed so full that they no longer had room for Him? Brothers and sisters in Christ, our selfish pursuits can push Christ off the throne of our lives if we’re not careful. It’s time to welcome Him back by making room for Him. Actually, we need to give Him the right to reign supreme, not just to occupy a little room in our life. If you’re a believer and you’ve allowed other things to crowd out Christ, take these words to heart from Revelation 3:20: “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.”

2. Making Room for the First Time. Have you ever opened your heart to Christ? When Jesus came the first time, there was not only no room in the inn, there was no room in minds, in wills, and in the hearts of people. The Savior came to this world and He was turned away. John 1:10-11: “He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.” The world did not receive Him because they did not recognize Him. And they did not recognize Him because they were not willing to relinquish control of their lives. How about you? What’s keeping you from fully receiving Christ right now? The very next verse tells us how to become a member of God’s family: “Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.”

Christ came to rule over the universe, and to reign in our hearts. He came as a child but will come again as King. He alone has the gift of true and eternal life. Next to his presence in our hearts, all the other presents with which we stuff our lives are mere trinkets.

No Vacancy?

Are you in essence saying to Jesus this morning that you have no room in your heart for Him? Do you have the “no vacancy” sign turned on? I’d like to close with an urgent appeal made by Charles Spurgeon over a hundred years ago (www.biblebb.com):

As the palace and the inn have no room for Christ, and as the places of public resort have none, have “you” room for Christ? “Well,” one says, “I have room for Him, but I am not worthy that He should come to me.” Ah! I did not ask about worthiness; have you room for Him? “Oh,” one says, “I have an empty void the world can never fill!” Ah! I see you have room for Him. “Oh! But the room I have in my heart is so wretched! So was the manger. “Oh! But I feel it is a place not at all fit for Christ!” Nor was the manger a place fit for Him, and yet there He was laid. “Oh! But I have been such a sinner; I feel as if my heart has been a den of beasts and devils!” Well, the manger had been a place where beasts had fed.

Have you room for Him? Never mind what the past has been; He can forgive and forget. It does not matter what even the present state may be if you mourn over it. If you have room for Christ He will come and be your guest. Oh! Sinner, if you have room for Him let Him be born in your soul today. “Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion.” “Now is the time of God’s favor, now is the day of salvation.” Room for Jesus! Room for Jesus now!

“Oh!” one says, “I have room for Him, but will He come?” Will He come--most certainly! Just open the door of your heart, and say, “Jesus, Master, all unworthy and unclean I look to you; come, lodge within my heart,” and He will come to you, and He will cleanse the manger of your heart; He will transform it into a golden throne, and there He will sit and reign forever and forever. What! Are there no hearts here this morning that will take Him in? Must my eye glance around these galleries and look at many of you who are still without Him, and are there none who will say, “Come in, come in?”

My master wants room! Room for Him! Room for Him! I, His herald, cry aloud, Room for the Savior! Room! Here is my royal Master--have you room for Him? Here is the Son of God made flesh--have you room for Him? Here is He who can lift you up out of the slimy pit and out of the miry clay--have you room for Him? Here He is who when He comes in will never go out again, but abide with you forever to make your heart a heaven of joy and bliss for you--have you room for Him? This is all I ask. Your emptiness, your nothingness, your lack of feeling, your lack of goodness, your lack of grace--all these will be but room for Him. Have you room for Him? Oh! Spirit of God, lead many to say, “Yes, my heart is ready.” Ah! Then He will come and dwell with you.

We’re going to close this morning by singing the beautiful song, “Joy to the World.” As we sing it, I’m going to ask you come up front if you’re ready to prepare him room in your heart. You know, there will be another quiz that each of us will have to pass. Actually, it’s more like a final examination. One of the questions will be, “Did you make room for Christ when you were alive?” Friend, if you don’t make room for Him now, there will be no room for you in heaven. John 12:48: “There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; that very word which I spoke will condemn him at the last day.”

Are you ready to take care of that right now? If so, please pray this prayer with me in your heart. “Lord Jesus, for too long I’ve kept you out of my life. At times I’ve been indifferent, ignorant, too involved and too indulgent. I admit that I am a sinner and that I cannot save myself. I repent of my sins by changing my mind about the way I’ve been living. I’m not going to close the door when I hear you knocking. I believe and gratefully receive your pardon. Thank you, Lord Jesus, for coming to earth. With all my heart I believe you are the Son of God who died on the cross for my sins and rose from the dead on the third day. Thank you for bearing my sins and giving me the gift of eternal life. I open my heart to you right now and receive you into my life. Not only is there room for you, but I ask that you get rid of anything else that may attempt to crowd you out. Amen.”

Luke 2:8-20 Christmas Questions: Discovery

Summary: Until you go, you’ll never know; until you know, you’ll never grow; until you grow, you’ll never glow. 11/30/08

Our culture really gets into Christmas cards. It’s reported that Americans send 2.1 billion of them each year. Hallmark alone has more than 2,700 Christmas card designs. I confess that, like Nathan in our drama, I don’t always read the cards but do like to catch up on those famous “Our-family-is-perfect Christmas letters” often found inside. Some cards just seem to be sentimental and sappy while others are just plain predictable. And a few make us laugh.

I came across some comical cards that made me chuckle like jolly old St. Nick. Check out this one: “Christmas is just plain weird. What other time of the year do you sit around staring at a dead tree in your living room and eat candy out of your socks?”

Behind all the serious and light-hearted cards, stands the truth that at Christmas we celebrate the sending of God’s Son into our world. We’re beginning a new series today called “Christmas Questions.” Today we’re looking at the theme of discovery. At the heart of Christianity is the invitation to come and see if what the Bible says is really true. God is an inviting God and wants each of us to pursue Him. To discover means “a thing found out through exploration, or for the first time ascertained or recognized.”

One night a couple months ago our family heard a loud noise in the neighborhood which was followed by what appeared to be a flash of lightning. We immediately lost power, as did all the houses around us. We scrambled to find flashlights and candles. I was very curious as to what happened so Becca and I got in the car and started driving in the direction of the noise and flashing light. While we were driving down darkened streets, we noticed a bunch of people walking and driving in the same direction we were. I commented to Becca, "Look at all those crazy people trying to figure out what happened." She just rolled her eyes at me. When we came out of our subdivision, we saw flashing lights near a power pole and learned that a car had hit it, thus knocking out the transformer. Now here's the deal. If we had not done some discovery, we never would have known what happened.

It's my prayer that we'll get past all the Christmas clutter this season and discover what really happened 2,000 years ago when the babe in Bethlehem burst onto the scene. Marcel Proust has some great words in this regard: "The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes." It's my hope that we will have new eyes to see the Nativity.

Have you heard the saying, "Familiarity breeds contempt?" That basically means that the more familiar we are with something, at best we get bored with it or at worst, we start resenting it. That's why many of us just chuck our Christmas cards. Let's try hard to encounter these accounts as if we were hearing them for the first time.

People had been pleading with God to come down into their world for a long time. Listen to Psalm 144:5: "Part your heavens, O Lord, and come down..." Isaiah said something similar in Isaiah 64:1: "Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down..." Isaiah is bold about his longing for something more. He dared to believe that something better was coming even though his culture was corrupt and everything around him seemed so dark. He is longing for the Lord to somehow come down into his world to make sense out of all the nonsense, to bring peace to all the problems, to dispel the darkness and to extricate evil. He's hungry to have the Holy One enter our whacked-out world in an extraordinary manner.

Friends, aren't you glad that the Lord has come down? Please turn in your Bibles to Luke 2. Most people in America are familiar with this passage because every December since 1965, in between scenes of the Grinch slithering around Whoville and George Bailey looking for a wonderful life and Rudolf not playing reindeer games, we hear from Linus who knows the true meaning of Christmas. Listen to the answer he gave to Charlie Brown's question: "Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?"

--> YouTube Video: Charlie Brown's Christmas

Let's set the scene. An angelic intervention takes place when God rocks the routine of some guys who are just out doing their job. Luke 2:8: "And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night." In the early pages of the Bible, shepherding was considered a noble profession but in the first century shepherding had lost its luster. Shepherds made up the lowest class of people, coming in just ahead of the lepers. Living out in the fields away from society made them outcasts. Most of them had foul mouths and were ready to fight at the drop of a hat. Kind of sounds like me in my high school days.

Except for an occasional bleep from the sheep, the night was quiet. In the midst of the mundane, an angel of the Lord suddenly shows up. Look at verse 9: "An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified." Into the darkness of a silent night came the brightness of the glory of the Lord. I'm sure the shepherds were rubbing their eyes and shaking in their sandals. In fact, the word "terrified" means that they were alarmed and agitated. This is totally understandable because angels often announced judgment but this time they had a message of joy.

"But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid.'" Once again, an angel has to tell humans to chill out in the Christmas story. Some of you are afraid about your job or your health today. The reason the shepherds did not need to be afraid is because the messenger was bringing "good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

The phrase "good news" is where we get the word "evangelize." Notice that this is good news of great joy. The Greek word here is "mega" which means exceedingly, large, loud and mighty. It's a superlative of greatest degree. Wycliffe translates it this way: "I evangelize to you a great joy." This message is for "all the people" but I want you to see the word "you" as well. It's for the whole world but it must also become deeply personal.

As the shepherds are trying to handle the message from this one messenger, they are taken aback again: "Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God..." The word "suddenly" means that the heavenly host came unexpectedly. I imagine the sky filled with a multitude of messengers. The phrase "heavenly host" refers to the Lord's army. By the way, while angels do sing in other instances, this time they say, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."

If we want to get our concerns and questions answered this Christmas, let's allow the shepherds to show us a few things.

1. Until you go, you'll never know.

After witnessing this incredible display of unbridled adoration and praise, the shepherds knew that they had to move. “When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.’” They discussed what they should do and were unanimous in their decision to head to Bethlehem. I love verse 16 because it shows that their fear had been replaced with faith and then their faith went to their feet: “So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.” There was no delay. The word “hurried” carries with it the idea of speed. The idea is “come on, hurry up, and let’s bounce over to Bethlehem.”

I did a study on the word “come” this week and discovered that it appears 1,463 times in the Bible! The Almighty invites us to come to Him. Psalm 66:5: “Come and see what God has done, how awesome his works in man’s behalf!” I’m reminded of what Philip said to Nathaniel in Luke 1:46 in response to his skepticism about Jesus: “Come and see.” In John 4:29, the Samaritan woman is so moved by what Jesus told her about herself that she runs to tell others and makes this invitation: “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?”

I love the fact that we don’t have to pay for what God wants to give us – we couldn’t afford it anyway. Our only responsibility is to come. Check out Isaiah 55:1-3: “Come to me, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost...Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live.” And, when we’re wiped-out and heavy-hearted, Jesus makes this invitation to us in Matthew 11:28: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” If you ever worry about whether Jesus will receive you when you come, hold onto John 6:37: “Whoever comes to me I will never drive away.”

Drop down to Luke 2:20 where we read what happens as a result of their going: “...all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.” Just think what would have happened had the shepherds delayed a few days or if they had just discussed what they had seen in the night sky. I don’t know where you are, but there’s a point in which you will never know until you go.

The offer is to come. Have you done so? Don’t hold back. Don’t stay distant. Instead, its time to discover! Until you go, you’ll never know.

2. Until you know, you’ll never show.

Too many times too many try to act like Christians but the fact of the matter is that until you know Christ, you can’t do the Christian life. Once you know, it will show in the way you sow the seed of the gospel. It’s striking that the shepherds don’t pull up a bale of straw and make themselves comfortable. They didn’t hang around the manger because they knew that they were now managers of the message. Notice that the message they shared had nothing to do with seeing the amazing angels or of adoring Mary and Joseph.

They came to see Him and now they head out to herald the good news in verse 17: “When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.” The word “spread” means to “make known in such a way that people can understand.” We’re here today because they couldn’t keep quiet. Let me encourage you to spread the word about the service next Sunday because we’ll be tackling the topic of doubt, which many people struggle with. Our Christmas outreach services will be held right here at PBC on December 21st and we’re also putting together a creative Christmas Eve service that will be held at 6:00 p.m.

Friends, once you know Jesus, it will show. His name was Bill, a college student. He had unruly hair, wore a T-shirt with holes in it, old jeans and shoes with no socks and had just become a Christian. Located next to campus was a well-to-do church that wanted to develop a ministry to students but didn’t know how to go about it. One day Bill decided to go to church there. He walked in late, wearing his everyday wardrobe, and couldn’t find a seat because the church was full.

People noticed him walking down the center aisle and became uncomfortable. Seeing no seats anywhere, when Bill got up to the front, he just sat down right on the floor. While this was perfectly acceptable at a college fellowship, this just wasn’t done in church. The congregation became visibly uptight, tension filling the air. And then people noticed an elderly deacon in his eighties slowly making his way to Bill. He was a distinguished man with silver-gray hair and a three piece suit. He walked with a cane. As he made his way to Bill, the congregation was relieved and most thought to themselves, “I’m glad somebody is going to tell that kid he can’t sit there!”

It took some time for the deacon to reach the young man. The church became utterly silent except for the clicking of the man’s cane on the tiled floor. All eyes focused on him. When he finally reached the college kid, he dropped his cane and with great difficulty he lowered himself to the floor and asked, “May I sit with you?”

I see two truths from this incident. First, when we know, it will show. Jesus calls us to reach out to people. Second, this is similar to

what God did when He sent His Son. Jesus entered our world and wants to sit down in relationship with us.

Until you go, you'll never know. Until you know, you'll never show.

3. Until you show, you'll never glow.

With hearts filled with gratitude, these men break out into praise in verse 20: "The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told." They don't just wonder about what they saw, they worship Him whom they saw. These rough shepherds go back to their jobs, but now do so with praise on their lips and a renewed desire to give glory to God. Psalm 34:3: "Glorify the Lord with me; let us exalt his name together." I love Psalm 34:5: "Those who look to him are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame." That means that when we give glory to God and praise Him with our lives, our faces will be radiant with the grace of God. When we show, we will glow.

Jesus is Hard to Ignore but Easy to Miss

In a Christmas sermon, David Devine relates a story that appeared in the Washington Post last year... "He emerged from the Metro at the Plaza Station and positioned himself against a wall beside a trash basket. By most measures, he was nondescript: a youngish white man in jeans, a long-sleeved t-shirt and a baseball cap. From a small case, he removed a violin. Placing the open case at his feet, he shrewdly threw in a few dollars and pocket change as seed money, swiveled it to face pedestrian traffic, and began to play. It was 7:51 a.m. on a Friday.

For the next 45 minutes the violinist performed six great classical pieces. During that time, 1,097 people passed by. No one knew that the violinist was Joshua Bell, one of the world's leading classical musicians, who fills concert halls. On this Friday morning Bell played on one of the most valuable violins ever made - a Stradivarius valued at \$3.5 million. The train station provided good acoustics for his performance and his beautiful music filled the morning air.

Over the time that he played, seven people stopped to listen for at least a minute. 27 people gave money. Just to give a frame of reference, Bell was accustomed to getting paid \$1,000 per minute in his concerts. This day, in total, he received \$32.17. At the end of each piece, there was no applause - just silent indifference. The master musician was ignored. People walked past musical glory without giving it a second glance - with the exception of two people.

The first was a postal worker named John who had learned the violin as a youth. He recognized the quality of Joshua Bell's performance and stood enjoying it from a distance. And then there was a woman named Stacy. Stacy had seen Bell in concert three weeks earlier and had recognized him. She had no idea what was going on, but whatever it was, she wasn't about to miss it. She moved closer, positioning herself front and center. She had a huge grin on her face and she stayed until the concert was over.

Later Stacy told the reporter: 'It was the most astonishing thing I've ever seen in Washington. Joshua Bell was standing there playing in rush hour, and people were not stopping, not even looking, and some were flipping quarters at him! Quarters! I was thinking, what kind of a city do I live in that this could happen?'

In another place, at another time, the night was filled with heavenly music and brilliant light. Never has earth seen such glory. Angels sang to some workers about a majestic one - a Savior; the Chosen One; the long-awaited One; the Lord. His arrival was 'good news of great joy for all people.' Where would the workers find this glorious one? In a palace? A temple? A concert hall with an orchestra perhaps? No. An angel gave the astonishing news: 'You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in manger.'

Who would expect to find a heavenly King in such a setting? Usually he lived among angels; now among cattle. What a surprising place to find God. The One who made the Universe placed himself in the inexperienced hands of a teenage Mom and the rough hands of a carpenter. God among the ordinary. Most people ignored him and went about their business. Only some shepherds, who were let in on the secret of his identity, stopped to acknowledge him and enter into the joy of his presence in their world. One of the puzzles of Christmas is why God did it that way. Why not make the angelic sound and light show a global event? God came as a baby in a manger for at least two reasons.

First, because God wants to be accessible to all people - especially to the least and lowest of us. Like a violinist playing in a train station, God made himself available to the masses so we can all enjoy the beauty of his gift.

A second reason for God coming as He did is that He does not impose himself on people; rather he invites us to enter into relationship with him. The Shepherds heard the angel's message, sought the Christ and found him. God invites us to seek him too. Finding the virtuoso in the subway, John and Stacy rejoiced. Finding Jesus in the manger, the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen which were just as they had been told.

A Christmas Card from Christ

Christmas cards first came on the scene over 150 years ago in England when Sir Henry Cole commissioned John Horsley to create

a card that depicted the destitute that needed help during the holidays. But actually, the first Christmas Card was sent by God himself when He announced the birth of His Son, sent to depraved and destitute people like you and like me.

I want to propose that there are three words that appear in God's Christmas card to us.

* Close. The shepherds were close to Christmas but still needed to make the journey to Jesus. You may be close yourself but you've not yet made the discovery that will change your life. Jeremiah 29:13-14: "'You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,' declares the Lord..."

* Cost. The shepherds left their sheep behind so they could look at the Lamb of God. It will cost you something to discover Christ. Don't be afraid to pay the price. To know Christ will cost you more than what you spend on presents – it will cost you your very life.

* Come. Like the shepherds, you don't need to have much or know a lot, what matters is whether you'll go or if you'll just stay the same. It's in the going that you'll start knowing. Friend, God may be trying to break into your ordinary routine with the message of good news. He loves you and has sent His Son to be your Savior. How long will you continue to ignore Immanuel? When will you hurry to the Holy One? He wants to bring you joy in the midst of all the junk going on in your life. Will you receive what He has done for you? Will you put feet to your faith?

Jesus was born to the whole world but He was also born "to you." Christmas is real history but it must become your story. Luke 2:11: "Today [that means right now – don't hesitate or procrastinate] in the town of David a Savior [one who forgives sins] has been born to you; [personal] he is Christ [the long-awaited Messiah] the Lord [master and Leader]."

It is not enough to just get sentimental during this season. I close with three questions:

* Is He "Savior" to you?

* Is He "Christ" to you?

* Is He "Lord" to you?

Until you go, you'll never know. Until you know, you'll never grow. Until you grow, you'll never glow.

If you're ready to receive the gift of Jesus right now, please pray this prayer with me.

"I'm in awe of you. Thank you for inviting me to come. I don't understand how you can accept me when I don't measure up. I confess that I am a sinner and I want to turn from the way I've been living. I need you to be my Savior and so I come to you now. You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God. I desire to live under your lordship for the rest of my life. Thank you for not only being born but for dying in my place and rising again so that I can be born again. I now receive the gift of salvation and forgiveness by asking you to come into my life. Make me into the person you want me to be. I want to show what I know to be true and I want to grow so that I can glow for you. In the name of Immanuel, I ask this. Amen."

Luke 2:8-20 Christmas According to Luke

December 20-21, 2014

Bridge from "Still He Came"

We wander and we're accustomed to darkness, blinded by our own sins as we turn our backs on you. And yet, Jesus you still came...for us.

And so here's a question. How do we know that it's even true? Can we have any confidence that Christmas really happened? Can we know with any certainty that the Savior has come?

We're continuing in our series called, "Christmas According to..." Two weeks ago we heard from Matthew and learned that at its heart Christmas is a call to conversion and commitment as Jesus still turns to you and to me and says, "Follow me!" The Gospel of Mark reminded us that even if we've failed or folded, the coming of Christ means we can have a fresh start.

Luke's approach is a bit different. He's a reputable historian who did some deep research, conducting intensive interviews to put his narrative together. The closest contemporary illustration of his approach is how Laura Hillenbrand went about writing the history of Louis Zamperini, the legendary Olympian and war hero. Critics have called her a "research genius" and one of the "best writers"

alive today. She conducted 75 interviews and pored over countless historical documents, taking 7 years to write "Unbroken," a 496-page biography of Zamperini's life.

Ruth MacAnally allowed me to borrow her audio CDs and I became so engrossed in the story when I was listening in the car that I would do laps around the block before coming home. I couldn't wait to hear what happened next so I went to the library and checked out the book. I would then figure out where I had last listened to the audio and pick up the story in the book, reading large chunks. Then, when I got back in the car, I'd fast forward to the place I had left off in the book and then repeat the process until I finished the story.

While Hillenbrand is a great historian and author (she also wrote *Seabiscuit*), she's nothing like the gospel writer Luke who researched the life of the Lord Jesus. He interviewed eyewitnesses and pulled together other source material. As a physician, he was careful, thoughtful and persuasive. As a scientist, he was accustomed to handling data and details as he crafted it all together in a compelling narrative we know as the Gospel According to Luke. By the way, if you have a skeptical and scientific mind with a logical bent, this book is for you.

In the opening verses of his gospel, he uses classical Greek to show that his research was deep and his interviews intensive. He is no doubt a man of culture and high education. Listen to verse 1: "...to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us..." That's a common phrase that was used when recounting history.

Check out verses 3-4: "...to write to you an orderly account...that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed." That helps us know that this is fact, not fable. What's contained in this book is inspired and inerrant, it's not legend but the actual life of the Lord Jesus Christ. Luke's purpose was to present Jesus in all His fullness, focusing on verifiable facts so his readers could know that His account was absolutely accurate and remarkably reliable.

It's important to know that the Bible is true but we also want to grow in our understanding of the Scriptures. And the only way to do that is to read it every day.

As we approach 2015, we want to provide some tools to help you dive deep next year. Can you take out the insert in your bulletin? What would your life look like if you set aside 15 minutes a day to read the Bible and pray in 2015?

This week I took our youngest daughter Megan with me to deliver Christmas gifts to some shut-ins. Our first stop was to Evelyn Skaggs, who is a joyful and peaceful 94-year-old, and a long-time member of Edgewood. Megan and I were moved to learn that she prays for our whole family by name every night. In the course of our conversation Evelyn humbly mentioned that she has almost finished reading the Bible through this year.

When I asked her what plan she is using, she reached for a book that helps her stay on track. And then she handed me another devotional. And then another one was added to the stack. She handed me a fourth booklet and then a fifth. I opened each of them to the bookmark and saw that each one was marking the very day we were there. And then she added humbly, "Plus, I read the Bible every day." I asked to see it and got teary as I flipped through well-worn pages held together by a weathered leather cover. I asked her how long she spends reading and she smiled and replied, "About an hour a day." That explains her joy and peace, doesn't it?

Friends, in order to Grow, it's essential to spend time in God's Word and in prayer and we want to help you with that. Simply click on the "Take 15" tab on edwoodbaptist.net and you'll see a wide variety of reading plans designed to help you read your Bible for at least 10 minutes a day. 8 different printed plans are also available at the display in the lobby and in the hallway by the gym. I'm finishing up a plan that has me reading from a different section of the Bible each day of the week. Next year I'm going to utilize the Legacy plan that is divided up according to the seasons of the year.

After you finish your daily reading, we'd like you to take 5 minutes to pray for our four vision points (Gather, Grow, Give and Go) for yourself, your family and for our church.

- Ask God to help you gather on a regular basis with God's people at one of our four weekend services.
- Ask God to equip you to grow in your faith by committing to an ABF class or Life Group.
- Ask God to enable you to give that which He has given to you, including your tithes, talents and time.
- Ask God to mobilize you to live on mission as you go with the gospel to your family members, neighbors, friends, classmates and co-workers.

Can you imagine what God will do for His glory in your life...in Edgewood...in the Quad Cities...in all the Earth...when we take 15 in 2015?

If you're wondering where to read before Christmas, check out the first two chapters of Matthew and the first two chapters in Luke.

On Christmas Eve at 4:00 and 6:00 p.m. we'll give our attention to a couple verses in the first chapter of John to see that the infant was really infinite. By the way, if you're able to come to the 6:00 service that would free up more seats for our guests at our 4:00 p.m. option, which we anticipate being the more popular one.

Most of us are pretty comfortable with the Christmas story. Some have sentimentalized it so much that they skim along on a superficial level, counting down the remaining shopping days, stressing about all the things to do, while neglecting the Nativity.

Let's lock into Luke so we can hear the message from the manger. In his first chapter, Luke introduces us to John the Baptist and we listen in as Gabriel comes to Mary and she responds in praise. In the beginning of chapter two he explains how Joseph and Mary arrive in Bethlehem and then we read how God chose to send the birth announcement about His Son to some smelly shepherds in Luke 2:8: "Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night."

Shepherds made up the lowest class of people, coming in just ahead of the lepers. I love that the Lord comes to the lowly, to the most undeserving, to the neglected and marginalized in order to show His power. The Shepherds help us see that God has a message for sinners just like us. That's really the message David was communicating to Tim in the drama.

As we briefly look at three responses the shepherds had, we'll see some lessons that we can apply to our own lives.

1. They were awed by the message.

Look at Luke 2:9: "And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid."

God's Shekinah glory lights up the sky and they shake in their sandals. The phrase "stood before" can refer to a sudden assault. Maybe the shepherds were terrified because they didn't know if this was an angel of judgment or not. Maybe their sins were catching up with them and they were about to be vaporized.

To be "sore afraid" (as quoted by Linus in Charlie Brown's Christmas) or "greatly afraid" literally means, "to fear with great fear." Whenever we come face-to-face with God's holiness, how can we not but fall apart because of our sinfulness? Peter had this response in Luke 5:8 when he said to Jesus: "Get away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man."

I wonder, when's the last time you and I were in awe? Do you marvel at the Messiah?

2. They accepted the message.

Check out Luke 2:10: "Then the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people.'" I like how Matt Papa puts it: "Christianity's first call is not 'Behave!' but Behold!"

The angel tells them to chill out because he is bringing good news of "great joy." The Greek word here is "mega" which means exceedingly, large, loud and mighty. It's a superlative of greatest degree. Wycliffe translates it this way: "I evangelize to you a great joy." We received a Christmas card several years ago that captures the sense of this scene: "May your steps jingle with delight and anticipation this time of year!"

And this message "will be to all people." That's why we get to know our neighbors and seek ways to share Christ at work and why we reach out to refugees and give gifts to Operation Christmas Child and the Floreciente neighborhood and why we support some 90 missionaries positioned strategically around the world.

Verse 11 contains the heart of the birth announcement: "For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." Notice the three words used to describe this baby born in Bethlehem:

- Savior. He came to save us from our sins. The name Jesus means the one who saves.
- Christ. This means "The anointed one" or "Messiah" in Hebrew.
- Lord. This is the Hebrew word Adonai and refers to "Master or Owner." It speaks of His total possession and my absolute submission.

They're given an indication of what to look for in verse 12: "And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger." And then suddenly a whole regiment of rejoicing warrior angels fills the sky, praising God in a thunderous voice and saying in verse 14, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!" Like David told Tim, the angels were giving glory to God because the message of the manger is that peace and goodwill are now available through Jesus.

Have you accepted the message and allowed the Word of God to work in you? God's good news is a gift that must be received if

you want it to be activated in your life.

3. They acted on the message

We read in verse 15: "Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us." When they heard the angels on high they were ready to high tail it to Bethlehem.

- They went and saw. We see in verse 16 that they moved quickly to the manger: "And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger." The idea behind "haste" is "come on, hurry up, let's go!" This is pretty amazing because shepherds normally did nothing quickly. They could have doubted or delayed but instead they decided to act and they departed for Bethlehem.
- They left and shared. It's striking that they don't pull up a bale of straw and make themselves comfortable. Instead of gathering a group to study the message they headed out to share the message from the manger. And the story they shared had nothing to do with seeing the amazing angels or Mary's magnificence. They came to see Him and now they head out to herald the good news about Him. Look at verse 17: "Now when they had seen Him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child." The phrase, "they made widely known" means to "make known in such a way that people can understand." We're here today because they couldn't keep quiet!

In what area is God calling you to some action? Some of you need to come and see and others of you need to leave and share. The shepherds were changed forever by what they saw and you can be as well if you follow their example:

- Be awed by God's message to you
- Accept the message of good news
- Act on the message and then share it with others

Christmas is real history but His story must become your story. Luke loved to spell out that Jesus came to save sinners as he quoted Him saying in Luke 19:10: "For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost."

"Salvation is not a reward for the righteous, but a gift for the guilty."

--- Steven Lawson

Check out Luke 2:11 again: "Today [that means in the present time] in the town of David [the promised place] a Savior [one who forgives sins] has been born to you; [personal] He is Christ [the long-awaited Anointed One] the Lord [your Master and Leader]."

"If Jesus were born one thousand times in Bethlehem and not in me, then I would still be lost."

--Corrie Ten Boom

It's time today to make sure that Jesus is born in you.

The book, "Unbroken" has been made into movie that is coming out on Christmas Day. Unfortunately, Angelina Jolie, the director, left out the most amazing part of the story. After returning from a POW camp, Zamperini was a broken man. He was plagued with dreams of his tormentors, he drank heavily and his marriage was hanging by a thread. At the urging of his wife, he reluctantly agreed to attend a Billy Graham crusade in 1949.

He left before the invitation but then went back another night and was gloriously and completely saved. He immediately threw out his alcohol and cigarettes and picked up a Bible. He later gave his testimony at several Billy Graham crusades.

Listen to how Franklin Graham, Billy Graham's son, explains it: "His life was transformed instantly that day. And it stayed with him for the rest of his life. He never turned from what he put his faith and trust in, and that was Jesus Christ." Zamperini, who died just recently at the age of 97, summarized what Jesus meant to Him: "The heart of this story is when I found Christ as my Savior. That's the heart of my whole life."

Incidentally, the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association is releasing a documentary on Christmas Day, the same day that "[Unbroken](#)" hits the theaters to give the "rest of the story." You can watch it here. I posted the link on the EBC Facebook page and on the "Sermon Extra" tab on our website.

Speaking of books, a week ago I returned two library books that were a couple weeks late. I found a librarian and said sheepishly, "This is the face of a delinquent." I handed over my books, hung my head, and told her I was prepared to pay the fine. She smiled pleasantly, scanned the books and politely told me that I owed \$5.50. I handed her the money, and she smiled again. She then handed me a receipt and said, "Your balance is Zero. It's as if it never happened."

I thanked her for the shame-free zone, telling her that the library where we used to live practiced public shaming. If I was a day late, I'd walk meekly up to the counter, slide my book to the librarian and would hear her exclaim loudly for all to hear, "You're late, Mr. Bill. That will be 10 cents!" I was always tempted to tell her that she wasn't using her library voice but was afraid that would just escalate the shaming.

I much prefer the Moline librarian: "Your balance is zero. It's as if it never happened." Maybe you have a temper like Tim. Perhaps your relationships are all messed up. We're all sinners and because of that there's a price to pay. You can either pay it yourself by serving time in Hell forever. Or you can ask Jesus to pay it for you.

Be in awe. Accept the message from the manger. And then act on the message. Your fine has already been paid by Christ. Your balance is zero...if you receive and accept what He has done for you. As David told Tim, "God reached down and now we must reach out and receive the gift of salvation."

You can do that right now by praying this prayer: "I'm in awe of you. Thank you for loving me even when I feel like a loser. I don't understand how you can accept me when I don't measure up. I confess that I am a sinner and I want to turn from the way I've been living. I need you to be my Savior. You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God. I desire to live under your leadership and lordship for the rest of my life. Thank you for not only being born but for dying in my place and rising again so that I can be born again. I now accept the gift of salvation and forgiveness by asking you to come into my life. Make me into the person you want me to be. I want to act on what I know to be true. It's only through Christ alone that I can be saved. In the name of Immanuel, the babe in Bethlehem, Jesus Christ, who died on the cross, I ask this. Amen."

Invitation Song: ["In Christ Alone"](#)

Benediction: Luke wrote a sequel to his account about Jesus and it's also included in your Bible. It's called the Book of Acts. It continues the story of Jesus at work in the world. As you leave today, go with these words from Acts 1:8 as your marching orders, looking for opportunities to speak about the message from the manger: "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

Luke 2:8-20 The Shepherds' Joy about Jesus

Summary: The shepherds were attentive, in awe, they accepted, they acted and they adored. 12/17/06

A survey was done to see which characters from the advent account most people identify with. How many of you think it's Mary? Joseph? The wise guys? Anyone for Herod? Not surprisingly, the shepherds came out on top by far. When I was young I always wanted to play a shepherd but was usually relegated to the role of a rock or I was told to just stand still and act like a palm tree. I can't imagine why I was never given a more important part!

Most of us are pretty comfortable with the Christmas story. Maybe we're so familiar that it's become part fable and part legend in our minds. Some have sentimentalized it so much that they skim along on a superficial level, counting down the remaining shopping days, stressing about all the things to do, while neglecting the Nativity. It reminds me of the little girl who misquoted John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only forgotten Son." The music this morning has helped us remember that the baby who was born in Bethlehem is Jesus, the Son of God, who brings great joy today.

The shepherds received news about the gift that still goes on. And because of what they did with this gift, we too can sing joy to the world! I find it very interesting that God chose to send the birth announcement about His Son to shepherds. Luke 2:8 doesn't tell us much about who they were. No adjectives are used to describe them: "And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby..."

Throughout the history of Israel, shepherding was a noble profession. Abel was the first to have this job, followed by Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and of course, David. God calls Himself a shepherd and we're compared to sheep, which is anything but a compliment. By the time we come to the first century however, shepherding has lost its luster. Shepherds made up the lowest class of people, coming in just ahead of the lepers. In the Talmud, which is a collection of interpretations and insight from the rabbis, we read these words: "No help is to be given to heathen or shepherds."

In order to understand how unusual it was to have the angels appear to these lowly shepherds, let's learn a bit about them:

- Considered ceremonially unclean. Because of the nature of their work they were unable to attend any religious services.
- Isolated and forgotten. Because their flocks needed to move around to find new grass and fresh water, they

never stayed in one place for long.

- Treated with contempt and mistrust. They were suspected of stealing from others and would often confuse “thine” with “mine.” Their testimony was never allowed in court because they were so unreliable.
- Known to be brash and bold. Living out in the fields away from society made them unappealing to most people. Most of them had foul mouths and were ready to fight at the drop of a hat.

Princess Diana is in the news again, ten years after her death. Imagine if you will that when her sons Prince Harry and Prince William were born, that instead of all the media attention and birth announcements to presidents and heads of state, the news of their births was delivered only to dock workers unloading cargo in the middle of the night.

God entrusted the greatest message ever sent from heaven to a bunch of smelly shepherds. Actually, this isn't so unusual, is it? God has always worked wonders for the forgotten, for the despised, and for the lowly. From the very beginning of his time on earth, Jesus came to those who felt horrible and were humble. Matthew 9:12-13: “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick...For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” Jesus reached out to sinners like Zacchaeus and Levi, prostitutes and the demon possessed, strangers and Samaritans. He did in His ministry what the Father did in a borrowed stable when the lowly shepherds looked at the Lord as the cattle were lowing. Mary captured this in her song recorded in Luke 1:52: “He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.” Paul said it this way in 1 Corinthians 1:26-29: “Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth... He chose the lowly things of the world and the despised things...so that no one may boast before Him.”

It doesn't say, “Now there were in the same region scribes keeping watch over their scrolls.” The Lord comes to the lowly, to the most undeserving, to the neglected and marginalized in order to show His power. The Shepherds help us see that God has a message for sinners just like us. Everyone matters to God. And the only announcement of Christ's birth goes out to a bunch of uneducated outcasts. Indeed, as the song says: What a strange way to save the world! As we briefly look at the shepherds' response, we'll see some lessons that we can apply to our lives so that we don't forget the Son this season.

1. Attentive.

The first thing we see about the shepherds is that they were attentive to their jobs. Listen to Luke 2:8: “And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over the flocks at night.” They were so committed to their career that they never left their work. They not only worked the third shift, they pulled the first and second as well. This was a 24/7 deal for them. We also see from this verse that they were faithful, since they were “keeping watch.” It was often the case that the different flocks would come together at night and all come into the same fold. One of the shepherds would literally lie across the entrance to make sure none of the sheep would get out and no predators in, which gives new meaning to John 10:9 when Jesus said: “I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture.”

Notice that God came to those who were attentive at the jobs they were given to do. They weren't slackers and He met them right where they were. Likewise, whatever God has called you to do, be attentive to it and do it with excellence. Colossians 3:23: “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men.”

You may be thinking that God doesn't even know you exist and if He does, He's somehow mad at you. Friend, you are not insignificant to Immanuel. God will meet you right where you are. You don't have to clean yourself up on your own or act like someone you're not. If you smell like a shepherd, let Jesus wash you up. If your sins are wiping you out, allow Jesus to lift you up. Heaven chooses to bring a message to the messed up, to the low achievers as well as the high. You were created in the image of God as an original masterpiece and the signature of the Creator is inscribed on your soul.

2. Awed.

While they were being attentive to the responsibilities they were given, they are suddenly awed by an angelic announcement in Luke 2:9: “An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.” God meets us where we are but then he brings us to our knees.

God's Shekinah glory lights up the sky and causes them to quake in their sandals. Whenever we come face-to-face with God's holiness, we fall apart because of our sinfulness. Peter had this response in Luke 5:8 and said to Jesus: “Get away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man.” They could also have been terrified because they didn't know if this was an angel of judgment or not. Perhaps he had been sent as payback for their raunchy jokes, bad language and sticky fingers. Maybe their sins were catching up with them and now they would be vaporized. Whatever the case, they were in awe and it would take a lot for these tough guys to be terrified.

I wonder, when's the last time you were in awe? Do you marvel at the Messiah? Has it been awhile since you hit your knees before Him?

3. Accepted.

The attentive shepherds are filled with awe and now they accept the message of good news of great joy in Luke 2:10-15: "But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.'" The angel calms them down, telling them that he is bringing good news of acceptance, forgiveness and hope. We would have a lot to fear if Christmas never happened. This is literally the word from which we get "evangelize." This is good news of great joy. The Greek word here is "mega" which means exceedingly, large, loud and mighty. It's a superlative of greatest degree. Wycliffe translates it this way: "I evangelize to you a great joy." Loved ones, joyless faith in Jesus is a contradiction in terms!

We received a card from Don and Lydia Bauer this week. They are former members of PBC and now live in Georgia. This is what Lydia wrote on the inside: "May your steps jingle with delight and anticipation this time of year!"

This message is for "all the people" but I want you to notice the word "you" as well. It's for the whole world but it must also become deeply personal. After getting some more specifics, a whole regiment of rejoicing warrior angels fills the sky, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." We know that they accepted this message because in verse 15 we read, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see..."

1 Thessalonians 2:13: "And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe."

Have you accepted the message and allowed the word of God to work in you? God's good news is a gift that must be received if you want it to be activated in your life.

4. Acted.

These shepherds didn't just accept and enjoy the message they received, they acted upon it. Look at Luke 2:16: "So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger." The word "hurried off" means they left in haste. The idea is "come on, hurry up, let's go!" This is pretty amazing in itself because shepherds normally did nothing quickly. They were patient men, accustomed to moving slowly through the pastures. The Bible is clear that acceptance must lead to action, or as James 2:17 says: "...faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead." They could have doubted or delayed but instead they decided to act and they moved.

- **They went and saw.** The first thing they did was bounce to Bethlehem. They wanted to see the baby with their own eyes. A baby born in a smelly stable would not have been a problem to men who were used to the scent of sheep. Check out this irony. Unclean shepherds came to a smelly stable to see the Holy of Holies lying on a bed of hay. Many commentators point out the possibility that they were taking care of sheep that were going to be sacrificed in Jerusalem's Temple. If that was the case, it's no accident that they leave their sheep behind to visit the Lamb of God. A millennium earlier, David kept watch over his father's sheep in this same pasture and now they see the Son of David born in the City of David.

- **They left and shared.** It's striking that they don't pull up a bale of straw and make themselves comfortable. They didn't hang around the manger because they knew that they were now managers of the message. Notice that the message they shared had nothing to do with seeing the amazing angels and there's no reference to Mary's magnificence or Joseph's job. They came to see Him and now they head out to herald the good news. Look at verse 17: "When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child." The word "spread" means to "make known in such a way that people can understand." We're here today because they couldn't keep quiet.

In what area is God calling you to some action? It's not enough to just say you have faith, or to feel good about something; there comes a time that after seeing, we must be involved in sharing.

5. Adored.

What's cool here is that the shepherds went back to their same boring jobs but they weren't the same on the inside. They returned to where they started and were attentive again. Notice that they didn't write a book or go on a speaking tour or launch a ministry called "A Shepherd's Story." After Christmas we have to go back to the same routine but now we can do so with rejoicing. We are to rejoice right where we are. Yes, it's possible to have joy in our jobs even if they're junky. Look at Luke 2:20: "The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told." They don't just wonder about what they saw, they worship Him who they saw.

A clear evidence of conversion is always adoration. Someone has observed that many of us worship our work, work at our play and play at our worship. When a person is genuinely converted he or she will praise God. Allow yourself this Advent Season to adore

Immanuel as you glorify and praise Him for all you have seen and heard. You can return to the same place tomorrow but not as the same person.

Do you want to take on the role of the shepherds? Or, will you just plant yourself like a tree and be as unmovable as a rock? The shepherds were changed forever by what they saw and you can be as well if you follow their example:

- Be attentive to what God has called you to do
- Be awed by God's message to you
- Accept the gift of good news
- Act on what you know to be true
- Adore Immanuel 24/7

The choir has reminded us that "The Gift Goes On." But it must first be received. The shepherds had to personalize their response. Jesus was born to the whole world but He was born "to you." TIME magazine's cover this week declares the "Person of the Year" as YOU! God declares that Jesus was born to YOU! (to read more about this, see my blog entry: www.pontiacbible.org/brian).

Christmas is real history but it must become your story. Luke 2:11: "Today [that means right now] in the town of David a Savior [one who forgives sins] has been born to you; [personal] he is Christ [the long-awaited Messiah] the Lord [your master and Leader]."

I close with three questions:

- Is He "Savior" to you?
- Is He "Christ" to you?
- Is He "Lord" to you?

I love what Corrie Ten Boom once said: "If Jesus were born one thousand times in Bethlehem and not in me, then I would still be lost." It's time today to make sure that Jesus is born in you. You can do that right now by praying this prayer:

"I'm in awe of you. Thank you for loving me even when I feel like a loser. I don't understand how you can accept me when I don't measure up. I confess that I am a sinner and I want to turn from the way I've been living. I need you to be my Savior. You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God. I desire to live under your lordship for the rest of my life. Thank you for not only being born but for dying in my place and rising again so that I can be born again. I now receive the gift of salvation and forgiveness by asking you to come into my life. Make me into the person you want me to be. I want to act on what I know to be true and enable me to adore you for the rest of my life. I want to exhibit your joy even when life is junky. In the name of Immanuel, the babe in Bethlehem, I ask this. Amen."

Luke 2:9-14 The Angels' Plea for Peace

Summary: The angels gave the Christmas message. Will you deny and doubt, are you uncertain but willing to surrender, are you ready to accept and act, and do you believe and will you broadcast the good news? 12/10/06

Yesterday I drove up to Milwaukee to celebrate my mom's 70th birthday with my four sisters. One of my sisters had a pretty cool idea a couple weeks ago. She told all of us to order a black t-shirt with the words, "Mom likes me best" written on the front. She thought it would be pretty funny for all of us to wear the same shirt when we walked in the door. I had an even better idea. Instead of going along with her plan, I ordered one that said, "Mom loves me more than my sisters!" I think they wish they never would have had a brother.

In order to celebrate this milestone for my mom, we gave my mom some gifts. Most of our gifts were small but they all represented a memory we've had of our mom. For instance, I wrapped up a box of Malt-O-Meal cereal because I used to make hot cereal for breakfast and my sisters would never eat it. The reason is because I would wake up about an hour earlier than they did and by the time they sat down for breakfast their hot cereal was cold and pasty. My mom would get pretty mad at them when they would just stare at the bitter blob in their bowls. I wanted to give my mom a can of pea soup in memory of the time I poured a whole bowl of it on my sister's head because she refused to eat it. My mom wasn't too happy with me that day.

I also wanted to give her a box of raisins to mark one of the most memorable moments of my life...I actually almost lost my life over this one. When I was around ten or so I emptied a box of raisins and filled it with rabbit droppings and gave the box to our neighbor boy Craig. Let's just say I was in big trouble with his mom and my mom. My dad thought it was pretty funny but he kept it to himself.

One consequence of this escapade is that I can no longer eat raisins...and now you might not either.

My sweet sisters also gave some goofy gifts but we did it all to celebrate our mom's birthday. When one contemplates Christmas in our culture, there are some pretty weird things that we do. One Christmas card captures this sentiment: "What other time of the year do you sit around staring at a dead tree in your living room and eat out of your socks?" As we go back to the details surrounding the birth of Jesus, there are some strange, surprising and supernatural elements going on. Ray Pritchard states: "Take the supernatural out of Christianity and all you have left is a religious book club." A virgin teenager becomes pregnant. A fiancé remains faithful. An 80-mile trip to Bethlehem. A birth in a barn. Shepherds leaving their sheep. A supernatural star. Wise guys traveling across a desert to see a king. Messages through dreams. And angels appearing.

Last week we were impacted by Isaiah's audacious hope as his prophecies were fulfilled with pinpoint accuracy. Jesus was a sure sign, a sent Son, a shoot from a stump and a suffering Savior. Isaiah reminded us that one can never start too early when getting ready for something really big. On this second Sunday of Advent, our focus today is on the Angels' Plea for Peace.

While the Christmas story is saturated with the supernatural, some of us miss the meaning because we just skim by this season on a superficial level. I want to suggest that we must see the mysterious and miraculous elements surrounding the birth of Jesus. In his book called, "Rumors of another World," Philip Yancey writes, "The Bible presents a...view of reality that encompasses both the familiar visible world and an invisible world that coexists as a kind of parallel universe" (Page 165).

Angels appear in more than half of the books of the Bible, with over 300 total references. They have three primary responsibilities.

- They magnify God. The number one job of angels is to adore God. Nehemiah 9:6: "You give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship you." According to Job 38:7, at creation "the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy."
- They are messengers of God. The word "angel," as used in the Bible, literally means messenger. Their job is to do what God sends them to do. Angel messengers basically convey two types of messages. Sometimes it's good news like announcing the birth of Christ. That Christmas carol "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing" captures the fact that angels "herald" or proclaim. But, other times they bring bad news. When they serve in this capacity, they are not cute and cuddly cherub dolls that we put on top of our Christmas trees. 2 Thessalonians 1:7: "This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels." The Book of Revelation is full of avenging angels and it is anything but pretty.
- They minister to people. Hebrews 1:14 puts it best: "Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?" Most of the time angels are not seen; they minister invisibly behind the scenes. And yet, on occasion, they break into our world, appearing for a short time to accomplish a specific purpose. The Bible mentions that when they do appear, they often look just like humans. Listen to Hebrews 13:2: "Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it."

It is impossible to read the Christmas story without understanding a little about angels because it begins and ends with them. The Incarnation is so incredible and so earth shaking that only the angels could be entrusted by God to be the appropriate messengers. No earthly channels of communication could be relied upon to get this amazing message out because no human person could possibly be persuasive enough. One interesting point to be made is that if you were to look at all the major events in the Bible, there is no other occurrence that has as many messages from so many angelic messengers.

Yancey refers to a concept called, "thin places," where the natural and supernatural worlds come together at their narrowest, with only a thin veil between them ("Rumors of another World," Page 45). As we read the Christmas story, there are many of these thin places, particularly when messengers from the angelic world make an appearance into our world. I'd like us to look at how four Christmas characters responded to these angelic encounters.

Let me mention something before we look at these accounts. Have you heard the saying, "Familiarity breeds contempt?" That basically means that the more familiar we are with something at best, we get bored with it or at worst, we start resenting it. Let's try hard to read these accounts as if we were hearing them for the first time. In fact, let's put ourselves in their sandals, remembering that four hundred years have gone by when God was silent between the end of Malachi and the beginning of Matthew. People have been pleading with God to come down into their world with words similar to what Isaiah said in Isaiah 64:1: "Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down..."

Let me make some observations about angels in the Christmas story.

- Angels appear suddenly to ordinary people doing ordinary things. Angels don't come with an announcement beforehand. Actually, they come bearing an announcement and they often break into our world unexpectedly with messages of galactic proportions.
- Angels cause people to be afraid. When an angel appears in Scripture, a sense of fear and wonder blasts through the blasé and predictable. This awe-inspiring element was built into the very worship fabric of ancient Israel. The Ark of the Covenant had two

cherubim carved into it. Prophets like Isaiah came face-to-face with seraphim who cried out in Isaiah 6:3: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.” With the doorposts shaking and the temple filled with smoke, Isaiah cried out in fear, “Woe is me!” Knowing that they have this kind of affect on humans, some of their first words are: “Do not be afraid.”

- Angels are never to be adored. Every reference to angels in the Bible is incidental to some other topic. We need to be careful to not give them too much attention. Psalm 103:20 says that they are “mighty ones who do His bidding.” We are never told to seek out encounters with angels and they refuse to be worshipped. In Revelation 22:8-9, the Apostle John is overcome by all that he has heard and seen: “I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel...But he said to me, ‘Do not do it! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers the prophets and of all who keep the words of this book. Worship God!’” Good angels never draw attention to themselves. They can get our attention, but they always do it for God’s sake, not their own. When Biblical angels discharge their duty and deliver their tidings, they withdraw from human contact. They don’t stay long because they don’t want us to focus on them; they want us to worship God. One other thought in this regard. Angels are not to be prayed to. They may help deliver answers to prayer, but the Bible never suggests that we should direct our requests to them.

Angelic Encounters

In one of the earliest recorded Christmas carols found in 1 Timothy 3:16, we read these words: “Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great: He appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory.” We know that angels were present at His Temptation (Matthew 4:11), in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:43), at His Resurrection (Mark 16:5), at His Ascension (Acts 1:10-11) and they will accompany Him at His Second Advent (Matthew 25:31). And angels were very involved during His first advent. Let’s look at four different reactions to these early angelic encounters in Matthew and Luke.

1. Denied and doubted (Luke 1:5-25). The first appearance of an angel in the gospel accounts takes place in the opening verses of Luke when Gabriel, one of only two named angels in the Bible (the other being Michael) appears to Zechariah to tell him that he and his wife Elizabeth were going to have a son named John. Luke 1:7 indicates that “they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years.” Zechariah was a priest and when it was his turn to serve in the Temple to burn incense, the angel of the Lord appeared and verse 12 tells us that he was “gripped with fear.” The angel comforted him and said in verse 13, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John.” The angel then proceeded to describe what kind of person he would be as well as his purpose: “...to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

Even though Zechariah had been praying for a child and even though he was a religious guy he denied and he doubted in verse 18: “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.” Because of his doubts, he is made dumb (literally) and is not able to speak until the baby is born. Luke 1:64 tells us that when he is finally able to speak eight days after John’s birth, the first thing he did was to praise God. He then breaks into a song with these opening lyrics in verse 68: “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because He has come and redeemed his people.” The song ends with an allusion to Isaiah 9:2 in verse 79: “To shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.”

2. Not sure but surrendered (Luke 1:26-38). In the next angelic encounter, Gabriel appears to a virgin named Mary six months later. After giving a greeting, Mary is greatly troubled and so we hear these words of comfort once again: “Do not be afraid...” Mary is then told that she will be pregnant and give birth to a son and she is to give him the name Jesus. In verse 32 Gabriel tells her a little about the baby she will give birth to: “He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High...” While Zechariah denied and doubted when he heard the amazing news, Mary was simply not sure how all this would happen when she asks in verse 34: “How will this be...since I am a virgin?” After Gabriel gives her a few more details that must have been very difficult for a teenager to comprehend, Mary responds with the heart of a servant in verse 38: “I am the Lord’s servant...May it be to me as you have said.” Mary wasn’t sure how it was all going to work out but she surrendered anyway.

3. Accepted and acted (Matthew 1:18-25). We won’t spend a lot of time on Joseph’s reaction because we’re going to focus on his limitless love Christmas Eve morning. Joseph needed some divine intervention after he found out Mary was pregnant because he knew he wasn’t the father. His reputation was on the line. What was he going to do? Because he was a righteous man, he determined to end the engagement as quietly as he could.

In the middle of his misery, Joseph gets a visit. Let’s look at Matthew 1:20-21: “But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.’” This unnamed angel fills in some of the blanks for Joseph but first he settles Joseph’s anxious heart by saying, “Do not be afraid.” Amazingly, he is being asked to raise a child that is not his. And, he’s given a glimpse of the glory of this child as the angel tells him that this boy will be the Savior, fulfilling the prophecy of a “sure sign” from Isaiah 7:14. Joseph immediately accepts his assignment and acts on it when we read, “he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took

Mary home as his wife.”

Joseph actually had two more encounters with angels several months later, and like the first time, he accepted these messages and acted on them. Look at Matthew 2:13-14: “When they [the wise men] had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. ‘Get up,’ he said, ‘take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.’ So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt.” Joseph had some “get up and go,” didn’t he? His response was identical some time later after another angelic encounter, in which he was told to go back to Israel because Herod had died. We see his obedience again in Matthew 2:21: “So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel.” Zechariah denied and doubted. Mary wasn’t sure but she surrendered. Joseph accepted and acted. There’s one more reaction...

4. Believed and broadcasted (Luke 2:8-20). The final exhibit of angelic intervention takes place when God rocks the routine of some guys who are just out doing their job. Luke 2:8-20: “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.” In the midst of the mundane, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared. Into the darkness of a silent night came the brightness of the glory of the Lord. I’m sure they were rubbing their eyes and shaking in their sandals. In fact, the word “terrified” means that they were alarmed and agitated. We’ll study more about the shepherds next Sunday.

“But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid.’ Once again, an angel has to tell humans to chill out. The reason they did not need to be afraid is because the messenger was bringing “good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

As the shepherds are trying to handle the message from this one messenger, they are taken aback again in verse 13: “Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God...” The word “suddenly” means that the heavenly host came unexpectedly and without warning. The phrase “great company” means there were so many that it was impossible to count; a vast array of angels. The sky was filled with a multitude of mighty messengers. The phrase “heavenly host” refers to the Lord’s army in other passages of Scripture like 2 Kings 6:17: “Then the LORD opened the servant’s eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.” The shepherds watched as heaven opened up and literally saw an entire militia of messengers, hundreds and thousands of angelic warriors worshipping God.

By the way, while angels do sing in other instances, this time they say in verse 14: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.” Notice that peace comes only after praising. We must put God and His glory first and then peace will come. While this is a neat time of the year, there is nothing magical about this season if one does not know the Christ of Christmas. The phrase “Happy Holidays” is meaningless without an acknowledgement of the holiness of God.

After witnessing this incredible display of unbridled adoration and praise, the shepherds knew that they had to move in verse 15: “When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.’” They discussed what they should do and were unanimous in their decision to head to Bethlehem. I love verse 16 because it shows that their fear had been replaced with faith and then their faith went to their feet: “So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.” There was no delay. The word “hurried” carries with it the idea of speed. It was no small matter for them to leave their sheep behind because they could have lost their jobs by leaving them unattended.

The shepherds then became messengers of the message they had received from the angel in verse 17: “When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.” With hearts filled with gratitude, these men broke out into praise in verse 20: “The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.”

There are angels everywhere and I believe they are still doing God’s work today. But whether we see or hear an angel doesn’t really matter. What matters most is that we get God’s message and that we respond to it. Which Christmas character most represents where you’re at today?

Responding to the Message of Christmas

- Are you denying and doubting? Don’t be like Zechariah and allow your doubts to delay a decision. Did you know that angels are very curious about Christmas? In fact, they have studied salvation and are amazed by it. 1 Peter 1:12 says that “Even angels long to look into these things.” Angels don’t understand everything about redemption because they can’t experience it but my guess is that they’re dumbfounded when people deny and doubt. Ask God to dispel your doubts; study the Scriptures and be open to the supernatural. Wise men still follow Him; dumb people don’t.

• Are you a bit uncertain but ready to surrender? Mary wasn't sure about everything but she surrendered anyway. Luke 2:11 says that a Savior is born to you. Christmas must become personal. Have you personally received Him even if you're a bit uncertain? When you repent and receive all that Jesus has for you, Luke 15:10 tells us that "there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels over one sinner who repents." The angels are ready to throw a party on your behalf but you must first receive Jesus as your personal Savior. Will you do that right now?

Friends, heaven is now open but it won't stay that way forever. John 1:51: "I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." At the heart of Christmas is a gift heralded by the angels. It's a present that must be received; a gift that must be opened. The first and second graders at PCS have been working on a little poem that Mrs. Schappaugh taught them. I'd like to have Kelvin Ridder and Megan Bill share it with you. It's called "My Gift."

What could I give Him poor as I am?

If I were a shepherd, I would give Him my lamb.

If I were a wise man, I would do my part.

What can I give Him?

I'll give Him my heart!

• Are you ready to accept and act? Joseph is a good model of someone who put feet to his faith. What is God asking you to do right now? No matter how difficult it is, if God is telling you to do it, that's what you need to do.

• Do you believe and will you broadcast the good news? Have you ever noticed the middle letters in the word "evangelism"? Do you see the word "angel" there? We are called to believe and broadcast the good news now, just like the angels did back then. The shepherds communicated the Christmas story. We are now the messengers of the manger story. Who can you point to the Savior this season? Invite a friend to church next Sunday for our Cantata presentation and to our Christmas Eve service at 6:00 p.m.

I came across a story that helps capture what may have been going on in the angelic realm during the birth of the Redeemer in our realm. It's called "Out of the Ivory Palaces" (Adapted from Bruce Howell: www.sermoncentral.com).

There was sorrow in heaven! Can you imagine that? Sorrow in heaven! It all seemed so strange to two of the smallest angels by the name of Arnal and Pax. They were given the task of carrying the messages for the Master from one end of heaven to the other.

Arnal said to Pax, "I actually saw those things called 'tears' in Gabriel's eyes. Something terrible must have happened to have caused that. Someone said that tears were shed in heaven on only one other occasion...I believe it had something to do with the first creatures of earth. They did something that broke the Master's heart." Pax added, "The Father loves them so much but I'm not sure why. They don't seem to appreciate what He has done for them. And do you know what I heard? The Lord Jesus is going down to earth to live among them!"

Arnal looked at his friend, shocked! And for the first time in his existence a tear fell down his cheeks and he said, "Going to leave us? Leave the Ivory Palaces and the Rainbow Throne and the love and beauty of Heaven? What will he do down there, Pax?" "I don't know for sure. Someone said He was going to be born." "Born? What's born?" "I don't know. It's something that happens to earth creatures."

You don't mean to say that He's going to be like them and take the same kind of body, do you?" "I'm afraid so," said Pax. "Well, when is this thing supposed to take place, Pax?" "I think it's what they call 'tonight' down there. It could be any moment now." Arnal said, "Then come on, Pax. Let's hurry back to the city."

There was a great deal of commotion in the celestial city when the two little angels arrived. Messengers were hurrying to and fro and there was a great blowing of trumpets. Angels had massed from the four corners of heaven. Row upon row, rank upon rank—angels and archangels were there before the Great Throne of God Almighty. Then Arnal and Pax saw something that made their hearts sink—the seat at the right of the throne was empty! The Bright and Morning Star was gone!

Suddenly, Arnal and Pax heard their names called and Gabriel ordered them to find a place in the massed group. They stood together at the end of the front row. Gabriel raised his hand and there was complete silence! Then in clear tones as sweet as the sound of many waters, he spoke: "You've been called together to hear the most wonderful pronouncement ever made! Our beloved Lord, the only begotten of the Father, has left us."

The voice of the great Gabriel trembled. In a moment he continued: "Our Lord has gone to earth to be born as a babe that He might take upon Himself the fashion of a man. Only in this way, the Father believes, can the earth people know of His love for them. He will take away the sin of all earth creatures who receive His offer of salvation."

A gasp of astonishment rose from the angels. Gabriel continued: "On earth tonight in a little town called Bethlehem, His incarnation

will be accomplished. By the order of the Father, you will accompany me as we bring the good news to that weary world. I will make the announcement to a few shepherds in the fields near Bethlehem, simple-hearted men who fear God and believe His promises. You will join me and give glory to God in the highest. It's time. Let us go."

Arnal was trembling with excitement as he and Pax, small though they were, had been selected for the journey. The whole air seemed filled with the angelic host that attended Gabriel on his way. By the thousands and tens of thousands they swept through the heavens. Down through the belt of Orion, on past the Milky Way---down, down, they went through the still night air, leaving the stars twinkling far behind them.

At a signal from Gabriel they stopped, poised above the earth. Below them, by the light of a camp fire, they could see shepherds keeping watch over their flocks. Suddenly, Gabriel broke through the clouds and stood before the men. The shepherds gazed at him in awe and then fell in terror to the ground. Then Gabriel spoke: "Fear not, for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy. For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior who is Christ the Lord. You shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger."

As the angel finished these words, the light of the glory of God fell from heaven and the angelic host stood revealed. They knew what they were supposed to say, though they didn't comprehend the mystery of it all. And so they lifted their glorious voices in praise to Him: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."

These words of worship floated out upon the still night air. It enraptured the shepherds who heard it. The night breeze that blows over the fields of Bethlehem caught it up and bore it heavenward, where it echoed around the Throne of God and was lost among the stars. Then at a signal from Gabriel the heavenly host moved upward once again.

"What does all this mean?" Arnal asked Pax. "I cannot tell. But wasn't it wonderful? Oh, Arnal, it will be great when the people down there appreciate what God has done. I suspect they will soon be gathered to welcome the Baby. They will come from all over the earth. They will love Him as we do. I hope it doesn't take long to redeem them for we will be so lonely in heaven without Him."

Some 33 years passed and again we listen in as Arnal and Pax are engaged in conversation. "I can't believe it Pax! They killed our Lord! He went to love them and to show them the way to the Father and they ridiculed Him and mocked Him and tortured Him and finally nailed Him to a cross. Why doesn't the Father punish them? Why doesn't He destroy that sick and wretched planet?"

"Well, Arnal, I guess it's because He loves them. In fact, I heard one of the bigger angels say that the Master knew all along that they would do all of these awful things to Him and He willingly laid down His life to redeem them."

"He returned to the city just two days ago, Pax. All heaven is rejoicing. It's just like the old days. It's so good to have Him back." And so the two small angels returned to the city to behold their Lord. His glory filled the entire city—with one difference—His glory was shining through an earth creature's body—a body with scars on His hands and feet.

And the angels had again come from the far corners of the universe to sing a new song. But when they approached the Great Throne, they saw that it was impossible to get near it for it was surrounded by thousands and millions of human souls singing loudly in perfect harmony: "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise! To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever! The four living creatures said, 'Amen,' and the elders fell down and worshiped."

Luke 2:14 The Angels' Alleluia

Summary: God gets the glory when people are at peace. 12/25/11

On Monday I listened to a sermon podcast while I was exercising at the Rec Center. I was actually multi-tasking on the elliptical so I quickly lost interest in the message. I was watching ESPN and reading something else as the sounds of the sermon went through my headphones. I was also trying to concentrate so that I wouldn't lose my balance and fall off and of course I sped up every time someone looked through the windows so they could marvel at how incredibly in shape I am.

I didn't think the podcast preacher was all that good so I actually turned the sermon off after about 20 minutes and started listening to something else. The content wasn't very helpful and his accent was starting to bother me (he obviously was not from Wisconsin).

Later that day, Lydia and I drove to Iowa in order to meet up with Emily so they could hang out for a few days. Since I knew I had an almost three hour return drive by myself, I decided to redeem the time by listening to some sermons. I listened to one message that was quite challenging and then I selected another one. This pastor had an incredible English accent and was a very gifted communicator. As a solitary traveler in the darkness of I-80, I was mesmerized by the message. About halfway through, I realized

that I had already heard this same sermon earlier in the day!

Why was my response so different the second time? Obviously I wasn't really paying attention to the preacher that afternoon (that would never happen here). I was distracted and doing other things so I missed the message almost entirely. But, in the darkness of the night and in the solitude of my car, God got through to me.

In a similar way, God got through to some shepherds one dark and silent night as they were simply out doing their job. He sent angels to get their attention and they sure got it. God could have made his angelic announcement at the Temple in the middle of the day, but this sermon song wouldn't have stuck, would it? When there's too much going on, we tune out and shut down.

This morning we're going to camp in one of the most famous Christmas choruses as we listen again to the lyrics made famous by Linus in "A Charlie Brown Christmas." Linus quotes directly from Luke's Gospel: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." Our Big Idea for today is this: God gets the glory when people are at peace.

Let me mention something before we look at this angelic encounter. Have you heard the saying, "Familiarity breeds contempt?" That basically means that the more familiar we are with something at best, we get bored with it or at worst, we start resenting it. Let's try hard to listen to this account as if we were hearing it for the first time. Imagine yourself a traveler in Judea and you're listening to this story first-hand from one of the shepherds.

Luke 2:8 says: "And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night." In the early pages of the Bible, shepherding was considered a noble profession but in the first century it had lost its luster. While we tend to romanticize them for our cards and carols, shepherds made up the lowest class of people, coming in just ahead of the lepers. They were not trusted as witnesses in court because they were known as liars and thieves. They were not able to keep the ceremonial aspects of the Law and living out in the fields away from society made them outcasts. Most of them had foul mouths and were ready to fight at the drop of a hat. Kind of sounds like me in my high school days.

Let's remember that Christmas always comes to the marginalized, the hurting, the discouraged, the outcasts, and the heavy hearted. The angels came to these guys to show that salvation is for everyone. We tend to think that God is for the 'good' people but actually He is for all people.

Luke 2:9 says, "An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified." An "Angel of the Lord" was one of God's top gun guys, literally meaning "from the face of God." This angel was sent out with a specific task. In the midst of the mundane, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a huge display of glory power. Into the darkness of a silent night came the brightness of the glory of the Lord. When he appeared, God's glory exploded all around them. The word "glory" refers to God's beauty and brightness. In the Old Testament glory is used synonymously with power, splendor and holiness. It has the idea of heaviness or weightiness.

I wonder if the shepherds were thinking of the cloud of glory and pillar of fire that led Israel through the wilderness. Were there minds filled with thoughts of God's "shekinah" glory, which referred to God's dwelling place? Could it be that God was coming down to dwell on the earth?

I'm sure they were rubbing their eyes and shaking in their sandals. In fact, the word "terrified" is probably an understatement and means that they were alarmed and agitated. The Greek uses the word "megas" which means they were "mega afraid."

Let's pick it up in Luke 2:10-12: "But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid.' Once again, an angel has to tell humans to not tap out. The reason they did not need to be afraid is because the messenger was bringing "good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.'" Let's break down the key words.

- Good News – This is where we get the word "gospel" and "evangelize." At its heart, Christmas is good news that must be shared with others.
- Great Joy – This good news should cause exceedingly great joy. This is the word "mega" again. Indeed, there is joy to the world because Christ has come.
- For all the people – This good news is not just for one group but for the whole globe.
- Today – This event happened that day, at a specific time in history. This is not a fable but is rooted in time. Galatians 4:4: "But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law."
- Town of David – In order to fulfill the promise of salvation, Jesus had to be a direct descendant of King David.
- Savior – The name "Jesus" means Savior, or Deliverer. He came to save us from our sins.

- Born to you – Christmas must always be personal. Specifically, the angel announced that the birth of Jesus was for them personally. Jesus was born “to you” too!
- Christ – This is the Greek word for Messiah, or Anointed One.
- Lord – Jesus is God and thus demands our total submission and full allegiance.

As the shepherds are trying to process the message from this one messenger, they are taken aback again in verse 13 because this proclamation is punctuated with an explosion of praise: “Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God...” The word “suddenly” means that the heavenly host came unexpectedly and without warning. The phrase “great company” means there were so many that it was impossible to count. The sky was filled with a multitude of mighty messengers.

The phrase “heavenly host” refers to the Lord’s army in other passages of Scripture. The shepherds watched as heaven opened up and they literally saw an entire militia of messengers, hundreds and thousands of angelic warriors worshipping God.

This song of Christmas is different from the others we’ve seen in this series because it’s not a hymn that rose up from “a him” or “a her” but an anthem that came down from heaven. Imagine the scene. The angels had been praising in the heavenly courts but now their adoration takes place in a different venue as they praise on earth as they have always done in heaven.

By the way, these angels say, not sing their Christmas carol in verse 14: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.” Notice that peace comes only after praising. We must put God and His glory first and then peace will come. While this is a neat time of the year, there is nothing magical about this day if one does not know the Christ of Christmas.

When we give glory to God He gives good news to us. Jesus came for the glory of God and for the good of all people. We could say it this way: Peace comes to those who praise Him and grace to those who give Him glory. The highest degree of glory to God is connected with the giving of His Son. It all starts in heaven with God’s perfect plan and it arrives on earth where peace comes to those who personalize the message. It’s available to all but activated only for those who accept Immanuel, for those who believe and receive (see John 1:12).

The word “peace” appears over 400 times in Scripture. In the Old Testament, “peace” is the word shalom, and is a state of wholeness and harmony that is intended to resonate in all relationships. When used as a greeting, shalom was a wish for outward freedom from disturbance as well as an inward sense of well-being.

The word “peace” in the New Testament means to “join together; to set at one again.” It has the idea of gluing something back together. Because it is multidimensional, it is used in at least three ways.

- Peace with God – that’s the vertical dimension
- Peace of God – this takes place internally
- Peace with others – that’s peace horizontally

1. Peace with God.

While God loves us and cherishes us, we are separated from Him because of our sinfulness. Because of what Jesus Christ did on the Cross, you and I can now be at peace with God. God the Father poured out His wrath, fury, and indignation on His Son, who died in our place, as our sin-substitute

Listen carefully. We don’t deserve this peace to men on whom His favor rests. In fact, what we do deserve is death and eternal punishment. But, because of God’s great love, He provided a way for us to be set at one again with the God of the universe. God’s joy and His justice converge on the cross of Calvary. His love and His law find full satisfaction through the sacrificial death of His Son. God is both just and the justifier.

Friend, do you have peace with God today? Or are you far away from Him? Peace comes to the earth one heart at a time. No matter how far away you feel allow the truth of Isaiah 57:19 to wash over you: “‘Peace, peace, to those far and near,’ says the Lord. ‘And I will heal them.’”

2. Peace of God.

In order to have the peace of God internally, we must first experience peace with God vertically. The upward dimension must be taken care of before inward peace can permeate our lives. Those at peace with God can experience the peace of God. Shortly before Jesus died, He declared in John 14:27: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”

3. Peace with others.

When we're at peace with God and have internal peace, we can then be at peace with others. Romans 14:19 lays out our responsibility: "Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification."

Here's a question. Are you planting peace in others or are you sowing seeds of strife? I heard from a happy grandmother this week who is rejoicing because her son and grandson have reconciled. Is there anyone you need to make things right with? Anyone you need to "be at one with"? Are you in conflict this Christmas with someone in your family? Maybe a root of bitterness has gone down deep in your life. It's time to let it go. Maybe the best Christmas present you could give to someone is to make peace with them.

A couple days ago I received a phone call at home that made me feel very special. The voice addressed me by name and then told me to not hang up. I was assured that it was not a sales call and was urged to stay on the line. I was then told that I was especially selected to participate in a 30-second survey about our nation's debt crisis. I felt so honored that this computer-generated call with a computer-generated voice had especially selected me for such an extremely important message...that I hung up the phone very quickly.

Friends, God is not like that at all. His message is meant to be very personal. He is addressing you by name right now and He doesn't need you to fill out a survey because He knows everything about you. He cares so much for you that He sent His Son at Christmas to be your Savior. Please don't hang up on Him.

Jesus was born to the whole world but He was also born "to you." Christmas is his-story but it must become your story. Luke 2:11: "Today [that means right now – don't hesitate or procrastinate] in the town of David a Savior [one who forgives sins] has been born to you; [personal] he is Christ [the long-awaited Messiah] the Lord [master and Leader].

- Is He "Savior" to you?
- Is He "Christ" to you?
- Is He "Lord" to you?

How many of you have already opened your Christmas presents? How many are waiting until after the service? Whatever the case, there's still a gift for you to open. The tag on the present reads like this:

TO: You

FROM: God

What do you have to do to make this gift yours? That's right. You have to take it and then open it. The mighty chorus of Heaven is proclaiming to you the glory of God wrapped up in the gift of His Son for you. Will you stop multi-tasking and receive the gift of salvation right now?

You could do so by praying this prayer with me: "I confess that I am a sinner and I want to turn from the way I've been living. I am not at peace with you, I don't have peace inside, and I'm certainly not at peace with others. I need you to be my Savior and so I come to you now. You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God. I desire to live under your lordship for the rest of my life. Thank you for not only being born but for dying in my place and rising again so that I can be born again. I now receive the gift of salvation and forgiveness by asking you to come into my life. Make me into the person you want me to be. In the name of Immanuel, I ask this. Amen."

Luke 2:25-38 Waiting for Christmas

Summary: In the Gospel of Luke, we come across two characters who make their appearance in the final acts of the Christmas drama. One is a man named Simeon; the other is a woman named Anna. They don't appear in any nativity scenes or in many Christmas cards, but

Waiting for Christmas

Kids have a hard time waiting for Christmas. Here are some actual letters that were written to Santa:

Dear Santa Claus,

When you come to my house there will be cookies for you. But if you are real hungry you can use our phone and order a pizza to go.

Dear Santa,

I want a Puppy. I want a playhouse. Thank you. I've been good most of the time. Sometimes I'm wild.

Dear Santa, (From a 4-year-old) I

I'll take anything because I haven't been that good.

Dear Santa,

I'm not going to ask for a lot. Here's my list: The Etch-A-Sketch animator, 2 packs of #2 pencils, Crayola fat markers and the big gift...my own color TV! Well, maybe you could drop the pencils; I don't want to be really selfish.

Christmas is often associated with waiting. I can remember one Christmas when I was growing up that I really wanted a Rock-em-sock-em-robot. I dropped hints everywhere. I wrote letters to Santa and cut out pictures in magazines and put them on my mom's pillow. I even tried extra hard to be nice to my sisters during the countdown to Christmas which wasn't easy to do!

When Christmas morning finally came, I jumped out of bed and ran to the tree. I looked for a box with my name on it. I looked everywhere but couldn't find it. Do you know what I got that year? I'll never forget it. My mom, who loves to sew, made feetie pajamas for all 5 of us kids my sisters had pink ones, and mine were blue. I could barely take the shame of it all...feetie pajamas instead of rock-em-sock-em-robots.

What Are You Waiting For?

Let me ask you some questions. What are you waiting for this Christmas? Are you longing for anything? What are you expecting to receive? Are you looking forward to anything special this Christmas?

In the Gospel of Luke, we come across two characters who make their appearance in the final acts of the Christmas drama. One is a man named Simeon; the other is a woman named Anna. They don't appear in any nativity scenes or in many Christmas cards, but they are significant players in the first Christmas pageant. Both of these individuals were waiting for something -- actually, they were waiting for someone.

Luke uses a Greek word of anticipation that identifies them as waiting with expectation for the coming of the Messiah, or Savior. It literally means that they were "alert to His appearance, and ready to welcome Him." We see this word in Luke 2:25 in reference to Simeon where we read that "He was waiting..." and in 2:38 to describe a woman named Anna who was, "...looking forward to..."

Simeon -- Waiting For Comfort

We're introduced to Simeon in Luke 2:25. "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 upon Him." Simeon was righteous before people, and he was devout in His relationship with God.

Things weren't going real well for the nation of Israel. They hadn't heard from God for many years and were under Roman rule. They had lost their political independence and were living in fear of the capable, crafty, and cruel King Herod, and many were wondering if the Messiah would ever come.

Luke 1:26 shows us that Simeon had good reason for his hope and anticipation: "It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ."

Simeon's expectation focused on the comfort that Christ would bring. Among Jews of Simeon's day one of the popular titles of Messiah was Comforter. Like some of the Christmas songs we just sang, they were longing for the Messiah to come and bring His comfort to them.

It strikes me that the desire to be comforted is a universal human need. We all struggle with loneliness, emptiness, insecurity, even desperation. In fact, the Christmas season is one of the major crisis times of the year for depression and suicide.

The Holy Spirit prompted Simeon to go to the temple courts at just the right time on just the right day that Joseph and Mary were bringing their infant to the Temple. When Simeon looked at the baby Jesus, now about 6 weeks old, he knew that God's promise had been kept. Here was Immanuel, "God With Us," to make everything right, to provide significance by His presence, and to eliminate rejection, fear, and loneliness.

Verse 28 of Luke 2 says that Simeon reached down and took Jesus out of Mary's arms and began to praise God. Let me pause here to make a comment. Parents, how would you feel if some old man came up to you, took your infant in his arms and started singing

out loud? I'm sure this was a bit unsettling for Joseph and Mary. But Simeon didn't look all that dangerous. As he broke out into praise, he acknowledged that God had not only fulfilled the individual promise to him, but also the promises of the prophets to send the Anointed One to comfort both Jews and Gentiles.

Anna -- Waiting for Forgiveness

The other Christmas Character waiting with anticipation was Anna. After her husband had died, she had dedicated herself to fasting and praying in the temple. In fact, the Bible says that she never left the temple but worshipped day and night. She could have filled all 360 slots of the Bible Reading Marathon herself because she was always at church!

She was looking forward to the same person as Simeon was, but with a different orientation. Instead of looking for comfort, Anna was looking for forgiveness. Take a look at verse 38: "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."

The word redemption is related to the idea of captivity. The Old Testament Passover and the release of Israel from Egyptian slavery stood in Anna's day as the ultimate redemption and the symbol of God's power to release captives. Ultimately, Passover pointed ahead to that day when God would provide deliverance from the slavery of sin.

When Anna saw Jesus, she gave thanks to God and spoke of Him to all who were waiting for redemption. Here, at last, was the One who would save His people from their sins.

Jesus Provides What We Need

Friends, when Jesus came, He provided the very things that Simeon and Anna were waiting for -- God's comfort and His forgiveness. Let me ask you a question. What are you waiting for this Christmas? Whatever it is, Jesus can give it to you.

Can any of you identify with Simeon tonight? Some of you are really hurting right now. You feel lonely, empty, afraid, and maxed out. Do you need some comfort? Some consoling? Do you need a fresh sense of God's presence? If so, you can find what you're looking for in Jesus. He came to console us right where we're at.

Or, do you identify more with Anna? Are you plagued with guilt this Christmas because of something you've done or the way you've been living? Do you feel like you're trapped in a pattern of sin that you can't break out of? If you need forgiveness, Jesus can give it to you tonight. I can think of no better time than Christmas to do just that.

Action Steps

There are three action steps from this passage that will help you experience God's comfort and forgiveness this Christmas.

1 -- Become a Marveler

#1: Become a marveler. When Joseph and Mary tried to process everything that was happening, verse 33 says that they marveled at what was said about Jesus. According to the dictionary, to become a marveler is to be filled with wonder, astonishment, and surprise.

Are you a marveler this Christmas? Or, are you too caught up in the busyness and stress of the season? Have you been running around because of the Holidays, or are you taking the time to make Christmas a "holy" day? Has Christmas become too predictable, too familiar? Have you heard the Christmas story so much that it no longer astonishes you?

Actually, this can be a dangerous time of the year for us. Our annual celebration of Christmas can immunize us to its reality. We hear just enough of the story each year to inoculate us against the real thing, so that we never really catch true Christmas fever.

Here's an idea that may help you recapture the marvel of Christmas. Pick one of the Christmas characters and put yourself in their sandals. Imagine what it must have been like to witness the Christmas story first hand. Go ahead; pick one -- Mary, Joseph, the Shepherds, Simeon, Anna, or the Wise Men.

2 -- Become a Mover

Action Step #2 is to become a mover. Take a look at verse 27: "Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts." Now drop down to verse 38: "Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God..."

Both Simeon and Anna were movers. When the Holy Spirit prompted them to move, they didn't sit still. I wonder what would have happened if they had not responded? Actually, every one of the Christmas characters responded to the Spirit's leading with the exception of Herod:

Mary was ready to move when she said to the angel, "May it be to me as you have said." (Luke 2:38)

Joseph demonstrated that he was a mover when he woke up from his dream and "...did what the angel of the Lord had commanded and took Mary home as his wife." (Matthew 1:24)

The Shepherds were movers as well when they said, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened..." (Luke 2:15)

And, as we learned this past Sunday, the wise men saw the star and moved out of their comfort zone to find the King of Christmas.

Friend, when God prompts you to do something, then you need to do it. It might mean salvation for some of you. It might mean full surrender for others of you. Or, maybe the Spirit wants you to be more involved in serving people. Do you sense Him asking you to do something tonight? Are you a mover? Are you willing to move? Don't procrastinate when God prompts you to do something -- you may miss out on a miracle this Christmas.

I'm struck by what Simeon told Mary in verse 34. It must have taken her breath away. "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will spoken against..."

That's not really a joyful Christmas greeting, is it? Simeon is not saying, "Merry Christmas and Happy New Year." Rather, he pauses, clears his throat and tells her that Christmas will never be merry and the New Year will never be happy until people get moving and surrender their lives to Christ.

Here's the truth. Christmas splits people into 2 camps. Since Jesus has entered the world, He has divided the human race. Jesus will cause the falling and rising of many. Because of who Jesus is and what He came to do, He forces people to make a decision about Him. The Bible uses powerful imagery Jesus is either a rock that you build your life upon (that's the sense of rising) or he's the rock that you stumble over (that's the meaning of falling). On the cusp of the last Christmas of the millennium, Jesus is calling each of us to a moral decision based upon our willingness to move and respond, we will either rise or fall.

You can't stay neutral about Jesus. You are either for Him or against Him. You're moving closer to Him, or further away. You either have the Son or you don't.

3 -- Become a Messenger

Interestingly, as we work at becoming marvelers, we can't help but become movers. That leads us to the final action step from this passage -- become a messenger. Notice verse 38 again: "...she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem."

Do you have family and friends who've been caught up in preparations for Christmas? Look at it this way -- maybe their anticipation and longings really represent an inner search for comfort and forgiveness -- those things that only the Messiah can provide. God wants each one of us to become messengers of the Christmas story.

Conclusion

Let me wrap this up. As you and I become marvelers, the wonder of Christmas will astonish us. Then, as we become movers, our needs for comfort and forgiveness will be met. And, as we take our role as messengers seriously, we'll be in position to introduce others to the Christ of Christmas -- so that they in turn can find what they have been waiting for.

Friends, in a nutshell, Christmas is a marvelous, moving, message! How can we not find what we've been looking for? And, how can we keep quiet about it? Once you have the Son, you have everything.

Whoever Takes the Son

Many years ago, there was a very wealthy man who shared a passion for art collecting with his son. They had priceless works by Picasso and Van Gogh adorning the walls of their family estate.

As winter approached, war engulfed the nation, and the young man left to serve his country. After only a few short weeks, his father received a telegram. His son had died.

Distraught and lonely, the old man faced the upcoming Christmas holidays with anguish and sadness. The joy of the season had vanished with the death of his son.

On Christmas morning, a knock on the door awakened the depressed old man. As he walked to the door, the masterpieces of art on the walls only reminded him that his son was not coming home. As he opened the door he was greeted by a soldier with a large package in his hands who said, "I was a friend of your son. I was was the one he was rescuing when he died. May I come in for a few moments? I have something to show you."

The soldier mentioned that he was an artist and then gave the old man the package. The paper gave way to reveal a portrait of the man's son. Though the world would never consider it the work of a genius, the painting featured the young man's face in striking detail. Overcome with emotion, the man hung the portrait over the fireplace, pushing aside millions of dollars worth of art. His task completed, the old man sat in his chair and spent Christmas gazing at the gift he had been given.

The painting of his son soon became his most prized possession, far eclipsing any interest in the pieces of art for which museums around the world clamored.

The following spring, the old man died. The art world waited with anticipation for the upcoming auction. According to the will of the old man, all the art works would be auctioned on Christmas Day, the day he had received the greatest gift.

The day soon arrived and art collectors from around the world gathered to bid on some of the world's most spectacular paintings. Dreams would be fulfilled that day.

The auction began with a painting that was not on anyone's museum list. It was the painting of the man's son. The auctioneer asked for an opening bid, but the room was silent. "Who will open the bidding with \$100?" No one spoke. Finally someone said, "Who cares about that painting. It's just a picture of his son. Let's move on to the good stuff."

The auctioneer responded, "No, we have to sell this one first. Now, who will take the son?" Finally, a neighbor of the old man offered \$10 dollars. "That's all I have. I knew the boy, so I'd like to have it."

The auctioneer said, "Going once, going twice...gone." The gavel fell.

Cheers filled the room and someone exclaimed, "Now we can bid on the real treasures!"

The auctioneer looked at the room filled with people and announced that the auction was over. Everyone was stunned. Someone spoke up and said, "What do you mean, it's over? We didn't come here for a painting of someone's son. There are millions of dollars worth of art here! What's going on?"

The auctioneer replied, "It's very simple. According to the will of the Father, whoever takes the son...gets it all."

Puts things in perspective, doesn't it? The message is the same this Christmas. Because of the Father's love...whoever takes the Son gets it all.

Will you take Him this Christmas?

You're invited to a birthday party tonight. It's the birthday of Jesus. It's His party but He wants to give you a present. He wants to give you the gift of Himself. Will you take Him?

Luke 2:38 All I Want for Christmas is Hope

Summary: Hold on to the rope of hope when you don't think you can cope. 12/23/07

Hark, the Herald angels sing,

'Glory to the newborn king;

Peace on earth, and mercy mild,

God and sinners reconciled'

[Put hand on Hope's shoulder and hold up blanket]

Yes, God and sinners reconciled.

If we were to take a survey today we would find that hope is hard to find during the holidays. I invited someone to today's service and when he saw the invite he said, "Looking for hope at Christmas? I need hope all year long." It's tough to sing "Joy to the World" when there's so much junk in our lives. Some of us secretly wonder if it's really true that the "hopes and fears of all the years are met in Thee tonight."

[Walk around drama set]

Is Christmas all about baking? Or is it wrapped up in football and food (Go Packers)? For some it's such a sad season that they can

barely talk about it. Or is it all about shopping? Some of you have been crushed by something that has happened in your life and you've lost all hope. I understand some of you are here today because you were friends of Craig Cole and you're still hurting because of his loss. We're glad you're all here today.

Definition of Hope

Hope is not only hard to find; it's difficult to define. Some equate hope with an optimistic feeling that all will turn out well. We hear this every spring from Cubs fans. For some it's wishful thinking whether it's related to the weather: "I hope it's nice today" or a general feeling that some desire will be fulfilled.

That reminds of Larry and Elmer who were out hunting in the woods and got lost. Trying to reassure his friend, Larry said, "Don't lose hope. All we have to do is shoot into the air three times, stay where we are, and just hope that someone finds us." They shot into the air three times, but no one came. After a while, they tried again but there was still no response. They decided to try once more but not before Elmer said, "I hope it works this time. We're down to our last three arrows."

It's easy to get hurt when our hopes are high and they come crashing to the ground. I can remember one Christmas when I was growing up that I really wanted "Rock 'Em Sock 'Em Robots" so I could see if "Red Rocker" or "Blue Bomber" would win. This classic toy came out in 1966 and is still available in stores today. I dropped hints everywhere. I wrote letters to Santa and cut out pictures in magazines and put them on my mom's pillow. I even tried extra hard to be nice to my sisters during the countdown to Christmas – which wasn't easy to do!

When Christmas morning finally came, I jumped out of bed and ran to the tree. I looked for a box with my name on it. I looked everywhere but couldn't find it. Do you know what I got that year? I'll never forget it. My mom, who loves to sew, made feetie pajamas for all five of us kids – my sisters had pink ones, and mine were blue. I could barely take the shame of it all...feetie pajamas instead of rock-em-sock-em-robots. I'm still waiting for them to this day. My hopes were dashed. I was a living example of Proverbs 13:12: "Hope deferred makes the heart sick."

Some of you have lost hope today but it's not just because you didn't get a present you wanted. Your life has been decimated by disappointment and your expectations have evaporated.

I came across a couple Bible-based definitions of hope that are very helpful: Hope is a future certainty grounded in a present reality. Here's another one: Hope is wishing for what God has already promised us. The Bible says in Isaiah 40:31 that strength is renewed for those who hope in the Lord. This word is more than just a wishful optimism.

In the Old Testament it means "to bind together, often by twisting." It refers to the process of making a rope by taking at least two strands of material and twisting them together. Understood in this way, hope means that I bring my pain to the Lord on the one hand and on the other hand I hold specific promises of God. To hope means to wrap my problems together with God's promises [hold up two ropes and wrap together].

We could say it this way: Hold on to the rope of hope when it's hard to cope. Ecclesiasts 4:12 adds God's provision to His promises and our problems: "A cord of three strands is not quickly broken." The third strand is the Savior, Jesus Christ, born on Christmas, crucified on Good Friday and raised on Easter. He is heaven's child, the hope of the world. With Him wrapped around our lives, we are safe and secure [hold up red rope and wrap it around the other two].

The word "hope" is used some 52 times in the New Testament and is always connected in some way to God; that's enough hope for every week of the year!

Dimensions of Hope

By its very definition hope is something that is invisible. 2 Corinthians 4:18 urges us to "Fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen." Romans 8:24-25: "For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently." These two verses teach that if we're going to hold on to the rope of hope so that we can cope, we must embrace its past, present and future dimensions. When your grip begins to slip, hold on to...

1. Past Promises.

The Old Testament looked forward to the coming of Christ as God progressively revealed His plan to send His promised One. Isaiah 64:1 longingly pleads: "Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down..." This was fulfilled when Jesus was given the name Immanuel, which means, "God with us." God came down at Christmas. In the first half of the Bible we read of people hoping and longing and waiting. After Jesus is born, we see this longing fulfilled. A woman named Anna is an example of this in Luke 2:38 because when she sees the baby Jesus she gives thanks and speaks about heaven's child to "all who were looking forward to

redemption.” For what things are you looking this Christmas?

2. Present Help.

No matter what you’re going through right now, no matter how much pain is pummeling you, or how much failure you’re feeling, you can count on God to help right now. Psalm 46:1: “God is an ever-present help in trouble.” David Jeremiah has written a book called, “A Bend in the Road,” in which he explains how everyone sooner or later, comes up against something unexpected and unforeseen. For him it was cancer. For you it may be unemployment or loneliness or straying children or financial worries or a relational rupture. This is when Jesus, the hope of heaven, steps into our hurts. Lamentations 3:25 says that the “Lord is good to those whose hope is in Him, to the one who seeks Him.” The key isn’t to hope for something; it’s to hope in Someone. Not to hope for something from God but to hope in God.

Romans 5:4 tells us pain has a place in God’s plan because suffering gives us the opportunity to persevere and change our character so that we end up having hope that doesn’t disappoint. Psalm 25:5: “No one whose hope is in you will ever be put to shame...”

I love what David Henderson writes: “Despair comes when we believe what our eyes tell us: that when difficult circumstances play their hand, the game is over; there is no trump card, no other hand to be played. Hold fast to hope means being unwilling to let circumstances have the last word. Despair says circumstances tell us what is true about God. Hope says God tells us what is true about circumstances” (Discipleship Journal, Issue #114).

3. Future glory.

There’s also a future element to hope. That reminds me of a scene where Lucy and Linus are sitting in front of the TV when Lucy says to Linus: “Get me a glass of water.” Linus looks surprised and asks, “Why should I do anything for you? You never do anything for me!” To which Lucy promises: “On your 75th birthday I’ll bake you a cake.” Linus gets up, heads toward the kitchen and says, “Life is more pleasant when you have something to look forward to.” At least Linus had his blanket [hold up blanket].

Our senses scream that this is all there is – that life is the sum total of profession plus possessions, and death ends it all. But this world is neither our home nor our hope (thanks to David Henderson for these ideas). The Bible says that those who are wrapped in a relationship with Jesus Christ have the hope of heaven; a confident assurance in God’s promises. 1 Corinthians 15:19: “If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.” To hope means to wait. Galatians 5:5 encourages us to hang in there: “By faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope.”

It’s only as I place my hope in God am I freed from a compulsive pursuit of the next thing that I think will bring satisfaction to my soul. Hope then can help me through tragedy or triumph. Did you know that Jesus is coming again? He came at Christmas the first time but the Bible says that He’s coming back. When the Scripture writers describe this event, they often link it to hope. Check out Titus 2:13: “While we wait for the blessed hope – the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.”

Decisions for Hope

A couple weeks ago, a government official gave out a phone number for homeowners worried about rising mortgage payments: “The best you can do for your family is to call 1-800-995-HOPE.” The only problem was that this was not correct. Instead of an 800 number it was an 888 number. Most everyone wants a little hope in their life but some of us think that we’ve been given a wrong number. Friends, I want to give you the right number this morning.

If you want to make your “hope rope” stronger, there are at least three decisions you need to make. If you want to cope then hold on to the rope of hope and wrap yourself in these three numbers.

#1: Get wrapped up in Scripture.

Romans 15:4: “For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.” I just talked to someone this week who told me that the older he gets the more he finds comfort not in situations, but in Scripture. This verse tells us that we can hold on to hope because the Bible helps us endure through problems and gives us encouragement through its promises. We’d love to have you join us for our Old Testament journey that we’re taking beginning in January on Sunday mornings. I think you’ll find it interesting, informative and encouraging.

#2: Get wrapped up in the Savior.

Jesus is Savior. In fact, that’s what His name means. Matthew 1:21 says that Joseph was to call him Jesus, “because He will save His people from their sins.” We are sinners in need of the Savior. The way to have hope is to have the Holy One in your life as Colossians 1:27 says: “Christ in you, the hope of glory.” And, as the children reminded us earlier: He is an indescribable gift!

The first part of John 1:14 says that the “Word became flesh...” This is the single, most unique quality of Christianity that makes it different from any other religion: God became flesh at Christmas. Jesus is the visible word of God. Theologians call this truth the Incarnation. The infinite second person of the Trinity, who created all things according to John 1:1, became a soft baby. The collision of deity and humanity had its full expression in Jesus when the Infinite became an Infant. What Gabe explained to Hope about the ants is exactly right. God became one of us in order to get a message of hope to us.

The Message paraphrase renders it this way: “The word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.” For 33 years God moved into our neighborhood. The NIV says that Jesus “made his dwelling among us,” which literally means, “to make one’s tent.” When we would camp at campsites growing up, we would always get to know the other campers around us. In fact, it’s difficult to be private when you’re camping. Everyone can see what you’re doing. To say that Jesus pitched a tent implies that He wants to be on familiar terms with us. He wants to be close. He wants a lot of interaction. He wants to wrap a blanket around us.

Did you hear about the father and his three children who were lost in the mountains of California for three days this week? Their story of survival is amazing. They were found because they used tree branches to spell out the word “help” in the snow. When asked how he survived, the father had a two word answer: “Jesus Christ.” I don’t know if you saw the pictures after they were rescued but they show two of the kids being wrapped in a blanket, much like this one [hold up blanket].

#3: Get wrapped up in salvation.

Over eight years ago, someone gave us a 1990 Acura. This car has been wonderful for our family. I drove it for many years and then our oldest daughter Emily drove it for several years and now our daughter Lydia has been driving it. Since the car is so old, I just hope that it will keep running because it has almost 200,000 miles on it.

The sun roof leaks so I used some caulk to seal it up. There’s no air conditioning, which is fine this time of year. The antenna is broken so the radio doesn’t work. We’ve become accustomed to the lights of different gauges lighting up like a Christmas tree – system check, antilock brakes, and the check engine light all come on. It’s quite festive. About two weeks ago another pretty light appeared. This one was red and had a picture of a battery on it. When Lydia asked me about it, I told her to just ignore it and enjoy the dashboard light show.

That was a bad move. This past Tuesday as Lydia was driving to school down Elm Street, the car died right in the middle of traffic. I felt terrible because by choosing to ignore a warning light I had put my daughter in danger.

Do you ever ignore the gauges in your life? Do you have any warning lights flashing? The drama we watched this morning was funny in parts but maybe you saw something that is really a warning to you. Is Christmas really about baking or shopping or sports or drinking or hopelessness?

God might be trying to get your attention. Maybe you’re at a place where you now realize that it’s time to hold on to the rope of hope because you don’t know how to cope. Perhaps the little brochure in your bulletin called, “Hope for the New Year” will be helpful to you.

* **Admit your sinfulness.** Ephesians 2:12 says that those who don’t have heaven’s child in their life are without hope and without God. 1 Chronicles 29:15 says that “...our days on earth are like a shadow, without hope.” It’s important to admit your hopelessness apart from Christ and to own your sinfulness. Earlier this fall we had a church work day and I was taking some trash out to the dumpster. As I was navigating a cart through the parking lot, the wind whipped up and blew some of my garbage off. I had quite a bit of trash so I just kept going, holding down what was left. When I finally made it to the dumpster I looked next to me and saw Rachel Watson, the girl who played “Hope” this morning helping me throw my trash away. Hope can help you heave your garbage to God.

* **Ask for help.** In a similar way, the hope of heaven, Immanuel who is Jesus, came to take away our junk. The Savior came to save us from our sins but this is not automatic. We must ask Him to do so. If you want hope you must cry out for help. He gives hope to those who have first humbled themselves enough to ask for help.

* **Accept Christ as your Savior.** When the angel made his announcement to the shepherds he personalized the proclamation in Luke 2:11: “Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord.” Another definition of hope is “to trust.” It’s time to trust Christ today because he has been born to you. If you need some hope to help you cope than you must receive the Holy One. I heard someone say these words that are so true: Life with Christ is an endless hope; life without Christ is a hopeless end.

Hebrews 6:19 refers to this hope as an “anchor for the soul, firm and secure.” In order to help you hold on to hope in the midst of your hurts, we have a free copy of a book called, “Anchor for the Soul” for all our guests this morning. Please pick one up on your way out as our gift to you.

We don't know what life will hold in 2008 but we can know the One who holds us; the one who lovingly wraps his blanket of love around us. Do you want to know Him right now? Traditionally, Christmas is looked at as the moment time changed. It's when B.C. became A.D. Today can be the day that you change as well by making Christmas personal.

If you're ready you can do so right now, today by praying this prayer with me. Feel free to just say it silently if you're prepared to do so: Jesus, I admit that not only do I have little hope but I have a lot of garbage in my life. I own my own sinfulness and recognize that you desire to wrap yourself around me today. I want you to be my Savior. Please save me from my sins. I need your help. Thank you for coming to our world on Christmas. And then for dying in my place on the cross to forgive me for my sins and to give me the hope of heaven. I believe and I receive you into my life. I accept your free gift of salvation. If there's anything in my life that needs to change please change me."

Friend, if you want to experience hope, then you must welcome Him to your world. Allow Him to wrap Himself around you so that when you don't know how to cope you can hold on to the rope of hope.

Tears are falling, hearts are breaking

How we need to hear from God

You've been promised, we've been waiting

Welcome Holy Child

"Welcome to our World" (Dan Ucherek)

Luke 5:27-31 Discovering Your Style (Part 2)

Summary: If you are not confrontational, or struggle with the intellectual style, perhaps you are more comfortable giving your testimony or focusing on the friends God has placed in your life. When the blind man was asked who Jesus was, he simply gave a testimony

Now that my 40th birthday is in my rear-view mirror, I'm starting to experience the joy of a marginal memory. I can't seem to remember all the things I used to. Someone sent me an email recently about three sisters who were all in their nineties and lived together.

One day the oldest filled up the bathtub. She put one foot in the water, paused, and then called downstairs to her sisters, "Am I getting in the tub or out of the tub?"

The middle sister started up the stairs to help, paused, and then called back downstairs, "Was I going up or coming down?"

The youngest sister, who was sitting at the kitchen table having tea, said, "I guess I'll have to help. I hope I never get that forgetful!" and she knocked on wood.

She got up, paused, and then called upstairs, "I'll be there as soon as I see who's at the door!"

A recent survey asked Christian people who were ninety-five years or older what they'd do differently if they could live their lives over. Here are their top three changes:

1. They'd reflect more. They would spend more time getting away from the daily grind in order to thoughtfully examine the direction and meaning of their lives.
2. They'd risk more. These elderly people made it clear that they'd be more courageous about stepping out of their comfort zones. In short, they'd pray the Prayer of Jabez and ask God to burst their boundaries on a daily basis.
3. They'd invest in eternity. Instead of just focusing on the here-and-now, they'd share the gospel more often.

During this series we've learned that there are three different stages of evangelism: cultivating, planting and reaping. Last week we introduced the idea that God has given each of us different evangelistic styles. It takes all kinds of Christians to reach all kinds of non-Christians. All people cannot witness the same way, but all people can witness some way. Or, another way to say it is that God desires to use our personalities as we participate in the process of evangelism.

During this section of our series called, Becoming a Contagious Christian, we're looking at the ways God equipped six people in the New Testament to fulfill different outreach needs. Last week we focused on Peter. Today we'll study Paul's approach and the Blind

Man's M.O.

Six Evangelistic Styles

Style Biblical Example Text

Confrontational Peter Acts 2

Intellectual Paul Acts 17

Testimonial Blind Man John 9

Interpersonal Matthew Luke 5

Invitational Samaritan Woman John 4

Serving Dorcas Acts 9

Paul's Intellectual Approach

The hallmark of Paul's style was his logical and well-reasoned presentation of the gospel message. The Book of Romans is a great example of how his mind works.

Can you think of a better person for God to send to the Athenian philosophers in Acts 17? These intellectual heavyweights would not have related well to Peter's "turn-or-burn" approach. They needed logic that conclusively proved its point. Because of that he reasoned with them. Paul's audience was probably more like our society than Peter's was.

We live in a world that doesn't know what we believe, and frankly doesn't care. That reminds me of the woman who walked into a jewelry store looking for a necklace. As she looked at the display case, she said, "I'd like a gold cross." The man behind the counter looked over the selection and asked, "Do you want a plain one, or one with a little man on it?"

The men of Athens were happy to see Paul because they loved to argue about new ideas. To them a good day always included some type of philosophical discussion.

Acts 17:16 tells us that when Paul saw the city, he was "greatly distressed." This literally means that he was provoked by a storm of protest within his inner being. Instead of leaving town or complaining to the officials, verse 17 shows us that he went to work. He spent time both in the religious centers and in the marketplace. The text says that he did it every day. We see in verse 18 that some philosophers eventually wanted to debate with him.

These intellectuals eventually brought Paul before the Supreme Court of Athens and asked him to explain his beliefs. This is one of the most dramatic scenes in the entire New Testament. Standing on their turf, at their invitation, he starts where they are and uses this opportunity to preach the gospel to them. Like Ravi Zacharias addressing people with their PhDs, Josh McDowell speaking to university students, or Lee Strobel logically presenting the truths of Christianity to atheists, Paul tangled with a group of intellectual giants.

There are at least four principles from Paul's style that we can apply today.

1. Be Courteous. If we want to follow Paul's lead, the first thing we need to do is to be considerate and civil. Look at verse 22: Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious..."

What a great approach! Paul started right where his listeners were. He didn't denounce them or attack their idolatry. In fact, he paid them a compliment. He basically said, "As I've been walking around your city, I've noticed one thing about you: You guys are really into religion."

2. Be Contemporary. In the first part of verse 23 we see that Paul looked for ways to establish some common ground with his listeners. When he was courteous, he broke down barriers; when he was contemporary, he built bridges to the heart of his audience.

Notice verse 23: "For as I walked around and observed your objects of worship, I found even an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD..." Paul was out where the people lived and worked. This is important for several reasons. First, it would tell the Athenians that Paul had taken the time to get to know their city. This is a key principle, isn't it? You've got to get to know people if you want to talk to them intelligently. Second, this statement tells us that Paul found a natural point of contact. As he walked around, he looked for connectors, or bridges, from their world to the gospel.

In verse 28, we see that Paul quotes their own poets to make his point. This is pretty cool. Because of his audience, Peter quoted the prophets. Because of Paul's listeners, he quoted poetry. That's exactly what Pastor Geoff did in yesterday's Pastoral Perspective

article in the Daily Leader. He started out by talking about a movie he had seen and then bridged into a discussion of Christ. People who utilize this evangelistic style love to study the culture so that they can make connections with their listeners.

3. Be Courageous. I want you to notice how bold Paul was in verses 23-30. Look at the last part of verse 23: "Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you." The phrase "something unknown" really means "in ignorance." It's as if he is saying, "You admit there is a God you don't know. I happen to know that God and I'm going to tell you about Him."

This is tremendous evangelistic strategy. How could they be offended when he starts by quoting the inscription from one of their own altars and by recounting what their own poets have said? By admitting there is more to God than they know, they have opened the door for Paul to preach the gospel boldly.

In verses 24-25, Paul gives them a theology lesson, courageously speaking of God as the Creator and the Giver of all things. He then establishes the fact that God is near enough for us to reach out to Him so that we can find what we're looking for. Verse 30 shows us the depth of Paul's courage: "In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent." Like Peter, he's not afraid to bring it on!

4. Be Christ-Centered. It's not enough to just be nice and spend time with people. It's not enough to just argue philosophy. Nor is it enough to just be bold. We must look for ways to talk about Jesus. Those with the intellectual style of evangelism are masters at communicating Christ in a relevant way.

Look at verse 31: "For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead." Paul did not hold back from speaking of an inescapable day of judgment. He did not shrink from speaking the truth about the resurrection of Jesus, even though he knew that many of his listeners would not want to hear it.

If this is your preferred approach, then as God gives you opportunity, speak boldly for Christ. Tell people about His death so they understand that Jesus died in their place and that they can be forgiven for all the sins they have committed. Tell them about His resurrection so that they can have hope for eternity. Tell them about the love and peace and joy that will be theirs once they surrender to Christ.

There were three reactions to Paul's intellectual reasoning of the gospel that day. In verse 32 we read that some were contemptuous. Others were curious and wanted to hear more. Verse 34 tells us that a number of others were convinced.

Friends, this is what we can expect when we're involved in the lives of lost people. Some will mock us. Others will be curious and ask questions. And some will become convinced and commit themselves to Christ.

Here are some of the traits normally found in people who use the intellectual approach:

- Analytical and Logical
- Inquisitive
- Enjoy debating

There are also some "blind spots" or cautions that you should be aware of:

- Avoid getting stuck on academic points.
- Remember that attitude is as important as information.
- Be careful about becoming argumentative.

The Blind Man's Testimonial Approach

While both Peter and Paul utilized arguments and logic, albeit from different starting points and with different audiences in mind, the Blind Man from John 9 took an entirely different approach. In John 9:25 we see that the man refused to enter into a theological debate with the religious leaders, though Paul would have been thrilled to offer them a few compelling arguments. He also steered away from confrontation, whereas Peter might have given them a shot of truth. These confrontational and intellectual approaches didn't fit this guy.

As Jesus walks along the road, He sees a man who has been blind since he was born. In verse 2, the disciples see a theological puzzle. They want to talk about the causes of his blindness while Jesus refocuses their attention to the purpose of his suffering in verse 3: "...this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life." The disciples were looking backwards when they wanted to know what sin caused the blindness. Jesus refreshingly gives the forward look: "It happened with a purpose so that God's

works could be put on display in his life.” Another way to say it is that this man was custom-designed for the testimonial style.

Using his own spit and the dust of the ground, verse 6 tells us that Jesus made some mud and put it on the man’s eyes. He was then told to wash in the Pool of Siloam. He obeyed and went back home seeing. His testimony and appearance created quite a stir when his neighbors saw him. This miracle had created a wholesale change in his entire being. Many didn’t even recognize him!

As we walk through the rest of this story, I want you to notice this man’s 10 different responses to the various questions that were thrown at him.

1. I am the man (verse 9). When people were divided about whether or not this was the same person, he insisted, “I am the man.” Many of you have experienced this. Christ has radically transformed your life and the people who know you well wonder if you’re really the same person.

2. Jesus did it (verse 11). Treating this miracle more like a crime than a wonderful cure, his friends are troubled. They want to know exactly what happened. This gives the man a wonderful opportunity to retell the story by giving credit to Jesus.

3. I don’t know (verse 12). When his neighbors want to know where Jesus is, the man simply replies that he doesn’t have a clue. This is very encouraging to me. When we give our testimony we don’t have to have all the answers. We can simply tell people what happened and say, “I don’t know” when asked for more information.

Verse 13 tells us that this man was “brought” to the Pharisees. These religious leaders have been watching Jesus and were looking for an opportunity to attack Him. They pulled out their policy manual to see if they could trip Him up. When they hear that the healing happened on the Sabbath, they think they have Jesus right where they want Him.

In their minds, Jesus broke their rules in three separate ways. First, while it was OK to spit on a rock on the Sabbath, saliva was not allowed on dirt because the making of mud involved work. Second, the rabbis said it was forbidden to heal on the Sabbath. They specifically said, “If you find somebody with a broken leg you can keep it from getting worse, but you cannot make it any better.” The third thing Jesus did was to use saliva. The rabbis did not allow this on the Sabbath because they believed it was medicine and medicine involved work.

4. He healed me (verse 15). When the Pharisees want more details in verse 15, instead of giving the complete story, this man gives a condensed version: “He put mud on my eyes, and I washed, and now I see.” Did you notice that he doesn’t name Jesus, or mention that he had been told to wash? I think he knows that they’re trying to accuse Jesus of “working” on the Sabbath and he doesn’t want to give them any additional ammunition.

Verse 16 reveals that the Pharisees are divided. One group has written Jesus off. The other is baffled by the miracles. Amazingly, they decide to ask the man what he thinks in verse 17: “What have you to say about Him? It was your eyes He opened.”

5. He is a prophet (verse 17). Seizing the opportunity the man reveals his growing understanding and declares that Jesus is a prophet. This is not the answer they want to hear so they take a different tack.

Frustrated by their interrogation of the healed blind man, the parents are now called in. They still don’t believe that this man was actually healed. His parents bail on their own son because they’re afraid of what these leaders can do to them. When the Pharisees are done grilling mom and dad they bring in the man for a second round of questioning. They hope to wear him down and break his story.

In verse 24 they say, “Give glory to God, we know this man is a sinner.” That’s their way of saying, “tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth.” I love his answer!

6. I now see (verse 25). This is the defining verse for the testimonial style of evangelism: “Whether He is a sinner or not, I don’t know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!”

In verse 26, the leaders, who are now losing ground, make another mistake when they ask him again how it happened.

7. Invitation to others. Verse 27: “...do you want to become his disciples, too?” He’s obviously being a bit sarcastic here but those who utilize the testimonial approach make their faith so compelling that others will want to follow Jesus as well.

This hits a nerve with them and they go ballistic and start insulting the healed man in verses 28-29.

8. Jesus is from God (verses 30-33). The man then takes a deep breath and boldly declares that Jesus is from God. That’s all they can handle so they throw him out of the synagogue. A few of you have experienced something similar after you got saved. Maybe your family has kicked you out or ostracized you. If so, you can draw strength from this healed man’s story.

By the way, the healing of the blind is one of the defining characteristics of the Messiah. The Pharisees should have known this from

Isaiah 61:1-2 but they missed it. The healed blind man is more willing to believe than they are.

When Jesus heard that the man was thrown out, he found him and asked him a question in verse 35: "Do you believe in the Son of Man?"

9. Wants to believe (verse 36). He wants to put his faith in Christ but he's not sure if he's got all the facts right. As we study this man's responses, we can see that his faith is growing in stages. He's obviously in process. He's right at the critical point. His heart is warmed, his mind is convinced and now his will is ready to surrender.

10. Believes and worships (verse 38). I love how faith and worship are linked in this verse: "Lord, I believe, and he worshipped Him. He recognized Jesus not only as His Healer, He also trusted Him as Savior and submitted to Him in as Lord in submissive worship.

A Style for Everyone

While a small percent of us employ the confrontational and intellectual approach, every one of us can and should utilize the testimonial style. If you're saved, you can say so. If you've been born again, you can tell about your birth. If the Savior has touched you, you can testify about it.

Some of you may be afraid to say anything about the Lord because you think you'll be dragged into a theological argument. Let's learn from the man who was once blind. He didn't worry about what he couldn't answer. He simply testified to what He had seen and knew to be true. We're not expected to teach theology, we're asked to bear witness of our relationship with Christ.

You are the greatest authority on what has happened to you. As someone has said, "A man with an experience is never at the mercy of a man with only an argument." When you stand on your experience no one can deny what the Lord has done in your life. You are a positive, powerful witness for Christ.

For the Friendship Banquet this Saturday, Don Carter will be relying primarily on his testimony to communicate what Christ has done in his life. Make sure you pick up your tickets today! You can do a similar thing with your neighbors, friends, and family members this week as you tell your story.

Bill Bright, the founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, says that at least 50% of nonbelievers would receive Christ if properly approached by someone who can give testimony of God's love and forgiveness. If you're like me, even this approach can be intimidating.

Here are some suggestions from Bill Bright about how to prepare your testimony.

Guidelines for Writing Your Testimony

www.5clicks.com

What to Do:

- Ask God to give you wisdom.
- Keep to a 3-minute limit.

What Not to Do:

- Make statements that reflect negatively on any church organization or individual.
- Speak or write in a preachy manner.
- Use vague terms like joyful or changed without explaining them.
- Avoid religious terms like saved or sin without explaining them.

Writing Style:

- Begin with an attention-getting sentence or incident.
- Be positive, accurate and specific - details arouse interest.
- Use Bible verses directly related to your experience.
- Write a logical conclusion

Several of you are involved in a Growth Group right now and will be learning more about how to prepare your testimony in the

weeks to come. If you're looking for an interactive 5-step approach on the web, you can check out www.5clicks.com.

Here are some common traits of those who use the testimonial approach:

- Good listener
- Vulnerable
- Overwhelmed by grace

Here are some cautions to keep in mind:

- Relate your experience to the listener's life
- Keep Christ and the Gospel message central

We often think of the testimonial approach as only focused on telling our conversion story. It actually can be used in a variety of ways. As you look for natural ways to talk about what Jesus is doing in your life, God will use you to make an eternal impact in the lives of other people. I want to close this morning by asking Mike and Sheri Dicks to come up and share some of their testimony with us.

Luke 8:1-3 - Women Who Worship

Summary: I want us to look briefly at two worshipping women who shared the same name, but had different job descriptions: Mary, the mother of Jesus; and Mary Magdalene, who as far as we know, was not a mother.

While it's nearly impossible to spell out everything a mother does, this Motherhood Job Description hits the highlights.

TITLE: Mother, Mom, Mama, Mommy.

SUMMARY: Long term, team players needed, for challenging permanent work in an often chaotic environment. Candidates must possess excellent communication and organizational skills and be willing to work variable hours, which will include evenings and weekends and frequent 24-hour shifts on call. Some overnight travel required, including trips to primitive camping sites on rainy weekends and endless sports tournaments in far away cities. Extensive courier duties also required.

RESPONSIBILITIES: The rest of your life. Must be willing to be hated, at least temporarily, until someone needs \$5. Must screen phone calls, maintain calendars and coordinate production of multiple homework projects. Must have ability to plan and organize social gatherings for clients of all ages and mental outlooks. Must be willing to be indispensable one minute, and an embarrassment the next. Must always hope for the best but be prepared for the worst. Responsibilities also include floor maintenance and janitorial work throughout the facility.

PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE: None required, unfortunately. On-the-job training offered on a continually exhausting basis.

WAGES AND COMPENSATION: Get this! You pay them! Offering frequent raises and bonuses. When you die, you give them whatever is left. The oddest thing about this reverse-salary scheme is that you actually enjoy it and only wish you could do more.

BENEFITS: This job supplies limitless opportunities for personal growth and free hugs for life if everything goes right.

I wonder how many would apply for the post of motherhood if they knew in advance what they were getting into. Actually, I think there'd still be a lot of women signing up! I recognize that while this is a happy day for many of you, for some, this is a difficult day. Perhaps your mom has died and you miss her terribly. Or maybe you've always struggled with your mom and you don't have very good memories. Others of you are hurting as you watch your mother's health deteriorate. Some of you have experienced the pain of losing a child, while others have children who have strayed. This can be a trying time for single women and for married women without children. It's also possible that a few of you are birth moms and you've made the tough choice to give your child up for adoption.

While today is Mother's Day, I want to broaden the scope of this sermon to suggest that we must do a better job of honoring women in our church, in our homes, and in our society. Women played a key role in the Bible.

Here's a brief summary of just the events surrounding the death of Jesus:

Women were the last to leave the Cross (Mark 15:47)

Women were the first at the Tomb (John 20:1)

Women were the first to proclaim the Resurrection (Matthew 28:8)

I want us to look briefly at two worshipping women who shared the same name, but had different job descriptions: Mary, the mother of Jesus; and Mary Magdalene, who as far as we know, was not a mother. Let's begin by noticing that their names were actually Miriam. That means that they were named after the sister of Moses, who most commentators believe was stationed at the Nile River to help rescue her baby brother (see Exodus 2:1-8). Miriam is referred to as a prophetess (Exodus 15:20-21).

Mary the Mother

First, we'll study the job description of Mary the Mother of Jesus rather quickly because most of us already know her life story. The biblical word translated "mother" is the Hebrew word "AME" (pronounced "ah-may"), and means, "the bond of the family" (Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible, 13). I see at least seven principles from Mary's role as a mother that can benefit those who are the adhesive in the home today.

1. Get ready to serve. In the history of the church Mary has often been portrayed as a kind of misty, otherworldly figure. That's a shame because the Bible makes it clear that she was very real, with very real doubts, very real questions and very real faith. Nowhere is this seen with more clarity than in Luke 1:38 when she responds to Gabriel's remarkable birth announcement: "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said." Without a doubt, servanthood is at the heart of motherhood.

A teacher at school put this question to little James in math class, "James, suppose your mother made a cherry pie, and there were ten of you at the table: your mother and father and eight children. How much of the pie would you get?"

"A ninth," was his answer. "No, no, James. Now pay attention. There are ten of you in the home. Don't you know your fractions?" "Yes, ma'am," he replied, "I know my fractions, but I know my mother even better, AND SHE'D SAY THAT SHE DIDN'T WANT ANY PIE."

2. Be prepared for a broken heart. Some time later, after Jesus is born, Mary receives a prophecy from a man named Simeon that must have stopped her in her tracks. She had great expectations for her boy but she was about to be reminded that being a mother would mean being broken. We see this in Luke 2:35: "And a sword will pierce your own soul too." Mothers certainly know what it's like to suffer.

3. Recognize your role. When Jesus was a 12-year-old, the Bible tells us that He and His parents went to Jerusalem as they did every year to celebrate the Passover. After the feast was over, Jesus stayed behind while His parents headed back home. Joseph and Mary thought Jesus was in their traveling group, but after a day had passed, they panicked and began to look for Him. They hurried back to Jerusalem and searched for three days. Can you imagine the fear that must have gripped their hearts? Then, when they finally find him, He's amazing the teachers in the temple with His questions and His answers. Luke 2:48 captures the tension: "When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, 'Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.'" The response of Jesus revealed more than just the angst of a pre-teen: "Why were you searching for me?" he asked. 'Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?'" I love verse 50: "But they did not understand what he was saying to them."

Mothers, not only will you not understand everything that your children do; you will be constantly reminded that your children belong to the Father, not to you. Do everything you can to point them to kingdom priorities.

4. Trust God's timing. When Mary was at a wedding in Cana, she tried to get Jesus to do something that He wasn't ready to do. She had an expectation for Him that wasn't in tune with the heavenly timetable. Jesus' response to His mother has a twinge of exasperation to it. Listen to John 2:3-4: "When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, 'They have no more wine.' 'Dear woman, why do you involve me?' Jesus replied. 'My time has not yet come.'" As hard as it is to do, we must trust God's timing and not force our agenda upon our kids.

5. A relationship with Jesus is more important than family relationships. In Mark 3 we read about a very interesting encounter. Verse 31 indicates that Jesus' mother and brothers arrived to where Jesus was teaching and they wanted a word with Him, because frankly He was starting to embarrass the family. Jesus redefined what is most important when He established that His spiritual family, made up of men and women and boys and girls who trust Him for salvation, is more important than His natural family. He looked at those seated around Him and said in verses 34-35: "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother." While your family must take priority, it should never be your #1 focus. Do whatever you can to cultivate your relationship with Christ.

6. Stay with your kids through the tough times. This principle was severely tested when Mary congregated around the cross to watch her son suffer and die (John 19:25). She hung in there with Him no matter what He went through. And, even though she had close

contact with her Son for many years, she ends up at the Cross, just like we need to. In His last act of kindness, Jesus turns His mother over to the care of His beloved disciple John.

7. Be a worshipping woman. After the resurrection, we read that Mary meets with others for prayer and worship: "They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers" (Acts 1:14). There is nothing like the power of a praying woman. No matter what happens, don't stop praying and meeting with others in groups like "Moms in Touch."

Mary the Provider

Now, recognizing that we're not all mothers, let's look at the job description of Mary the Provider. A couple introductory points need to be made about this Mary because she is perhaps the most maligned and misunderstood woman in the Bible. She is mentioned in all four gospels, fourteen times in all, more than any other woman except Mary the mother of Jesus.

Her last name was not "Magdalene" but was rather distinguished from other "Mary's" with the same first name by mention of her place of residence, in this case Magdala.

She is not the woman caught in adultery in John 8, a fairly common mistake that was repeated in the *Passion of the Christ* movie.

Also, she is not the woman in Luke 7 who anointed Jesus' feet in the house of Simon the Pharisee. This woman is unnamed and is associated as someone with a bad reputation. Luke mentions Mary Magdalene for the first time in chapter 8, in a totally different context.

Contrary to the absurd thesis set forth in the bestselling *DaVinci Code*, there is no evidence that she married Jesus and that their bloodline continues in France today.

Jesus did a couple unusual things that set Him apart from other Jewish teachers. First, He recruited disciples, and He traveled throughout the country. He didn't have a "home." Second, his followers were both males and females. This would have been scandalous to many, but Jesus always elevated women above the cultural benchmark. In his book called, "Women: God's Secret Weapon," Ed Silvoso writes: "One of the main reasons Christianity spread so rapidly in the early years is because its message restored honor and inner worth to half of the world's population; that is, women" (Regal, page 35).

Mary of Magdala is the first-named woman among Christ's followers. We're actually introduced to three women by name, and a number of other women, in Luke 8:1-3: "After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Cuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means."

This passage begins with the phrase, "After this," indicating that Jesus is beginning another missionary campaign. With each journey, the crowds became larger, as Jesus systematically visits town after town to make sure people hear the good news.

Here's what we know about Mary.

1. Satan held her in bondage. We're not certain what led to Mary having seven demons, but we do know that she was held captive by the evil one. Jesus referred to Satan as a "thief that comes only to steal and kill and destroy..." (John 10:10). Perhaps she had opened herself up by dabbling in the occult. We do know that she needed deliverance by someone stronger than she was. The number seven was the number of completion, which leads us to believe that she was overwhelmed by this dark presence in her life.

2. The Savior set her free. The gospel of Mark indicates that the most frequently mentioned miracle of Jesus was exorcism. While Mary was set free from spiritual bondage, the other two women mentioned had also been miraculously healed. Each was beyond human help; only Jesus could provide the freedom they longed for. John 8:36: "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." And because they were delivered, they couldn't depart from Jesus, wanting to be with Him as He traveled the countryside.

3. She served out of her means. Mary and her companions were active contributors to the traveling team, as each one gave what they could to finance the journey. To give out of one's "means" refers to possessions or property. Because they had been healed, they now wanted to help. Humanly speaking, this ministry endeavor could not have happened without their financial partnership. While Jesus met spiritual needs, these women met needs that would not have been met in any other way. Like the widow who gave everything she had to Elijah in 1 Kings 17:13-15, these women offered their possessions for God's purposes. Jesus could have miraculously provided bread like He did on two other occasions but He didn't. I think this was in part to give these women the opportunity and privilege to partner with Him in ministry. By the way, no man is explicitly identified in the gospels as a financial supporter of Jesus.

We can draw at least three conclusions from this:

Ministry costs money. Even our Lord's ministry had some logistical and physical needs.

Those who give are partners in ministry. You are part of the "team" when you give out of your resources.

It's biblical to be supported in ministry. Some are called to "send" and others are called to "go." In the fourth century, a woman named Paula paid the expenses of Jerome, so he could translate the Bible in the language of the common people ("A Celebration of Women," Joann C. Webster, Watercolor Books, page 84).

This summer, over 20 young people will be serving as missionaries. This is unbelievable and unprecedented in the history of our church! These students will be serving in India, Kenya, Livingston County, Panama, and Memphis. And guess what? They all need people who will partner with them.

A short while ago, we found out that one of our students still needed \$1,000 and the balance was due in less than one week. We prayed fervently and passed the word. Amazingly, all but \$100 came in the day before it was due. Early that next morning, before the sun was even up, I was praying with someone who was getting ready to have surgery. As I was getting ready to leave their house, this couple asked how much money this summer missionary still needed. I told them and they immediately wrote a check for \$100! I wanted to call the student right then but it was only 5:30 in the morning. There are still others waiting upon God to provide their needed funds so that they can go and be used. Is God prompting you to help send them?

In July, ten students will be ministering in Memphis as they help to repair homes and engage in evangelism. They will be staying at a Christian College and speakers will challenge the weary witnesses at night. They are raising \$2,500 for the whole group. They would like as many people that could partner with them as possible. They are selling goodies in the Family Life Center between services today. On May 22nd, they will be having a car wash in the church parking lot from 12:00 to 4:00 PM. Check out the giving gauge outside of Pastor Jeff's office to see how the fund raising is going.

Mary went from bondage to freedom to voluntary servanthood. Friends, when we're hurting and then healed, we will want to do all we can to help others find healing.

Let's fast forward now to what happened when the resurrected Christ appeared to Mary in John 20. We know that she was one of the last ones at the cross and now she's the first one at the empty tomb. She had come with a group of other women to complete the task of preparing the body of Jesus for burial. They weren't quite sure how they were going to get into the tomb but an angel took care of that for them. Mary went ahead of the other women and got to the grave first.

When she saw that the stone had been removed, she mistakenly thought that someone had stolen the body of Jesus. She then ran to tell Peter and John the news. Peter and John take off for the tomb, with John outrunning old Pete.

Here are some principles that we can learn from Mary the Provider.

Jesus meets us right where we are. After John and Peter went back home, verse 11 tells us that Mary stood outside the tomb crying. In Verse 14 Mary turns around and sees Jesus but doesn't recognize Him. He then spoke words of comfort when he asked her the first of two questions in verse 15: "Woman, why are you crying?" Friend, Jesus knows all about those things that make you sad. He understands your fear and anxiety. Think of all the tears that have been shed through all the years of human history. Jesus doesn't always take away our tears but He stands on resurrection ground as the answer to our agony. And there's a day coming according to Revelation 21:4 when "He will wipe every tear from our eyes, when there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain..."

Jesus not only asks about her sorrow but He also wants to know about her seeking. He tenderly prods with a second question, "Who is it that you are looking for?" He doesn't ask her "what" she is looking for but "whom." Until we find Jesus, each of us are looking for someone as well. Sadly, some of us are on a search for something, when we should be looking for Someone.

Jesus knows us personally. It's kind of funny what takes place in the second part of verse 15: "Thinking he was the gardener, she said, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him and I will get him.'" In verse 16, Jesus said just one word to her, "Mary." Actually, in the original He uses her Aramaic name, "Miriam." All Jesus had to do was speak her name she immediately turned toward Him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni." This was a title of highest respect. It was like she was saying, "My master and my teacher."

Have you ever stopped to think that Jesus knows everything about you, and likes you anyway? He cares deeply for you, regardless of what you've done, or how you've been living. The Resurrected Christ is speaking your name this morning. Ed. Jane. Joe. Stephanie. Do you hear Him? Will you follow Him?

· Jesus gives us a message. After hearing her name, Mary drops to her knees and Matthew 28:9 tells us that she grabs on to His

feet in worship. Now that she's found Jesus she doesn't want to let go. Jesus then gently rebukes her, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father." The phrase literally means, "don't cling to me." She was still going to have a friendship with Him, but it was going to be much deeper and richer once He ascended into heaven.

After reframing their relationship, Jesus then gives Mary a message: "Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary was responsible to deliver the news about this new relationship. Verse 18 reveals that Mary did what she was told to do: "...she went to the disciples with the news, 'I have seen the Lord.' And she told them that He had said these things to her." We've been given a message as well.

One common character quality in both extraordinary Mary's was that they gave their all to Jesus. Let's conclude with three challenges.

Concluding Observations

1. Jesus elevated women and so should we. Husbands, don't demean your wives. Men, don't look down on women. Remember, it was the disciples who referred to the women's report about the empty tomb as "nonsense," when in fact the men were wrong (see Luke 24:11).

2. Become a spiritual mother to someone. The apostle Paul chose the metaphor of a mother to describe his ministry in 1 Thessalonians 2:7: "But we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children." Paul also urged older women to "train the younger women to love their husbands and children" in Titus 2:4. Women, there are other women around you who would love to be taught by you. I talked to a couple ladies recently who have a heart to begin this kind of ministry here at PBC.

Listen to this tribute to spiritual mothers, as found in the book, "The Celebration of Women" (page 166):

I want to thank you Lord for the spiritual mothers in my life,

Each had a different talent and was in my life for a different season.

They prayed for me. They listened to me. They helped me.

They cooked for me. They taught me. They gave me counsel. They cried with me.

They gave me a safe place to rest. They gave me money when I was broke.

They freed me from the prison of guilt and confusion.

Without them I do not know where I would be.

They have been Jesus in the flesh to me.

They are Wisdom dancing with Knowledge.

They are Understanding kissing Discernment.

Thank you Lord for the blessing of Spiritual Mothers.

3. Use what you have to serve where you can. In other words, fulfill your job description. If you're a mother, use your position to make an impact on the next generation. If you're not a mother, give what you've been given in service to the Savior. In her book, "Women of a Generous Spirit," Lois Mowday Rabey says there are seven unique gifts that a woman can give: Grace, Hope, Presence, Extravagance, Loving Truthfulness, Provision, and Legacy.

Lu Dunbar, Maxine Williams' mother, wrote a wonderful story about Emily Tubman (www.royaltreasure.org/html/fall_031.html). Eighteen years before Lincoln's preliminary Emancipation Proclamation of 1862, as a result of reading Galatians 3:28: "...there is neither slave nor free..." she freed all of her slaves, giving them the opportunity to live free in the country of Liberia. Only half agreed to go, and for those who elected to stay in this country, Emily provided land, clothing and provisions so they could support themselves. In regard to her wealth, she often said this: "I am a steward of the Lord, and only hold this money in trust, and my supreme joy is to dispense it to advance His Kingdom or to relieve human suffering."

She fulfilled her job description, as did Mary the Mother and Mary the Provider. Will you do the same?

As we close this morning, I'm going to ask the men to stand and applaud the worshipping women of this church. [Applaud]. Women, didn't that feel good? Now imagine the applause of heaven, when God will say to you, "Well done, my good and faithful woman!"

Knowing Our Neighbors

Luke 10:25-37

Summary: On the surface the Parable of the Good Samaritan appears to be a simple story about being kind. It's actually much deeper than that. This story is designed to show each of us how sinful and selfish we really are and that our only hope of going to heaven

The story of the Good Samaritan is one of the most well-known parables of Jesus. There are hospitals named after him and his name has become an idiom for unusual kindness and extraordinary care for the hurting. The "Good Sam RV Club" provides campground discounts and its members help one another. We also have "Good Samaritan Laws" that protect from liability those who choose to aid others who are injured or ill. To call someone a "Good Samaritan" is to pay them a great compliment.

While this parable is popular it's not always correctly understood. That reminds me of the little boy who came home from Sunday School after learning about the Good Samaritan. He told his mother the story in great detail. He had all the facts straight and all the people in their right character roles. The mother then asked, "What's the purpose of the parable? What's it supposed to teach us?" The young boy replied, "It means that when we're in trouble, others should come to help us!" Not exactly.

It's common to just skim a story, especially when we're pretty familiar with it. This morning I'm going to take a different angle in the hopes that we'll encounter the parable's purpose in a fresh and moving manner.

Putting the Text in Context

Before studying the story, let's back up a bit and look at the text in context. Please turn in your Bibles to Luke 10. There are two basic structural divisions, each of which is prompted by a question.

1. What must I do to inherit eternal life? In verse 25 we read: "On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he asked, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?'" This law expert was adept at understanding the Old Testament and wanted to put Jesus to the test, hoping he could trip Him up so the people would stop listening to Him. Specifically, this sophisticated Scripture scholar was "heresy hunting" by attempting to discredit Jesus. Do you see the contradiction in his question? He's wondering what he must do in order to inherit eternal life. An inheritance is not something that we work for; it's a gift.

As Jesus often did, He turned the question back on the person who asked it in verse 26: "'What is written in the Law?' he replied. 'How do you read it?'" Notice that Jesus took Him to the authority of the Bible, which is something we should do as well. The man answers correctly by citing Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. All he had to do was pull up his shirt sleeve and read the answer that was written on his phylactery, a small leather box: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" Our students have this memorized as well. LGLO: Love God, Love Others.

In verse 28 Jesus affirms him for giving the right answer (the word is "orthos" from where we get orthodoxy, which means "correct belief") and at the same time flips the tables to show that He's the authoritative expert. Jesus then adds these unsettling words: "Do this and you will live." This is "orthopraxy," which refers to "correct behavior." Is Jesus advocating a works-based theology? Not at all. He's saying that if you want to use the Law as leverage to get into heaven, then you better follow everything in it by always loving God every second, every hour, every day with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your mind from the day you are born until the day you die.

The phrase, "do this" means "to keep on doing this forever." The word "love" is in the present tense, meaning constantly and continuously. That also includes loving your neighbor perfectly, all the time. That's the standard that God sets. If you want to get in, then be perfect. One slip up and you're out. This legal beagle is condemned by the very Law he quoted.

The purpose of the Law is to show us that we can't keep it. Listen to Romans 3:20: "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin." The Law not only shows us our sin, Galatians 3:10 shows us that if we don't keep every part of it, all the time, then we are cursed: "All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.'" To fall once is to fail forever. James 2:10: "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it." Galatians 3:24 states that the aim of the Law is to lead us to Christ: "So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith." The Law then points out that we're sinners and that we're in desperate need of a Savior.

2. Who is my neighbor? Jesus' response makes the expert nervous and he's probably regretting he ever asked the question. One pastor writes: "It's like raising your hand to ask a question in class and then having the professor make you look like a fool." The man should have said something like, "I admit my inability. I can't keep the law perfectly. What should I do?" Instead, in verse 29 we see

that the lawyer is looking for a loophole when he asks a second question: "But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'"

The man now seeks to defend himself and deflect his responsibility by asking for a definition of the word "neighbor," much like one of our former presidents who wondered what the word "is" really means. He's hoping to be acquitted on a technicality in the Law. A bit of background is helpful here. There was a raging debate back then about whom a neighbor really was. They wanted to know who was in and who was out. The Jews typically interpreted "neighbor," as "one who is near," or a fellow Jew. The Pharisees tended to reject "ordinary people" while a smaller community at Qumran excluded everyone who was not part of their group. This man wants Jesus to draw a circle but it's a lot bigger than he bargained for. The lawyer wanted a legal limit by making the Law require less than it does.

People do this all the time. Some rely on being a "good person" in order to get into heaven. Others know that they're not all that good so they try to reduce God's entrance requirements. Does that describe anyone here today? Do you really think you're good enough to get in? Or do you think you can justify yourself by lowering God's standards?

Jesus doesn't directly answer the question but instead tells a simple story or parable. He doesn't quote the Greek or offer a lengthy dissertation. Instead of arguing in the abstract, Jesus presents a concrete case. He could have blasted the man but instead He gives him one more chance to see his own sinfulness. On the surface this popular parable appears to be a simple story about being kind. It's actually much deeper than that. This story is designed to show each of us how sinful and selfish we really are and that our only hope of going to heaven is by being justified by Jesus, not by doing good works. Being good is not good enough because none of us is good enough to get in.

The Story

In an effort to keep us from just skimming over the story because it's so familiar, we're going to view the events through the swollen eyes of the wounded man. Put your Bible on your lap so you can follow along.

I had just left Jerusalem and was on my way home to Jericho, which was about 17 miles away. I treasured my time of worship in the Temple but was now eager to see my family. I should tell you that the road I took was treacherous and dangerous, dropping some 4,000 feet from beginning to end. There were huge boulders and caves where robbers would hide out. We called it the "bloody pass" because so many who passed this way got beat up and robbed. It was like walking through a dark alley in the worst part of Chicago. I knew I shouldn't be out there alone but I didn't know what else to do.

As I rounded a sharp bend in the road a man jumped off a rock on to my back. Another one took me out at the knees. I felt a third man grab my head and he started slamming it into the stony path. I tried to scream but nothing came out. They took all my money and then I felt them rip my clothes off my back. As they got up to leave the bigger guy kicked me in the face and I felt excruciating pain as one of my teeth fell to the dirt. Another one slugged me in the stomach and I started vomiting.

I don't know how long I laid there because I slipped in and out of consciousness. I then heard some noise and thought the robbers were coming back to finish me off. I had a difficult time focusing but I could make out a priest coming my way. Surely he would help me because he had just come from the Temple. I saw him glance at me and then look away as he moved to the opposite side of the path where he picked up his pace and vanished around a corner. A few minutes later a Levite came upon me. He slowed down and gazed at me. I was relieved because surely this religious man would help. He seemed grossed out by my wounds and quickly scurried to the other side of the road and was gone. I thought I was a goner.

By now the sun was starting to go down and I couldn't get up. I was just starting to shut my eyes and drift off when I saw a blurry image of a man on a donkey. I could tell by the way he was dressed and by his features that he was a Samaritan. Our people hated people like him and he hated people like me. Our animosity went back generations to when his ancestors intermarried with pagans. My forefathers burned the temple of the Samaritans to the ground and they responded by sneaking into our temple and defiling it. The very reason this road to Jericho was so long is because Jews used it as a detour so as not to travel through the land of the Samaritans. This was the Samaritan's opportunity to spit on me or finish me off. You don't really have an exact equivalent in your culture but it would be similar to having a member of the Taliban as the one who stopped to help you.

I couldn't believe what happened next. I saw compassion in his eyes. He jumped off his donkey and came right over to me to see how he could help. He then took his precious wine which served as an antiseptic and poured it on my wounds. Then he showered my sores with expensive soothing oil. He then ripped some of his clothes off and used the strips as bandages. When the bleeding stopped he lifted me up and put me on his donkey and walked next to me for miles until we came to an inn. He stayed up all night taking care of my needs, bringing me water and trying to get me to eat something.

The next day he took out two silver coins (which represented two days' wages) and gave them to the innkeeper and urged him to look after me until he could return. That might be hard for you to grasp in your economy but that was enough money for about a

month's worth of food and lodging. He even told the motel manager to put any extra charges on his credit card and he would settle up when he came back.

Two Points of the Parable

I see at least two main points of this parable. The first has application to those of us who are already born again. The second application, which gets to the main purpose of the parable, is for those who have yet to be converted.

1. For believers. In verses 36-37, Jesus presses home the point of the parable to the religious man: "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The expert in the law replied, 'The one who had mercy on him.' Jesus told him, 'Go and do likewise.'"

The question is not "Who is my neighbor" but rather, "Am I being neighborly to everyone, even my enemies?" The law expert put the emphasis on whether a person was worthy of love; Jesus put the emphasis on the one who does the loving. The lawyer wanted a definition and a limitation. To ask "Who is my neighbor?" is to look for a loophole by focusing on what claim others have on my time and energy and resources. To ask "Whose neighbor am I?" is to focus on what I owe to the suffering people all around me.

The law-expert answered correctly when he said that the neighbor was "the one who had mercy on him." Notice that he couldn't even say the word "Samaritan." He's told to go and do as the Samaritan did. Not just once, but as a lifestyle of loving servanthood.

Brothers and sisters; be careful about allowing "religiosity" to become an excuse for excluding those you don't like. The ironic thing is that the priests were to serve as public health officials and part of what Levites did was to distribute funds to the poor and needy. Listen. The religious people in this story gave the right answers but they didn't apply what they knew. They spent all their time worshipping and praising but didn't work it out practically. They came from God's presence but somehow God's presence never got through to them. We can sing "Praise to the Lord" and "Great is our God" in worship and yet walk right by injured people made in the image of God.

Notice also that the priest "happened to be" going down the road when he came across a need. I believe that things don't happen "by chance." God orchestrates our days and activities and provides opportunities for us to meet needs. Ephesians 2:10 says: "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." We need to make sure we're ready. I'm saddened when I think of how many "good works" I pass up everyday. Will you pass by when God purposely brings people across your path?

Practice acts of kindness and compassion. Proverbs 21:13: "If a man shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, he too will cry out and not be answered." When the Samaritan saw the man, he took "pity" on him. This is a very strong word in the Greek referring to the inner recesses of the stomach and bowels. It's the idea of being deeply moved. One of the best definitions I've heard for compassion is this: "Your hurt in my heart." His emotion led to motion. Compassion must lead to action. Seeing led to sympathy which led to service.

* He saw

* He felt

* He came near

* He helped

* He sacrificed – the word for "pouring" has the idea of lavish generosity.

* He gave

* He followed-up

Every part of the Samaritan gets involved – his eyes, heart, feet, hands, thoughts, time, possession, speech and money.

Though we cannot be saved by good works, those who are saved will practice good works. Good works are not a condition of salvation but they are certainly the fruit of it. True love says, "All the world is my neighborhood and all the hurting are my neighbors. I will do what I can to help whoever I can whenever I can by using whatever means are available to me, with God's help."

Let's go back to the lawyer's question: "Who is my neighbor?" In light of this story, we can answer the question this way: My neighbor is anyone in need whose path I cross whose need I am able to meet. In that light you never know when you'll run into a neighbor. You will find neighbors everywhere you go. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, liked to say, "The world is my parish." With this story Jesus is teaching us to say: "The world is my neighborhood."

Do not say, "I will do more when I know more." You know too much already. Act on what you know and God will bless you. Do not say, "If I am ever going down a lonely road and happen to see a dying man, I will stop and help him." No, that person is all around us. He or she is young, old, rich, poor, black, white, Asian, Hispanic, Middle Eastern, Muslim, Hindu, atheist, a homosexual, a child, a beggar, a divorcee, a cancer victim, an AIDS patient, an out-of-work engineer, a persecuted believer in North Korea, a single parent, a lonely widow, a new arrival from another country. She doesn't look or act or sound like you but God has put her in your path. You can't avoid him. What will do you? Will you walk on by? Start with the need that is near you and God will give you grace. Your religion is empty if it does not compel you to reach out to those who are hurting whose path you cross.

Several years ago the news reported about a man who was standing near a hole that had been dug as part of a large excavation. A number of workers were in the hole removing dirt when the walls collapsed around them. Rescuers began running from everywhere but the man just stood by and watched the scene with detachment. Suddenly a woman called out from a nearby house: "Jim, your brother is down there!" Instantly he stripped off his coat and began digging frantically. Why? His brother was in mortal danger and he must get him out.

Who is my brother? Who is my neighbor? My brother is anyone in danger, anyone in need, anyone in pain, anyone in trouble. Look! Your sister is sick, your brother is dying, your brother has lost his job, your sister is homeless, your brother is lost, your sister is discouraged, your brother lies beaten and wounded by the roadside. Do not walk by on the other side. (This section comes from Ray Pritchard: www.keepbelievng.com)

All around us men and women are dying. We have plenty of pastors and a truckload of Levites. Where are the Good Samaritans of Pontiac Bible Church?

There are three groups presented in this parable. Which one represents you?

- * The robbers: "What's yours is mine and if I want it, I'll take it from you."
- * The religious: "What's mine is mine and if you need it, you can't have it."
- * The redeemed: "What's mine is yours and if you need it, I will give it to you."

This week all of us will walk the Jericho road. Sooner or later we are bound to meet someone in need. Do not ask, "Who is that man and how did he get there?" Do not ask, "Is this friend or foe?" Do not ask, "Do I know this person?" Do not ask, "What did he do to deserve this?" Do not ask, "Is he of my religion? Is he of my color? Is she of my family, my tribe, my background, my language, and my people?" If he or she is in need and you can help, he or she is your neighbor.

The religious guys had a number of excuses to not help. Once again, Spurgeon is spot on: "I never knew a man refuse to help the poor who failed to give at least one admirable excuse!" Here are some that come to mind...

- * I was in a hurry
- * I wanted to get home
- * Blood turns my stomach
- * The needs are greater than I alone can meet
- * Let someone else do it
- * The robbers might come back for me
- * He was going to die anyway
- * If others see me with him, they'll think I committed the crime
- * I didn't want to be defiled

On Friday Bridget Zeller posted a quote from Charles Wesley on her Facebook status that I really like: "Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can." We should pray something like this: "Oh, God, don't allow me to come into contact with anyone in need and leave him or her no better off than they were before I met them."

2. For unbelievers. The question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" is easily the most important question any person can ask. The primary purpose of this parable is to convince those who think they're good enough to realize that there is no way to inherit eternal life by doing good works. Forget trying to trick Jesus or justify yourself. It won't work. Matthew 5:18: "You are to be perfect as

your heavenly father is perfect.” You’re not good enough, but there is One who is good enough. Put your faith and trust in Jesus. Don’t be like the religious man who, instead of being justified by throwing himself on the mercy of God, tried to justify himself.

Don’t miss the main message of this story. If you are not yet a believer, don’t run out of here and try to just do a bunch of good works, thinking that will somehow get you into heaven. Doing good works cannot save anyone, because no one can keep the Law completely and perfectly. Jesus is the only one who kept the whole Law and then died to satisfy the death penalty which the Law pronounced upon sinners.

It’s impossible to live up to God’s standards. Are you ready to admit that right now? The demand of God’s Law still stands. The Law doesn’t save but shows us that we need saving. There can be no real conversion without conviction. That’s why you need a substitute, one who will take your place. That’s exactly what Jesus did. I love how Charles Spurgeon puts it: “What the Law demands of us, the Gospel produces in us. The Law tells us what we ought to be and it is one objective of the Gospel to raise us to that condition.”

Once upon a time a man fell into a pit and couldn’t get himself out. A sensitive person came along and said, “I feel for you down there.” A practical person came along and said, “I knew you were going to fall in sooner or later.” A Pharisee said, “Only bad people fall into a pit.” A mathematician calculated how far he fell. A news reporter wanted an exclusive story on his pit. An IRS agent asked if he was paying taxes on the pit. A self-pitying person said, “You haven’t seen anything until you’ve seen my pit.” A mystic said, “Just imagine that you’re not in a pit.” An optimist said, “Things could be worse.” A pessimist said, “Things will get worse.” Jesus, seeing the man, took him by the hand and lifted him out of the pit!

I like how Ray Pritchard captures Christ as the “Good Samaritan.” Finally, in this story we see the gospel of Jesus Christ. Ever since Eden, the human race has been on a journey away from Jerusalem. We’ve been going down, down, down into the Jericho valley. One day we were attacked by Satan and left for dead. He robbed us of our dignity and stripped us of our righteousness. We couldn’t help ourselves and religion left us on the side of the road. Along came the Good Samaritan himself—the Lord Jesus Christ. He came to us in compassion and bound our wounds, he carried us to safety, he paid our debt, and he guaranteed our future. He has shown mercy to us when we were left for dead by the side of the road.

Here is a message for those who are still lying by the road, wounded and bleeding, forgotten and abandoned. This is for those who feel hopeless and helpless, not half-dead but completely dead and destroyed by sin. Jesus comes to help you. Will you not give him your heart? Will you not love him and trust him and serve him? Will you not believe in him?

Invitation Prayer: God, I confess that I fall way short of loving you and loving others. I am not only selfish; I admit that I am a sinner. I can’t help myself and nothing else seems to work either. Please rescue and redeem me so that I can be healed and forgiven. I believe that you sent your Son Jesus to fulfill the requirements that I cannot keep and right now I receive what He has done for me. I ask you, Lord Jesus to save me from my sins and it’s my desire to follow you for the rest of my life. If there’s anything in my life that you don’t like, please get rid of it. And help me now to go and do likewise for those who have fallen on the path. Give me your compassion and enable me to put my faith into action by serving others.

Closing Song: There is a Redeemer (Dan)

Luke 11:1-4 How to Pray the Lord’s Way

It makes sense to begin a study on prayer after concluding our “Heaven Help the Home” series. Prayer is the key ingredient in having a home that honors God for husbands, wives, fathers, mothers, and children. Prayer is also one of our six stated purposes as a church.

Prayer has been in the news a lot this week. On Monday the Supreme Court delivered its strongest rejection of prayer in public schools in nearly a decade, forbidding invocations at school activities like football games, even when students organize them.

Chief Justice William Rehnquist, writing the dissent opinion, said the ruling “bristles with hostility to all things religious in public life.”

I don’t know what you think but it seems to me that the Supreme Court is out of step with most people in our country. On Wednesday, USA Today published a survey that shows that 78% of Americans support prayer in public schools.

Chuck Colson, in his Breakpoint Commentary, had this to say about the ruling: “Maybe we should let the Court know it has gone too far. Many good Texans, I suspect, will go to football games this fall and defy the Court’s order. What a sight it would be if stadiums filled with God-fearing citizens rose to their feet and recited together the Lord’s Prayer.”

I know this is not a football stadium but let’s take advantage of the privilege we still have in church to stand and pray the Disciples’

Prayer as found in Luke 11:1-4.

This version may be a bit different than the one you're used to because Jesus also gave his disciples a model for prayer in Matthew 6:9-13. Most all of us are familiar with the Lord's Prayer, and some of us have attended churches where it was recited every Sunday (ask people to raise their hands if they were in a church that did this). I grew up saying this prayer so much that it just became rote for me.

Not everyone is familiar with this prayer. Two men were out walking one day. One guy challenged his buddy by saying, "If you're so religious, let me hear you quote the Lord's Prayer. I'll bet you \$10 you can't do it." The second guy responded, "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. And if I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." The first guy pulled out his wallet, fished out a \$10 bill and muttered, "I didn't think you could do it!"

Before we launch into our text, let's address whether Jesus intended for us to repeat this prayer verbatim.

Don't Just Recite It

On one hand, we are to pray this prayer because it is Scripture. Anytime we take a prayer passage and pray it back to God we bring Him glory. But, let's take a look at four reasons why we are not required to recite it today.

1. This prayer is recorded twice in Scripture and the wording is different in each prayer. If Jesus was giving us a prayer to be memorized and recited, He would not have given us different words the two times He gave it.
2. The disciples said, "teach us to pray" not "teach us a prayer." It's one thing to read or deliver a prayer; it's something else to know how to pray.
3. Jesus warns us against repetitive prayers. In fact, in the verse immediately preceding the Lord's prayer in Matthew 6:7, the King James Version says this: "And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do."
4. This prayer is repeated nowhere else in the New Testament. We have no record of believers using this prayer in any of the other prayer passages in the Bible.

Clearly, Jesus was not intending to give the disciples some sort of prayer that they could memorize and then just deliver. It's much deeper than that. Jesus wanted to give His followers a model to follow when addressing God so that we can learn how to pray like Jesus Himself prayed.

That's what we're going to do today. I don't want to just give you some more information about prayer. I'm not interested in laying on some guilt because you're not praying enough. I don't even want to give you some easy steps to a deeper prayer life. And, I don't want to just preach; I want to actually lead us in prayer as we walk through this passage.

Outline

The model for prayer that Jesus gave to His followers can be looked at in a variety of ways. It can be divided into two sets of three elements each. The first three (Father, hallowed by your name, your kingdom come) deal with God's glory. The second three (give us our daily bread, forgive us our sins, lead us not into temptation) deal with our needs. Prayer is to begin with the character of God. And, the reason we pray and the reason God answers is to put Himself and His glory on display.

We must begin with God when we pray. I don't always do this. On Wednesday, when I was praying and writing down my requests in my journal, I was ashamed to realize that I had just jumped right into a long list of requests without taking the time to worship and praise my holy heavenly father.

This profoundly simple model captures everything we need to know about prayer. It sets the standard, or pattern, for praying the way Jesus prayed.

For our purposes this morning, I'm going to use the following outline:

The paternity of prayer: "Father"

The priority of prayer: "Hallowed be your name"

The program of prayer: "Your kingdom come"

The provision of prayer: "Give us each day our daily bread"

The pardon of prayer: "Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us"

The protection of prayer: "And lead us not into temptation"

Lord, Teach Us To Pray

Let's begin by looking at Luke 11:1: "One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When He finished, one of his disciples said to Him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.'" Jesus was a continual source of amazement to His followers. They watched and they listened to everything He did. I can picture the scene. Jesus is praying again and the disciples are standing around watching and listening. After he said, "Amen," one of them courageously asked the question they were all wondering about: "Lord, teach us to pray."

Several things strike me about this request.

1. One of the disciples brings up the subject of prayer, not Jesus. Even though Jesus considered prayer vitally important, He did not initiate the topic. Why? I think it was because He wanted the disciples to conclude on their own how important prayer was. By the way, this is the only time in the Gospels where we read of the disciples asking Jesus to teach them anything. They could have asked for some instruction on a variety of topics like preaching, teaching, or how to perform a miracle, but prayer is the only subject matter they specifically asked for some help with.

2. Jesus knew the power of a good example. It is no accident that the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray at the very time the Lord had set aside for His own prayer. I know that I have learned the most about prayer by following the model of others. I'll forever be indebted to Alex and Eugenie Longinow who taught me how to pray Scripture back to God. They never wrote it down for me or led a prayer seminar; I just listened and prayed with them during prayer meetings at the church where I interned.

3. The disciples were not known for their praying. I don't know of anywhere in the Gospels where the disciples were characterized as men of prayer. They often watched Jesus pray but they didn't enter into prayer themselves. In fact, in the hour of Jesus' greatest need they dropped their eyelids instead of dropping to their knees. The question voiced by this one disciple shows that prayer is not only needed, but that it was a deficiency in his life and in the life of his friends.

We're the same way, aren't we? We know prayer is important, we know Jesus modeled it, but most of us fall far short. If we want to pray like Jesus prayed, let's learn along with his disciples.

Verse 2 begins with, "When you pray, say..." Even though it was just one disciple who wanted some tutoring in prayer, Jesus uses the plural pronoun here to indicate that prayer is to have a corporate element to it. While we certainly need to pray on our own, we can't discount the importance of praying with other believers. Prayer is not to be selfish, but to be done with a sense of community and togetherness.

Most of us come to the Lord with a lot of "I, me, and my" in our prayers. When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he used no singular personal pronouns. Listen: "give us...our daily bread...forgive us our sins...we also forgive...lead us not into temptation."

Let's look at each of the elements.

The Paternity of Prayer

"Father" is probably the most common term we use in prayer, and rightly so, because that is how Jesus addressed His prayers, using the phrase more than 70 different times. The only prayer He ever prayed without using it was when He was on the cross and cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Only in sin-bearing was He separated from the Father.

This term indicates a childlike trust in our heavenly Father who will not only hear us but longs to listen to our requests. The better we know what our heavenly father is like, the more we will readily leap into his arms in prayer.

When we become Christians, Romans 8:15 says that we receive the Holy Spirit who makes us children of God, "and by Him we cry, 'Abba, Father.'" This word "Abba" means "daddy," and communicates the intimacy and nearness of God. He is not indifferent or detached from His children.

As such we don't have to approach Him with big churchy words or formalities. He wants us to embrace Him as our Father, to come to Him without fear of retribution or shame. He wants us to come boldly into His presence, having the confidence that He is eager to hear the prayers of His children.

Let's Pray: "Our Father God, we come to you this morning as your children. We praise you for allowing us to have a relationship with you. Thank you for loving us deeply and for longing to have us approach you as our 'daddy' in prayer. Thank you for your nearness and for your involvement in our lives."

The Priority of Prayer

After acknowledging God as our Father, Jesus now instructs us to see Him as holy: "Hallowed by your name." He is intimate like a Father and He is infinite in holiness. God's nature is like a daddy but His name is holy. Our open access to God that leads to a close relationship with Him should not destroy our esteem for Him. He is not the "big guy in the sky" or "our buddy." He is the holy and awesome God of Israel, before whom we should tremble like Isaiah did in Isaiah 6.

Even though He is my loving Father and does meet my needs, my first petition should not be on my behalf, but on His. Praying, "hallowed by your name" is a safeguard against self-seeking prayer.

To make something "hallow" carries two basic ideas in the Greek. The first means to make an ordinary thing extraordinary by bringing it into contact with something extraordinary. That's how it's used in 1 Peter 1:16 where God says, "Be holy because I am holy." We're unholy, but by coming into contact with One who is holy, we can be made holy.

The second meaning for "hallow" means to treat something or someone as set apart or separated. To "hallow" God's name therefore is to hold His matchless being in awe and veneration so that we will believe what He says and obey Him. Friends, we have to guard against becoming flippant and shallow in our view of God. God is holy, holy, holy. The holiness of God is the only one of His attributes repeated three times.

One way that we can "hallow" His name is by living a life of obedience before Him. God want His name "hallowed" in us so that we can become a vehicle of His holiness to others. Martin Luther said that God's name is made holy among us "when both our doctrines and our living are truly Christian." That's where prayer begins. Before we start asking for what we want, we need to ask for what we should be in light of His penetrating holiness.

Two questions come to mind related to this part of the prayer:

Are we approaching God with holy reverence, awe, and respect when we pray?

Are we "hallowing" God by the way we are living?

Prayer: "Our holy heavenly Father, we bow before your majestic presence, recognizing that as we come before you, our sins threaten to consume us. You are holy, holy, holy and the whole earth is full of your glory. We praise you and prize you because of your transcendent holy name. We hallow your name because you are high and lifted up and we hallow your name by striving to live holy lives."

The Program of Prayer

When we pray the third part of this prayer, "Your kingdom come," we are saying, "Almighty Father God, take control of my life and do what you will for your glory." Prayer is not asking God to do my will. It is bringing myself into conformity with His program. Praying the Lord's way does not mean letting God in our plans, but calling for God to fulfill His own. My anemic prayers are too often filled with my kingdoms, my plans, and my causes.

Can you imagine what would happen if we were preoccupied with the things of God? Just think about what would take place in this community if we were determined to pray that God's kingdom rule would make itself known in the lives of our neighbors and co-workers!

Let me go back to my introduction. While the Supreme Court's decision on prayer is certainly concerning, this is not the real issue. As Christians we don't pin our hopes on what a court may decide because God's kingdom will prevail.

The word "kingdom" in the Greek means "rule" or "reign." I think this is a better translation than the word "kingdom" because this word makes us think of castles and knights. To pray, "Your kingdom come" is to pray that God may take up reigning residence in the hearts and lives of those who are in rebellion. It is a prayer for salvation, for kingdom citizenship.

There are at least three aspects of praying for God's kingdom to come that should permeate our prayers:

1. Conversion. We should pray that people would bow before Christ and get saved. One of the ways we want to do this as a church is to establish Lighthouses of Prayer this fall as a precursor to the mass distribution of the Jesus Video in December. It's my prayer that scores of people will be converted in Livingston County!
2. Commitment. As believers, we need to daily respond to the royalty residing in us and bow before His lordship in our lives. We need to check to make sure Jesus is at the center of our lives, not anyone, or anything else. The bottom line in prayer is this: "God, because you are King, do what you want in my life and in the lives of others."
3. Consummation. One day the heavens will split open, and Jesus Christ will descend and plant His feet on the Mount of Olives, and He will establish His kingdom that will last forever and ever.

How is one qualified to pray, "Your kingdom come"? By changing citizenship through conversion. How does one live out that citizenship? By commitment. And how is that citizenship fully realized? By consummation.

Let's pray: Our Father who art in heaven, you are holy and you are the King eternal. We pray that your kingdom, not ours, would come through conversions, through our commitment to your kingship, and we look forward to the glorious day of your appearing as you consummate history and usher in your eternal kingdom. Help us to be kingdom oriented in the way we live so that we will honor you with our lives."

The Provision of Prayer

The first half of this model prayer is God-ward. The second half focuses on the believer. Once God is given His rightful place, then we have the proper perspective toward ourselves. This magnificent section of the prayer covers our whole being: body, soul and spirit: "Give us each day our daily bread" relates to our body. "Forgive us our sins" speaks to our soul. "And lead us not into temptation" deals with our spirit.

"Give us each day our daily bread" may at first glance seem irrelevant to most of us. While there certainly are people right here in this community and in other countries that are not sure where their next meal is coming from, most of us have plenty to eat. This request has more to do with the totality of our physical life. The word bread is really a broad term meaning all of our physical needs.

When we pray, "Give us each day our daily bread," we are saying that we trust God as the source to supply all the physical needs of our lives, and we affirm that He will take care of everything we need. Notice that this trust in God for these needs is for each day. In the first century, bread had to be made on a daily basis. They couldn't just buy a couple loaves and put them in the freezer. Like manna that comes once a day, God provides one day at a time.

Do we pray for our daily needs? Do we take time to ask God to meet our physical needs or do we at least give thanks for them? Sure, we might say grace before every meal but these prayers can easily become just a sanctimonious way of saying, "Let's eat."

Friends, if we don't ask God to give us what we need every day we will gradually succumb to the delusion that we actually can provide for these needs ourselves. We can think that we handle this part and God only handles stuff that is serious. Here's the danger in thinking like this: pride can swell up within us and we can subtly pull away from trust in God.

Let's pray: "Our holy father God, we desire to have you triumph as King in our lives and we lean on you to provide for our physical needs. If it weren't for your provision, we would have nothing. What we do have is a gift from you. And so we choose to trust you for our daily bread, every day so that we might grow in our relationship with you as we see you provide in ways we never thought possible.

The Pardon of Prayer

The next phrase of the prayer goes like this: "Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us." Forgiveness of sin is the greatest need of the human heart. Only God can grant us a pardon from punishment and guilt.

It's been my observation that there is one thing that troubles Christians more than anything else. It's guilt. We kick ourselves for our failures and punish ourselves relentlessly. Let's pray this prayer, asking God to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Romans 8:1 declares that there is now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus. Let's claim it and live without being paralyzed by guilt and shame.

Now, having said that, notice that Jesus immediately gives us a limitation we are to also forgive others. This verse teaches us that it is wrong to ask from God what we are not willing to give to other people. Let me ask you a question. Is there anyone who comes to mind right now who is in need of your forgiveness? Have you been holding someone captive? Is there someone in need of some grace? These are potent words. When we fail to forgive someone, we set ourselves up as a higher judge than God himself. Another way to say it is that our relationship with the Lord cannot be right until our relationship with others is made right.

Matthew 5:23-24 tells us what to do if we know of someone who has something against us, "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift."

Matthew 18:15 urges us to make things right when we have something against someone else: "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over."

Have you been wronged by someone? Have you sinned against anyone else? Meet with the person face-to-face. Express yourself. Then let it go by giving the gift of forgiveness. Most of us grossly underestimate how committed God is to building and maintaining a loving community.

Before we pray together, take some time right now to do a “forgiveness” inventory. Ask God to bring someone to mind that you have been withholding forgiveness from. Ask Him also if you have wronged anyone else. If the Holy Spirit brings a name to mind, determine right now to meet face-to-face this week. Don’t short-circuit your own spiritual welfare.

Let’s pray: “Our holy Abba Father, we submit to your reign in our lives by trusting you for our daily needs and by living as forgiven sinners without any fear of condemnation. Give us the courage and humility to make things right with others by owning our sins and by cutting others some slack by giving them the same gift of grace that you’ve given to us.”

The Protection of Prayer

We come now to the last part of learning to pray the Lord’s way: “And lead us not into temptation.” The kingdom child realizes that he lives in a fallen world that pounds against him with temptations he can never resist in his own humanness.

Just yesterday, I was sitting in a restaurant finishing this message when I was faced with a temptation. In fact, I was typing these very words: “And lead us not into temptation” when the waitress came by my table with some more coffee. I told her that I was ready for my check and she told me to just tell the person at the register that I had coffee. Do you know what flashed through my mind? I’m almost embarrassed to tell you. I was thinking about how I could walk past the cashier without stopping and head to my car!

You and I are faced with temptations all around us. The Greek word translated temptation is neutral and can refer to a test or a trial. This phrase should read, “And lead us not into trials or testings that can turn into temptation.” The word “into” means “into the power of” or “into the hands of.”

And so, we are to ask God to keep us from falling into the power of trials and temptations. We are not strong enough to handle these on our own. Will God answer a prayer like this? You bet He will. 1 Corinthians 10:13 gives us a wonderful promise: “No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; He will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.”

Brothers and sisters, ask God to lead you away from temptation. When you’re faced with an enticement to sin, look for the way out. God is faithful and will not leave you to face your temptations alone. Pray for His protection and keep your guard up.

Let’s pray: “Father God, you are arrayed in majestic splendor. You are close to us and yet you are wholly different and separate from us. As we approach you we’re mindful of our sins that threaten to destroy us and those around us. We confess them and surrender to your royal reign in our lives. Give us everything we need for daily living, enable us to forgive those who’ve wronged us and show us the way of escape when we’re faced with the temptation to trample your holiness in our thoughts, words, and actions.”

Conclusion

An unknown author put together a great summary of the Disciples’ Prayer that will serve as our conclusion this morning:

—I cannot say “our” if I live only for myself.

I cannot say, “Father” if I do not endeavor each day to act like His child.

I cannot say, “hallowed be your name” if I am playing around with sin.

I cannot say “your kingdom come” if I am not allowing God to reign in my life.

I cannot say “give us this day our daily bread” if I am trusting in myself instead of in God’s provision.

I cannot say, “Forgive us our sins” if I am nursing a grudge or withholding forgiveness from someone else.

I cannot say, “lead us not into temptation” if I deliberately place myself in its path.

Closing. Would you please stand? I’m going to ask the quartet to come back up and play the Lord’s Prayer for us again. Here’s what we’re going to do as we close this morning. I’m going to say each phrase of the prayer and then pause, allowing you to spend some focused time with the Lord on each part. This will help us put into practice what we learned today.

Luke 13:1 Why Do Bad Things Happen?

I like puns. Here are two are my favorites.

Two boll weevils grew up in South Carolina. One went to Hollywood and became a famous actor. The other stayed behind in the

cotton fields and never amounted to much. The second one, naturally, became known as the lesser of two weevils.

Two Eskimos sitting in a kayak were chilly, but when they lit a fire, it sank. Proving once again that you can't have your kayak and heat it, too.

Beth and I used to enjoy watching Home Improvement. One of the best parts of the show would come at the end when they would run the bloopers from that particular episode.

There's something very funny about watching other people mess up. But let's face it; real-life problems are nothing to laugh at, especially when they happen to you. Like "bloopers," some pretty awful things have made an unwelcome entry on the screen of your life.

If you're not going through a hard time right now, just wait -- you will. That's the nature of living in a world like ours. Pain is guaranteed for anyone who takes on the task of living. Some of you are in the furnace of suffering right now. Others of you have just come out, and the rest of us will be there sooner or later.

Going through bad times begs a couple questions, "What have I done to deserve this kind of treatment?" "Why does God allow this to happen?" And so we wonder. Did God just make a blooper? Is this all just a bad pun? A big cosmic mistake?

The topic we're tackling this morning is the most commonly asked question about God -- it's been referred to as the "Achilles Heel" of Christianity. George Barna, the public-opinion pollster, conducted a national survey in which he polled adults: "If you could ask God one question, what would you ask?" The top response was, "Why is there pain and suffering in the world?"

In a story that appeared in the New Yorker this week, it was reported that CNN founder Ted Turner was suicidal after the breakup of his marriage to Jane Fonda and losing control of Turner Broadcasting. Interestingly, Turner told the magazine that his marriage to Fonda broke up partly because of her decision to become a practicing Christian.

Turner is a strident nonbeliever who is filled with bitterness not just because of his marital and business problems, but also because his own father killed himself when Ted was 24 and then his sister later died from a painful disease. When asked about these tragedies, Turner responded, "I couldn't understand how someone so innocent should be allowed to suffer so much." (Associated Press, 4/16/01).

This is not just an intellectual issue to be debated in sterile academic arenas: it's an intensely personal matter that can leave us with spiritual vertigo. One writer referred to the problem of pain as the "the question mark that turns like a fishhook in the human heart."

Reasons for Bad Things

The Bible helps us see that there are at least four reasons why bad things happen.

1. Our Personal Sin. This explains why there is so much moral evil in the world. In order to understand this, we need to go back to the first book in the Bible, the book of Genesis. We read here that God created Adam and Eve in His image. That doesn't mean they looked like God, but instead that they were given the ability to make rational choices.

God did not create evil. Rather, He created the possibility of evil when He created human beings. We have actualized that potentiality. God gave Adam and Eve some moral parameters and very clearly told them what they could and could not do. But they chose to defy and disobey His standards. Ever since that day, every one of us have been born with that same ability to make choices -- and with the same rebellious bent for sin. We can make decisions that either build others up, or tear them down. In other words, our actions often have a direct impact on other people.

Luke 13:1 tells us about a group of people who came up to Jesus and asked Him why Pilate murdered some men and women while they were worshipping in the Temple. After killing them, he took their blood and mixed it with the blood of their sacrifices. Our entire country asked a similar question after Larry Gene Ashbrook went on a shooting spree at Wedgewood Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas on September 16, 1999, killing seven people. Both groups of worshippers were murdered because of the sinful choices made by two different men separated by almost two centuries -- Pontius Pilate and Larry Ashbrook.

You may wonder at this point why God doesn't step in and prevent people from doing bad things to others. He could have made Timothy McVeigh have an accident before he arrived at the Mura Federal Building in Oklahoma City. Except then we'd be robots. You see, our freedom gives us the ability to hurt others.

Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a best-selling book several years ago called, "When Bad Things Happen to Good People." His title is deceiving because the Bible says that there's no such thing as a good person. God's image has been tarnished. We're good stuff that has gone bad. We're a defaced masterpiece. A rebellious child. We're not just imperfect people who need to grow. The Bible says that we're rebels who need to lay down our arms.

When sinful people make decisions, God allows them to play out -- and sometimes those consequences result in some bad things happening to you, and to others. I am not suggesting that we always suffer in direct proportion to our sin. In Luke 13:2, Jesus addressed this when He says, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no!" What I am saying is that many bad things are related to sin.

2. Corporate Sin. The second cause of bad things has to do with natural evil. The Bible teaches that this is the result of our corporate sin. We live in a disease and death environment. Before Adam and Eve exercised their free will and rebelled against God, there were no earthquakes, hurricanes, natural disasters or diseases. They came rolling onto the scene after Adam and Eve sinned against God.

When Adam and Eve told God to take a hike, He partially honored their request. Nature began to revolt. The earth was cursed. Genetic breakdown and diseases were unleashed to do their work of destruction. Pain and death became a part of the human experience. Listen to how God describes the consequences of their decision in Genesis 3:17-18: "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you..." In the picturesque story of Genesis, disobedience results in shame, alienation from God and others, but also in the disruption of nature.

Romans 8:22 describes the present state of our planet: "We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time." Natural disasters and diseases are making inroads because the whole creation is groaning under the pressure of God's judgment. This was all set in motion the moment Adam and Eve defied God's parameters.

Jesus continues in Luke 13:4 by raising the question about 18 construction workers who died when the tower of Siloam fell on them: "...do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no!" Things are out of whack. Accidents happen. Rivers flood. Tornadoes touch down.

3. Satanic Influences. I want to briefly mention a third reason behind terrible tragedies. Many bad things are the result of the devil's destructive designs. Satan is ultimately behind all the hatred, war, oppression, and evil in the world. He works behind the scenes to inflame our passions and to prompt us to make bad choices. He's out to spoil God's world in every possible way he can. Jesus referred to him as the murderer in John 8:44.

4. God's Providence. The fourth factor is difficult for some of you to swallow. God is in control. He allows suffering. And, He's a good God even when bad things happen. That goes right to the heart of the question, doesn't it? If God is good, why does He allow evil? I'll be the first to admit that I don't fully understand this one but I know that God is good and I know that bad things happen. It's all part of His plan somehow. God puts it this way in Isaiah 55:9: "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

There must be some reasons behind why God permits things to happen in our lives. Because He is a good God, there must be some practical benefits.

Practical Benefits of Hard Times

The Bible speaks of at least 4 good things that can come out of bad things.

#1, Hard Times Can Stretch Us. About 8 years ago, I experienced some chronic pain that lasted about 14 months. It was a very tough time -- and I wasn't easy to live with -- just ask Beth! Dealing with this difficulty helped to stretch my character. I learned what it means to persevere, to hang in there even when I didn't want to.

If you think about it, we can only learn qualities like patience and endurance if we go through some difficulties. If we always get what we want, and cruise through life with no problems, we'll stay the same -- and our character won't be refined. James 1:2-4 puts it this way: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."

#2, Hard Times Can Equip Us. The Bible says that another reason we go through difficulties is so God can have the opportunity to comfort us -- and then in turn, we can comfort others. Listen to 2 Corinthians 1:4: "The God of all comfort...comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God."

I was on the receiving end of this after Rebecca, our third child was born. She had just been diagnosed with some breathing problems and had been hooked up to an apnea monitor in the hospital. I remember standing outside the nursery window with tears running down my face, when I heard a door open at the end of the hallway and saw one of the deacons from our church in Rockford walking toward me. He didn't say a word; he just came up and hugged me. He understood what I was going through because he had recently gone through a tough time with one of his daughters. God had comforted him and now he was able to comfort me.

#3, Hard Times Can Teach Us. God may use the bad things you are experiencing to teach you something that He can't get through

to you in any other way. Hebrews 12:10 says that, "God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in His holiness." When God wants to teach us something He allows us to go through some tough times.

In his book called, *The Case for Faith*, Lee Strobel shares an illustration about a bear in a trap and a hunter who, out of sympathy, wants to liberate him. He tries to win the bear's confidence, but he can't do it, so he has to shoot the bear full of drugs. The bear, however, thinks the hunter is trying to kill him. Then, in order to get the bear out of the trap, the hunter has to push him in further to release the tension on the spring.

God does the same thing to us sometimes so that He can teach us what He wants us to learn. To us, it seems like God is punishing us, but actually He's attempting to teach us and to free us. I love Lamentations 3:33: "He does not willingly bring affliction or grief to the children of men." Hebrews 12:11 says, "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it."

There's one more benefit -- #4, *Hard Times Can Reach Us*. It was C.S. Lewis who said, "God whispers to us in our pleasures; speaks in our conscience; but shouts in our pains. It's His megaphone to rouse a deaf world." God can use the hard times to get our attention, to help eternal realities break through.

Let's go back to Luke 13 for a minute. After bringing up those who were wiped out while they were worshipping and those who were killed in a construction accident, Jesus gives His answer to the question, "Why Do Bad Things Happen?" His reply is surprising and quite strong. He says it twice in five verses. Look at verse 3 and verse 5: "But unless you repent, you too will all perish."

Here we see the heart of Jesus. He longs for us to change by repenting of the way we've been living. We think that we somehow deserve good things, that God owes us an easy life. Then, when things go wrong, we wig out because it wasn't supposed to happen that way. Instead of wondering why bad things happen, Jesus reminds us that we are fallen individuals, living in a fallen world. We should be amazed and thankful that we are given another day to live, that we're not killed or involved in a fatal accident. While there's still time, Jesus calls us to repentance.

When I was 18 years old, I was living a pretty wild life. I thought I was invincible. At the end of my senior year of high school I was out swimming with some buddies. We were having a blast. That is, until one of my friends did something he shouldn't have done, and drowned right before my eyes.

Then, a year later, the girl I was dating dropped me on my head. I went into a tailspin. I began to drink more than I ever had before. My emptiness was like a hollow pit in my stomach. It was shortly after that, due to the influence of my college roommate, that I started reading the Bible and eventually asked Christ to be my Forgiver and Leader.

I often wonder if my friend would not have drowned, and if my girlfriend had not broken up with me, whether I would have become a Christian. I really believe that God used these "bad things" to reach me. I wasn't listening when everything was going fine. God needed to knock out some of the props in my life.

Where is Job When It Hurts?

One of the most vivid examples of suffering in all literature is found in the Bible. The story is a case study of human suffering, chronicling the life of a "good man" who underwent extreme misery. He lost everything: his job, his possessions, his family, his health, and his friends. His name is Job. The book that bears his name is the all-time classic on the problem of suffering.

Job's trust wavered. He mourned. He cried. He protested. He questioned. He even cursed the day he was born. Job begged God to answer his questions. He desperately wanted to know why all these bad things had happened to him. God answered him, but the answer was not what Job expected.

You see, God's answer to Job was unsettling. Instead of giving a direct response, God gave His longest speech in the entire Bible in chapters 38-41. He asks Job questions like, "Where were you when I established the heavens and the earth? Can you place the stars in the sky? Do you give the horse his strength or clothe his neck with a flowing mane? Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct Him?"

Job, after getting a theology lesson from God, broke down and said in 42:3, 5: "Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know...My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you...therefore I repent in dust and ashes." Did you catch that? He repented. That's exactly what Jesus challenges us to do in Luke 13.

Ultimately the only answer God gave to Job was Himself. It was if God said to him, "Job, I am your answer. Learn who I am. When you know me, you'll know how to handle anything." Job wasn't asked to trust a plan but a person -- a personal God who is in ultimate control and knows what is best for us. This has been called the first rule of the Christian life: He is God, and we are not.

The main point of the book of Job is that life is unfair, that bad things do happen. The question really is not, "Where is God when it hurts?" Instead, the question is, "Where is Job when it hurts?" The most important battles take place inside of us. Let me personalize it a bit more. Where are you when it hurts? Where am I?

God's answer to Job is instructive for you and for me. He basically challenged Job in the only thing he could control: his response. God moved the tragedy to the future -- now what will you do, Job? Blaming God got him nowhere; he needed to decide how he was going to respond. What was he going to do now? Was he going to shake his fist at God? Was he going to get better, or get bitter? His response was his responsibility. Likewise, we can't change our circumstances, but we can change how we respond to them.

Jesus Is Our Hope

What's your response to the bad things that happen in your life? Don't give up and become passive or become bitter and hardened like Ted Turner. God is no stranger to your pain. The great news of the Bible is that God is a suffering God. Jesus Christ died a horrible death on a rough cross to provide you with the ultimate solution for suffering and death. No, he can't take away all your pain, or protect you from bad things, but He can walk with you through them. He may not shield us from all of life's storms, but He does shelter us.

You have a choice. You can accept the bad things that come your way, and allow them to stretch you, equip you, teach you, and reach you -- or you can live as a bitter and hardened person.

Sometimes we choose to believe because of what we see, often we believe in spite of what we can see. As I look at the world around me, many things remain mysterious and unanswerable. But if there is no God, or if He is not good, then nothing at all makes sense.

When we hurt, we really have only two choices:

- We can hurt with God, or
- We can hurt without him.

If you are hurting today, you may feel like you're at the end of your rope. I pray that you will hang on to the Lord. If you turn away from him, things will only get worse.

This past Friday was the two-year anniversary of the tragedy at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. An editorial in The Pantagraph called Columbine a "defining moment" for our generation. People will never forget it. I was amazed when I did an Internet Search and discovered that there are over one-quarter of a million sites devoted to what happened on April 20, 1999.

First Service Conclusion

One of the students who was murdered that day was Cassie Bernall. When she was asked if she believed in Christ, she boldly declared, "Yes, I believe." And then she was killed.

You and I might not ever face a gunman who asks us a question about our faith but we will face difficulty and struggle and pain and heartache. What will you say? Make this your defining moment. Put your faith in the God who loves you.

Cassie's martyrdom was even more remarkable when you consider that just a few years earlier she had dabbled in the occult, including witchcraft. She had embraced the same darkness that drove her killers to such despicable acts. But, several months before she was killed, Cassie had dedicated her life to Jesus.

Cassie's brother Chris, found this poem that Cassie had written just two days prior to her death.

Now I have given up on everything else

I have found it to be the only way

To really know Christ

And to experience the mighty power

That brought Him back to life again,

And to find out what it means to suffer

And to die with him.

So, whatever it takes

I will be one who lives

In the fresh newness of life

Of those who are alive from the dead.

Are you ready to do whatever it takes this morning to trust God and His goodness, no matter what has happened, or what will happen? Are you willing to receive the free gift of forgiveness and eternal life? Make this your defining moment.

Let's stand and sing our closing hymn, "Have Thine Own Way, Lord."

Second Service Conclusion

We want to close this morning by showing a music video by Michael W. Smith called, "This is Your Time." He wrote this song in honor of Cassie Bernall, who when asked if she believed in Christ, boldly declared, "Yes, I believe." The first section of the video is an excerpt from a film project that Cassie did. It was played at her funeral and 70 teenagers came forward and prayed to receive Jesus.

[Play Video](#)

It was a test we could all hope to pass.

But none of us would want to take.

Faced with a choice to deny God and live.

For her there was one choice to make.

Friend, this is your time. You and I might not ever face a gunman who asks us a question about our faith but we will face difficulty and struggle and pain and heartache. What will you say? Make this your defining moment. Put your faith in the God who loves you.

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I will be one who lives

In the fresh newness of life

Of those who are alive from the dead.

Are you ready to do whatever it takes this morning to trust God and His goodness, no matter what has happened, or what will happen? Are you willing to receive the free gift of forgiveness and eternal life? This is your time. Make it your defining moment.

Closing Prayer.

Luke 15 The Scope of Grace

Since most of you are familiar with the story of the Prodigal Son, I thought I would read a different version of it it's called the "Prodigal Son in the Key of F."

Feeling footloose and frisky, a feather-brained fellow forced his father to fork over his farthings. Fast he flew to foreign fields and frittered his family's fortune.

Fleeced by his fellows in folly, facing famine, and feeling faintly fuzzy, he found himself a feed-flinger in a filthy foreign farmyard. Feeling frail and fairly famished, he filled his frame with foraged food from the fodder fragments.

"Fooley," he figured, "my father's flunkies fare far fancier," the frazzled fugitive fumed feverishly, facing the facts. Finally, frustrated from failure and filled with foreboding, he fled.

Faraway, the father focused on the fretful familiar form in the field and flew to him and fondly flung his forearms around the fatigued fugitive. Falling at his father's feet, the fugitive floundered forlornly, "Father, I have flunked and fruitlessly forfeited family favor."

Finally, the faithful Father, forbidding and forestalling further flinching, frantically flagged the flunkies to fetch forth the finest fatling and fix a feast.

Faithfully, the father's first-born was in a fertile field fixing fences while father and fugitive were feeling festive. Frowning and finding fault, he found father and fumed, "He frittered family funds and you fix a feast for the fugitive?"

Frankly, the father felt the frigid first-born's frugality of forgiveness was formidable and frightful. But, the father's former faithful fortitude and fearless forbearance to forgive both fugitive and first-born flourished unfurl the flags and finery, let fun and frolic freely flow. Former failure is forgotten, folly is forsaken.

Jesus told a story about a young man who made a wrong decision and what happened to him as a result. We call it the parable of the prodigal son.

Please turn in your Bibles to Luke 15. This is a classic chapter. If our text last week was one of the most unfamiliar in the New Testament, our passage today is perhaps the most recognizable. Many people consider it the greatest short story ever written because it speaks so truthfully to the human condition. It's really the story of a father with two sons. One sinned when he left the other sinned while staying home. We're going to look at both of the sons this morning.

In order to understand the parable, we need to start with verses 1-2: "Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them!'"

You can almost feel the tension here, can't you? Jesus likes to spend time with the worst kind of people and it bothered the self-righteous religious people. They wanted Him to spend his time with good people. Jesus then tells three parables that are directed to these grumpy old saints.

In the first one, a farmer has 100 sheep and one gets lost. Jesus shows how the farmer leaves the 99 and goes on a search and rescue mission for the one that is lost. In the second story, a widow loses one of her 10 coins and searches intently until she finds it. These coins represented her Social Security savings just as she lost hers, we're probably going to lose ours as well! In the third story, a son is lost and eventually returns home.

There are many things that could be said about these three parables but I want to just point out one common thread. Whenever the lost is found, there is great rejoicing! In Verse 6, the farmer calls his buddies together and says, "Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep." In verse 9, the widow says, "Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin." And when the lost son returns home, the father throws a big party filled with rejoicing.

Jesus is making the point that when the lost are found, heaven throws a big celebration! Whenever a lost person repents, spontaneous partying breaks out in heaven. Whenever guilt is kissed away by God's grace, the angels go wild!

The Younger Son

Now, let's begin with the younger son in verse 11-12. "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father give me my share of the estate.' so he divided his property between them."

The younger son chafes under his father's rule and perhaps feels put down by his obedient older brother. So he demands his inheritance while his father is still alive and in good health. In traditional Middle Eastern culture, this was the equivalent of saying,

"Father, I'm eager for you to die!" Normally, a father in this situation would kick his kid out of the house for making such an unthinkable request. In fact, the father is expected to refuse a request like this.

As the younger son, he was entitled to 1/3 of everything his father had. Legally, this was his. But, in order for the father to give him this amount, some of his property had to be liquidated and sold.

Taking the money, he leaves home and journeys to a place the Bible calls "a distant country." There he spends every dime he has on riotous living. When a famine comes, not having any cash and being too far away from home, he attaches himself to a farmer who says, "The only work I have is feeding my pigs." He who had eaten prime rib just a few weeks earlier now dines with the swine.

Before going any further with the story, let's stop and analyze what happened to this young man. How did he end up in such a mess?

Five Steps to the Pigpen

He was selfish. His fall began with a selfish act, a disregard for his father. He said, "I want my money and I want it now." All he could see were the dollar signs. "Dad, give me my money. Forget you and forget my family. Show me the money. I want out of here."

He acted hastily. The Bible says that when he got his money he took off to a distant country. When you hear that phrase, you shouldn't think of somewhere thousands of miles away. Do you know where the distant country is? It's one step outside of God's will. It's not a matter of geography, but a broken relationship with God.

He wasted everything he had. The word prodigal means, "to waste." When he left, he never intended to come back home. After all, he took all the money with him. If he had planned to return, he would have left some assets behind.

He separated himself from every relationship that was important to him. By leaving, he broke his relationship with his father and his brother. He also left his family and his friends. He rejected everything that was good and right and holy. All of that went out the window.

He made a long string of bad decisions. Sin always works that way. One bad decision leads to another. First you tell a lie, and then you have to tell another one to cover up the first one. Sin always leads to more sin. Once you start making bad decisions, it's easier to make them as you go along. But pretty soon you are about 15 bad decisions down the road. At that point it seems easier to keep on going in the wrong direction

Notice what happened next in verse 14. There was a famine in the distant country. Whenever you leave God, there will always be a famine. It looks so good, like a land flowing with milk and honey. In the distant country you enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season. But after a while the money runs out, the music stops, the beautiful people get bored with you, and you are broke and penniless.

In the end he lost everything. He who had it all lost it all. He who came from a good family now sleeps with the pigs. The prodigal son has hit rock bottom. God often lets that happen because many of us won't look up until we start to eat with the pigs. When we finally reach the end of our rope, then and only then do we begin to think about returning home again.

The Way Back Home

While he's face-to-face with the pigs he begins to change. Five words tell the story.

First, there was an awakening. Verse 17 says that, "...he came to his senses." Sin is senseless it's a form of temporary spiritual insanity. It's turning away from living water in order to drink out of a sewer.

What was it that brought him to his senses? He was hungry. His stomach made him come back to his father. That's not a very exalted motive. Nothing suggests he turned back because he realized what a terrible thing he had done. He hasn't repented yet or come to grips with the enormity of his sin. That's still in the future.

Here is a startling truth: People often turn to the Lord simply because they have nowhere else to go. Their motives may be no more exalted than the need to find a hot meal and a place to stay on a cold night in December. What that means is this: When you are praying for a straying believer, ask God to make them hungry. Pray for the famine to come. Pray for their money to run out. "Lord, make him so miserable that sin no longer looks inviting." "Lord, make her hungry for the love she used to know." "Lord make him so restless that he can't sleep at night."

Second, there was repentance. He said to himself in verse 18, "I will go back to my father." Repentance is what happens when you've been going the wrong direction and finally you say, "I've gone this way long enough. I'm going to turn around, and I'm going to go back in the other direction." Repentance is a change of mind that leads to a change of life.

If the first step back home stemmed from personal need, he now begins to grapple with the root problem. He realizes that his

fundamental need is not for food, but for a restored relationship with his father. He's hungry tonight because many months ago he got greedy and left home. He's sleeping with the pigs because in his pig-headedness, he demanded his own way. He's living alone because he chose to go his own way. Repentance means admitting that you are solely responsible for the mess you are in. You can't go back home until you admit that you were the one who left in the first place.

Third, there was honesty. Notice what he says in verse 18, "I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you." You will know that you are really serious about changing your life when you stop making excuses for your behavior. Think about what the prodigal son could have said. "It was really my older brother's fault. He always picked on me, and Daddy always liked him best." Or he might say, "If my old man had given me more money I wouldn't be in this fix." Or, "That farmer never gave me a good job."

He could have found a thousand excuses. But he didn't. He simply said, "I have sinned." These words marked the beginning of a new life for this young man. When you stop making excuses for your failures, you are not far from a brand-new life.

Fourth, there was humility. While he is still in the pigpen, he mentally rehearses what he will say to his father in verse 19: "I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men." What a tremendous statement that is. He came back home with no pre-conditions.

He didn't say, "Dad, before I'll come back, we've got to make a deal." That's not real repentance. This man was so deeply hurt over the way he had lived that he said, "Father, I'm not worthy to be called your son. I've disgraced you. If you will take me back, I will work like a hired hand." Real repentance doesn't make deals with God.

Fifth, there was resolution. Look at the first part of verse 20: "So he got up and went to his father." It's certainly easy to criticize the prodigal son. But, when the time came to move, he moved. So many people say, "Give me some time to think about it." Not this guy. He didn't delay, but simply started out on the journey home.

The Father's Welcome

As he shuffled along the road, a couple questions went through his mind: "What is my father going to say? Will he take me back?" With his head down, he walked along that dirt road, embarrassed and humiliated.

Certainly his fears were well founded. We don't often think about the father's pain when we read this story. But it couldn't have been easy for him. First of all, he lost part of the fortune he had worked so long to amass. Second, he lost his reputation in the community. When a son leaves home in such anger, there's no way to keep it hidden.

But the worst pain was the simple fact that the father had lost his son. After all these years, after all those prayers, after holding him in his arms, after teaching him how to hunt and fish, after pouring out an ocean of love, suddenly the dream is shattered, and the father is left with a huge hole in his heart. Words cannot express the pain, the sadness, the loss the father feels. His son has left home, and no one can console him. After all that, could anyone blame the father if he refused to take his son back? No wonder the son worries as he slowly plods toward home. He has no idea what awaits him.

Verse 20 says that while he was still a long way off, his father saw him. This is a great moment. His father saw him and was moved with compassion. Have you ever wondered how long the son was gone? It was probably at least a couple months, if not longer. Day after day the father watched for his son. Night after night he waited for his return. Nothing deterred him, not the weather, not the jeers and jokes of the skeptics, not the doubting looks of his friends. Deep in his heart, he knew his son would someday come back home.

Then it happened. One day, late in the afternoon, when the sun was beating down and sweat covered his face, he saw a figure walking hesitantly toward him.

Throwing all dignity aside, he ran to meet his son, embraced him without saying a word, threw his arms around him and kissed him. The word Jesus used means he smothered him with kisses.

The father knew full well how his son would be welcomed in the village when he returned in failure. So he prepared a plan he would run to meet his boy before he reaches the city limits. If he is able to reconcile with his boy in public, no one will be able to treat his son badly. Interestingly, in that culture, men who wore robes never ran in public to do so was deeply humiliating.

In that one moment all questions were answered. The son's fear melted away in the tears and hugs. No words passed between them but one broken heart spoke to another.

Then the sobbed confession he was so overwhelmed that he could only utter the first part of his prepared speech in verse 21: "I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son."

It would be impossible to predict what would happen next. This “Grace Encounter” gives each of us the hope of tasting grace ourselves.

Notice the five signs of the father’s welcome:

1. The kiss represented forgiveness.
2. The best robe a status symbol.
3. The ring a sign of authority.
4. The sandals a sign of freedom. Only slaves went barefoot.
5. The feast, the sign of a joyful welcome reserved for special occasions.

Verse 24 brings the first part of the story to a close with these wonderful words of hope: “So they began to celebrate.” At the father’s command, a party begins that lasts for hours.

The Older Son

Perhaps you also know about the older brother who refused to join in the celebration. He represents all those right-thinking, right-living, rule-keepers who want to see repentant sinners publicly punished to teach them a lesson. Just as the prodigal son still lives today, so does his unhappy older brother. Before we get too hard on this guy, have you ever thought that he’s got a point? I mean, how come the Father didn’t do anything cool for him?

The older son is working in the field when the younger son returns and does not get home until after the party had started. You know, there is something about hard work that seems to awaken a self-righteous attitude within us. There is something about putting forth effort that makes us look down on those who do not.

One of the servants tells him that his brother has come home and his father is exceedingly happy about it. This news is met by an immediate expression of jealousy and anger. He begins to sulk and pout like a little boy, and refuses to go into the house. When the father comes out to urge him to come in all the pent-up inward rage comes boiling out. The father’s request is met with a flood of bitterness.

Notice the emphasis on self in what the boy says. He was angry and answered his father in verse 29: “Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends.”

Verse 30: “But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him.” Can you hear the resentment and bitterness?

Some of us this morning stand in the shoes of this elder brother. Perhaps it would help to analyze this a bit so that we can see how closely we match up with his 3 self-righteous tendencies.

3 Marks of Self-Righteousness

1. The first mark is a sense of being treated unfairly. “You never gave me a goat so I could have a party with my friends.” He felt like he was ignored or forgotten. This feeling of unfair treatment is always the initial mark of a self-centered attitude. It is the sign of crushed pride, of wounded ego, revealing the centrality of self. Its most common expression -- as this story brings out is that of anger and a “won’t play” attitude. “I’m gonna take my marbles and go home!”

2. The second mark is an over-inflated view of self. Notice how the older brother describes his own superiorities and advantages. Self-righteousness is always full of self-praise: “Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you.” From the older son’s perspective, he’s just been contributing to his father. He makes no recognition of how much his father has helped him, of how much his father has taught him over the years.

“And I never disobeyed your orders.” I doubt that this is a true statement. No one has ever lived up to that kind of a standard. It is remarkable how easily he can conveniently forget the many times the Father had forgiven him over the years. His view of himself is that of being completely and totally in the right. That is always a mark of self-righteousness.

3. The third mark is his blame of his father and his contempt for his brother. “This son of yours...” You can hear the cutting edge of contempt in that. He does not call him his brother and there is no gladness at his return. He rather views him as something vile, as something despicable. Also, there is no love or respect for his father. Did you notice how the father ends up with all the blame? It is all his fault. “You never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has

squandered your property...you kill the fattened calf for him.”

Self-righteousness is one of the world's most deadly sins. Jesus dealt with it more severely and more sharply than any other sin. He could be tender, gracious, and accepting toward those who were involved in adultery or drunkenness, but when he faces self-righteous Pharisees in their smug complacency His words burn and sear and scorch.

This sin is deadly because it is so easily disguised as something justifiable. This is what is wrong with a self-righteous spirit. It can always be proved by the book to be right. There is a sense in which this son can be justified for his attitude. But that is always the mark of self-righteousness.

Joseph Stowell, president of Moody Bible Institute, has said that the American Church is “long on mad, and short on grace.” We're mad at politicians, we're mad at the media, we're mad at the President. We're also mad at those who live their lives differently than we do. Friends, let's stop being so angry with people who sin. Lost people are going to sin because they're lost. Christians are going to sin because they're not perfect. I've said it before but it bears repeating let's refuse to be angry with people who sin differently than we do.

The church of Jesus Christ is to be what Christ longs for it to be -- a gathering place for forgiven sinners.

Friends, when we're self-righteous, when we think we're better than others, it's impossible to be gracious. We can't be grace-givers if we constantly believe that we are superior to others. We need to remember what we learned last week we're equal to each other. We need to remember that there's a much bigger party going on than we think are we going to join it, or just stay outside and criticize? Maybe there's not much joy in your life because it's been a long time since you've come to the party of grace.

Notice the contrast with the Father in the story. He said to him in verse 31-32: “My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.” Let me just point out two characteristics of true fatherhood.

Two Characteristics of the Father

First, this father comes out to meet the angry boy. Just as he went out to meet the returning rebel, so he goes out to seek this sulking son. God the Father loves the self-righteous, the smug, and the self-centered legalist even as he loves the rebellious and defiant. When the father finds his oldest son, he does not scold, berate, or rebuke him harshly, but rather pleads with him. The tense of this word indicates that the father invited his son again and again to come in to the party.

The father tells the son that everything he had was available to him all he had to do was ask. A self-righteous attitude frequently occurs in those who are sitting in the midst of great possibility, but never claim it. They get upset when they see others, whom they feel do not deserve anything, coming in and getting what they could have had, but never asked for, never claimed.

This reveals that the older son is actually more lost than the other was. He, too, is in a distant country -- a far country of the spirit -- far removed from the father's heart.

Second, the father offers grace to the boy, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. Now don't be angry because I have shown love and grace to your brother.”

Jesus ends the story with this boy standing outside the house. We do not know what happened next. He is nursing his wounded ego and whether he repents, goes in, and joins the party or not, we do not know.

The story was addressed, obviously, to the Pharisees and scribes who had the same spirit as the elder brother.

Jesus does not tell us what became of these two sons. He just leaves the ending hanging. I think he does so because he wants us to see ourselves in the story. Which one of the brothers most closely describes you today?

Last Sunday I went along with the guys from PBC who lead a service in the prison. I had two thoughts as I drove up and the guards began to search my car. First of all, I was afraid. I had asked Paul Becker if I should take my tie off before I go in. He told me I should. I then asked him, “You don't wear ties because you don't want them to use it to hang themselves, right?” Paul smiled and said, “No, it's so they don't hang us!”

But, I had a second thought as well. One I'm not very proud to admit. As we were ushered into a room for the service, I began to feel self-righteous. I looked at the guys and inside I knew I was better than they were.

But then, something happened. Once again, God used the song, “Amazing Grace” to get my attention. As the 20 prisoners and our team of 4 stood to sing, I was convicted and saddened by own smugness. After verse one, one of the inmates standing next to me shouted out, “I'm a new man.”

And then it hit me. I was the older brother who had come face-to-face with a group of prodigals who had returned to the Father. As they continued to sing from their hearts, I was invited to the party. God's grace touched me that day and I went in and joined the celebration.

Friend, where are you today? Which brother most represents you? Do you need to turn around and head back home? Are you already home and need to come into the party?

The Father has enough grace for both of us. He's looking for prodigals and He's looking for the proud. He welcomes sorry sinners and smug saints.

Luke 16:19-31 What Happens When You Die?

Summary: Like an unwelcome intruder, death has made a rude entrance into many of our lives. When someone close to us dies, we can't help but wonder what will happen to us when we stop breathing. Jesus told a story one day to help illustrate the suddenness of death.

A little girl was standing outside her Sunday School classroom when the pastor noticed she was holding a big storybook entitled, "Jonah and the Whale." The pastor wanted to have some fun with her so he asked her, "Do you really believe that Jonah was swallowed by a whale?" The little girl frowned and declared, "Of course I do!" The pastor pushed her a bit and said, "You really believe that a man can be swallowed by a big whale, stay inside for three days and then come out and still be alive?" The little girl said, "Absolutely. The story is in the Bible and we studied it in Sunday School today."

Then the pastor asked, "Can you prove to me that the story is true?" She thought for a moment and then said, "Well, when I get to Heaven, I'll ask Jonah." The pastor was on a roll and asked, "Well, what if Jonah's not in Heaven?" She then put her hands on her little hips and sternly declared, "Then you can ask him!"

This morning we're addressing the final question in our "Glad You Asked" series: "What Happens When You Die?" Jesus addressed this question one day in Luke 16:19-31. In the first part of this chapter He established the fact that you and I are managers of all that He has given us. We are responsible to manage our time, our talents and our treasures for kingdom purposes.

Jesus then pulls back the curtain to help us catch a glimpse of life on the other side of death. This story is unique to the Gospel of Luke and is the only one to name any of its characters. Some commentators believe that this is not a true parable but rather a specific story much like the account of the Good Samaritan. The story is divided into three parts. I invite you to follow along in your copy of Scripture as I retell it.

Act I: A Contrast in Life (16:19-21)

In Act I, we're introduced to a rich man. This guy is extremely wealthy. He lives in a home with a gate to keep others away from him. Jesus tells us that his clothes were made out of purple, which was normally reserved for royalty. The process to get the purple dye from shellfish was very expensive but this man didn't care how much it cost. He wanted the very best.

In addition to his beautiful robe he had his T-shirts and underwear made from the finest linen available. He was not a "Fruit of the Loom" kind of guy! This linen was produced from the flax that grew on the banks of the Nile River. It was white, very soft, and kept him cool in the warm weather. Because it was so expensive, it was only worn by those who were really rich. Often it was just kings and queens who could afford it.

This guy had it all and lived in dazzling splendor every day. While some people are quiet about their wealth, this man strutted around like a peacock. While some are able to splurge once in awhile, he lived in opulence every day. He wanted everyone to know how rich he was. He was in love with himself. He had servants galore, bountiful food, and a gorgeous home.

As this rich guy left in his chariot to dine in the finest restaurants he drove right past a beggar named Lazarus who was sitting by his front gate each day. Lazarus was not able to walk so someone had to put him by the gate every morning. In contrast to the rich man, Lazarus was in need of everything. He had no home, his health was fading, he was an outcast, and he had no food. As he observed the rich man he longed to have the leftovers that were thrown away after each meal, or even just the crumbs that fell from the table.

His only companions were the stray dogs, who were themselves outcasts, who came and licked the oozing sores that covered his body. While the rich man ignored his plight, the dogs gave him some comfort as they cleaned the puss away from his festering blisters. While the rich man was clothed in purple, the poor man was covered with oozing ulcers.

He probably knew that this contact with these dogs made him disqualified from any religious service that he might want to attend.

Act II: A Contrast in Death (16:22)

While there was an obvious contrast in how the rich man and the poor man lived their lives, there was also a difference in their deaths. When Lazarus died his misery finally ended, even though he didn't receive a proper burial or even a memorial service.

When the rich man died he had a fantastic funeral. In that culture, when wealthy people passed away, the family hired mourners, purchased costly spices for the body and used an elaborate tomb for the burial. The whole town turned out for the funeral and listened to the shrieks and lamentations of the professional weepers and the litany of praise heaped upon the rich man by countless eulogies. He learned too late that "he who dies with the most toys...still dies."

Act III: A Contrast in Eternity (16:23-31)

But, as soon as Lazarus died, the angels came and took him to the place where Abraham was. True Israelites were expected to share with Abraham in the world to come. Abraham is regarded in Scripture as being not only the great patriarch (Hebrews 7:4) but also the father of all believers (Romans 4:11). To be considered a friend of Abraham was the highest honor possible and true happiness would be to spend eternity at his side.

Some of your Bibles indicate that he went to "Abraham's bosom." In that culture the most honored seat in a banquet would be nearest to the host, reclining in such a way that one's head was near his chest. The one who had yearned to receive crumbs and scraps is now feasting at Heaven's table.

The rich man went to Hell, or more properly a place called Hades. He was in terrible torment and awful agony. As he looked up he saw Lazarus far away, nestled next to Abraham. The rich man cried out in a parched voice, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.' What a change from the way he lived his life! He could have anything he ever wanted to eat or drink and now he would be satisfied with just a drop of water!

And, even though he was indifferent and apathetic toward Lazarus when they were both alive, he has no problem now treating Lazarus as if he's his personal servant. How ironic to ask for a favor from the very person who never received a favor from him!

Abraham tells this rich guy to remember how he lived his life. His mind fills with images of poor Lazarus lying by his door with stray dogs licking his wounds. He remembers those who tried to tell him about God. He recalls sermons he heard. He remembers those who warned him about the coming judgment. Memories come swimming out of the oblivion. There is no torment greater than an accusing memory. It is impossible to forget when you're in Hell. The rich man could not take his money, but he did take his memory.

Abraham then states that it is absolutely impossible for Lazarus to come and help him now. There is a great chasm between Heaven and Hell that is fixed so that those who want to go from one place to the other cannot do it. There were many of these yawning gorges in Palestine that were impossible to cross. The lost and the redeemed are separated forever. There are no exit signs in Hell because it is a place of everlasting punishment. The rich man is still in Hell today and will be there forever.

The rich guy then tries one more plea. This time he begs Abraham to send Lazarus to his family members. He's beginning to understand the mission of the church. He didn't want any company in Hell and especially did not want his brothers to join him there. He now knows the absolute critical importance of repentance before it's too late. He's hoping that if Lazarus could just go back and warn them that they would change. If his brothers, who no doubt had seen Lazarus by the front gate on many occasions, would suddenly reappear they would change their ways and get right with God.

Abraham tells him that his brothers have everything they need. They have their Bibles. They can listen to believers who can explain the way to Heaven. The rich man doesn't like this answer because he knows his brothers. He knows they've just tuned out God and are chasing materialism just like he was. If someone would come back from the dead then they would repent.

Abraham responds by saying that even a resurrection will not convince them. They are not open to spiritual matters.

Playing With Fire

A recent poll reveals that 89% of Americans believe in Heaven while 73% believe in Hell. When asked where they think they will go when they die, 3 out of 4 think they will go to Heaven while only 2% believe they will end up in Hell.

Why is it that most of us think we'll go to Heaven when we die? The rich man was surprised and shocked that he ended up in a place of torment. I'm afraid that he won't be alone.

Let me summarize what we can learn about the afterlife from Luke 16.

1. The dead are still alive. Both Lazarus and the rich man survived their own funerals. We think this is the land of the living but it's really not. This is the land of the dying. When we die, we wake up to spend eternity in either Heaven or Hell.

2. The dead retain their personalities and their essential character. Lazarus is still Lazarus and the rich man is still the rich man. Even in Hell the rich man could see, hear, feel, recognize, remember, speak, reflect, plead, suffer, and think ahead. There was only one thing he couldn't do. He couldn't get out.

3. Death marks the final separation between the saved and the lost. Once in Heaven, always in Heaven; once in Hell, always in Hell. No one can pass from one place to another.

4. Hell is a place of personal suffering. Three times Jesus mentions the torment, suffering, and agony of the rich man. Hell is where God's wrath is poured out. The Bible speaks of a fire that never burns out, a place where the worm does not die, a place of darkness and gloom where there is continual weeping and gnashing of teeth.

That reminds me of the evangelist who was exhorting people to flee from the wrath to come. "I warn you," he thundered, "that there will be weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth!" Suddenly an old woman in the gallery stood up and said, "Sir," she shouted, "I have no teeth!" To which he replied, "Madam, teeth will be provided!"

5. Those in Hell cry out for help that will never come. Contrary to popular opinion, Hell is not a place of one big long party with all of your buddies. None of the rich man's "prayers" were answered nor could they be.

The rich man who is still in Hell today knows at least three things:

- There is no way out for him.
- People can avoid Hell if they put their faith in Jesus.
- Someone needs to warn people about the danger they are in.

If what I have just said is true, then you must do whatever it takes to make sure you go to Heaven and you must make sure at all costs that you do not go to Hell.

I should go to Hell because that is where I belong. But, I am going to Heaven because Jesus Christ died on a cross for me. He took my punishment so that I could go free. Friend, God has done everything necessary for you go to Heaven. His creation reflects His handiwork. He's given you the Bible, Christian friends, and multiple opportunities to get on the road to Heaven. God has posted an enormous stop sign on the road to Hell and the sign is in the shape of a cross. If the road to Hell is paved with good intentions, the road to Heaven is paved with the blood of Christ.

Let me say it clearly. You don't have to go to Hell. God has provided a way of escape for you. But even God's way of escape will do you no good unless you reach out and take it. If you ignore Jesus, there is no hope for you. God doesn't have a Plan B for those who reject his Son.

The Road to Heaven Illustrated

In a recent interview with Fidel Castro, he was asked if he spends time pondering his own death. Here's how he answered that question: "I have never thought much about that because I don't attach much importance to what happens after I die" (WORLD, 3/31/01). This sounds exactly like something the rich man would have said before he died.

In an effort to be as clear as I possibly can be, I want to conclude this morning by walking you through some action steps from Luke 16.

I've always liked new inventions. I read about a new product recently that sounds fascinating. The LifeClock ticks off your remaining time on earth in hours, minutes, seconds -- and even tenths of seconds. All you have to do is enter in some data and the clock begins the countdown. I went on their web site this week and found out that based on my age and lifestyle, I'm going to live until I'm 84!

[Pick up clock]

I don't think this invention will be a best-seller because most of us don't want to be reminded of how much time we have left. It's even hard for us to say the word, "death" or "dead." Have you ever noticed that instead we use phrases like "passed away," "departed," "no longer with us," or "passed on"? Death is an ugly word, isn't it?

I know some of you have experienced death recently. Perhaps someone close to you has died and you're still reeling from the impact. Like an unwelcome intruder, death has made a rude entrance into your family or friendships. I hurt with you this morning -- and God certainly feels your pain.

The problem with death is that it's almost always unexpected. Even when a doctor says that someone is about to die, death still has a way of ambushing us. I've been in a few hospital rooms when someone has died -- and it's always abrupt, even when a family is somewhat prepared for it. Death was certainly a surprise for those 25 people who were dancing at a wedding reception in Jerusalem when the floor suddenly gave way and they all died.

Job 18:14 refers to death as the "king of terrors." I don't think the rich man in our story thought much about dying. He was too busy with life, too caught up in this world to even think about the next one. Lazarus, on the other hand, probably thought about death every day. He wondered if he would even wake up the next morning. The clock was ticking for both of them. Even though only one of them was cognizant of the seconds slipping away, they both were moving closer to eternity each day.

[Put the clock on the stand]

I've been to quite a few funerals in my life -- in fact, I'm doing one this afternoon. It might surprise you to know that the Bible says that it's actually a good thing to go to a funeral. Ecclesiastes 7:2 says, "It's better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of every man; the living should take this to heart."

In other words, it's more profitable to go to a funeral than to go to a party. At least when we're at a funeral, we're forced to think about what will happen to us when we die. If the truth were known, many of us unconsciously think that we can beat the odds.

This verse is teaching that it's better to read the Obituary section of the paper than it is to read the Sports page. God says that it's more profitable to be reminded of death's reality than it is to just fill our lives with entertainment.

I don't know about you, but I now read the Obituary page. My dad always says that he reads it to see if his picture is there! I sometimes read about people to see what they accomplished in life. Now that I'm middle aged, I always look to see how old people are when they died.

[Pick up Obituary page and start reading it. Walk over to stand]

There are a lot of people on this page who were over the age of 70 when they died. Others died in the prime of their life. Man, I wonder if they were ready to go...

As I've talked to people, I've discovered that most of us have different ideas -- or different plans we're following that we think will get us to Heaven. The first plan is the Good Works plan. If you just do a lot of good things, if you help enough people, then God will let you into Heaven, right?

The problem with this approach is that it's never good enough. No matter how hard you try, you're still going to come up short. It's important to try to live a good life, but God says that it's not enough. Even when we try to do good, Isaiah 64:6 says, "all our righteous acts are like filthy rags." Being good is never good enough.

The other plan is called the "Why Worry?" plan. I know that some of you believe that everyone goes to Heaven when they die. I've heard it at almost every funeral I've been to. It goes something like this: "Well, this was too bad but at least we know she's in a better place now." I certainly understand the sentiment and can appreciate the grief that people experience, but this statement reveals an underlying belief that many of us have -- that when people die, they just go to Heaven. Let me ask you a question: how do you know someone goes to Heaven when they die?

Jesus made it very clear that there is a place called Heaven and a place called Hell. And, most people avoid the narrow road that leads to Heaven. Matthew 7:13-14: "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."

Many are on the road that leads to destruction. After we die we'll have to give an account for our life. When we stand before God, there will be no secrets. Everything will be made known. Those who have lived only for themselves, and had no room for God in their life will be like the rich man who is in torment in Hell. Only those who put their faith and trust in Jesus Christ will go to Heaven when they die.

A payment has to be made for sin. A sentence must be carried out. Because of our sins we all deserve to go to Hell. But, Jesus died in our place on the Cross. He died to bridge the gap between a holy God and sinful people. Those who admit their sinfulness and transfer their trust to Christ by receiving Him into their life, will go to Heaven. Those who do not, will spend eternity in torment.

The Bible is clear. Hebrews 9:27 says that, "...Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment." There's no getting around the fact that judgment follows death.

Friends, the "Why Worry?" plan and the "Good Works" plan are both fraught with problems. There will be a time of judgment [hold up gavel]. And because of this, some of you do need to worry because your good works aren't good enough.

[Place gavel on stand]

The rich man was not only suffering the pain of Hell, he was devastated by the fact that his family members were going to end up in the same place. He wanted the former beggar to go and warn his loved ones about the reality of Hell.

What the Bible is saying is that there are no free rides to Heaven. You don't get there automatically or by cashing in your frequent flyer miles. It's not easy to get into Heaven because you need to have the right paperwork.

When we first went to Mexico five years ago we had to have our passports or a valid birth certificate to cross the border. We needed proof of our nationality and of our birth. In order to get into heaven, we need a certificate that declares that we've been born...again.

[Hold up birth certificate].

Jesus has already filled out the paperwork when He died on the cross as payment for your sins. In order to have your certificate validated you need to receive what Jesus has done on your behalf.

Don't be like the family of this rich man. They were busy with their lives and their own concerns. They were too wound up to slow down and listen to what God has to say in the Bible. They were too preoccupied to receive their birth certificate to Heaven.

When Beethoven was on his deathbed, he shook his fist at Heaven and reportedly said, "I need more time. I need more time!" Friend, when it's time to go, it's time to go.

Let me ask you a personal question. What will happen to you when you die? You only have two options -- if you have a second birth, you'll go to Heaven. If you don't, you'll have to face the judgment of God, and you'll then spend eternity in Hell. There's no halfway house. No second chances. If you don't take steps in this life to get ready to die, it will be too late once you die.

I remember seeing a tract once with the title, "What you have to do to go to Hell." When you open it up, the inside was totally blank. You don't have to do anything to go to Hell...just continue as you are.

What must I do to go to Heaven? Acts 16:31 is clear: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved." Do nothing and be lost. Trust Christ and be saved.

Once you receive your birth certificate, your name will be recorded in God's book of life. Then, you can await that glorious day when your name will be called -- and you'll cross the border to Heaven.

In the Twinkling of an Eye – Jeff Williams

Three weeks ago I was invited to go to the hospital and talk to a man who wanted to get himself ready to die. He had been fighting some serious health problems and he knew that he was at the end of his life. He wanted to get right with God before it was too late.

As I sat next to him I shared the story of the two thieves on the cross. When they were first hung on the cross the Bible says that they both were hurling insults and blasphemies at Jesus. As the day went on however, one of them stopped and began to talk to Jesus. He recognized that Jesus had done nothing wrong and he wanted Jesus to remember him when He came into His kingdom. Jesus then spoke words of grace and love to this criminal when he tenderly replied, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

I told my friend that it didn't matter how he had been living. It didn't matter how many times he had been to church. What mattered was what he was going to do with Jesus. I then explained how I became a Christian and then walked him through what he needed to do if he wanted to be cross the border into heaven.

With tears in his eyes he prayed and asked Jesus to save him from his sins as he put his faith and trust in Him for salvation. By the time he was done, we were both crying. I'll never forget what happened next. After I shared some Scripture with him to let him know that he was now ready to die and gave him assurance that he would be in Heaven, I went out into the hallway to talk to his daughter.

While we were talking a lullaby starting playing over the hospital sound system. They do that whenever a baby is born to let everyone know that a new life has come into the world. I turned to this man's daughter and said, "They're playing that song for your dad in celebration of his new birth!"

My friend died early Thursday morning and I can tell you with full assurance today that he's now in heaven with Abraham and Lazarus, worshipping the one who alone is worthy of our praise.

What will happen when you die?

Luke 17:7-10 Settling the Servanthood Issue

Play “Me Church” Video (<http://www.worshiphousemedia.com>). We live in a “me-first” culture that encourages us to think of ourselves first and others...well, rarely. We’re told to focus on our self-image, to be involved in self-actualization and to be self-reliant. There’s even an entire magazine called “Self” just in case we start thinking too much of others and need help getting the focus back on ourselves. Because we’re saturated with messages about self, it’s easy to bring this mentality to church and expect the congregation to cater to us and to treat God like a genie whose only purpose is to meet our needs. In his book called “The Ministry Playbook,” Henry Klopp writes: “Many Christians believe the way to evaluate the health and effectiveness of the church is by figuring out the degree to which the church meets their own individual needs...”

We’re beginning a new series today called “Living Beyond Myself.” Since we follow a Savior who serves us, how can we not get out of our seats and into service? We need some help learning how to live beyond self so that we can stop defaulting to our selfish settings. I’m praying that during this sermon series God will ignite a fire that will revitalize our hearts and burn within us a white-hot passion for servanthood. Our focus today is on settling the servanthood issue. Here’s our menu of messages:

- September 3: Doing What You Were Made to Do (Ephesians 2:10)
- September 10: Serving According to Your Shape (1 Corinthians 12:1-7)
- September 17: Jumping in to Ministry (1 Peter 4:10)

Did you know that the word “servant” in one form or another is used over 1,000 times in the Bible? That means it’s a very big deal to God and should be to us as well. In Numbers 12:7, God refers to Moses with these words: “My servant Moses; he is faithful in all my house.” Abraham, David and Job are called “my servant” by God. When Paul, James, Peter and Jude introduced themselves in their letters, the first thing they did was to identify themselves as servants. Here’s just a sampling:

Romans 1:1: “Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus...”

James 1:1: “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ...”

2 Peter 1:1: “Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ...”

Jude 1: “Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ...”

Do you see yourself as a servant or just a volunteer? There’s a world of difference between the two. A volunteer picks and chooses when and even whether to serve. A servant serves no matter what. A volunteer serves when convenient; a servant serves out of commitment. 1 Peter 2:16 challenges us to “...live as servants of God.” As I survey Scripture, you and I are called first to be servants, and second to serve. We must settle the fact that we are called to a life of servanthood that leads to loving acts of service. Serving flows from the heart of a servant. We could say it this way: Serving doesn’t make you a servant; but if you are a servant you will serve.

I am honored to be part of a church that is saturated with servants. As Pastor Dick said last week, we don’t want to be a church where 20% of our people do 80% of the work. I’m not sure what the percentage is here, but I know that many of you are sold out to the Savior and to selfless service. 57 of you made a commitment last week to be involved in serving this fall. That is amazing but not surprising because this church is filled with faithful servants. I had the privilege of meeting with our ministry coordinators this past Wednesday night and was reminded again of how committed so many of you are to ministry. You have unlocked the secrets of serving and you wouldn’t trade it for anything.

One day Jesus revealed the importance of serving with no strings attached. I should warn you ahead of time that this passage is not for the faint of heart. If we’re serious about growing in depth this year, our spiritual syllabus contains some pretty tough assignments. Please turn in your Bible to Luke 17:7-10 and follow along as I read: “Suppose one of you had a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, ‘Come along now and sit down to eat’? Would he not rather say, ‘Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink’? Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.’”

Serving doesn’t make you a servant; but if you are a servant you will serve. I see four servanthood secrets from this passage.

1. A servant’s work is not always glamorous (7a). Look with me at the first part of verse 7: “Suppose one of you had a servant plowing or looking after sheep.” This particular farmer probably only had one servant who had to multi-task throughout the day. He’d do the back-breaking work of plowing and then the tedious work of watching sheep. His muscles would scream and then he may

have screamed out of boredom. And then he'd get up the next day and do it all over again. Kind of sounds like some of our jobs, doesn't it? My guess is that over time, his daily responsibilities became routine and his tasks were not thrilling. Not only that, he may have felt lonely since there were no other servants around.

Let me state the obvious. Sometimes serving is not very sensational. It involves exertion and often exacts a price. If you find yourself strutting about how much you serve, you better check your motives. In fact, if we're not willing to sacrifice something, we've not really settled the servanthood issue. Bill Hybels puts it this way: "I would never want to reach out someday with a soft, uncalloused hand – a hand never dirtied by serving – and shake the nail-pierced hand of Jesus." When we took Emily to Moody Bible Institute a week ago Wednesday, I was very moved when I saw Dr. Easley, the president of MBI, dressed in khakis and tennis shoes out in the parking lot. Whenever a new student would drive up, he would greet him or her and then start unloading the car. When he was done, he went on to the next car. That is servant leadership at its finest.

Sometimes we recruit people to a ministry by telling them how fun and easy it is to serve. Actually, we make this same mistake when we urge people to get saved by promising them a happy life. You and I must stop soft-selling the Savior and the life of servanthood. 2 Timothy 3:12 says: "In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." There's really no way around it. When we follow Christ we are saying goodbye to self and when we serve we are giving up all rights.

We've been praying and pleading with people to plug into AWANA this fall. But let me say that this is not a casual commitment. You cannot just stay home when you're tired or not show up when something else comes up. It's a sacrificial commitment that sometimes is not very glamorous. You'll be around sweaty kids during game time but you'll also have the satisfaction of seeing the Scriptures come alive and boys and girls come to salvation. Is it easy? No, it isn't. But it's worth it.

Fred Craddock, in a message to ministers, once said: "To give my life for Christ appears glorious. To pour myself out for others...to pay the ultimate price of martyrdom – I'll do it. I'm ready, Lord, to go out in a blaze of glory...it would be easy to go out in a flash of glory; it's harder to live the Christian life little by little over the long haul." He then tells a story about a wealthy man who handed his pastor a check for fifty thousand dollars. The pastor looked at it and then handed it back to the man and said: "Go cash it in for quarters or dollars and spend fifty cents or a dollar at a time doing the Lord's work." The man was flustered and said, "But that will take the rest of my life!" "Precisely," replied the pastor. "That's the point." Incidentally, now that I've made the point, if you have a check for \$50,000 we'd gladly accept it to help pay off the Family Life Center!

I shared Proverbs 14:4 with a couple ministry leaders the other night because this verse reminds me that ministry is always messy. Things break, people drop the ball, and they make a mess. Listen to these words in the King James Version: "Where no oxen are, the crib is clean..." If we don't want to paint or clean or straighten or fix, then we shouldn't be open for ministry. Our deacons certainly understand this as they do a great job of improving and fixing and making sure everything gets clean every week. They could use some help beginning next Saturday as we put a new roof on the old part of the building.

Serving doesn't make you a servant; but if you are a servant you will serve.

2. A servant's service never ends (7b-8). After working all day, the servant comes back to the Master's house. He's probably tired and hungry but it still is not time to relax. Here's the principle. A servant's service may change locale and the specific job description may be in flux but the truth of the matter is that service never ends. Actually, the job description for a servant is very simple and straightforward: "Do everything your Master commands." Let's listen to how Jesus said it in the second half of verse 7 and verse 8: "Would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat'? Would he not rather say, 'Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink'?"

The servant moves from outdoors to indoors, from day to evening, and from hard labor to home life. He goes from the fields to fixing food. Don't miss this truth. A servant serves whenever, wherever, for whomever, doing whatever it takes. We could say it this way: "It's not break time yet." We talk a lot about serving opportunities in the church, but we're actually to be serving all the time. Matthew Henry says that we must make "the end of one service the beginning of another...when we have been working for God, we must still wait on God...continually." That means when you get up you serve your family, when you go to work you serve your boss and co-workers, when you come home you serve your family, when you go out into the community you serve, and you serve in at least one ministry at church.

I heard about a little girl who finally learned to tie her shoes. Instead of being excited, she was overcome with tears. Her dad bent down and asked her why she was crying. "I have to tie my shoes," she said. Her dad responded, "You just learned how. It's not that hard." The little girl started wailing and said, "I know, but now I'm going to have to do it for the rest of my life." I suspect that some of us feel like we've already put our time in. We've done the hard labor and now we feel like it's time to sit and relax a bit. Friend, if you're alive, you're still a servant. The location and intensity of your serving may change as the seasons of your life change, but no Christ-follower has the option of sitting down to have his or her needs met, when there are still things to do.

Notice that the servant is to spend time preparing and getting himself ready and then he is to serve. These are good words to help

us make sure we are prayed up and studied up and pumped up to serve. The servant had to get himself ready before he could wait on his master. If you're teaching, make sure you have your lesson ready. If you're a small group leader, it's a good idea to have the chapter completed (I need that reminder sometimes). If you plug into AWANA, make sure your heart is right before you come. When you go to the PTA meeting at school, make sure you're prayed up. When you look for ways to serve your neighbors get yourself ready by thinking through what their needs are.

The key is to be a servant, not a slacker. I heard about a company that felt like they had to shake some things up so they hired a new CEO. His number one job was to get rid of all slackers. On his first tour of the building he noticed a guy leaning against a wall, not doing anything. Seeing this as an opportunity to show everyone he meant business, he went up to the guy and asked, "How much money do you make a week?" Undaunted, the young man looked at him and said, "I make \$200 a week. Why?" The CEO then reached into his pocket, pulled out \$200 in cash and screamed at him, "Here's a week's pay, now get out and don't come back!" Feeling pretty good about his decisive decision, the CEO looked around the room and asked, "Does anyone want to tell me what that slacker did here, anyway?" With a sheepish grin, one of the workers muttered, "He's the pizza delivery guy."

The servant in the story Jesus told is able to sit down to a meal only after he has served his master. Likewise, there is a time coming when we will receive a reward, but it's still in the future, isn't it? Until then, keep serving. D.L. Moody once said, "The reward of service is more service." 1 Corinthians 15:58: "Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain." In Revelation 22:12, Jesus says: "Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done."

Ray Stedman tells the following story. "Years ago I heard of a missionary couple returning from Africa in the days of Teddy Roosevelt. It happened that after years of service they came back on the same ship as President Roosevelt, who was returning from a big-game hunting expedition in Africa. When they pulled into New York harbor there was a band playing the president's favorite songs, and all the high officials of the city were there to meet him. But the missionary couple slipped off the ship unnoticed, and rented a run-down flat on the East Side of New York. The man was utterly crushed, and said to his wife, 'It isn't fair, it just isn't fair! Here we are, we haven't any money, and we don't know who is going to take care of us or where we are going. God has promised great things, but nothing's happened. We've given him everything we've got, and what has he done for us? But just look at what happens when the president goes on a big-game hunt! It isn't fair!'

His wife said, 'Dear, I know it isn't fair...Why don't you go into the bedroom and talk to the Lord about it, and see what he has to say?' He went in and knelt by the bed, alone. He was there a long time, but when he came out his face was alight...She said, 'What happened?' And he said, 'I got down on my knees and poured out the whole story to the Lord. I told him that I thought it was so unfair... I told him that he was treating us all wrong. But you know what the Lord said to me? It was almost as though I could hear the voice, he leaned down and said, 'But you're not home yet.'"

Serving doesn't make you a servant; but if you are a servant you will serve. Why? Because you're not home yet.

3. A servant should not expect to be thanked (9). After going all out and working from sunup to sundown, the servant is no doubt tired. A word of appreciation would mean so much to him, but it never comes. Look at verse 9: "Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do?" The implied answer is a strong "no." The word "thank" means to have gratitude or to be grateful. The idea is if the master expresses gratitude it could be construed as a debt that must somehow be settled to even the score. This is absurdly arrogant as Job 22:2 points out: "Can a man be of benefit to God?"

Some of us think that God somehow owes us for all that we've done for Him. The Pharisees believed that their deeds put God in their debt. This kind of thinking gets us in deep trouble because God doesn't owe us anything. In fact, according to 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, God doesn't owe us, He owns us: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body."

We are not entitled to a word of thanks or appreciation. Our focus is often on our feelings whereas this servant was focused on just doing his job. Here's the amazing thing. The farthest thing from his mind was the feeling that he should be thanked for doing what he was supposed to do. Too many of us serve with way too many expectations. This gets us frustrated and angry and mad and we determine to never serve again because no one thanked us, or because it didn't go like we wanted it to. God does not need us to serve Him; it's our duty and delight and He is under no obligation to reward us.

Let me clarify something. I don't think it's wrong to show appreciation when someone is serving. In fact, we need to do more of that. Most people, including me, get discouraged and a word of encouragement can go a long way. Hebrews 3:13 says that we are to encourage each other every twenty four hours: "But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness." The theme verse for our women's mentoring ministry is Proverbs 25:11: "A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver." What I am saying is that it is dangerous to expect affirmation and wrong for us to expect acknowledgment and make that the motivation for our service. Serving doesn't make you a servant; but if you are a servant

you will serve.

4. A servant does what is expected (10). Jesus concludes this story with some corrective words to those of us who attend the church of “me, myself and I” in verse 10: “So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.’” Unfortunately, too many of us want to know what serving will cost us and how it will benefit us. If the benefits outweigh the costs, and we can fit it into our schedule, then maybe we will do a little bit of ministry. This verse helps us see what being a servant is all about. A servant’s heart is intent upon, and his will is bound to, the will and wishes of another. If I am your servant, what you say goes. Someone put it this way, “Regardless of how much we do, we cannot do more than is expected of us.” Can we really say that we’ve “done everything we’ve been told to do?”

Instead of having a feeling of entitlement, we need to see ourselves as unworthy servants. The idea in the Greek is that we are “unworthy of any praise.” It means “no one owes me anything extra.” My observation is that the happiest servants are those who consider themselves to be unworthy. In 2 Samuel 23:13-17, David exhibits this attitude when three of his “mighty men” show their devotion by risking their lives to bring him water. Astonishingly, he would not drink it but instead “poured it out before the Lord” because he said he wasn’t worthy of such devotion. Unfortunately, too many of us drink up praise and admiration, seeking to be exalted and affirmed rather than to be humble before the Master.

One of the best biblical images of this single-minded resolve to deflect devotion from self to the Savior is found in Psalm 123:2: “As the eyes of slaves look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maid look to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the LORD our God...” When the master moves his finger, the servant falls in line. When he says, “jump” the servant says, “how high?” The servant does not waffle or hedge or complain or bargain or debate. He or she simply obeys like the child Samuel who responded to the Lord’s voice in 1 Samuel 3:9 by saying, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

God hasn’t called us to be sensational; He’s called us to be servants. Lorne Sanny, the founder of the Navigators, was once asked how we can really know when we have the attitude of a servant. His answer is to the point and very profound. It’s worth pondering: “You know you’re a servant by how you act when you’re treated like one.” When you’re treated like a servant, do you get offended? When someone forgets to say thanks do you go in the tank? Do you think you’re worthy of recognition? Or do you say, “I just got treated better than I should, because I’m not just a servant, I am an ‘unworthy’ servant.”

Gayle Erwin, in his book called, “The Jesus Style,” writes: “A servant’s job is to do all he can to make life better for others...a servant’s first interest is not himself but others.” A lifestyle of servanthood flies in the face of most Americans because we’ve been led to believe that the way to be happy is to gratify our physical and emotional desires. In a recent Breakpoint Commentary called “Vanity of Vanities,” Mark Earley points out that Americans will spend \$22 billion on luxury bathroom items alone, ten times what is spent on AIDS research. While Americans are wealthier and healthier than they were fifty years ago, the number of people who say they are very unhappy has risen 20 percent. Earley argues that since most of us believe our lives are our own, then it’s up to us to “maximize comfort and ease pain.” Quoting J.P. Moreland, in his new book, “The Lost Virtue of Happiness,” happiness does not come from a life filled with self-gratification: “Real life does not come naturally. It is counterintuitive. It’s a skill we have to learn. That’s because the way to real life is not something we get, but something we give” (www.breakpoint.org). Jesus said it this way in Matthew 16:25: “For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.”

The issue is really one of obedience. Am I going to serve myself or serve others? The servant does his duty out of devotion to the master. Part and parcel of living out the second ingredient of our vision statement, as Pastor Dick reminded us, is to grow in depth. We do that by diving deep with God so that we do our duty with devotion to our Master. It was Kierkegaard who said, “It’s hard to believe, not because it’s hard to understand, but because it’s hard to obey.” That’s true, isn’t it? Serving doesn’t make you a servant; but if you are a servant you will serve.

Let’s summarize the secrets of servanthood:

1. A servant’s service is not always glamorous.
2. A servant’s service never ends.
3. A servant should not expect to be thanked.
4. A servant does what is expected.

Application

It’s not “me-first” or even “we-first.” It’s got to be “He-first.” We need to be involved in service, not “serve-us.” How do we do this? Let me give some practical applications.

1. Surrender first to the Savior. The first place to start is by making sure that you have surrendered to the Savior by being saved and

that you are a devoted disciple. One way you can publicly demonstrate your commitment to Christ is by following Him in believer's baptism. Our next service is scheduled for Sunday, October 8th. After you surrender, you will want to serve Him, not because you have to, but because you want to. You'll live as a servant because you love Him as your Savior. And, when you realize that He is committed to serve you, you'll want to do all you can to serve Him and others. Luke 22:27: "But I am among you as one who serves."

2. Choose to be a servant, not a volunteer. Richard Foster, in his book "Celebration of Discipline," writes: "There's a difference between choosing to serve and choosing to be a servant." We could say it this way: Don't serve until you've settled the servanthood issue; but once you've settled it, don't ever stop serving. In John 13, we read about Jesus washing the dirty feet of His disciples. He did this in large part to set an example of what servanthood is all about. He concludes the lesson with these words in John 13:17: "Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them." Have you ever been to a foot washing service? Well, we're going to have one right now. When the ushers get to your row, those of you at the end of each aisle take the container of water and the towel. I'm going to ask everyone to remove their shoes and socks and turn to the person on your left.

I'm just kidding. You can breathe again. With thanks to Dave Stone for this idea, let me ask a couple questions. How did you feel when you thought something bizarre was about to happen? Did you feel incredibly apprehensive and uncomfortable? You were uneasy because either you didn't want to handle the feet of the person next to you or you didn't want someone else to see your feet, or both. It doesn't really matter what camp you were in because either one comes from the same root cause. We want to preserve our dignity, don't we? We're prideful people. We don't want to do menial tasks like washing someone else's feet and we certainly don't want someone to wash ours. Friend, what unglamorous, undignified duty does God want you to do this week? You won't serve until you settle the servanthood issue.

3. Don't settle for any sourness in your spirit. This next action step may seem out of place but it's really not. In the verses before the passage we just studied, Jesus warns us about causing others to sin in verses 1-13: "Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come. It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin. So watch yourselves." At the ministry coordinators meeting on Wednesday, someone brought up the fact that both men and women, teenagers and children, need to be taught the importance of dressing modestly. That led to a long discussion and I was pleased to hear that both the women's mentoring and men's mentoring programs deal with purity. The student ministry also addresses this. Let me just say that how we dress can cause someone to stumble and even sin. I don't want to embarrass anyone this morning, or call anyone out, but could you take a look at what you wear and ask this question: Is this how Jesus wants me to dress? Would I be embarrassed for Him to see what I'm wearing? You may even want to ask a trusted friend to give you their advice.

In the very next breath Jesus tells us to make sure we are quick to forgive those who sin against us: "If he sins against you seven times in a day...forgive him." Is there anyone you've been withholding forgiveness from? Stay with me on this. When the disciples heard these challenging words they immediately asked Jesus for more faith. He told them that just a little bit of faith in a big God was all that they needed. He then told the story about the servant doing the will of His master. Why? Because everything ultimately comes down to obedience and submissive servanthood. Am I going to obey God and serve those around me by making sure I'm not causing them to sin? Am I going to forgive those who sin against me? Friend, this is only possible when you settle the servanthood issue and realize that life is not about you.

4. Sign up to serve. Deuteronomy 10:12 says: "...serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul." That reminds me of the story I heard about a pastor who grabbed a man named Jack by the hand after the service and pulled him aside. The pastor said to him, "You need to join the Army of the Lord, Jack." Jack quickly replied, "I'm already in the Army of the Lord, pastor." The pastor persisted, "Then why do I only see you on Christmas and Easter?" Jack looked around and then whispered, "I'm in the secret service."

While the best kind of service is done in secret, I'm afraid that too many believers have gone AWOL. Let me list several practical ways that you can enlist in the Lord's Army.

- Commit to listen to each message in this series. If you're out of town, listen online or download the manuscript at www.pontiacbible.org.
- In two weeks, we're going to have a Ministry Fair in the Family Life Center to help you learn more about the possibilities for service here at PBC.
- Attend wedding and baby showers. This is a very practical way for women to serve other women.
- I'm pleased to see how the Student Ministry is encouraging teens to join one of three serving teams as they focus this year on the theme "Created to Care." They also have three teams that adults can join.
- Serve in our community. Robert Lewis, in this book called, "The Church of Irresistible Influence," writes this: "Move from being

served to serving, from finding community in the church to impacting the community as the church, from retreating to influencing, from isolation to engagement.” We will have a float in next Sunday’s Thresherman’s Parade and need people to hand out flyers that point people to the big God we serve. We’re inviting people to go to our website where they can fill out a form to receive a free book.

It’s not about us, is it? This is not a “me-church.” Serving doesn’t make you a servant; but if you are a servant you will serve. Jesus said in Luke 12:48, “From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.”

Luke 17:7-10 Serving Without Thanks

A couple weeks ago our daughter Lydia and I visited the campus of Olivet University. We arrived early so we decided to just walk around on our own. After a few minutes we spotted a guy who was riding a bike. He looked older than a college student and had huge calves. We immediately surmised that he must be a member of the Chicago Bears because they hold their preseason training camp at ONU.

Later, while we were on our official tour of the campus, I kept looking for more Bear players, wishing that I would have worn my Packer hat just to antagonize them. About half-way through our tour, a custodian greeted us on the sidewalk with a big smile on his face. He introduced himself and told Lydia that he hoped she would attend ONU next year. I gave him a fake smile and kept looking around for more superstars.

As we neared the end of our tour, we saw a bunch of sports reporters and then this huge guy walked into the building we were in. I was excited by the possibility of meeting an NFL player. I didn’t recognize him but he was huge – maybe 6’ 8” and 300 pounds. I tried to make eye-contact but he simply ignored us and just walked by, like we didn’t even exist. I thought about telling him that the Pack will be back this year but thought better of it.

As I reflected on this, it hit me that I was more interested in meeting an overpaid superstar than I was in talking to a sincere overlooked servant who keeps the buildings clean. As we continue in our summer series called, “Practical Parables,” we’re going to learn how we can keep serving even if no one notices.

Did you know that the word “servant” in one form or another is used over 1,000 times in the Bible? That means it’s a very big deal to God and should be to us as well. When the Apostle Paul introduced himself in his letters, he would start with his name and then describe his nature. Here’s an example from Romans 1:1: “Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus...” He tells us who he is (his name) and then what he is (a servant). This is his fundamental identity.

Are You a Servant or a Volunteer?

Let me ask you a question. What’s the difference between a servant and a volunteer? [Ask for answers] A volunteer picks and chooses when and even whether to serve. A servant serves no matter what. A volunteer serves when convenient; a servant serves out of commitment. Someone said it well: “The servant does what he is told when he is told to do it. The volunteer does what he wants to do when he feels like doing it.”

Friends, Jesus didn’t recruit volunteers; He calls us to be servants. Listen to these words from Carlton Coon: “Everyone in our church is a servant....Jesus never asked His followers to give a few hours of their day off. He did call them to give everything for the sake of the kingdom...most church volunteers have to be cornered, coddled and convinced that their participation won’t take up too much of their time...the church doesn’t need more volunteers who give away spare time. We need servants whose lives belong to the Lord.” 1 Peter 2:16 challenges us to “...live as servants of God.” We could say it like this: The issue is not whether we will serve but where we will serve.

One day Jesus revealed the importance of serving without being thanked for it. I should warn you ahead of time that this passage is probably not what you want to hear before our picnic. It’s quite a difficult and demanding little story. Please turn in your Bible to Luke 17:7-10 and follow along as I read: “Suppose one of you had a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, ‘Come along now and sit down to eat’? Would he not rather say, ‘Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink’? Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.’”

The issue is not whether we will serve but where we will serve. I see four standards for servanthood from this story.

1. A servant’s work is not always sensational (7a). Check out the first part of verse 7: “Suppose one of you had a servant plowing or

looking after sheep.” The word Jesus uses in this story for servant is *doulos*, or a “bond-slave.” This basically means that the servant is attached to the owner. This particular farmer probably only had one servant who had to multi-task throughout the day. He’d do the back-breaking work of plowing and then the wearisome work of watching sheep. His muscles would scream and then he may have screamed out of boredom. And then he’d get up the next day and do it all over again. Kind of sounds like some of our jobs, doesn’t it? My guess is that over time, his daily responsibilities became routine and his tasks were not thrilling.

Let me state the obvious. Sometimes serving is not very sensational because we’re called to be faithful in some pretty ordinary tasks. Serving involves exertion and often exacts a price. If you find yourself strutting about how much you serve, you better check your motives. Our daughter Emily shared with us something a missionary told her this summer. He and his wife have ministered to Muslims for over twenty years and sometimes he’s asked if being a missionary is fun. His answer is somewhat jarring: “Our ministry is difficult; we don’t have much fun but God gives us great joy.”

Sometimes we recruit people to a ministry by telling them how fun and easy it is to serve. We need to stop doing this because serving is strenuous and not always sensational.

2. Serving must be sustained (7b-8). After working all day, the servant comes back to the Master’s house. He’s probably tired and hungry but he still has work to do. Here’s the principle. A servant’s service may change locale and the specific job description may be in flux but the truth of the matter is that our serving must be sustained. The issue is not whether we will serve but where we will serve. Actually, the job description for a servant is very simple and straightforward: “Do everything your Master commands.”

Let’s listen to how Jesus said it in the second half of verse 7 and verse 8: “Would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, ‘Come along now and sit down to eat’? Would he not rather say, ‘Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink’”? The servant moves from outdoors to indoors, from daylight to dusk and from hard labor to home life. He goes from the fields to fixing food. Don’t miss this truth. A servant serves whenever, wherever, for whomever, doing whatever it takes.

One of the best places to exhibit serving is within your family situation. How would marriages be changed if husbands and wives would serve each other instead of finding fault with one another? I was reminded again this week in the book “Love Dare” about the importance of not just following our feelings but instead leading our heart by doing acts of service to our spouses. Think of what could happen in a home if siblings would look for simple ways to serve a sister or a brother. How would things be different if children would serve their parents? Or if parents looked for tangible ways to serve their kids? In addition, can you imagine what would happen in this community if families would not only serve one another but would serve as families at the Food Pantry or by helping someone move?

I suspect that some of us feel like we’ve already put our time in. We’ve done the hard labor and now we feel like it’s time to sit and relax a bit. Friend, if you’re alive, you’re still a servant. The location and intensity of your serving may change as the seasons of your life change, but no Christ-follower has the option of sitting down to have his or her needs met, when there are still things to do.

The key is to be a servant, not a slacker. I am so moved by the caliber of our committed servants at PBC whose serving has been sustained for a long time. In just one week, this is what I observed (Note: I’m not going to use names because these servants don’t want that kind of recognition).

* This past Saturday, GTLC worked to shingle someone’s house. A number of women provided food for the crew and some of the guys were there all day. On Monday a few guys showed up to work again and then on Thursday they were back at it.

* On Sunday night PBC hosted a community-wide Back2School prayer time. I was struck by all the people serving as we had greeters, nursery workers and people who led in prayer for different requests. One person in particular, who provided the leadership for this, did a lot of work ahead of time to make it happen. When I tried to thank her, it just “bounced off” her. Actually, it “bounced up” as she quickly gave all the credit to God. By the way, we’re beginning a “Call This Fall to Pray” emphasis where you can sign up for 30 minute time slots to pray for our community, our ministries and our missionaries. These sheets are available in the back of the room.

* On Wednesday afternoon, two women were working in the library. When I came back that night, they were still hard at work.

* A husband and wife, who are both new believers, come to PBC once a week and clean both kitchens.

* Related to this, a team from the Women’s Ministry met on Thursday to organize and clean up the clutter in the old kitchen.

* A father and his children sanitize nursery toys during the week.

* A mother and daughter are committed to make enough cookies to be stored in the freezer so we can give them to our Sunday morning guests.

- * The Junior High leadership team met in the middle of the week for some training.
- * Several small group leaders got together early one morning this week to support one another and receive some training.
- * A handful of people tend a garden on the PBC property and give food away to those in need.
- * A group moved our equipment over here yesterday so we could have this service.
- * An entire family worked together on all the food details for the picnic to follow the service.

Serving is not always sensational and it must be sustained. Why? Because the issue is not whether we will serve but where we will serve.

3. Serving is a sacrifice (9). After going all out and working from sunup to sundown, the servant is no doubt tired. A word of appreciation would mean so much to him, but it never comes. Look at verse 9: "Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do?" The implied answer is a strong "no." The word "thank" means to have gratitude or to be grateful. The idea is if the master expresses gratitude it could be construed as a debt that must somehow be settled to even the score. This is absurdly arrogant as Job 22:2 points out: "Can a man be of benefit to God?" We can't impress God in such a way that He will feel obligated to give us some special honor.

Some of us think that God somehow owes us for all that we've done for Him. He doesn't favor us especially because we've done something special – we're servants and therefore we must serve. The Pharisees believed that their deeds put God in their debt. This kind of thinking gets us in deep trouble because God doesn't owe us anything. In fact, according to 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, God doesn't owe us, He owns us: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body."

We are not entitled to a word of thanks or appreciation. Our focus is often on our feelings whereas this servant was focused on just doing his job. Too many of us serve with way too many expectations. This gets us frustrated and angry and mad and we determine to never serve again because no one thanked us, or because it didn't go like we wanted it to. Remember that God does not need us to serve Him; it's our duty and delight and He is under no obligation to reward us.

We live in a culture where we're consumed with our "own rights" but Christ-followers must reject an attitude of entitlement that leads us to think we have a right to certain benefits or privileges. Consider the following statements that could be signs that you feel entitled:

- * I blame people for my failures or difficulties.
- * I'm frustrated over the gap between what I deserve and what I get.
- * I'm angry with people who fail me and I'm holding grudges.
- * I'm disappointed with God because He's not come through for me.

Brothers and sisters, let's get this straight: God created us for His glory. Listen to Romans 11:35-36: "Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen." I need to be reminded of 1 Corinthians 4:7: "What do you have that you did not receive?"

Let me clarify something. I don't think it's wrong to show appreciation when someone is serving. In fact, we need to do more of that. Most people, including me, get discouraged and a word of encouragement can go a long way. Hebrews 3:13 says that we are to encourage each other every twenty four hours: "But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness."

Serving is not always sensational, serving must be sustained, and serving is a sacrifice. There's one more serving standard...

4. Serving is satisfying (10). Jesus concludes this story with some corrective words in verse 10: "So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'" In the first part of the parable we're called to identify with the master but now with the words, "So you also..." we're to see our identity as servants. This verse helps us see what being a servant involves. A servant's heart is intent upon, and his will is bound to, the will and wishes of another. Someone put it this way, "Regardless of how much we do, we cannot do more than is expected of us." Can we really say that we've "done everything we've been told to do?"

Instead of having a feeling of entitlement, we need to see ourselves as unworthy servants. The idea in the Greek is that we are "unworthy of any praise." It means "no one owes me anything extra." It's like when we pay our taxes and we don't receive a thank

you note from the government – we’ve simply done what was expected of us. Likewise, we shouldn’t expect an extra reward for expected service. We’re to recognize our unworthiness and realize our obligation. Think of it this way – the Lord of glory has you in His service. In that sense, serving is very satisfying because it’s an honor and privilege!

One of the best biblical images of this single-minded resolve to deflect devotion from self to the Savior is found in Psalm 123:2: “As the eyes of slaves look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maid look to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the LORD our God...” When the master moves his finger, the servant falls in line. When he says, “jump” the servant says, “how high?” The servant does not waffle or hedge or complain or bargain or debate. He or she simply obeys like the child Samuel who responded to the Lord’s voice in 1 Samuel 3:9 by saying, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” Our society seems to be obsessed with helping people develop their self-esteem; Jesus is much more concerned that we understand ourselves to be unworthy servants.

Lorne Sanny, the founder of the Navigators, was once asked how we can really know when we have the attitude of a servant. His answer is to the point and worth pondering: “You know you’re a servant by how you act when you’re treated like one.” When you’re treated like a servant, do you get offended? When someone forgets to say thanks do you go in the tank? Do you think you’re worthy of recognition? Or do you say, “I just got treated better than I should because I am an ‘unworthy’ servant.”

The issue is really one of obedience. Am I going to serve myself or serve others? The servant does his duty out of devotion to the master. It was Kierkegaard who said, “It’s hard to believe, not because it’s hard to understand, but because it’s hard to obey.”

Next Steps

Serving is not always sensational, serving must be sustained, serving is a sacrifice, and yet serving is satisfying. As we begin a new ministry year, we need to be involved in service, not “serve-us.” How do we do this? Let me give four practical applications.

1. Surrender to the Savior. The first place to start is by making sure that you have surrendered to the Savior by being saved. After you surrender, you will want to serve Him, not because you have to, but because you get to. You’ll live as a servant because you love Jesus as your Savior. C.S. Lewis said, “The more we get what we now call ‘ourselves’ out of the way and let Him take us over, the more truly ourselves we become.” Let’s make sure our time, talents and treasures are at the disposal of the Master.

2. Choose to be a servant, not a volunteer. I saw a t-shirt recently that said, “Yes, the world DOES revolve around me!” And all God’s people said, “Not!” Is there anything uglier than spiritual arrogance? Richard Foster, in his book “Celebration of Discipline,” writes: “There’s a difference between choosing to serve and choosing to be a servant.” We could say it this way: Don’t serve until you’ve settled the servanthood issue; but once you’ve settled it, don’t ever stop serving. In what ways can you serve this fall? PBC is in need of servants, not just people to fill some slots.

3. Take the Master’s Steps. Part of our mission at PBC is to equip believers to grow and become more faithful. This reflects what’s in verse 8: “...Get yourself ready.” Last week Pastor Dick introduced some upcoming courses called “In the Master’s Steps” that are designed to equip us. Two of these will launch on Sunday, September 13th. During the 9:00 hour, Jeremy Leacock will be teaching a class to help us understand the Bible better and at 10:45, Ken Marley will be teaching about how to know Jesus better. In October Nathan Hilt will lead a course called, “Finding and Using Your Spiritual Gifts” and in November we’ll offer a class on Finances led by Bob Russell. Pastor Dick will also be teaching a class on Future Events. If we’re serious about serving, we must first be equipped. May I urge you to adjust your Sunday morning schedule so that you can get involved in one of these classes?

Related to this, if you’re serious about growing, then it’s important to start serving. According to the book, “Think Orange,” there are actually several catalysts for spiritual growth (Reggie Joiner, page 188). Life-changing truth helps us understand who God is and how we should live – that’s what we can learn in the Master’s Steps courses. That’s really the first and most important place to begin but there are some other growth catalysts:

* Spiritual Disciplines we develop that puts us in tune with God’s Spirit.

* Significant Relationships that God uses to prompt or encourage us.

* Pivotal Circumstances that cause us to depend on God in a new way.

* Personal Ministry that stretches us to tap into God’s power and purpose.

4. Restore your relationships. In the verses that come before the passage we just studied, Jesus warns us about causing others to sin in verses 1-3: “Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come. It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin. So watch yourselves.” In the very next breath Jesus tells us to make sure we’re quick to forgive those who sin against us: “If he sins against you seven times in a day...forgive him.” Is there anyone you’ve been withholding forgiveness from? When the disciples

heard these challenging words they immediately asked Jesus for more faith. He told them that just a little bit of faith the size of a mustard seed in a big God is all that they needed. How much faith do you need to forgive? As much faith as it takes to believe God has forgiven you.

When we avoid causing someone to stumble, that doesn't make us spiritual superstars – it's merely what's expected of us. When we forgive someone, we shouldn't look for a reward because that's just what Christ followers do. And when we serve we shouldn't expect that God is somehow indebted to us for our incredible sacrifice.

David Livingstone served as a missionary in Africa for 33 years. When he came home people tried to applaud him and heap accolades on him as a "superstar servant." Listen to how he viewed himself: "For my own part, I have never ceased to rejoice that God has appointed me to such an office. People talk of the sacrifice I have made in spending so much of my life in Africa. Can that be called a sacrifice which is simply paid back as a small part of a great debt owing to our God, which we can never repay? Is that a sacrifice which brings its own blest reward in healthful activity, the consciousness of doing good, peace of mind, and a bright hope of a glorious destiny hereafter? Away with the word in such a view, and with such a thought! It is emphatically no sacrifice. Say rather it is a privilege. Anxiety, sickness, suffering, or danger, now and then, with a foregoing of the common conveniences and charities of this life, may make us pause, and cause the spirit to waver, and the soul to sink; but let this only be for a moment. All these are nothing when compared with the glory which shall be revealed in and for us. I never made a sacrifice."

If someone were to come to visit the campus of PBC, would they see a few superstars or would they see a team of sincere servants who are working to connect others to Jesus and equip them to be growing and faithful followers?

We want to celebrate what God did through some of our servants this summer as they served Christ cross-culturally.

Summer Missionaries Interview

Luke 18 Our Just God

This past Monday I had the opportunity to play "Mr. Mom" while Beth attended a conference in Chicago. There is no doubt in my mind that Beth has a more difficult job than I do!

My greatest challenge came late morning when I was trying to give our baby Megan a bottle. Since Beth is nursing her, Megan has no interest in artificial leche that's the one word I know in Spanish. Being the resourceful person that I am, I decided to sit down on the couch, and watch "Judge Joe" on TV while I tried to figure out how to get some formula down Megan's throat. I was worried that she was going to dehydrate on me! Whenever I put the bottle in her mouth, she would just smile at me and push it away with her hands.

Finally, I came across a plan. I took the Playtex bottle in one hand and used my other hand to push the little bag of formula up into the bottle so the milk would spray out the nozzle or whatever it's called. Whenever Megan opened her mouth, I just aimed, and squirted. She didn't get much in her mouth but I did hear her swallow a couple times.

While Judge Joe was berating a young man in his TV courtroom, and Megan was wiping milk off her chin as it drooled down her neck, our 5-year-old Becky came into the room. She observed what I was doing, frowned a little bit and said, "Dad, do you really know what you're doing?"

Just then Judge Joe was lecturing the criminal on TV by asking him a similar question, "Son, did you really know what you were doing?" I was afraid that Becky and Megan were going to press charges so I quickly put the bottle down and listened intently to the judge conclude his remarks by saying, "I've seen your types before. Even if you didn't know what you were doing, I know what you're all about. You're guilty as charged. Now pay up!" I don't know how this guy got up the courage, but he yelled out at Joe the Judge, "That's not fair! I don't deserve that kind of punishment it was my fiancée's fault!"

Like Judge Judy on a different channel, Judge Joe seemed to enjoy dispensing justice maybe a little too much! I couldn't help but wonder the same thing his ruling didn't seem all that fair.

As we continue in our series called, "Getting to Know God," our focus this morning is on "Our Just God." Justice is not an external system to which God tries to adhere. He didn't have to go to law school or get a TV courtroom to learn how to apply the law. His justice comes out of his inner being and is based on His holiness, His truthfulness, and His righteousness. Moses put it this way in Deuteronomy 32:4: "He is the rock, His works are perfect, and all His ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is He."

God always acts in a way consistent with the requirements of His character as revealed in His law. He rules His creation with

honesty. He keeps His word. He renders to all creatures their due.

The word justice in the Bible refers to conformity to a rule or norm. God plays by the rules. The ultimate norm of justice is His own Holy character. There is a consistency in God, a straightness about Him. This is in contrast to humans, who are referred to as being unrighteous, or crooked. We refer to criminals as crooks because they are crooked -- they're not straight. Only God is. In all eternity, God has never done a crooked thing.

Biblical Survey

Let me give you a brief overview of some key passages that deal with God's justice:

Psalm 9:16: "The Lord is known by His justice."

Psalm 75:7: "But it is God who judges."

Proverbs 29:26: "Many seek an audience with a ruler, but it is from the Lord that man gets justice."

Daniel 9:14: "For the Lord our God is righteous in everything He does."

Our fascination for fairness is found not only in court and in real life, but also in the Bible. A case in point is a parable Jesus tells in Luke 18, which describes an incredibly corrupt legal system. It's a simple story with only two characters, a crooked judge and a desperate widow. Jesus told this story to show that God is the exact opposite of this type of judge. This profound parable touches on at least four points about God's justice:

We want it

We don't want it

We're going to get it

We may have to wait for it

We Want It

The first point, when it comes to justice is this: we want it.

Notice the picture Jesus paints in Luke 18:2-3: "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.'"

Judges during the time of Jesus were notorious for being crooked. Unless a plaintiff had influence and money to bribe his way to a verdict, he had no hope of ever getting his case settled. This widow didn't have a chance since she probably had little influence and even less money. She didn't measure up to the judge's standards -- crooked though they were. So she used the only weapon she had -- persistence! She knew she could never receive justice from this crooked judge unless she persisted.

What a contrast! He was the epitome of power and social status. She was on the lower rung of the cultural ladder. Widows back then had no clout, no cash, and no connections. They were easy prey for predators. And one day a thief came and robbed her blind. The widow then appeals to the judge for some justice. She doesn't seek vengeance; all she demands is justice. And so do we.

In New York City, 4 police officers were found not guilty in the death of Amadu Diallo, an African immigrant. Many minority groups are outraged. At the end of the lead story on the NBC Nightly News last night, the reporter said this, "There's a bitter feeling that justice has not been done."

Injustice leaves a bitter taste in our mouths. At school, when some bully shoves us or ridicules us, we demand justice. At work, when an employee lies to us, or when an employer falsely accuses us, we demand justice. In marriage, when a partner cheats on us or abandons us, we demand justice.

I've really enjoyed watching PCS volleyball games this year. I admit I didn't know many of the rules before the season started, but now I'm an expert. I've been intrigued by how the two referees call the game. One climbs a ladder and stands perched above the net so he or she can scan all the lines and keep an eye out for all infractions.

I remember one game a couple weeks ago when a ball was called out that sure looked like it was in. I remember thinking, "that's not fair you didn't even see where it landed!" Later, between the games, one of the refs who was perched on the ladder, turned to the crowd and asked us if we had any questions about volleyball. I was going to ask when he last had his eyes checked, but thought better of it!

Why was I so upset about a call? It's because I want justice I want things to be fair and if they're not, I at least want the calls to go in our favor...

Are you upset with any blown calls in your life? Are you angry with anyone today? Who is your adversary? How has he or she offended you? In what area of your life are you like this desperate widow? The truth is, when it comes to justice, we all want it.

We Don't Want It

The second truth about justice may sound contradictory when you first hear it: We Don't Want It.

R.C. Sproul recounts an experience he had teaching a freshman Old Testament course to 250 students at a Christian college. On the first day of class he went over the assignments very carefully, explaining that the course required three short term papers. He made it clear that the first one was due by noon on the last day of September no extensions would be given. If the paper was not turned in on time, the student would receive an F for the assignment.

On September 30th, 225 students turned in their paper, while 25 students stood quaking in terror, full of remorse. As they cried out for mercy, Dr. Sproul decided to give them a break. He then said, "Remember, the next assignment is due the last day of October." The students were very happy and promised to have their next assignment in on time.

On the last day of October, 200 students came with their papers. 50 students came empty-handed. They were nervous, but not in a panic. They told the professor, "We're sorry. Please give us one more chance. We promise it will never happen again."

The professor relented one more time but said, "This is the last time. If you are late for the next paper, it will be an F. No excuses and no whining. Is that clear?" They all nodded their heads in agreement.

What do you think happened on the last day of November? Right. Only 150 students came with their papers. The other 100 strolled into class utterly unconcerned. Dr. Sproul shouted out, "Where are your term papers?" One student replied, "Oh, don't worry, Prof, we're working on them. We'll have them in a couple days."

The professor then picked up his lethal black grade book and began taking down names. "Johnson! Do you have your paper?" "No sir," came the reply. "F," the professor said as he wrote the grade in the book. The students reacted with unmitigated fury. They howled in protest, screaming, "That's not fair."

Sproul then looked at one of the complaining students and asked, "Do you think this is unfair?" The student courageously responded, "Yes this is not fair at all."

The teacher then said, "I see. It's justice you want? I seem to recall that you were late with your paper the last time. If you insist upon justice you will certainly get it. I'll not only give you an F for this assignment, but I'll change your last grade to the F you so richly deserved."

The student was stunned. He had no more arguments to make. He apologized for being so hasty and was suddenly happy to settle for one F instead of two.

In God's court, you and I have a flimsy defense. Romans 3:23 says, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" and Romans 6:23 reminds us that "the wages of sin is death." There's no possibility of a plea bargain or of God grading on a curve. Because God is a just God, He will judge accordingly. Friends, be careful of demanding that justice be done -- God may give you the "F" you deserve!

We're Going to Get It

In thinking about God's justice, we've established two things so far. First, We Want It. Second, We Don't Want It. Let's come back to the parable that Jesus told. Here we see point #3: We're Going To Get It.

This widow eventually gets her day in court. This judge, though corrupt, finally caves in. Jesus tells us why as he continues the parable in verse 4. Referring to the judge, he says:

"For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care about men, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!'"

He gets tired of her hounding, and so reluctantly renders a decision. This judge finally responds, not because it is the right thing to do, but because it is the convenient thing to do. Jesus then presses home his point.

Notice verses 6-8: "And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly."

Think about it. This unjust judge had no respect for absolutes. He probably cheated on his exams for law school! He may have become a judge by bribing other officials. What's worse, he has no compassion for people. He is indifferent to the needs of the poor plaintiffs who have to appear before his corrupt court. All he cares about is himself.

By contrast, our just God is the author of absolutes. His standards are not arbitrary, but are completely consistent with his perfect character. And his standards are not for sale. He cannot be bribed. He cannot be fooled. He accepts no plea-bargains.

God will judge the world; God must judge the world. This means that he must judge you and he must judge me.

The Law News Alert reports a story about a police lineup. Each suspect was asked to repeat the words, "Give me all your money or I'll shoot." This was to help witnesses make a positive identification. Suddenly, one of the suspects yelled out, "Hey, that's not what I said!"

We're all a bit like this guy. We know we're guilty and it's tough to keep quiet about it. In God's court of law, we're all busted. The good news is that God is not only passionate about truth -- He is compassionate toward people. The unjust judge did not care about men. But our just God became a man. Jesus is God's gift of forgiveness to a world that didn't just demand justice; we all deserved justice. John 3:17 says, "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him." Are you trusting in the Son to save you from judgment?

We Can Be Pardoned

Because God is a just God, He must judge everyone who does not meet his standards for perfection. That means you. That means me. Sin has to be paid for. Time must be served. God's justice requires that there be payment for the penalty of sin.

There really is no tension between God's love and God's justice. Jesus is the fusion of divine love and divine justice. Picture a line drawn vertically -- that's God's justice. And another line drawn horizontally -- that's God's love. Where they meet is the cross. There is dissonance only if your view of love requires that God forgive sin without any payment being made.

Actually, the offer of Jesus as our sin substitute shows a greater love on God's part than simply releasing us from the consequences of sin without payment being made. To fulfill his justice, God's love was so great that He gave His Son for us. Love and justice are not two separate attributes competing with one another. God is both righteous and loving, and has himself given what He demands.

God sent His Son Jesus to die in our place. Romans 3:26 says that "he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies the one who has faith in Jesus."

The cross was at once the most horrible and the most beautiful example of God's wrath. It was the most just and the most gracious act in history. With the concentrated load of sin that Jesus carried to the Cross, God poured out His wrath -- the penalty for the sins that every one of us have committed -- on Jesus. It was with this act that God's holy justice was completely satisfied. It was done for you. It was done for me.

In other words, the sacrifice of Jesus demonstrates God's justice. When you put your faith in Jesus for forgiveness of sins, according to Romans 3:26 you will be declared just in His sight -- and you won't have to pay the price.

I read this week about a burglar from Belgium who was surprised while he was robbing a house. When he heard the homeowners returning, he fled out the back door, clambered over a 9-foot wall, dropped down on the other side, and found himself in the city prison! As we've already learned in this series, it is impossible to run from God because you'll eventually be imprisoned by your own sins.

For those of you who have been acquitted by a just God due to the sacrifice of his Son, there is a fourth principle in this parable. When it comes to justice, we want it, we don't want it, we're going to get it, and finally, we may have to wait for it.

We May Have to Wait For It

The context of this parable is the Second Coming of Christ. That is how Luke 17 ends and how Luke 18 begins: "Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up." Jesus concludes this story in verse 8 with this question: "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"

The implication is that He may not. The danger is that God's apparent delay in dispensing justice may cause some to doubt, or to despair, or even to depart from the faith. When evil goes unpunished, when good is not rewarded, some may be tempted to walk away.

I don't know how many times you've been wronged. I don't know how many ways you've been victimized. I don't know how long you've waited for justice to be served.

But I do know that God is not deaf to your cries. Unlike the widow, you don't have to pester a reluctant God to act on your behalf. He will not keep putting you off. Genesis 18:25 asks, "Will not the Judge of the all the earth do right?" The answer is a resounding "Yes!" But our question is "When?"

This parable refers to the interval between Christ's first Advent and his final Advent. 2,000 years ago, he came as an unrecognized babe in a manger. One day, he will come as the inescapable Judge of all the earth. We now live in the interim between these Advents. And these interim days are ones that call for patient, persistent, waiting faith.

Why does God delay? Two reasons come to mind.

He delays in order to fortify the faith of those who demand justice. He wants believers to keep praying and not give up.

Second, he delays in order to give those who deserve justice time to trust in his Son. Each day of postponed judgment is an extended day of grace. Will you receive Him?

Closing Challenge

All you need to do is ask and He will erase all your sins. He will pay your debt by charging your sins to Christ's account.

When our daughter Becky was born, we accumulated a mountain of medical bills and some family members offered to pay for some of them. We were very thankful but didn't send any bills to them for a while. A couple weeks later they called and wondered why we hadn't taken them up on their offer. We assured them that we would as soon as we got the next bill.

You see, they couldn't pay our debt unless we gave it to them -- and we'd have been stupid to not take advantage of their generous offer.

Friends, the same is true for your spiritual bills. Jesus has already paid for them -- but you need to submit your claims. It's not automatic. If you haven't surrendered your life to Him and asked Him to forgive you for your sins, His payment will not be applied to your account. And, if Jesus doesn't pay for your sins, guess who will?

Let me ask you a question. How are you going to pay for your sins? How are you going to do it? Someone has to. You have 2 choices:

1. Either you choose to pay for your sins in Hell -- and justice will prevail.
2. Or, you receive Christ as your sin substitute -- and justice will prevail.

Are you ready to charge your sins to Jesus' payment plan? If you are, you will spend eternity with Him on the merits of what He did on the cross.

Some of you are ready to make that commitment right now. You want Jesus to cancel your sin debt. You're ready to surrender yourself to His leadership in your life. If you are, then there's no better time than now to do it.

Thousands of cars are stolen every year in California, but in 1981, there was one car theft that made all the local papers and was the lead story on the evening news. The police issued an all-points bulletin to find the missing car and tried to make contact with the person who stole it.

Why all the excitement? The owner of the car had informed the police that on the front seat of the car was a box of crackers laced with a deadly poison. The car owner had planned to use the crackers as rat bait. So the police were desperately trying to find the thief not to punish him, but to save his life. They were afraid he would eat one of the crackers and die.

In the same way, our just God pursues us not because He wants to punish us but because he wants to save us. You may be running away from God because like the car thief you are a sinner. You have broken God's law. But what you may not realize is that God is trying to rescue you, not condemn you. Jesus has paid the penalty for your sin, and God wants to give you your freedom. So stop running away from Him and turn yourself in. Run to Jesus, not away from Him. Your life is at stake!

Luke 18:1-8 Will He Find Faith?

Today is Veteran's Day. Could I ask those of you who have served our country to please stand? Some of you have a son or daughter or spouse or parent in the service right now. Could you please stand as well so we can express our gratitude? I came across a very sad statistic this week. Did you know that one in four homeless people in the U.S. are vets, even though they make up only 11% of

the population? By the way, one way to increase your awareness is by visiting the War Museum here in Pontiac.

Information like this is unsettling, and we've certainly been unsettled by some of things that the Savior has said in the Gospels during this series called, "What Jesus Wants to Know: Questions Christ Asked." Here's where we've been so far:

* Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God?

* How many loaves do you have?

* Has it not been written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer?'

* Do you want to get well?

And today the question we're going to ponder is a bit perplexing and certainly unsettling. Turn in your Bibles to Luke 18:8: "When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?"

When Jesus looks at the church in America, what does He see right now? Have you ever wondered about the state of the church in our country today?

[Play "State of Church" video]

I read a study this week from SermonCentral.com in which this question was asked: "Do you think the church in America is appropriately reflecting the character of God?" Only 13% of the respondents said "yes."

"When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?" Three truths stand out to me from this question.

1. Christ is coming. Note that it doesn't say "if" He comes, but "when" He comes. The Bible indicates that He will come "like a thief in the night," when we least expect Him. If we back up a bit to Luke 17:26-28, while people are partying and thinking only of themselves, just like in the days of Noah, the Son of Man will come. It's way too easy to play and not pray.

Friends, while we don't know when Jesus is coming, we know He can come at any time. Having said that, Matthew 24:14 indicates that His return is somehow contingent on our obedience to the Great Commission: "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come."

2. The faithful will be few. The question Jesus asks expects a negative answer. When Jesus returns will he find faith on the earth? He will find more people faltering than faithful. This reminds me of Psalm 12:1: "Help, Lord, for the godly are no more; the faithful have vanished from among men."

3. Persecution will be prevalent. We know from other passages that persecution will become prevalent the closer we get to Christ's coming. Some of us have bought into the belief that once we have Jesus in our life, everything will go great. Maybe we've even thought that we should be successful and financially well off. Actually, the Bible says that the exact opposite will happen for those who honor and obey Christ. Listen to Acts 14:22: "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God." Jesus never taught the "prosperity gospel," but He did preach the "persecution gospel." Matthew 5:10: "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

John Stott suggests that we should not be surprised if anti-Christian hostility increases, but rather be surprised if it does not. In John 15:20, Jesus said, "If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also." In John 16:33 He adds, "...In this world you will have trouble..." The Augsburg Confession defines the church as the community of those "who are persecuted and martyred for the gospel's sake." Speaking of their futures, in Matthew 24:9, Jesus told the disciples that they would face incredible struggles: "Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me."

2 Timothy 3:12 says, "In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." Could it be that the American church in general, does not face persecution like believers in other countries do, because we are not living godly lives? Philippians 1:29: "For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him." When Paul wrote to the young church in Thessalonica, he reminded them that Timothy was sent to them, "so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. You know quite well that we were destined for them. In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know" (1 Thessalonians 3:3-4). Peter, after witnessing all that Jesus went through, wrote in 1 Peter 4:12: "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you."

Today is the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church. Since Christ is coming again, how can we help the faithful few who are being persecuted for their faith around the world? Actually, there's more than just a few who are being persecuted. Many estimate that there are up to 200 million suffering Christians around the world today.

On behalf of the other pastors and their families, we want to say thanks for the amazing pastor appreciation gift. In commenting on this, Beth mentioned that it's humbling to have a whole month for pastor appreciation in our country when in other countries there is "pastor assassination." Like our vets who often get ignored, we can no longer ignore the plight of the persecuted.

"When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?"

Part of our problem as American believers is that we've become so spiritually soft that we don't take what is happening to other believers seriously. As we saw in the opening video, church is not all that important to a lot of people here. Pastor Jeff told me about a PBC teenager who, after viewing a DVD with the other students about the underground church in Vietnam, said something like this: "Nobody really cares. Were they really listening?" I believe that this church cares...we just need to be informed, reminded and mobilized.

In light of that, we're going to watch a reenactment produced by the Voice of the Martyrs called "Sarah's Blood." I want to warn you ahead of time that because this is based on a true story, it is intense and quite graphic. I strongly encourage parents with young children to step out. You may want to just go into the old kitchen so you can still hear the words and then come back in when it's over in seven minutes.

Video: "Sarah's Blood"

Application/Testimony (Beth Bill)

Watching that DVD bothers me. For one, it confronts me with my greatest fear: that of denying Christ. It pushes me to wrestle with the inequity of life. I don't get it. Here in the US we are free to worship Christ, read and distribute Bibles and share Christ with anyone. Why do I get to live here? I am confronted with my angry feelings toward those who persecute believers, and yet I'm challenged to obey Jesus' words to pray for and love our enemies. And then there is a part of me that would like to ignore this information, or just deny its reality.

I struggle reconciling my freedom with the severe consequences Christians face in other countries. But God doesn't struggle with reconciling. In fact, please listen to 2 Corinthians 5, starting in v.18: "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God."

I love these verses! They tell us that God gave us the message of Christ's love and that as His ambassadors; we are to tell the world! And in August of 1988 I wrote here in the margin, "This is my life purpose!" Actually about 10 years earlier at age 16, I dedicated myself to God's missionary work. I had always loved hearing missionary stories and about people coming to Christ and was fascinated by God's work around the world. Finally in 1996 when I was 33, our family left for Mexico City to be missionaries. I could not have been happier and more fulfilled. However, shortly before completing 3 years there, it was necessary for us to come back to the U.S. During these years of living in Pontiac, I have often wondered if I could somehow be a small part of God's global ministry again. It has just been in the past year or so that God has shown me that "Yes!" I could still be His ambassador.

So back to this DVD about persecution...Do I really need to know about it? Do I really need to respond? Yes, I need to know...I need to respond. The Bible says that Christians worldwide belong to the same Father. We belong to Him and to each other. We are sisters and brothers because we are in the same family! When one part suffers, the whole suffers. Hebrews says that we are to remember those being mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.

So what can I do? Pray! This last year, I've been receiving a prayer bulletin from Open Doors USA. (Show and explain). They need for us to care about them, to pray for their strength, to pray that they continue to be loving and strong witnesses in their countries. Paul said in Philippians that he hoped his chains would serve to advance the gospel. What a great prayer request: that suffering would be used to actually spread the good news of Jesus Christ and that more people would become Christians! What about praying that they would be able to forgive and love their persecutors? What about praying for the salvation of persecutors? I count it a great privilege to pray for these saints. I beg you to pray more for them. The believers "over there" are asking us "over here" to pray for them. Let's pray that their lives would be a strong witness of God's amazing love. Let's love them with prayer.

Another way to respond is to learn! There is a great big world out there and that world matters to God and it should matter to me and to you. It is so exciting and interesting to learn about what God is doing around the globe. *Look at your brochure: you can send in this card to receive a free book and learn more. What a thrill to learn firsthand from our own missionaries about God's loving work in people. For more information, check out this website: www.persecution.com.

And speaking of missionaries, we have the opportunity to pray for them as well. They often minister in the midst of strong opposition too. Let's pray that they don't get weary and keep sharing Christ. What a privilege to intercede for our own missionaries. How

amazing to be here in central Illinois and pray to God Almighty on behalf of Christians on the other side of the globe and then to hear how God is working things out for His glory.

The third way to respond is to get involved. There are so many things we can do. Our family learned about a project called Bibles Unbound. The purpose of BiblesUnbound is to send Bibles to specific recipients in countries where the Bible is restricted, confiscated and even destroyed. Each month we receive 5 new testaments, envelopes and addresses of 5 recipients. We package them up, pray over them and send them back to a distribution center that sends them off to China. It is then our privilege to pray that God would get these Bibles into the hands of the intended recipients. I can't even describe the measure of joy I have sending the Bibles, praying for these people I'll probably never know who Lord-willing will read God's truth and become Christians and grow in their faith. In our struggle against the evil one, who wants to eliminate God's truth and His people, it's humbling and a delight to send Bibles to those who desperately need His love and life-changing truth. For more information, here's a website: www.biblesunbound.com.

I know that reading about persecuted believers is overwhelming and breaks our hearts. I cry frequently for them. But we can't let that stop us from caring and praying for them. Let's use our religious freedom and resources for others and to glorify God in His church.

"When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?"

The context in which today's question comes relates to an account of a widow who practiced persistent prayer in Luke 18:1-8: "Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. He said: 'In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.' For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care about men, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!' And the Lord said, 'Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?'"

Let me quickly share some principles from this passage.

1. The purpose behind this parable is for us to be persistent in our praying. Its stated right at the beginning: "Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up." Notice that "she kept coming" and "bothering" and was starting to "wear him out."
2. We will become persistent when we realize there are no other solutions. She had no other recourse. Friends, we won't pray until we recognize our desperate need. Some of us don't pray simply because we don't think we need to.
3. God is never bothered by believers and will not put off persistent prayers. He is not at all like this unjust judge.
4. Persistence shows how much we love those who are persecuted. We are to "cry out to Him day and night." I heard someone say that we should practice P.U.S.H. prayers – Pray Until Something Happens.
5. Delay doesn't mean denial. Jesus will come and bring justice. Don't become weary in your waiting.
6. Persistent prayer honors God because it expresses our complete dependence on Him. When we're relentless in our requests we demonstrate our reliance on God.
7. The main thing Jesus looks for is faith. Remember that we don't need a lot. All we need is a little faith in a big God. The question really is this: Am I fervent or am I faint in prayer?

Prayer Time

We're going to spend some time praying right now. You'll see nine different slides appear on the screen, with each one highlighting a prayer request from a specific country. Hebrews 13:3: "Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering." Let's pray...and then determine to persist in our praying every day.

We honored vets at the beginning. I wonder how many of you are ready to serve in the spiritual battle. Are you ready to be counted? "When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?" The key issue is not whether we can wait until Jesus returns; the real question is whether or not He will find us faithful when He comes back.

There are really three questions to ponder in this passage.

* Will not God bring about justice? The answer is yes.

* Will God keep putting us off? The answer is no.

* Will the Son of Man find faith on the earth? This answer is yet to be determined.

Here's a probing question. If Jesus were to come back today, would he find you living out your faith? Are you a born again believer? If you're saved, have you been baptized? If not, why not? Our next baptism service will be held on Sunday, December 2nd. Baptism is a biblical way to express your obedience. In many countries to be baptized is the equivalent of signing a warrant for your death. Are you ready to die to self and live for the Savior?

Listen to the words of Jesus to the church of Sardis in Revelation 3:2-3: "Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you." If you're ready to remember the persecuted and you're committed to live out your faith with fervor as you pray with persistence, would you please stand right now? We're going to conclude our service by singing this chorus: "I Pledge Allegiance to the Lamb."

Closing Chorus: "I Pledge Allegiance to the Lamb"

Luke 18:9-14 A Prayer God Will Answer

- [Luke 18:9-14 A Prayer God Will Answer](#)

Luke 18:31-34 A Blind Man Meets a Healer

Stevie Wonder (the singer) and Jack Nicklaus (the golfer) are sitting around the pool talking. Inevitably the conversation turns to golf and Nicklaus is surprised to find out that Stevie Wonder, who is blind, has been playing golf for years.

The golf pro can't believe it. He wants some details so Stevie Wonder explains how he does it: "My caddy stands out in the middle of the fairway and calls out to me. I listen for the sound of his voice and play the ball towards him. Then when I get to where the ball lands, the caddy moves further down the green, shouts out and I hit the ball again.

Nicklaus is obviously impressed but then asks, "But how do you putt?" The famous singer replies: "Well, I get my caddy to lean down in front of the hole and call to me with his head on the ground and his mouth just over the cup. I just play the ball towards his voice."

Nicklaus finds all this very amazing and then asks Wonder if they can play a round sometime. Stevie agrees but says that because people don't take him very seriously he only plays for money and he never plays for less than \$10,000 a hole. Nicklaus thinks about it for a minute and then says, "OK, that's serious money, but I'm up for it. When do we play?"

To which Steve Wonder answers, "You name the night."

This morning I want to talk about another blind man. Instead of being a professional golfer or a famous musician, this guy was wiped out by life. Because he was not able to see, he spent his days sitting by the fairways and highways, just waiting for someone to give him a shekel or a piece of bread.

Before we meet this blind man, I want to first set the context for you. Please turn in your Bibles to Luke 18:31-34. Here we read that Jesus is walking to the Cross in order to accomplish what He came to do:

Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them, "We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be handed over to the Gentiles. They will mock Him, insult Him, spit on Him, flog Him and kill Him. On the third day He will rise again." The disciples did not understand any of this. Its meaning was hidden from them, and they did not know what He was talking about.

This is the third time in the Gospel of Luke that Jesus predicted His impending death. And, each time He told them about what was to come, He got more explicit. If you were to read through the Gospel of Luke, you would notice that beginning in chapter 9, there is a major shift in Jesus' orientation. We're introduced to a "travel motif" that permeates the remainder of the book.

9:51: "As the time approached for Him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem." We see here that His approaching goal is not only His death and resurrection, but also His ascension. The phrase, "resolutely set" out for Jerusalem means that He "set His face towards" the place where He was going to die as the final sacrifice. And so, He begins His walk to the Cross.

10:38: "As Jesus and His disciples were on their way, He came to a village..."

13:22: "Then Jesus went through the towns and villages, teaching as He made His way to Jerusalem."

13:33: "In any case, I must keep going today and tomorrow and the next day for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!"

17:11: "Now on His way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee."

18:31: "...we are going up to Jerusalem."

Without a doubt, Jesus is on a mission. He's headed to Jerusalem. And the caravan of people that are following Him is growing at each rest stop. We see in Luke 18:35 that Jesus is now approaching the city of Jericho, which is about 15 miles from his final destination.

Since it is about 800 feet below sea level, Jericho has a climate that is tropical and at times very hot. The town is known as an oasis because of its fresh water spring and is called, "the city of palm trees." In fact, I'm told that Yassar Arafat is building a summer home in Jericho. It was in Jericho that the pilgrims gathered to make the final leg of the journey to Jerusalem to celebrate the annual Passover feast.

Let me show you on a map where Jesus is as we come to our text this morning. [Show PowerPoint Slide]

As Jesus heads into Jericho, He meets a blind man named Bartimaeus we know that's his name from Mark's account of the story. In order to help us get a better feel for what happened when Blind Bart met Jesus that day in Jericho, I'm going to play a short clip from the Jesus Video, which is based entirely on the Gospel of Luke. By the way, it now looks like this evangelistic video will be distributed to every home in Pontiac this December instead of during the summer. I'll keep you posted.

Play Video Clip.

As I try to understand this incredible encounter between Bart and Jesus, I see four different stages that Bart goes through.

1 His Blindness

The first stage is blindness. We see this in verse 35: "As Jesus approached Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging."

Blindness was a very common problem in Palestine. Generally, one who was blind was never healed. In the city of Lydda, the saying was that everyone was either blind or had only one eye. In Jaffa, there were 500 blind people out of a population of 5,000.

While Leviticus 19:14 establishes that God's people were to care for those who are blind, there was also a cultural and religious stigma against blindness. We see this especially in the account of another man who was healed of his blindness in John 9. There, as Jesus and the disciples are out walking, the disciples ask Jesus a question in John 9:2: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

And so, there's a sense in which those who were blind deserved their blindness. Many people thought this disease was a consequence of sin, either by the individual himself, or because of something the parents did. As a result, blind people were often ignored or even castigated.

Because this man was blind, he was relegated to a life of begging. In the Gospel of Mark we learn that this man was wearing an old garment, which was a sign that he was a beggar. He's just sitting there, waiting for something to happen because there was nothing he could do to improve his condition.

This is really a word picture for our spiritual condition, isn't it? 2 Corinthians 4:4 states that "The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers so that they cannot see the light of the gospel..." We are spiritually blind and there is nothing we can do to change that on our own.

Just as Jesus gives sight to those who are physically blind, so too He grants spiritual insight to those who are in moral darkness. This man knew he was blind, and so did everyone else. Are some of you trying to act like you're not spiritually blind this morning? The first thing you need to do is to admit that you are just as blind in a spiritual sense as this man was in a physical sense.

Now, take a look at verse 36: "When he heard the crowd going by, He asked what was happening." This man was smart. He knew that there would be a mass of people in Jericho that day preparing to make the final journey to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. That's why he was sitting by the side of the road with his hand out. He couldn't see what was happening, but he could hear the commotion and excitement. And so he's curious. He wants to know what was happening. Perhaps he heard some unusual comments about a Healer who was headed to Jerusalem.

Verse 37 gives us the answer to his question, "...Jesus of Nazareth is passing by." Bart's heart begins to race. Could it be, that the person He had heard of before was right here in front of him? It was almost too good to be true.

2 His Belief

The first stage is Bart's blindness. The second thing we notice is his belief. Notice how Bart addresses Jesus in verse 38: "...Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!" The crowd referred to the earthly heritage of Jesus He was from Nazareth. That just lets us know where He grew up. That's like someone saying that I'm from Wisconsin. That tells you a lot -- I like brats, cheddar cheese and the Wisconsin Badgers -- but it doesn't tell you everything about me.

Instead of calling on Jesus as the guy from Nazareth, Bart expresses His messianic heritage. He is the Son of David, the one who the Old Testament has been pointing to as the Savior of the World. This blind man can see that Jesus is more than just a man from a small town in the north; He's the God-man, sent from Heaven to be the Savior of the world.

Related to this, I wonder if Bart was aware of what the Son of David had accomplished in the lives of other people? Maybe he had heard of Jesus giving sight to other blind people. Perhaps he heard what Jesus said in Luke 4:18, when He stood up in the temple and read from the book of Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind..."

When Bart called out for the Son of David to have mercy on him, he was expressing his belief that Jesus was the Messiah, and that He could heal his blindness. He knew who Jesus was and He also knew what Jesus could do for him. Do you know what Jesus can do for you? If He can restore sight to the blind, He can grant you the deepest longing of your heart. We need to cry out for mercy just like Bart did.

Do you know who Jesus is? He's much more than just a good teacher. He is the promised one, the Messiah, the Savior of the World. If you are just beginning to get to know Him, I encourage you to join us each week as we walk together with Him to the cross. Our journey will culminate on Easter Sunday morning as our choir presents, "At the Name of Jesus," which will be a wonderful way to end this series. This cantata does a masterful job of communicating who Jesus really is you won't want your friends and family members to miss it!

Bart was aware of his blindness, and his belief in Jesus was right on. But, he did more than just believe He acted on what He knew to be true by his boldness.

3 His Boldness

Bart knew that he needed mercy because there was nothing he could do on his own. And so, he called out to Jesus, the Son of David, for mercy in verse 38. In the first part of verse 39 we see that the crowd of people is bothered by the blind and believing Bart: "Those who led the way rebuked him and told him to be quiet..."

The people who were leading the way may have been important city officials in Jericho. They wanted Jesus and his followers to see how beautiful their community was. They were probably embarrassed and even irritated when they heard Bart cry out for mercy. They wanted to shut him up and so they told him to knock it off and to be quiet.

It reminds me of what the city of Atlanta did when they hosted the summer Olympics. Before the games began, they removed all the homeless people who lived under an overpass because they didn't want their city to look bad. These officials from Jericho probably wished they had done the same.

I love the second half of verse 39: "...but he shouted all the more, 'Son of David, have mercy on me!'" This guy was really bold and courageous! He chose to not listen to the crowd and shouted out even louder than the first time. He broke all the cultural rules of etiquette. He didn't want Jesus to get away. This was his chance to receive some mercy and perhaps his sight.

I wonder if you and I have this same kind of boldness and courage when it comes to calling out for divine help. Maybe we don't because we don't really understand our condition of blindness. Or maybe we don't because we don't believe Jesus can really do anything about it. What about you? Do you think of yourself as more enlightened than you really are? Or, do you think less of Jesus than you should? If you saw yourself in the dark and in need of mercy, and if you saw Jesus as Bart did, you too would shout out for Jesus to change you.

Hebrews 4:16, in the King James Version, tells us to "...come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in our time of need." Friend, don't hold back or be afraid to give yourself to Jesus. Come to Him boldly and with confidence. Let Him know what you need. That's what He's waiting for and He'll reward you with mercy and grace to help in your time of need.

As a result of Bart's boldness, verse 40 says that, "Jesus stopped and ordered the man to be brought to him..." Mark 10:50 tells us that Bart threw his cloak aside and jumped to his feet. Can you imagine how the crowd must have felt, especially those who had rebuked Bart? I picture everything getting real quiet. People are looking at Bart and then at Jesus. Jesus orders some guys (maybe the same ones who rebuked Bart) to help him walk through the crowd so that he is face-to-face with the Messiah.

The question Jesus then asks Bart is very interesting. Look at verse 41: "What do you want me to do for you?" Isn't it obvious what Bart needed? Jesus knew what Bart wanted but He asked the question for Bart's sake and for the crowd of people who had gathered around. He wanted Bart to verbalize what it was that He wanted. I love Bart's answer: "Lord, I want to see."

What do you want Jesus to do for you? Have you ever put into words the cry of your heart? Have you ever verbalized your deepest needs? Have you ever shouted out for mercy to have Jesus save you from your sins? If not, Jesus is waiting for you to exhibit some boldness and to ask Him for what you need. James 4:2 says that we have not because we ask not. Just as Oscar Lopez told us that he has been asking God for a BMW, maybe you and I are not asking God for enough. At the very least, my guess is that some of you have never asked Jesus to demonstrate His mercy to you by saving you from your sins.

This ties in to the last point from the passage. Once we admit our blindness, and place our belief in Jesus as our only Savior and Lord, we can then be bold in our requests. That then leads to the fourth thing that happens: we receive a blessing.

4 His Blessing

In verse 42, we read, "Jesus said to him, 'Receive your sight; your faith has healed you.'" Here's a spiritual principle that you should never forget: Jesus always responds to faith. Because Bart believed and put his faith in Jesus, he received his sight back. Jesus is looking for more Barts today people who will exhibit some faith, no matter how small it is, and cry out for mercy. Jesus loves to answer prayers like that by healing us from the inside out, granting us spiritual insight as he moves us out of darkness.

Verse 43 tells us that, "Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus, praising God. When all the people saw it, they also praised God."

When Bart got his sight back, he couldn't help but break out into praise. He was thrilled! A couple weeks ago, I read in the paper about a man from Madrid, Spain who had been blind for 40 years and just had an operation on his eyes that was successful. For the first time he was able to see 4 of his 9 children and all 22 of his grandchildren. He was also able to gaze at his wife's face. He liked everything he saw except for the image in the mirror. Here's what he said, "I thought I would look better. I look really ugly and old!"

Now we don't know if Bart had any grandkids or even if he was interested in looking in a mirror, but here's what happened: Bart received, then he followed, and then he praised. Those who saw what took place also were led into a time of praise. Let me put it into different terms to help us see how this applies today: Conversion leads to Discipleship, which leads to Worship, which spills over into Evangelism. Bart went from darkness to the light, from begging to following, and from crying to praising. His blessing then led to the blessing of others as they were led into worship. This is exactly what Oscar Lopez taught us last week from Psalm 67: We are blessed in order to bless others so that all the nations will worship God.

Bart the blind man became Bart the believer. He recognized his blindness, exhibited his belief by crying out with boldness and then received a blessing, which spilled over into others' lives.

Bart experienced four things:

A change of focus: from darkness to the light that's conversion

A change of direction: from sitting to following that's discipleship

A change of purpose: from begging to praising that's worship

A change of scope: was blessed in order to bless others that's evangelism

Friends, God wants us to recognize our blindness and beef up our belief in who Jesus is. He then wants us to exhibit some boldness by asking Him for mercy so that we can receive a blessing that can be passed on to others.

From Darkness to the Light

I remember vividly an experience I had when I was about 8 years old. My bedroom was down in the basement, which was really cool because I got to be away from my sisters and have some privacy. The only thing that was tough about this was that it was really dark at night. I was normally pretty adept at finding my way around in the dark and used to like the challenge of finding the bathroom in the middle of the night by just feeling my way past my dad's workbench, the furnace and the woodpile.

One night however, I woke up and got out of bed in order to use the bathroom. But, without realizing it, I had gotten out of the wrong

side of the bed. Instead of finding the door, I was on the other end of my room, frantically searching for the light switch or the door. I was starting to panic. I couldn't figure out who moved the door on me it must have been one of my sisters! The more I searched the more upset I became. Finally I couldn't take it anymore. I started screaming at the top of my lungs for my mom and dad. Eventually they came running down the stairs, opened my door and turned the light on. I'll never forget how glad I was to see them!

I was in the dark and I knew it I was blind. I couldn't get out on my own. Do you recognize that you're in the dark and trapped in a room full of sin with no way out?

I knew I needed some help and I knew my parents could help me I had belief. Do you know you need some help? Do you believe that Jesus can help you? Do you have faith in who He is and in what He can do for you?

I knew I had to scream and shout in order to get some help I was bold. Are you willing to boldly ask Jesus for the help you so desperately need? Are you ready to go against the crowd, and against your peers in order to find what you've been searching for?

I experienced the joy of finally being able to see and hugged my mom and dad profusely I was blessed. Have you experienced that same kind of joy and are you sharing it with others? Are you praising God with your walk and with your talk so that others are drawn to Jesus? Are you using your blessing to bless others?

The blind man seized the moment. Jesus is passing by right now in our lives. This is the moment! If you don't take it, you'll miss something extraordinary and your spiritual blindness will continue. Just as the crowds tried to keep Bart from Jesus, so too the crowds in your life are trying to keep you from Him. Don't listen to them. Stand up. Be bold. Go against the grain. Cry out for mercy and healing. Boldly express your belief in Jesus by recognizing your blindness so that you can receive a blessing that will spill over to others.

Communion

As we get ready to meet Jesus at the table this morning, which stage are you at? What do you need to do next?

Blindness

Belief

Boldness

Blessing

Jesus is asking you a question this morning: "What do you want me to do for you?"

Luke 19:1-10 A Little Man Meets a Big God

There's a story about a local fitness center, which was offering \$1,000 to anyone who could demonstrate that they were stronger than the owner of the place. Here's how it worked. This muscle man would squeeze a lemon until all the juice ran into a glass, and then hand the lemon to the next challenger. Anyone who could squeeze just one more drop of juice out would win the money.

Many people tried over time other weightlifters, construction workers, even professional wrestlers, but nobody could do it.

One day a short and skinny guy came in and signed up for the contest. After the laughter died down, the owner grabbed a lemon and squeezed away. Then he handed the wrinkled remains to the little man.

The crowd's laughter turned to silence as the man clenched his fist around the lemon and six drops fell into the glass. As the crowd cheered, the manager paid out the winning prize and asked the short guy what he did for a living. "Are you a lumberjack, a weightlifter, or what?"

The man replied, "I work for the IRS."

Have you filed your taxes yet? I guess we still have a week so you don't have to worry yet. I have a buddy who always starts his taxes on April 14 every year and stays up all night to get them finished. I think he likes the adrenaline rush!

It's tough to be honest during tax time isn't it? Here's an actual letter that was received by the IRS a few years ago:

"Enclosed you will find a check for \$150. I cheated on my income tax return last year and have not been able to sleep ever since. If I still have trouble sleeping I will send you the rest."

This morning we're focusing on a high-ranking IRS man who cheated not on his return, but on everyone else's. He had figured out a way to skim some money off the top and squeeze the last drop from people's wallets.

Our passage this morning has some parallels to last week's topic. As you recall, when Jesus was approaching Jericho, he had an encounter with blind Bart, a poor beggar from the lowest social class. Now, as we look at Luke 19:1, we see that Jesus is passing through Jericho on his final trip to Jerusalem, and comes in contact with Zacchaeus, a very wealthy government man from the top rung of the economic ladder.

I want to use a very simple outline this morning:

I. The Searching Sinner (19:2-4) [read]

II. The Seeking Savior (19:5) [read]

III. The Spectacular Salvation (19:6-10) [read]

The Searching Sinner

In verse two, we see that Zacchaeus was a man of some prominence. His name in Hebrew means, "pure and righteous," but he was not thought of as being anywhere close to righteous because of the job he had. As a tax collector, he worked for Rome and was considered a traitor by the Jewish people. The fact that he worked for the Roman IRS indicated to others that he was more interested in money than anything else.

Zack was more than just an IRS agent, however. He was a "chief" tax collector. He was in charge of all the agents and was able to take a "cut" of commission from those who collected taxes for him. He stood on top of the collection pyramid, stuffing his pockets with shekels before he sent the required taxes to Rome. If Rome charged a 5% tax, Zack may have collected 10% from the people.

Jericho was a great place to be for Zacchaeus because there were a lot of people coming in and out of the city on their way to Jerusalem for the Passover. Jericho was considered the "tax capital" of Palestine, the center of a vast trade network that extended from Damascus to Egypt. Zack was in charge of one of the three tax offices in the entire country, and may have had the best job of them all. Not surprisingly, the last part of verse 2 tells us that he was wealthy.

But he was a renegade in the eyes of the religious people. He would have been thought of as fondly as a high-level drug dealer is today. In fact, in the minds of people, tax collectors were often linked with murderers, adulterers, robbers, and other "sinners."

Tax collectors were not new to Jesus. Early on in His ministry, Jesus had attracted, and worse yet (in the eyes of the Pharisees), received them warmly. In Luke 5:30, Jesus was accused by the religious leaders for eating and drinking with "tax collectors and sinners." These two terms were almost synonymous to the Pharisees. There was hardly a life form more offensive than these traitors.

In verse 3 we notice that while Zack is very wealthy and successful by the world's standards, he knew something was missing. Even people today, if they are honest, will eventually admit that there's more to life than just trying to make money and obtain possessions.

Notice that it doesn't say that Zack just wanted to see Jesus. No. He wanted to see who Jesus was. He wanted to figure out what it was that made Jesus different from everyone else. He was drawn to this man who had just given sight to the blind beggar on the outskirts of Jericho. Now this healer was walking through his town. He may not have fully understood what was going on in his heart, but Zack had a desperate need to get to Jesus. He probably couldn't even explain what drew him to see who Jesus was.

Perhaps that's how some of you are feeling this morning. You're drawn to Jesus. You're intrigued by who He is and you want to get to know more about Him. I can remember that happening to me shortly before I became a Christian. I was curious about Jesus and loved to hear about the stories that we're focusing on in this series.

Zack had at least two problems that day. The first was that he was a short man. I picture him bouncing up and down on his toes, like tigger, trying to see above the taller guys in front of him. With all the crowds pressing in, there was no way for him to get close enough to Jesus. In a large crowd like this I wonder if some unhappy taxpayers took out their frustrations with Zack by giving him an accidental elbow or a shove from the back.

His second problem was spiritual his sins were keeping him from Jesus. Isaiah 59:2 say that "our iniquities have separated us from God." Not only was Zack of short stature, he, like us, was not able to measure up to God's standards. He came up far short in a spiritual sense of ever entering into a relationship with God. He was short on integrity and tall on sin.

I love verse 4: "So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way." This guy was

resourceful. It reminds me of something a friend of mine used to say when I'd play basketball with him. His name was Curt and he was even shorter than I am. He was always grinning and would say this: "I may be short...but I'm slow."

Zack was short, but he wasn't slow! He ran ahead of the crowd, looking for a way that he could see Jesus. This picture is a bit amusing, isn't it? First of all, it would have been considered undignified for a rich man to run. Secondly, I don't know about you, but it seems funny to me that this wealthy man would shimmy up a tree to see Jesus. Sycamore trees often grew by the side of the road and had branches that grew out horizontally from the trunk, which would give him a good view of Jesus. He probably snagged his cloak on some branches but it didn't slow him down. Maybe he fell a couple times. He was determined to see Jesus and frankly didn't care what others thought of his sprinting or his climbing.

Zack did not allow anything, not the crowd or his condition, to stand between him and his desire to see the Lord Jesus. What about you? Do you care enough about the condition of your soul to pay whatever price is necessary to be right with God? Are you willing to turn from that little pet sin? Are you ready to walk away from the crowd in order to see Jesus? Are you ready to run to Him?

The Seeking Savior

In verse 5 we see that while Zacchaeus may have been searching, it was really Jesus who was seeking him: "When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.'"

Jesus took note of Zacchaeus, although we are not told why. He stopped, looked up, called him by name, and told him that He must come to His house. Again we see that while Jesus has set his face toward the Cross, he stops and ministers to a searching sinner. He knew right where Zack was because He knew all about him and He was filled with compassion toward him.

This is how it always happens. Jesus makes the first move by coming to the dead sinner and offering life through Himself. We would never be able to come to Jesus unless He came to us first.

He then gives Zack a two-fold command: "Come down immediately." Get out of the tree, Zack. Right now. There's always a sense of urgency about following Christ. 2 Corinthians 6:2 says, "...Now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation." Can you imagine what must have been going through the minds of those who were walking with Jesus that day? How did Jesus know his name? Why did Jesus stop under that particular tree? Why did Jesus want this sinner to come down right away?

And then Jesus gives the second part of the command: "I must stay at your house today." Why did Jesus express the necessity of going to the house of Zacchaeus? Why the "must"? The Pharisees and religious leaders would say that because Zack was a chief tax collector he was a "sinner." Such a person should never be invited to your home. One should certainly not enter their home as a guest, and you were especially forbidden to eat their food. Notice here that Jesus invited Himself to dinner! This is the only instance in the 4 Gospels where we read of Jesus inviting Himself to someone's home for a meal. Jesus must stay at his house because it pictures what His ministry is all about. He came to save sinners from their sins.

The Spectacular Salvation

Zacchaeus didn't waste any time getting out of the tree. Verse 6 tells us, "So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly." Jesus said, "jump" and Zack jumped. He came down right away and welcomed Jesus joyfully and with great excitement. He got way more than he asked for he just wanted to get a closer look at the Savior but now He was coming over for dinner! He was overwhelmed with joy! The word "gladly" carries with it the idea of "jubilant exultation."

This is similar to the response of Bart in Luke 18:43 when it says that he praised God. Next week we'll see that the disciples break out into joyful praise when Jesus enters Jerusalem (Luke 19:37). Joy is one of the key themes found in Luke's gospel, being mentioned over 20 times in one form or another. I wonder what it will take for us to become more filled with glad and joyful praise? With all that God has done for us, we should be exuberant with joy! Yet too often our faces are fallen, our hearts are heavy, and our minds are muddled with cares and concerns. Friends, let's learn from this example when people encountered Jesus, they broke out into joyful praise! That should be reflected in our daily lives and when we gather together for corporate worship.

Now, in contrast to Zack's joy, we see in verse 7 that the entire crowd began to mutter. If the crowd was confused about why Jesus was even talking to Zack, they now go ballistic when they figure out that Jesus has invited himself to dinner at Zack's place. Notice that it wasn't just some of the crowd. The text says that it was all the people. It may have even included the disciples. The word itself means a low grumble, and indicates that they were complaining and finding fault with what Jesus was going to do. This root word is also used to describe what the Israelites did in the desert when they complained and grumbled to the Lord.

We might want to get down on the crowd for their response but I wonder how many times we respond in a similar way? Let's admit it. We have categories in our minds of people who are really "bad." We might be upset if Jesus were to drop in on them for a meal as well. It's so easy for us to think that we're better than others that our sin somehow smells better than other people's.

After the meal and conversation with Jesus, we see in verse 8 that Zacchaeus was greatly impacted by the call on his life. Because of what he is about to say, I think we can safely conclude that Zack was converted during the meal. He knew he was a sinner and had come to the Savior for salvation. His conversion is clear because of the life-change we see.

Zack pushes himself away from the table and says to Jesus, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."

The phrase, "here and now" indicates that Zack was not waiting to negotiate a contract with Jesus or just trying to slide by. He was fully sold out to Christ. Jesus had changed his heart and now he wanted to demonstrate that change through his actions. His decision was voluntary and flowed out of a heart of gratitude for what Christ had done for him. Whenever Jesus meets someone there is change. If you've never changed, it may be because you haven't truly been saved.

William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, understood the importance of asking God to change him. I came across one of his prayers: "Lord, I give you everything there is in this man, William Booth. Do with me what you will." God loves to hear prayers like this because it shows a willingness to change.

Zack's public confession shows the sincerity of his repentance and was his way of living out Romans 10:10: "For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved."

As part of his repentance, Zack wants to right his wrongs. Biblical repentance always goes hand-in-hand with restitution because conversion is a radical life-changing event. He's now a different man so he declares that he will give half of his possessions to the poor and will make restitution at four times the amount he swindled. The man who had felt small his whole life, and had treated others as if they were small, suddenly becomes a "big" man.

Both of these responses stand out in light of cultural and religious expectations. It was considered extremely generous to give 20% of your money away he gave 50%! When he made restitution of four times he was following the standard required in the Jewish law when a sheep had been stolen, and a man was convicted of the theft at a trial (see Exodus 22:1).

If he "confessed" it himself, without being found out, he was only required to restore what was stolen, and add 20% (see Numbers 5:6-7). Zack's repentance is obvious in that he was willing to respond as if it had been proved against him in a court of law. He knows that his behavior was of the worst kind and was eager to make things right no matter the cost.

We sometimes think we're generous if we give God 10% of our income. The mark of Zack's transformation and conversion was his staggering generosity. He learned the truth quickly that it is impossible to serve both God and money. Before he met Jesus his money was everything to him. After his conversion, it took a back seat and became something to be given away. It was Albert Schweitzer who said, "If you own something that you cannot give away, then you don't own it, it owns you."

Now we come to verse 10: "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost." The mission of Jesus is very clear: He came to seek and save what was lost. Jesus is still on a search and save mission. He is seeking out people who need to be saved. If you've never been saved from your sins, you need to know that Jesus is pursuing you even if you are not pursuing Him. He wants to have a vibrant relationship with you. Right now, He's outside the door of your life knocking. Can you hear Him? He knocks and then he waits for you to open the door. Revelation 3:20 says that, "...If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me."

When he knocks he speaks your name out loud. He knows everything about you and has been pursuing a relationship with you for a long time. He knows your pain, your dreams, and all the details of your life. He knows your failures and your sins. He has seen and felt them all. And, He's been trying to get your attention. You may be hearing His voice right now in your heart. Just as He called out to Zacchaeus so too he is calling out to you: "Come to me right now, for I must come into your life."

4 Stages

I see four stages that Zack went through, which have direct application to our lives today.

- Curious. He wanted to get to know who Jesus was.
- Considered. He investigated the claims of Christ.
- Converted. The searching Savior saved him and forgave his sins.
- Changed. His life was radically redirected after his conversion.

As I look back on the process that God had me go through, I see all four of these stages. When I was 19 and observing how my college roommate was living, I became very curious about Jesus. Then, when he was out of the room, I started to read his Bible. In

my desire to consider the claims of Christ I asked a lot of questions and went to a Bible study in my dorm. That then led me to the realization that I was not a Christian and that I needed to be saved from my sins. On October 3, 1979 I was converted by the grace of God as I prayed to open the door to my heart and receive the free gift of eternal life. The last thing I prayed that night was for Jesus to change me. I asked him to get rid of anything in my life that he did not like. Thankfully, some changes were immediate like taking away my desire for alcohol other changes are still in process today.

What stage are you at this morning? Are you curious about who Jesus is? If so, don't stop there. Investigate. Check Him out up close by reading the Bible. Consider His claims. Keep coming to church. As you do, your next step is to be converted. That's why Jesus came. He came to convert you, He seeks to save you, and He longs to show you His love. And then, He will change your life in ways you can't even imagine.

And so, the call has gone out. Is Jesus living within you or do you just let Him visit once in awhile? If He has taken up residence, have you been denying Him access to some of the rooms in your life?

Jesus is calling your name right now. Will you respond? Will you abandon it all for the sake of the call?

If you are ready to respond to Jesus right now by opening the door to your life, I'm going to ask you to do so while AI comes up to sing. I'm going to be down on the floor. If you are ready to begin a relationship with the Seeking Savior, I want to challenge you to come forward this morning. I have a book called, "The Case for Christ" and a Bible that I want to give you as a gift from PBC. Zack jumped out of the tree in response to Jesus' invitation. I'm asking you to jump out of your chair and come down to the front if you're ready to be saved.

(altar call and song: "For the Sake of the Call")

Lord Kenneth Clark, internationally known for his television series Civilization, admitted in his autobiography that while visiting a beautiful church he had an overwhelming religious experience. This is what he wrote: "My whole being was irradiated by a kind of heavenly joy far more intense than anything I had never known before." But, as he described it, the "gloom of grace" created a problem for him. If he allowed himself to be influenced by his spiritual yearnings, he knew he would have to change and his family would think he had lost his mind. And so he concluded, "I was too deeply embedded in the world to change course." As far as I know, he died without putting his faith in Christ.

Friend, are you too deeply embedded in the world to change course? Zacchaeus was locked into a way of life that was pretty comfortable and yet Jesus changed him. And he can do the same for you.

Luke 19:28-44 A Big Crowd Meets a King

I don't know about you, but I like watching movie bloopers. There's something funny about watching other people mess up. Many times these bloopers make it through the final cuts and show up on the screen.

In a movie starring Jack Nicholson, he walks past an automatic teller machine -- the only problem is that the movie is set in 1948 -- decades before ATMs!

In Days of Thunder, Tom Cruise suffers a racing injury with an interesting symptom. When he first goes to the hospital, he has a red ring around his right eye. Later, the circle is seen around the left, and then moves back to the right eye.

And, in another movie, the characters take a ferry ride from Detroit to Racine, Wisconsin. The trouble with this is, no such ferry exists. And even if it did, you would practically have to be Magellan to navigate the Detroit River, Lake Huron, and Lake Michigan!

I think some of the people in the crowd on that first Palm Sunday thought that they were witnessing a blooper. This wasn't exactly how they thought it was going to work out. In their minds, the script wasn't followed the way they thought it should have been. As we will see, however, Jesus followed the script perfectly.

Let me summarize where we've been so far in this series as we're walking to the cross with Jesus. Two weeks ago we were introduced to Bartimaeus, who was sitting alongside the road as Jesus approached Jericho. Bart went through four stages in his spiritual journey:

His blindness He knew he was physically and spiritually blind

His belief He knew Jesus was the Son of God

His boldness He was not afraid to put his desire to be healed into words

His blessing He was blessed in order to bless others

Last week, we focused on what happened as Jesus made his way through Jericho and encountered Zacchaeus. Zack went through four similar, yet different steps in his faith development:

He was curious he wanted to get to know who Jesus was

He considered he investigated the claims of Christ

He was converted The Searching Savior saved him and forgave his sins

He was changed Zack's life was radically redirected after his conversion

And so, Jesus is headed to Jerusalem. Luke makes it clear that there is nothing that will get in His way. Even though He has stopped and ministered to people, he has never lost sight of His final goal. In order to understand what is about to take place in our passage today, it's important to grasp at least three background details.

Background

First, everyone in Israel knew that the Messiah would be enthroned as King in Jerusalem. The Old Testament makes it very clear that the coming King would do His main work in the city of David. Since the Garden of Eden, all of heaven and earth have been waiting for that moment when Messiah would enter Jerusalem for the last time. The scarlet thread of redemption weaves its way throughout Scripture and will culminate on Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

Second, the Passover feast was just about to begin. This celebration brought many spiritual pilgrims to Jerusalem and fueled the fires of spiritual and messianic expectations. Historians tell us that it was not unusual to have between two and three million people in Jerusalem for the Passover.

On the Passover, the paschal lamb is slain, just as it was at the beginning of the exodus. This yearly reminder served to help the Israelites never forget that it was the blood of the lamb that provided their deliverance. Now, Jesus the Lamb of God is about to be slain once-for-all, for the remission of sins.

Third, Jesus had recently performed a number of spectacular miracles that attracted the crowds and further fueled their messianic enthusiasm. In particular, when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, John 11:45-46 tells us that many of the Jews put their faith in Christ. Others went away and told the Pharisees what had happened. The growing popularity of Jesus alarmed the religious leaders. They met together after Lazarus was raised from the dead, and from that day on, they were intent on killing Jesus. In fact, they were also planning to kill Lazarus.

It's difficult for us 2000 years removed from this event to grasp the mood of that time. The people were looking for the Messiah, and Jesus was a likely candidate. The moment was right as He headed to the capital city. The people were excited and pumped. They couldn't wait for a King to come and free them from Roman rule. In contrast, the religious leaders were intent on putting Jesus to death and were just waiting for the right opportunity.

As we come to this passage, I see four ways in which we can welcome the King this morning.

Welcome Him with Obedience (19:28-35a)

Welcome Him with Gifts (19:35b-36)

Welcome Him with Praise (19:37-40)

Welcome Him with Faith (19:41-44)

1 Welcome Him With Obedience

I want you to notice in Luke 19:28 that the text says, "...He went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem." I picture Jesus walking ahead of the disciples, more determined than ever to enter the city of David. This is why He had come. It's almost as if He couldn't wait to complete His job. The disciples may have been following rather reluctantly; perhaps they were even dragging their sandals. They knew very well that their Master was already under the sentence of death by the Jewish leaders.

Luke 19:29 tells us that Jesus and his disciples arrived at Bethany, which was just two miles east of Jerusalem. John 12:1 indicates that He was there six days before Passover, which would have been on a Sabbath. According to my harmony of the gospels, after sunset he was invited to the home of Simon the leper, where he met with the risen Lazarus and was served a meal by his sisters. After supper Mary anointed His feet with expensive burial oil.

The next day was Sunday and Jesus began his final walk to Jerusalem. At the hill called the Mount of Olives, he called for two of his disciples to do a special assignment for him. The Mount of Olives is a place of great significance. According to Zechariah 14:4, the Messiah was to appear on this mountain. Interestingly, during His last week on earth, Jesus spent His nights there. It's also where Jesus gave the Olivet Discourse, where He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane and from where He ascended into heaven (see Acts 1:12).

In verses 30-31, the two disciples are told to "Go to the village ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find a colt there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' tell him, 'The Lord needs it.'"

Verses 32-34 tell us what happened: "Those who were sent ahead went and found it just as He had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, 'Why are you untying the colt?' They replied, 'The Lord needs it.'"

Jesus spells it out for them very specifically. Somehow He knew all about the colt that would be tied up. Matthew tells us that the colt was a donkey and that it was with its mother. The disciples are instructed to bring both of them, perhaps to help the colt not be so wild.

These animals were quite expensive, and we see in verse 32 that there were at least two people who had gone in together to buy these donkeys. In our culture today, it would be like someone coming up to a bright red convertible Porsche, opening the door, starting the car and driving away. When the owner comes running outside you would just say, "The Lord needs it."

Some cultural background helps at this point. According to a custom called *angaria*, a dignitary could procure use of property for personal reasons. It would be like a president coming up to you and telling you that he needed to use your car.

Another important point to make is this. When the disciples were sent to get a colt, Jesus was putting into place yet one more very specific prophecy about who He was. In Zechariah 9:9, which was written some five hundred years earlier, we read, "Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

Now, keep in mind that many of the followers of Jesus were hoping that the Messiah would come with power and overthrow the Roman government. The one who raised Lazarus from the dead could certainly defeat the Romans. As they bowed down to Rome, they longed for a warrior king who would come on a great white horse, like King David did one thousand years earlier when he wiped out the Philistines. You can imagine the confusion in their minds when the people saw their Messiah ask for a baby donkey.

Jesus was about to enter the city of David not as a warrior Messiah who would physically conquer the Roman army, but as the prophetic Prince of Peace who would seek to conquer the spiritual hearts of people. Many in the crowd would have understood the message behind the symbolism.

While the disciples obeyed without asking any questions, I wonder what was really going through their minds. They could have been amazed, once again, that everything was just as Jesus said it would be. Or, they could have wondered what went wrong with the script. You may recall that shortly before this, the disciples were arguing about who was going to be the greatest in the kingdom. They were hoping Jesus was going to set up His cabinet and begin His reign in Jerusalem. But, instead of ruling, the disciples find themselves running errands and saddling donkeys, not marching in places of honor. Nevertheless, they obeyed.

Friend, are you as quick to obey as the disciples were even when you don't understand everything that's going on? When you discover clear commands in the Bible, do you follow or do you falter? Do you need to own up for any deliberate deeds of disobedience right now? If so, do it. Determine to welcome the king with an obedient heart. John 14:15 reminds us that if we say we love Jesus, then we will obey what He commands.

2 Welcome the King with Gifts

The first way we can welcome Jesus this Palm Sunday is by our obedience. The second way is by welcoming the King with our gifts.

There were at least three gifts given that day. The first one was the colt. The owners didn't question the disciples after they were told the colt was for Jesus. Maybe they had heard of Jesus before and were happy to give their possession away. They gladly gave Him what rightfully belonged to Him anyway. As the Creator, Jesus has every right to possess what is ultimately His. Someone has suggested that the owners may have been laughing to themselves because they knew that this little colt had never been ridden before and would give the rider quite a ride!

Not only did Zechariah prophecy about the Messiah riding a colt, the journey of Jesus to Jerusalem on the back of a donkey brought back memories of King Solomon's procession to Gihon in 1 Kings 1:38-39: "...they put Solomon on King David's mule...the priest anointed Solomon...then they sounded the trumpet and all the people shouted..."

Verse 35 tells us about the second gift that was given to Jesus. The disciples put their cloaks on the colt as a saddle for Him and helped Him get on. Verse 36 says that, "As he went along, people spread their cloaks on the road." They willingly took off their outer garments and laid some of them on the colt and others were placed on the road in front of Jesus.

Can you imagine what all this commotion would have done to the colt? Remember, it had never been ridden before and now Jesus was on its back, the crowd was shouting, and cloaks and palm branches were being laid in front of it as it walked down the hill toward Jerusalem. Earlier this week, I read this passage to our family as part of our devotions and then asked our girls what kind of insight they had. One of them mentioned that the colt was probably afraid. I then asked them why the colt didn't buck Jesus off and just run away. Becky, our five-year-old, gave a profoundly theological answer: "Because the donkey knew it was Jesus."

The laying of cloaks on the road would be like rolling out the red carpet for someone today. In 2 Kings 9:13, people spread cloaks under King Jehu as he walked on the bare stairs. The people recognized Jesus as royalty and gave Him the honor afforded a King.

That leads to the third gift the laying of palm branches on the road. Luke doesn't mention this detail but Matthew 21:8 tells us "... others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road." This was a common way to welcome a victorious King when he would return from battle. These palm branches were also a symbol of joy and victory and were placed on graves as a sign of eternal life. Since they often grew out in the desert near water, palm trees were a sign that life-giving activity was near. By laying palm branches on the road, the people were signifying that Jesus was the victorious King who gives eternal life to those out wandering in the desert of life.

The gifts of the colt, the cloaks, and the branches all point to who Jesus is. What started out as a Jewish feast is now turning into a Messiah celebration. The colt was expensive, the cloaks were essential, and the branches were an expression of joy. Friend, what can you give to welcome the King today? Is He asking you to give something that is expensive? Is He longing for you to give something that you consider essential? Or, have you been holding out on an expression of joy? If you want to welcome the King, you can do so with your gifts. While there is nothing we can do to earn our way to heaven, or nothing we can give to impress Jesus, our giving does demonstrate our love and devotion.

3 Welcome the King With Praise

The followers of the King welcome Him with obedience and with their gifts. We see next that they welcome the King with their praise. If they started with preparation they now break out into celebration. In verse 37, we read: "When He came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen:"

The language suggests that it was more than just the 12 disciples who were praising God. At this point, there were many followers of Christ, and as they move down the mountain, the city of Jerusalem comes into view, causing them to get even more excited.

The people broke out into a great spontaneous outpouring of praise. Sadly, however, these same vocal cords with which they praised God for the Messiah's entry would be used just a few days later to scream, "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!"

But for now, they shout out in verse 38: "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" This is a quotation from Psalm 118, which was read earlier. The phrase comes in the name of the Lord means that Jesus is coming according to the promise of God. This Psalm speaks of the coming Messiah and was sung out loud during the Passover meal. By singing this Psalm, the followers of Christ are declaring that Jesus is the sent King who comes with the very authority of God. Matthew 21:9 tells us that they included the word, "Hosanna" which means save now. There was a feeling of celebration, exaltation, and adoration for what they were anticipating would come to pass.

As the crowd is praising God loudly, the Pharisees come up to Jesus in verse 39 and say, "...Teacher, rebuke your disciples!" They knew that the crowd was declaring Jesus as the Messiah and so they tell Jesus to reject the claim and to rebuke his followers. These claims are offensive to the religious leaders.

I love the answer Jesus gives in verse 40: "I tell you...if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out." If the disciples do not speak, creation will. Just as Jesus calmed the wild colt, so too He can command an inanimate object like a rock to praise Him because He is the creator of all things. Or, to put it another way, Jesus is saying, "If I stop my disciples from singing Psalm 118, then you're going to hear a literal 'rock concert!'"

Instead of rebuking the disciples, Jesus rebukes the Pharisees by implying that the rocks know more about what is taking place than they do! By the way, in effect this was literally fulfilled when we read in Matthew 27:51, that after Jesus died, "...the earth shook and the rocks split." The rocks responded to Jesus even though the Pharisees didn't.

How are you doing at welcoming the King with praise? Do you have moments in your schedule in which you stop and break out into

adoration? Do you start and end your day with praise and worship? When you come here on Sundays to worship collectively with others is it the culmination of a week of personal worship experiences or is it your only time of praise? Friends, God can make the stones cry out -- but He'd rather have men and women and boys and girls who worship Him in spirit and in truth, spontaneously, loudly, and regularly!

4 Welcome Him With Faith

Jesus is longing for people to welcome Him with obedience, with gifts, with praise, and finally, with faith. As Jesus makes His way down the mountain, he sees the entire city of Jerusalem in a panoramic view. The city was stunning in its beauty with shining white buildings and the gleaming gold of Herod's temple. But Jesus saw it with a different vision. He was coming not to be respected but to be rejected.

As we try to put ourselves back in that day, we see that the disciples' preparation led to celebration. Now, sadly, the mood shifts to one of lamentation. Look at verse 41: "As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it."

We may be tempted to rejoice in Jesus' victory over the Pharisees. But Jesus doesn't gloat; He weeps. His interest is not in winning arguments but in winning people. The word "wept" means "to burst into tears, to weep out loud, to sob deeply." This was more than just a tear streaming down His cheek. This same word is used in Mark 5:38 to describe how family members were crying over the death of a young daughter when it says they were "crying and wailing loudly." While everyone else was shouting joyfully, Jesus was crying because of the hard hearts of people.

Jesus was not weeping because He was going to suffer and die. No, He was weeping for the lost. He wants people to exhibit faith and trust Him as their Lord and Savior. He wants this so much that He breaks out into loud wailing when people choose to go their own way.

On three separate occasions, the Bible speaks of Jesus crying:

-At the death of Lazarus in John 11:35. These were tears of sympathy.

-At the sight of Jerusalem in our passage today. These were tears of sorrow.

-In the Garden of Gethsemane in Hebrews 5:7. These were tears of anguish.

As Jesus looks out at Jerusalem, with his deep sobbing and wailing almost choking Him up, He cries out rather abruptly in verses 42-44: "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize God's coming to you."

Jesus had offered salvation to the people, but they rejected it. As a result, they have lost out on real peace. In these verses, Jesus is looking at the future and sees some really bad things in store for the City of David. His chilling prophecy became reality in 70 A.D. when Titus and the Roman legion surrounded Jerusalem, built embankments around it so no one could escape, and besieged the city for 143 days before turning it into a pile of rocks. Over 600,000 adults and children were slaughtered. The temple was totally destroyed and set on fire.

All this took place because they "did not recognize God's coming." Friends, can I talk straight with you this morning? There is a very clear principle here in these words that are dripping with the tears of Jesus. If you and I do not recognize God's coming in the form of the Lord Jesus and put our faith in Him, we will be exposed to judgment. If you reject Christ, you will pay the consequences.

This does not bring Jesus any pleasure. It breaks Him up. It brings Him pain. He is deeply moved and choked up when He thinks about you not responding to Him in faith. Ezekiel 33:11 reveals God's heart toward you: "As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?"

As Jesus breaks out into tears about the coming judgment for those who do not turn to Him in faith, I see two aspects that should motivate us to put our full faith and complete confidence in Christ for forgiveness of sins.

-His tears reveal His heart of compassion toward you. Romans 2:4 says that God's kindness can lead you to repentance. As you focus on his tears, allow His kind heart to melt away your hardness and turn to Him.

-The coming terror reveals His holiness. Earlier in Luke's gospel, in chapter 16, a rich man dies and goes to hell. As he deals with the terror and torment of the eternal fire, he begs for someone to go back and warn his family members before it's too late. If you're not moved by the tears of compassion, maybe you'll be motivated to repent because of the terror of the coming judgment.

Which one will spur you on to welcome the King with obedience, with gifts, with praise and with faith this morning?

I'm told that there is Rembrandt painting of the face of Christ that is very captivating. If you cover one of Christ's eyes His face has a sparkle of joy and hope. But if you cover the other eye, He looks like He is about to cry. And if you try to look at both eyes at the same time, you will see both emotions: first one, then the other, then mingled in a beautiful yet tragic expression. That's the face of Christ on Palm Sunday. In one eye we see the sparkle: "I am the one who has come in the name of the Lord. Hosanna." But in the other eye we see a tear: "There will be no peace and only the terror of my holy judgment for those who miss the day of my visitation."

Do you know what the biggest blooper of all time is? The biggest blooper takes place when individuals decide to not put their faith and trust in Jesus Christ. Friend, don't put off the decision any longer. Welcome the King into your life today.

Luke 19:28-44 Every Member a Worshipper

A little boy was sick on Palm Sunday and stayed home from church with his mom. When church was over, his dad returned holding a palm branch. The little boy was curious and asked, "Why do you have that palm branch, dad?" The dad told him the story about Jesus coming into town and how the people waved palm branches to greet Him. The little boy's face fell and he replied, "What a bummer! The one time I miss is the Sunday that Jesus shows up!"

Most of us know a little about Palm Sunday so I thought I'd begin with a true/false pop quiz to find out whether our information is accurate or not (adapted from christianitytoday.com).

1. According to the gospels, the people waved palm branches when Jesus rode into Jerusalem. False. None of the four Gospels say the people "waved" branches but that they spread garments and branches in Jesus' path. Only John mentions palm branches (see Matthew 21:6; Mark 11:8; Luke 19:36; John 12:13).
2. When the people spread branches and garments in Jesus' path it was to pay Him honor. True. It was common in Bible times to spread garments in the path of princes and kings, especially at their coronation (see 2 Kings 9:13).
3. The pilgrims who praised Jesus were there for a holiday celebration known as "Palm Sunday." False. People were pouring into Jerusalem for the Jewish feast of Passover.
4. The shouts of "Hosanna!" meant "Praise the Lord!" False. Halleluiah means "Praise the Lord;" Hosanna means "save us!"
5. By their actions, the people were publicly proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah. True. When Solomon was anointed king, he rode into the city on a mule, to the shouts and praises of the people (see 1 Kings 1:43-45).

One of my preaching purposes today is to pull out some exciting details in the popular Palm Sunday story so that when we're finished, we'll be filled with praise and want to sing again.

Even though all the gospels record the events of this amazing day, we're going to camp in Luke's account found in 19:28-44.

Luke makes it clear that the Savior is steadfastly set on getting to Jerusalem and there is nothing that will get in His way. Even though He stopped to minister to people, he never lost sight of His final goal. Look at Luke 9:51: "...Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem." And Luke 18:31-34: "Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them, 'We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be handed over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him, spit on him, flog him and kill him. On the third day he will rise again.' The disciples did not understand any of this."

In his book "And the Angels were Silent," Max Lucado writes, "Forget any suggestion that Jesus was trapped. Erase any theory that Jesus made a miscalculation. Ignore any speculation that the cross was a last-ditch attempt to salvage a dying mission. For if these words tell us anything, they tell us that Jesus died...on purpose. No surprise. No hesitation. No faltering. No, the journey to Jerusalem didn't begin in Jericho. It didn't begin in Galilee. It didn't even begin in Bethlehem. The journey to the cross began long before. As the echo of the crunching of the fruit was still sounding in the garden, Jesus was leaving for Calvary."

In order to understand what is about to take place in our passage today, it's important to grasp at least five backstage details.

Backstage Details

1. Everyone in Israel knew that the Messiah would be enthroned as King in Jerusalem. The Old Testament makes it very clear that the coming King would do His main work in the city of David.
2. The Passover feast was just about to begin. This celebration brought thousands of spiritual pilgrims to Jerusalem and fueled the

fires of spiritual and messianic expectations. Here's a cool thing. On the very day that Jesus, the Lamb of God, entered Jerusalem; families would have chosen their lamb to be sacrificed. This yearly reminder served to help the Israelites never forget that it was the blood of the lamb that provided their deliverance. Check this out. While the people are sacrificing their own lambs on Friday of that week, Jesus the Lamb of God is about to be slain once-for-all, for the remission of sins. For more about these cool connections, be sure to attend our Good Friday service at 7:00 p.m.

3. This exact day may line up with the prophecy in Daniel 9:24-27. According to commentator Dwight Pentecost and others, God's timetable as set forth in Daniel involves seventy "weeks" of years or seventy times seven, which is 490 years. The first week would start with the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem under the decree of King Artaxerxes, which was March 28, 445 B.C. Over the next sixty-nine weeks or four hundred eighty-three years, Jerusalem would be restored and rebuilt and the Messiah would present himself to Israel right on schedule, to the exact day! ("The Words and Works of Jesus Christ," pages 374-376).

4. The Sadducees, a group of religious leaders, had a tradition in which they believed the Messiah would show up four days before Passover. They took this so seriously that they kept the gates of the Temple open so He could walk in to his rightful place. Because of this, nationalistic fervor was at its peak and the Romans were on high alert (Paul Wallace, www.sermoncentral.com).

5. Recent miracles by Jesus led many to believe that He was the Messiah. After Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, according to John 11:45-46, many of the Jews became believers. The growing popularity of Jesus alarmed the religious leaders and from that day on, they were intent on killing Him, and Lazarus.

We can learn at least four truths from this passage that apply directly to our lives.

* Do what Jesus says – even when it doesn't make sense (19:28-34)

* Give what Jesus wants – even when it isn't easy (19:35-40)

* Feel what Jesus feels – even when others don't (19:41)

* Receive what Jesus offers – even when others won't (19:41-44)

1. Do what Jesus says – even when it doesn't make sense (19:28-34)

Luke 19:28 says, "...He went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem." I picture Jesus walking ahead of the disciples, more determined than ever to enter the city of David. The disciples may have been following rather reluctantly; perhaps they were even dragging their sandals. At the hill called the Mount of Olives, he called for two of his disciples to do a special assignment for Him. The Mount of Olives is a place of great significance. According to Zechariah 14:4, the Messiah was to appear on this mountain. Interestingly, during His last week on earth, Jesus spent His nights there. It's also where He gave the Olivet Discourse, where He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, from where He ascended into heaven (see Acts 1:12), and where His feet will touch again when He returns, splitting it in half, forming a great valley.

In verses 30-31, the two disciples are told, "Go to the village ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find a colt there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' tell him, 'The Lord needs it.'" That's kind of an unusual command, isn't it? They didn't know how it was going to turn out, but they simply did what Jesus said to do.

Verses 32-34 tell us what happened: "Those who were sent ahead went and found it just as He had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, 'Why are you untying the colt?' They replied, 'The Lord needs it.'" I love their "immediate and exact obedience." Matthew tells us that the colt was a donkey and that it was with its mother. The disciples are instructed to bring both of them, perhaps so the mom could settle the youngster down. These animals were quite expensive, and we see in verse 32 that there were at least two owners who had gone in together to buy these donkeys. In our culture today, it would be like someone coming up to a bright red convertible Porsche, opening the door, starting the car and driving away. When the owner comes running outside you would just say, "The Lord needs it."

Some cultural background helps at this point. According to a custom called *angaria*, a dignitary could procure use of property for personal reasons. It would be like President Obama sending someone from his security team to take Pastor Jeff's yellow scooter for official business. Or maybe not.

When the disciples were sent to get a colt, Jesus was putting into place yet one more very specific prophecy about who He was. In Zechariah 9:9, which was written some five hundred years earlier, we read, "Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

Now, keep in mind that many of the followers of Jesus were hoping that the Messiah would come with power and overthrow the

Roman government. Their hearts were filled with the picture of a warrior king on a great white horse, like King David did one thousand years earlier after he wiped out the Philistines. The one who raised Lazarus from the dead could certainly defeat the Romans. You can imagine the confusion in their minds when the people saw their Messiah ask for a diminutive donkey.

While the disciples obeyed without asking any questions, I wonder what was really going through their minds. You may recall that shortly before this, the disciples were arguing about who was going to be the greatest in the kingdom. They were hoping Jesus was going to set up His cabinet and begin His reign in Jerusalem. But, instead of ruling, the disciples find themselves running errands and saddling donkeys, not marching in places of honor. Nevertheless, they did what Jesus said – even when it didn't make much sense.

One thing that becomes abundantly clear in this story is that Jesus is in absolute control of the circumstances. Friend, are you as quick to obey as the disciples were – even when you don't understand everything that's going on? When you discover clear commands in the Bible, do you follow or do you falter? Do you need to own up for any deliberate deeds of disobedience right now? I like how Pastor Steven Cole summarizes this entire passage: "We must follow Jesus because He is Lord, not just because of what He can do for us."

2. Give what Jesus wants – even when it isn't easy (19:35-40)

There were at least four gifts given that day. The first one was the colt. The owners didn't question the disciples after they were told that the Lord needed it. They gladly gave what rightfully belonged to Him in the first place. Back then, a donkey was a person's most prized possession as it functioned like a tractor, a family car, a shopping cart, a guard dog and a companion. A person's wealth was often measured by what livestock he had. Let me make just one application from this. When you or I lose a possession or a person that is close to us, it's very helpful to say, "The Lord needs this possession or this person." God wants us to release that which is His anyway.

Not only did Zechariah prophecy about the Messiah riding a colt, the journey of Jesus to Jerusalem on the back of a donkey brought back memories of King Solomon's procession to Gihon in 1 Kings 1:38-39: "...they put Solomon on King David's mule...the priest anointed Solomon...then they sounded the trumpet and all the people shouted..." Christ on the colt was also an important symbol of His overall plan to present Himself as the prophetically promised Prince of Peace from Isaiah 9:6.

Verse 35 tells us about the second gift that was given to Jesus. The disciples put their cloaks on the colt as a saddle for Him and helped Him get on. Verse 36 says that, "As he went along, people spread their cloaks on the road." Can you imagine what all this commotion would have done to the colt? Remember, it had never been ridden before and now Jesus was on its back, the crowd was shouting, and cloaks and branches were being laid in front of it as it walked down the hill toward Jerusalem. The laying of cloaks on the road would be like rolling out the red carpet for someone today. In 2 Kings 9:13, people spread cloaks under King Jehu as he walked on the bare stairs. The people recognized Jesus as royalty and gave Him the honor afforded a King.

That leads to the third gift – the laying of palm branches on the road. Luke doesn't mention this detail but Matthew 21:8 tells us "...others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road." This was a common way to welcome a victorious King when he would return from battle. These palm branches were also a symbol of joy and victory and were placed on graves as a sign of eternal life. Since they often grew out in the desert near water, palm trees were a sign that life-giving activity was near. By laying palm branches on the road, the people were signifying that Jesus was the victorious King who gives eternal life to those out wandering in the desert of life.

The gifts of the colt, the cloaks, and the branches all point to who Jesus is. What started out as a Jewish feast is now turning into a Messiah celebration. The colt was expensive, the cloaks were essential, and the branches were an expression of joy. Here's the principle: The Lord has the right to make use of anything I own. Is He asking you to give something that is expensive? Is He longing for you to give something that you consider essential? Or, have you been holding out on an expression of joy?

If they started with preparation they now break out into celebration. In verse 37, we read: "When He came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen." The fourth gift they offered was their praise. This is the only time that Jesus permitted a public demonstration on His behalf. In John 2:4, He told Mary, "My time has not yet come." In John 6:15, just one year before, after feeding the crowd, the time was not right: "Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself." But now the time had come.

Listen to what they're shouting in verse 38: "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" This last phrase reminds us of what the angels said when Jesus was born. Verse 38 is a quotation from Psalm 118, which makes up the Hallel, or a section of the Psalms that was sung out loud during the Passover meal. The phrase "comes in the name of the Lord" means that the arrival of Jesus is according to the promise of God. By singing this Psalm, the followers of Christ are declaring that Jesus is the sent King who comes with the very authority of God. Matthew 21:9 tells us that they included the

word, "Hosanna" which means save now. There was a feeling of celebration, exaltation, and adoration.

As the crowd is praising God loudly, the Pharisees come up to Jesus in verse 39 and say, "...Teacher, rebuke your disciples!" They knew that the crowd was declaring Jesus as the Messiah and so they tell Jesus to reject the claim and to rebuke his followers. I love the answer Jesus gives in verse 40: "I tell you...if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out." To "cry out" means "to shriek, scream or exclaim." If the disciples do not speak, creation will break out into a chorus of praise. Just as Jesus calmed the wild colt, so too He can command an inanimate object like a rock to praise Him because He is the creator of all things. Or, to put it another way, Jesus is saying, "If I stop my disciples from singing Psalm 118, then a rock concert is going to break out!"

Instead of rebuking the disciples, Jesus rebukes the Pharisees by implying that the rocks know more about what is taking place than they do! This statement was fulfilled when we read in Matthew 27:51, that after Jesus died, "...the earth shook and the rocks split." The rocks responded to Jesus even though the Pharisees didn't.

I listened to a sermon snippet this week by Kempton Turner. He said that when God called the frogs in the plague, they said, "ribit... yes, Lord." When God called the flies, they said, "buzz...yes, Lord." When God called a big fish to swallow a rebellious prophet, the whale opened his mouth and said, "Yes, Lord." They all said, "Yes, Lord."

In our passage for today, the donkey obeyed and declared, "Hee-haw, hee-haw. Yes, Lord." The rocks were ready to roll, "Yes, Lord." And in Matthew 21:15 we read that the chief priests were indignant when they heard the children saying "Yes, Lord" by shouting out in the temple area, "Hosanna to the Son of David." I love how Jesus corrects them by quoting Psalm 8:2: "From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise." By the way, the children are going to kick-off our Easter service next Sunday at the high school with a song called, "He's Alive Again."

How are you doing at giving what Jesus wants – even when it's not easy? Do you have moments in your schedule in which you stop and break out into adoration? When you come here on Sundays to worship collectively with others is it the culmination of a week of personal worship experiences or is it your only time of praise? Friends, God can make the stones cry out -- but He'd rather have men and women and boys and girls who worship Him spontaneously, loudly, and regularly!

Part of our mission is to not only live as missionaries and as ministers but also as worshippers. If we want to make our mission possible, then we must pray and proclaim, and we must serve and sing. We must give our possessions and our praise.

3. Feel what Jesus feels – even when others don't (19:41)

As Jesus makes His way down the mountain, He sees the entire city of Jerusalem in a panoramic view. The city was stunning in its beauty with shining white buildings and the gleaming gold of Herod's temple. But Jesus saw it with a different set of eyes.

As we try to put ourselves back in that day, we see that the disciples' preparation led to celebration. Now the mood shifts to one of lamentation. Look at verse 41: "As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it." Jonah looked on Nineveh and hoped it would be destroyed, while Jesus looked at Jerusalem and wept because it had destroyed itself. The parade suddenly stops. People see His shoulders shaking. Maybe He's laughing. Everyone else is throwing up cheers while Jesus is shedding tears. The word "wept" means "to burst into tears, to weep out loud, to sob deeply." This was more than just a tear streaming down His cheek. These were chest-heaving sobs. This same word is used in Mark 5:38 to describe how family members were crying over the death of a young daughter when it says they were "crying and wailing loudly."

Jesus was not weeping because He was going to suffer and die. No, He was lamenting the lost and their hard hearts. He breaks out into loud wailing when people will to go their own way. I like how the Bible Exposition Commentary puts it: "No matter where Jesus looked, He found cause for weeping. If He looked back, He saw how the nation had wasted opportunities. If He looked within, He saw spiritual ignorance and blindness...as He looked around, Jesus saw religious activity that accomplished very little...as Jesus looked ahead, He wept as He saw the terrible judgment that was coming to the nation, the city, and the temple." I wonder how much He weeps for the things that are happening in our country?

I find the weekly email prayer requests that Vera Wahls sends out to be extremely helpful. I trust that you're receiving them each week. If not, send us an email: office@pontiacbible.org. Here's part of what she wrote this week: "Lord, give us a sense of urgency to reach the lost with the message of salvation. Lord, may all of those around me thirst for you, the solid rock, and know that ALL OTHER GROUND is SINKING SAND! When the final trumpet sounds, may a whole army of people from Livingston County, our state, our country, and our world go marching to the throne! Help me to do my part to equip the troops to faithfully live for the Lord and serve Him well until the end!"

Do you feel what Jesus feels – even when others don't? Are you willing to let your heart be broken for those who are hurting and wandering? God knows who they are, and so do you – a colleague, a roommate, a brother or sister, a mother or a father, a close friend, a casual acquaintance. Take some time right now and think of someone who doesn't yet know Christ. Ask God to help you

feel what Jesus feels about their lostness and then determine this week to invite him or her to our Good Friday and Easter services. Surveys indicate that the majority of people who don't attend church give the same reason when they're asked why they don't: "No one ever asked." Your mission this week is to make the Easter ask!

4. Receive what Jesus offers – even when others won't (19:41-44)

Jesus looks out at Jerusalem and laments the lostness. And then He cries out rather abruptly in verses 42-44: "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace – but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize God's coming to you."

Jesus had offered salvation to the people, but they rejected it. As a result, they lost out on real peace. In these verses, Jesus is looking at the future and sees some really bad things in store for the City of David. His chilling prophecy became reality in 70 A.D. when Titus and the Roman legion surrounded Jerusalem, built embankments around it so no one could escape, and besieged the city for 143 days before turning it into a pile of rocks. Over 600,000 adults and children were slaughtered. The temple was totally destroyed and set on fire.

All this took place because they "did not recognize God's coming." I like how The Message paraphrases this verse: "You did not recognize and welcome God's personal visit." Friends, can I talk straight with you this morning? There is a very clear principle here in these words that are dripping with the tears of Jesus. If you and I do not recognize God's coming in the form of the Lord Jesus and put our faith in Him, we will be exposed to judgment. If you reject Christ, you will pay the consequences. It's possible to miss the time of God's visitation today as well. This word translated "coming" means "to relieve." It's the same word used in Matthew 25:36 where Jesus said, "I was in prison and you came to visit me." The coming of Christ is meant to bring us comfort.

As Jesus breaks out into tears about the coming judgment for those who do not turn to Him in faith, I see two aspects that should motivate us to put our complete confidence in Christ for forgiveness of sins. Receive what Jesus offers – even when others won't.

* His tears reveal His heart of compassion toward you. Romans 2:4 says that God's kindness can lead you to repentance. As you focus on his tears, allow His kind heart to melt away your hardness and turn to Him.

* The coming terror reveals His holiness. Earlier in Luke's gospel, in chapter 16, a rich man dies and goes to hell. As he deals with the terror and torment of the eternal fire, he begs for someone to go back and warn his family members before it's too late. If you're not moved by the tears of compassion, maybe you'll be motivated to repent because of the terror of the coming judgment.

In Matthew 21:10-11, we read that the whole city was "stirred and asked, 'Who is this?'" The word stirred is where we get our word seismic. I can tell you this. When you totally submit and surrender to the Savior, allowing Him to make a triumphal entry into your own heart, seismic changes will take place. Friend, don't put off the decision any longer. Welcome the King into your life today and worship Him in these four ways...

* Do what Jesus says – even when it doesn't make sense (19:28-34)

* Give what Jesus wants – even when it isn't easy (19:35-40)

* Feel what Jesus feels – even when others don't (19:41)

* Receive what Jesus offers – even when others won't (19:41-44)

We read these words of Jesus in Luke 13:34: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!" Let me personalize this: "John, John, how often I have longed to put you together but you were not willing." "Jane, Jane, how often I have longed to put you together but you were not willing."

The theme of Luke's gospel is found earlier in Luke 19. Listen to verse 10: "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost." The donkey yielded its stubborn will to the Savior, how about you? Ask Him to save you now! Allow Him to make a triumphal entry in your heart.

We started with a quiz this morning and now want to mention that there's a final exam coming. When you die, you may be asked just one question. The question will go something like this: Why should I let you into heaven? Any answer other than because you have put your faith in Jesus and allowed Him to triumph over your sins, is the wrong answer.

Luke 19:28-44 Worship Fit for a King

- [Luke 19:28-44 Worship Fit for a King](#)

Luke 22:31-34, 54-62 Recovering from Failure

People across the country tuned in this week to watch another former Illinois governor head off to prison. Seeing him shaking hands and signing autographs as the media followed his every step stirred up various feelings inside of me. I felt really badly for his wife and daughters even though he's getting what his crimes deserved.

When I started out as a pastor over 20 years ago, a number of well-known televangelists failed and their sins became public. I remember not feeling very compassionate because I secretly thought that their excessive flamboyance somehow led to their failures. I think I was actually spiritually smug about their sins. Shortly after this, a well-known evangelical leader failed and I was really bummed out because I had heard him speak several times and had read a number of his books. He was one of my spiritual heroes. In this same time frame a pastor who was mentoring me in an internship imploded and then just disappeared.

I remember thinking, "How could all this happen so suddenly?"

To answer that, let me demonstrate using this tire from my bike. I hadn't ridden my bike all winter and when I took it down this week I noticed that the tires were almost flat. Have you ever had a slow leak in a tire? Sometimes it's difficult to figure out where the leak is coming from but you notice that air is escaping somehow. I'm told that tires can simply lose air over time, even if there are no punctures present.

Peter had some slow leaks going on in his spiritual life. In Luke 22:31-34 we're going to see that our failures are not final with God: "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers." But he replied, 'Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death.' Jesus answered, 'I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me.'" Let's pull out two truths from the passage.

1. Satan is our Adversary. Satan is out to take us out. He wants to sift us: "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat." The word "sift" is an agricultural term. When wheat was harvested, the kernel would be crushed and then the wheat would be tossed into the air to blow the chaff away. They would then put the grain into a square box covered with netting, turn it upside down and start shaking it violently. The idea is that all the dirt and junk would fall out, leaving behind the clean grain. Satan is out to turn us upside down and shake us to pieces.

1 Peter 5:8 says: "Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." And in Revelation 12:10 we're told that Satan accuses believers day and night. Behind every spiritual failure is a spiritual enemy. I find it very interesting that Jesus allowed the Adversary to attack a follower. Why didn't He just tell Satan to buzz off? Here's why. He knew that Peter would ultimately profit from this, though it would be extremely painful. Satan is on a short leash and can go no further than God allows.

2. Jesus is our Advocate. I love the fact that Jesus intercedes for us: "But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail." While Satan goes after everyone, he seems to have a bulls-eye on leaders because they are a threat to him. If he can torpedo Peter's faith, others will be disheartened and discouraged. Jesus didn't pray to keep Peter away from the sifting but for his faith to not ultimately fail.

I want you to notice that Jesus tells Simon that He is praying for him. Friend, take comfort that Jesus is pulling for you. Hebrews 7:25: "Because he always lives to intercede for them." He knows Peter will stumble but He also knows that his unfaithfulness will only be temporary; he will not fail forever.

I see a three-step process in this passage that led to Peter's recovery.

- Rebellion. Jesus told Peter that he would turn away: "I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me."
- Repentance. Jesus told Peter that he would turn back: "And when you have turned back." I love that Jesus uses the word "when" referring to Peter turning back. There's no question but that he will repent.
- Restoration. Jesus told Peter that he would have a turnaround and would eventually "strengthen his brothers."

Rebellion

While Peter's denial of Christ was a huge spiritual blowout, there were actually some slow leaks going on for some time. Leaks like these are often unseen and unnoticed...at least at first. Here are some that come to mind.

1. Peter was proud. [Let air out] The disciples had just been arguing about who was the greatest. In John 13:37, Peter said that he would lay down his life for Christ. In Luke 22:33 Peter declared his willingness to go with Jesus "to prison and to death." Check out what he proudly proclaimed in Matthew 26:33: "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will." He thought he was better than anyone else. He went a step further in Mark 14:31 when He even contradicted what Christ told him: "But Peter insisted emphatically, 'Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.'" We need to be on guard against pride in our lives according to 1 Corinthians 10:12: "So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!"

2. Peter was prayerless. [Let air out] In Luke 22:45 we see that Peter fell asleep instead of doing battle in prayer. In verse 46, Jesus tells them that prayer can keep them from temptation: "Get up and pray so that you will not fall into temptation." Without prayer, there's no power to fight. We'll look more closely at this next Sunday.

3. Peter was impetuous. [Let air out] Peter was prone to react according to his feelings, not by his faith. He's similar to how Craig Groeschel describes Samson: "Emotion-driven, not Spirit-led." A clear evidence of this is found in John 18:10 where we read that Simon took a sword and sliced off a servant's ear and then fled in fear.

4. Peter was predisposed. [Let air out] While Peter seemed to be "all in," I think there was something keeping him from fully committing himself to Christ. I can't quite put my finger on it but to use Facebook language, he was more a "friend" of Jesus than a full follower. Luke 22:54 says that "Peter followed at a distance."

What about you? Are there some slow leaks going on in your life right now?

Let's turn over to Matthew's account and see how Peter handles some increased pressure. If you listen, you'll be able to hear more air hissing out of his tires.

- Denial #1: Matthew 26:69-70: "Now Peter was sitting out in the courtyard, and a servant girl came to him. 'You also were with Jesus of Galilee,' she said. But he denied it before them all. 'I don't know what you're talking about,' he said." It's hard to believe that this was the same guy who had just whacked off a servant's ear.

- Denial #2: Matthew 26:71-72: "Then he went out to the gateway, where another girl saw him and said to the people there, 'This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth.' He denied it again, with an oath: 'I don't know the man!'" Peter now gets up and moves toward the door. Peter calls out an oath and refers to Jesus as the "the man," as if He were a complete stranger to him, and uses an expression that conveys contempt.

- Denial #3. About an hour later (see Luke 22:59) we read in Matthew 26:73-74: "After a little while, those standing there went up to Peter and said, 'Surely you are one of them, for your accent gives you away.' Then he began to call down curses on himself and he swore to them, 'I don't know the man!'" Galileans were careless with their vowels and failed to clearly differentiate the various guttural consonants...kind of like how people from Michigan talk.

As Satan sifted, Peter shifted...and then His failure was exposed...but it wasn't final for him. Let's look now at some steps of repentance that Peter took.

Repentance

1. Crowing of his conscience. As Peter is cursing he hears a cock crowing. I picture him freezing in mid-sentence because the last part of verse 74 indicates that this happened "immediately" after his third denial. Matthew 26:75: "Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken: 'Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times.' And he went outside and wept bitterly." Peter remembered what Jesus had said. Let me just say that it's good when we feel bad. Our conscience is a gift from God; He can use our guilt to bring us back to that which is good.

2. Look of love. At the point of Peter's denial, Jesus fixes His gracious gaze on Peter. This is portrayed powerfully in the Passion movie. Let's watch a brief clip right now. Luke 22:61 indicates that "the Lord turned and looked straight at Peter." With his face covered with spit and bruised by the blows He had received, Peter sees pain...and he sees pardon. The look of love from His Lord broke Peter's proud heart.

Romans 2:4 reminds us that when we consider God's kindness, we should be moved to repentance: "Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance?"

The words to that great hymn say it well: "Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in His wonderful face. And the things of earth will grow strangely dim in light of His glory and grace."

3. Sorrowful brokenness. This caused Peter to run outside and weep bitterly as the words that Jesus spoke consumed his conscience. Mark 14:72 indicates that Peter "broke down and wept" continuously. This word means that he wailed violently. 2 Corinthians 7:10: "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death." The path to restoration requires repentance. Craig Groeschel says that while you can't un-sin, you can repent.

I wonder if you feel a bit like Peter today. You've failed and you feel like you can't be forgiven. Maybe your marriage is a mess or a close friendship has fractured. Perhaps you've been fired from your job or your business is a bust. Maybe your kids haven't turned out like you wanted them to. Maybe there's a slow leak going on or perhaps you've already had a blowout. Move from rebellion to repentance so that you can be restored. I love the truth found in Proverbs 24:16: "For though a righteous man falls seven times, he rises again."

Restoration

After Jesus is put to death, the disciples are afraid and go into hiding -- they're not sure what's going to happen to them now. Three days later on Easter Sunday, Jesus rises from the dead and begins appearing to many people. I love what the angel said to the women who had come to the empty tomb in Mark 16:7: "But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see Him, just as He told you.'" The angel wanted Peter to get the news that Jesus was now alive. This customized message was designed especially for someone who felt like a failure.

In John 21, we read that Peter is still bummed out so he decides to go fishing with his buddies. Maybe if he does something he's good at, he'll begin to feel better. He's actually going back to his old life. They fish all night and don't catch anything. Mark this down. It's always unsatisfying to go back to the way you once lived. Peter's now in a free-fall down the slippery slope of failure. He can't even catch a carp!

Early that morning a man on shore asks them how the fishing was going. They shout to him and tell him that they struck out. This man tells them to throw their nets on the other side of the boat and then they will find some fish. When they followed through with his suggestion, they caught so many fish that they couldn't even pull in the net. It was at that point that the disciples recognized that this man was Jesus. Peter, true to his impulsive nature, jumped into the water and swam for shore. After having breakfast on the beach, Jesus restores Peter to ministry.

One pastor writes that there are a lot of things that Jesus could have said to Peter. He could have responded to him like we would have. He could have treated him with silence and given the cold shoulder. He could have expressed anger and let Peter suffer. He might have said, "You know, Peter, I just don't trust you anymore." He could have brought up his failure in every conversation. He could have talked to the other disciples about it: "Remember that night when Peter denied me?" He could have excluded him and found subtle and not-so-subtle ways to punish him. And if he ran out of ideas...He could have asked us! (Bruce Goettsche, www.sermoncentral.com). We're pretty tough on people who sin differently than we do, aren't we?

There's a lot we can learn about how Jesus restores Peter in John 21:15-22. He tells him to...

1. Love Lavishly. After breakfast is over, Jesus publicly forgives and reinstates Peter. This is for Peter's benefit and also provides some teaching for the other six disciples who are listening to the conversation. As Peter smells the charcoal fire and feels its heat, he is reminded of how he warmed himself next to a fire in a courtyard right before he denied Jesus three times.

I think Peter was taken aback when Jesus greeted him with "Simon, son of John." He probably wished Jesus would have called him Peter, a piece of the rock. But he knew that he was anything but a rock at that moment. Jesus then asked Peter a question: "Do you truly love me more than these?" Was Jesus referring to the fish on the fire? Or was He speaking of the boat and the fishing supplies? Actually, Jesus wanted Peter to admit that his pride was now gone. He could no longer say that he was better than the other disciples. Instead of bragging, he was broken. That's a good place to be according to Psalm 51:17: "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."

Jesus could have asked Peter anything, or did some teaching, or told a parable, but He chose to ascertain his love level. Twice more he asked Peter if he loved Him. In verse 17 we read that "Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, 'Do you love me?'" Through the repetition of the same question, Jesus is bringing out the depth of Peter's penitence. What about you? What do you value most in life? Possessions? People? Your own pride? Is there anything or anyone you love more than you love the Lord?

2. Serve Selflessly. With each of Peter's replies, Jesus gives him a task to do. The Lord is not looking at Peter's past; He is focused on what Peter can do in the future. One way Peter is to demonstrate his fondness for Christ is by loving and caring for people. The main point here is that our love for God will always show itself in love and care for God's people. Peter's told to feed the Lord's

lambs and to take care of His sheep.

I like what Craig Groeschel says when drawing out some lessons from the sins that Samson committed: "Don't let what you did keep you from doing what God wants you to do. You are not what you did; you are who God made you to be." Jesus wanted Peter to know that He still had an assignment for him.

3. Follow Faithfully. The key when we fail is not to wallow away but to follow today.

- We are to follow no matter what has happened or what will happen. The command, "follow me" in verse 19 is a present imperative, which means "keep on following me."
- We must follow faithfully no matter whom else follows. We like to focus on what others are doing, don't we? After Jesus revealed some shepherding plans for him, Peter immediately wanted to know what Jesus was going to do about John. I love the answer Jesus gave in verse 22: "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me."

Peter Principles

We can learn at least two things from Peter.

1. Failure does not have to be final. Peter had messed up by failing big time. He felt awful. He could have just given up -- but he didn't. He moved from rebellion to repentance to restoration.

YOU ARE NOT A FAILURE JUST BECAUSE YOU HAVE FAILED.

2. Failure can be fruitful. If you were to study the life of Peter, you would discover that his failure had a positive effect on his life. Before his blowout, he was reckless, brash, and abrupt. After repenting and being restored, Peter was a changed man. He became more tenderhearted and humbled by his obvious failure. He went on to become one of the leaders in the early church and wrote two letters that eventually became part of the Bible.

YOU CAN STRENGTHEN OTHERS BECAUSE YOU NOW KNOW HOW EASY IT IS TO FAIL.

Many years ago, when Emily was really young, Beth and I decided to sign her up for ice skating lessons. On the first day of class, the teacher spent the entire time teaching the shaky skaters only two things -- how to fall down, and how to get up. Her teacher knew that if you're going to skate on slippery ice; you're going to fall. And, once you fall, you need to get back up.

There's a life application here. God knows you're going to fall and you're going to fail. Life is like an ice skating rink sometimes. I suspect that some of you have fallen but don't want to get back up. Maybe you're so embarrassed by your failure that you simply don't want to risk another one.

I can remember one guy in the class. It seemed like he fell about 100 times in 45 minutes. He'd come sliding across the ice, his arms flailing and would land right on his backside. It never seemed to bother him. He just got right back up and tried it again. He looked like a yo-yo. He'd go a couple feet and fall, get up and fall, get up and fall. The scary thing was that this guy had some speed -- and he didn't fall all that gracefully. Others were a bit more cautious; they took little steps so that they wouldn't crash too quickly. Eventually they wiped out as well.

If you've fallen, it's time to get back up...you may be down, but you're not out. Jesus died as your substitute for all your sins. You can fail forward.

If you're leaking air, it's time to plug the holes...so that you don't have a blowout and your faith goes flat...keep up the spiritual disciplines in your life...establish boundaries...find an accountability partner. PBC is a place of grace where the fallen can have a fresh start.

Stay filled with the Holy Spirit [pump up tire]. And get some help so you can keep rolling.

Luke 23:24-48 A Few People Meet the Savior

We've been walking to the cross over the last three Sundays now we're finally there. Watching some clips from the Jesus video has helped us, and we're going to watch another one tonight.

Clip #1: The Reality of Christ's Death

The first clip we're going to look at is the Reality of Christ's Death. It's now Thursday night. Jesus has just finished having dinner with

his closest followers. The camera zooms in to capture the resolve on the face of Jesus and the look of fear and confusion on the faces of his disciples. Jesus announces that one of his dinner guests, one of his closest friends, is about to betray Him. The camera follows Jesus now as He goes into a garden to pray. He's praying fervently as He sweats drops of blood on the rocks in front of Him. When He's done, He looks up to see a crowd armed with swords and clubs coming to arrest Him.

The camera now starts to bounce up and down in the commotion. Jesus is rushed to a makeshift trial and condemned to die. Some begin to spit on Him. Others blindfold Him and hit Him with their fists; asking Jesus to guess who it is that is hitting Him. The guards then take Him and beat Him some more.

Early on Friday morning, the religious leaders reach a decision to send Jesus to a governor named Pilate. Pilate is hesitant to do anything to Jesus, but gives in to the clamor of the crowd. The camera again shows the mob of people, now agitated and screaming, "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!"

Jesus is then taken by the soldiers, stripped of His clothes, and tied to a wooden pole where he is beaten with a whip -- sharp jagged pieces of bone and lead come crashing down on Jesus with every stroke. The soldiers take turns lashing his bare back with the whip, tearing into the flesh with every hit.

Jesus is now bleeding profusely with multiple lacerations exposing muscles, ligaments, and blood vessels. One of the soldiers takes off his purple cloak and puts it over Jesus' shoulders. Another quickly puts together a crown of sharp thorns to mimic the wreath that Caesar wore and jams it onto his head -- the thorns are as sharp and as sturdy as spikes. The camera graphically shows the blood running down his head to mingle with the blood that already covers the rest of His body.

But, the soldiers aren't finished yet. Next they place a reed in his right hand to look like a scepter and even kneel down before Him to mock Him as king -- as they get up from kneeling, they spit at Him in His face. Someone then grabs the scepter and begins to beat Him on the head; others beat Him in the face with their fists.

All this took place before 8:00 Friday morning! But, things were going to get much worse. It was customary to make a prisoner carry his own crossbar to the place of execution. But, since Jesus is so weak from the terrible beating, the soldiers grab someone out of the crowd to carry the 100 pound piece of timber the 1/2 mile or so to the execution site.

The guy running the camera is out in front of the crowd so he can capture the procession as they make their way to a hill outside Jerusalem. It's a grim scene. Jesus is bloody and exhausted as he stumbles along the rough cobblestone.

They finally arrive at a place called Golgotha. The soldiers take off Jesus' clothes and offer him something to numb the pain but he refuses. He's fully conscious as they throw Him to the ground and position Him on the cross. A 5-7" spike is nailed through each of his wrists -- the man running the camera has to turn away. His feet are then crossed and a spike is driven through them. The cross is raised by at least 4 soldiers and positioned in the right place.

The callous soldiers sit down, indifferent to what is going on -- they had seen all this before. They throw some dice to see who gets to keep Jesus' clothes. This first clip ends as the camera records people insulting Christ and making fun of Him while He hangs on the cross.

Clip #2: The Results of His Death

The first clip depicts the Reality of His death. The second clip shows two Results of His death.

The Bible records two incidents that happened when Jesus died. The first is a sound bite that Jesus utters from the cross. He's been on the cross for about six hours now. The soldiers have been assigned to keep watch. Just before Jesus dies, He cries out in John 19:30, "It is Finished!"

What is finished? What does this mean? The term Jesus used was a common phrase from the world of finance and banking. When someone would borrow some money and then pay it back, the banker would use this term to declare that the debt had been paid off. Literally, it means, "Paid in Full." The payment had been made.

When Jesus died on the cross, He paid the price for us. Jesus took our moral liabilities and stamped "Paid in Full" across the ledger sheet of our life. Our sin debt has been forgiven. Because of our moral failures and patterns of sin, each of us deserves to be sentenced for our cosmic crimes against a holy God. Someone needs to pay the price for our sin. The Bible makes it clear that either we pay it -- or someone else needs to.

You see, each one of us have violated God's standards. Because He is a just God, a penalty has to be paid. God sent His son Jesus to be that payment for each one of us. Jesus died on the cross as our substitute. He paid the price with His life and God accepted His death as full payment for all of our sins.

Result #1 is that we are acquitted -- our debt has been paid in full. The Bible says that Jesus shouted loudly right before He died. It was like a victory shout. The sacrifice had been made. His final cry from the cross was not a cry of despair. No. It was a cry of completion, of fulfillment -- this is why He had come to earth. It's now over. If His hands were not nailed to the cross, He would have thrust a triumphant fist into the air. He then took His last breath.

Matthew 27:51 tells us "At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom." Let me explain. The temple is where people used to go to pray and offer animal sacrifices to God.

There were different parts to the temple. The most holy place was called the holy of holies. A thick curtain separated this inner sanctuary from the outer area. This curtain was not an ordinary curtain -- it was 60 feet long and 30 feet high and about two inches thick. It was said that it took 300 priests just to install it.

Only one person, the high priest, was allowed to even go into this area of the temple -- and then only one time a year to offer a major sacrifice for his people. The whole structure emphasized the remoteness of God and the difficulty of gaining access to Him.

Hold on now -- stay with me. When Jesus died, this 60 x 30 foot curtain was torn in two -- from top to bottom, signifying that it was God Himself who tore it in half. Now, instead of just one person having access to God once a year, the way to God stands wide open to everyone, on every day of the year.

Result #1 is our acquittal. Result #2 is open access to God. Everything has been paid in full -- we have been declared free and forgiven. And, we now have an open avenue to God -- we can access Him at any time. Friends, all this is possible now through the death of Christ!

The Reality of the death of Christ is that it really happened. There are at least two Results of his death -- acquittal and open access. Now, let's take a look at 4 different Responses to the death of Christ. These responses are evident in the various people who witnessed Jesus die that Friday afternoon.

Clip #3: The Responses to the Death of Christ

1 - The Scoffers

The Scoffers make up group #1. Luke 23:35 records that they said things like, "He saved others; let Him save Himself if He is the Christ of God, the Chosen One." They were indignant. They wanted to give Jesus a hard time -- now was their chance while he was hanging on the cross.

Peter, who had denied Jesus just hours before, wrote about this scene in 1 Peter 2:23: "When they hurled their insults at Him, He did not retaliate; when He suffered, He made no threats. Instead, He entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly." These scoffers launched a verbal assault. They strung their bows with self-righteousness and launched stinging arrows of pure poison.

Jesus could have retaliated by saying, "Come up here and say that to my face," or, "Just wait till after the Resurrection, buddy! I'm coming back for you." He didn't do that. His body was wracked with pain, his eyes blinded by his own blood, his lungs gasping for air and yet, amazingly, He prayed in Luke 23:24, "Father, forgive them for they don't know what they're doing." If ever a person deserved a shot at revenge, Jesus did. But He didn't take a shot at the scoffers -- instead, He died for them.

2 - The Spectators

In Group #2 we find the Spectators. These people were attracted to the execution. As they walked past the scene, they saw the "gaper's block" and pulled over. Just like we slow down to take a look at an accident when we're driving, this group of people was content to just watch, but they were indifferent to what was going on -- at least when they first came on the scene.

The Bible says that as they watched, they began to drift away, one by one. Luke 23:48: "When all the people who had gathered to witness this sight saw what took place, they beat their breasts and walked away." When someone beat their breast in the first century, it was a sign of guilt and remorse. Their indifference had been replaced with feelings of guilt. As they watched what Jesus went through, maybe they began to realize their role in putting Him on the cross. They came to witness a show, but they left with feelings of woe.

3 - The Seekers

There weren't many people in group #3 -- I call them the Seekers. In fact, we know from reading the different Gospel reports that really only 2 people fit in this category -- one was a thief who was nailed to the cross next to Jesus. The other was the captain of the soldiers. He was called a centurion, meaning that he was in command of up to 100 Roman soldiers.

The centurion witnessed the scourging, the mocking, the spitting, the crucifixion, the indignant scoffers, and the indifferent

spectators. He heard everything that Jesus said on the Cross, heard His last cry, and watched Him die. He was deeply impressed. He had never seen anything like this before! He was moved and drawn to the Savior.

He was intrigued by what He saw. You see, he started out viewing Jesus as an ordinary criminal. But, he watched and listened. He investigated. His closed mind was starting to open. He began to seek, to question, to wonder. And, as he processed everything, he changed his mind on the basis of some new evidence. Jesus was no ordinary criminal -- He died as a triumphant hero.

Mark 15:39 records the response of this battle-scarred soldier: "And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, heard his cry and saw how He died, he said, 'Surely, this man was the Son of God!'"

Max Lucado wrote a book called *Six Hours One Friday*. Listen to how he captures what may have been going on inside the centurion that afternoon:

He was uneasy. He had been since noon. It wasn't the deaths that troubled him...he'd mastered the art of numbing his heart. But this crucifixion plagued him. Half the crowd taunted, half cried. The soldiers griped. As the hours wore on, the centurion found himself looking more and more at the one on the center cross. He didn't know what to do with [his] silence or with his kindness. Suddenly the center head ceased to bob. It yanked itself erect. Its eyes opened in a flash of white. A roar sliced the silence. "It is finished." It wasn't a yell. It wasn't a scream. It was a roar...a lion's roar. He looked up into the face of the one near death. The King looked down at the crusty old centurion. Jesus' hands were fastened -- they couldn't reach out. His feet were nailed to timber -- they couldn't walk toward him. His head was heavy with pain, he could scarcely move it. But his eyes...they were afire. They were unquenchable. They were the eyes of God. Perhaps that's what made the centurion say what he said. He had seen the eyes of God. (167-170)

Instead of being an indignant scoffer who walked away unchanged or an indifferent spectator who walked away with some guilt, the centurion was a seeker who was intrigued by Jesus. He hung around long enough to reach a conclusion about who Jesus was -- and when he reached his conclusion, he wasn't afraid to shout it out: Jesus was the Son of God!

4 - The Saved

There was a fourth group present the day Jesus died -- they were the Saved. They were the friends and followers of Jesus. They were probably scared when they first got there so the camera shows them watching from a distance. But, as time goes on, the camera shows them moving closer to the Cross. As they understood more of what was happening, I'm sure some of them realized that this was exactly what Jesus had predicted would take place.

They began to see it clearly now. He had to die in order for them to be acquitted from their sins. He had to die in order to give them access to God the Father. They were now intent to take it all in.

He's Dying to Reach You

Friend, which group best describes where you're at in your spiritual journey this evening? Are you an indignant scoffer? Are you determined to launch a volley of attacks at the Savior? Do you have something against Him?

Are you an indifferent spectator? Are you just kind of hanging around? Then, when you feel some guilt, will you just walk away?

Are you an intrigued seeker? Are you interested in Jesus? Do you find yourself drawn to Him?

Or, are you in the camp of the intently saved? Are you a follower of Christ but have grown distant from Him? What will it take to move you closer to Christ?

That's really the question for each of us tonight. What will it take to move us closer to Christ? The centurion started out as an indignant scoffer who became an indifferent spectator. As he watched, he became an intrigued seeker. By his bold confession, he may have become a recipient of salvation that afternoon. In other words, because of the reality of the death of Christ, and his declaration of faith in Jesus as the Son of God, he may have activated his acquittal and access to God.

Friend, you can't be passive about this one. There's something about the Crucifixion of Christ that made every witness either step toward the cross or move away from it. It compelled some and repelled others. The scoffers and spectators walked away from the Cross. The seekers and the saved took a step closer.

Don't remain in neutral this evening. A choice is required. The Cross won't allow you to sit on the fence. You'll either walk away or take a step closer. What's it going to be? Jesus is dying to reach you -- do you have the courage to change your mind like the centurion did? Jesus is reaching out to you -- if you'll listen, you'll hear Him call your name.

Someone told me about a billboard they saw recently. On it was a picture of Jesus on the Cross, His head bowed. In big, bold

letters, the caption read: "IT'S YOUR MOVE!"

Friends, He's done it all for you -- it's now your move. Why don't you move one step closer to the Cross right now?

If you're a scoffer, why don't you take a step closer and become a spectator?

If you're a spectator, why don't you take a step closer and become a seeker?

If you're a seeker, maybe it's time for you to become saved.

If you're saved, it's time for you to come closer to the cross and surrender.

We're going to walk to the Cross right now. You've been given a spike and a piece of paper with the words, "My Sins" on it. We're going to walk up to the cross and, using the nail you received and the hammers down on the floor, we're going to nail "our sins" to the Cross right now.

Luke 23:16-49 The Case for Christ: His Death

I was on the wrestling team in High School. The wrestlers and the basketball players didn't get along very well. We practiced on the gym stage while the wimpy round-ball guys ran around in the gym. There was a big stage curtain that we always pulled shut so we wouldn't have to look at our rivals. We used to really enjoy it when a basketball would slip under this thick curtain and bounce on one of our mats. We had a routine whenever this would happen. We'd give the ball to Guy Duffy, who wrestled heavyweight, and waited for one of the basketball guys to jump up on the stage to retrieve the ball.

When "Basketball Jones" would poke his head under the curtain and crawl up on the stage, one of us would tackle him and the rest of us would pile on. When we were done tenderizing him we'd roll him off the stage and then throw the ball out after him. As the season went on, I think they wished this curtain could have been a brick wall!

Do you ever feel like there's a brick wall between you and God? Does He seem far away and distant? As you read through the Old Testament, you can't help but recognize that God is holy, majestic, and separated from His people. There's a definite doctrine of divine distance. Close contact with the Holy God of the universe was formal, and somewhat limited. A clear line of separation was drawn between what was sacred and what was profane. When God spoke to Moses, He told him in Exodus 19:21: "Go down and warn the people so they do not force their way through to see the Lord and many of them perish."

Jesus came to bridge this gap by making God near and accessible. This morning we're going to focus on three short verses from the Gospel of Mark. Please turn to Mark 15:37-39: "With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last. The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, heard his cry and saw how he died, he said, 'Surely this man was the Son of God.'"

In this brief passage, we see three truths:

- The Victory Has Been Won
- The Way is Now Open
- The Offer Still Stands

The Victory Has Been Won

Verse 37 tells us that Jesus let out a shout right before He died: "With a loud cry, Jesus breathed His last." When Jesus died he didn't whimper or whisper. The phrase "loud cry" can be translated, "a big, or exceedingly great voice." His final words were a roar of victory. He died knowing that His work was complete. The price had been paid. The sacrifice had been accepted.

John 19:30 tells us that this shout contained the words, "It is finished." That means that all of our moral mess-ups and our total sin debt has been canceled.

When you think about it, it's amazing that Jesus was able to give a loud cry right before He died because victims of crucifixion usually had no strength left, especially when they were close to death. I came across a medical summary of what happens to the human body when it is crucified. Let me read part of it to you:

The cross is placed on the ground and the exhausted man is quickly thrown backwards with his shoulders against the wood. The soldier drives a heavy, square wrought-iron nail through the wrist and deep into the wood. Quickly he moves to the other side and

repeats the action, being careful not to pull the arms too tightly, but to allow some flex and movement. The left foot is pressed backward against the right foot, and with both feet extended, toes down, a nail is driven through the arch of each, leaving the knees flexed. The cross is then lifted into place.

As the man slowly sags down with more weight on the nails in the wrists, excruciating, fiery pain shoots along the fingers and up the arms and explodes in the brain. As he pushes himself upward to avoid this stretching torment, he places the full weight on the nail through his feet. Again he feels the searing agony of the nail tearing through the nerves between the bones of his feet.

As the arms fatigue, cramps sweep through the muscles, knotting them in deep, relentless, throbbing pain. With these cramps comes the inability to push himself upward to breathe. Air can be drawn into the lungs but not exhaled. Carbon dioxide builds up in his system.

Hours of this limitless pain, cycles of twisting, joint-rending cramps, intermittent partial asphyxiation, searing pain as tissue is torn from his lacerated back as he moves up and down against the rough timber. Then another agony begins: a deep, crushing pain deep in the chest as the pericardium slowly fills with serum and begins to compress the heart.

It is now almost over--the loss of tissue fluids has reached a critical level--the compressed heart is struggling to pump heavy, thick, sluggish blood into the tissues--the tortured lungs are making a frantic effort to gasp in small gulps of air. (Adapted from C. Truman Davis, M.D. in the Expositor's Bible Commentary, Vol. 8)

Jesus can feel the chill of death creeping through His tissues...and yet He still gives a victory chant. It's Friday, but Sunday's coming!

The Way is Now Open

The first truth we discover is that the Victory Has Been Won. Let's look now at verse 38 where we learn that the Way is Now Open. This verse is packed with meaning! Let's read it: "The curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom."

Several items in Israel's worship system spelled out the remoteness of God. In particular, in the Jewish temple there were curtains to keep people separated from God's presence. And, there were scores of rules and regulations.

In the New Testament, when you read of the Temple, the writers are most likely referring to the one that Herod built, or was in the process of building. Nothing remains of this worship center that was destroyed in 70 A.D. except some broken pieces of rock and some other fragments. This temple had replaced the one constructed under Zerubbabel in the book of Haggai, which had replaced the one built by Solomon in the book of 1 Kings.

The temple is where people used to go to pray and offer animal sacrifices to God. People would head to the temple at different times of the year, especially during the big celebrations like Passover, which generally took place during the month of April. This year, Passover begins today.

One curtain was located between the temple itself and the outer courtyard. While non-believers were welcome to be out on the patio, Gentiles were forbidden to go into the temple building. This area, which was paved with marble, was where the merchants and moneychangers had set up their tables. As we learned last week, Jesus dispersed those who were standing in the way of prayer and worship. Here's a picture of what the Temple looked like:

As you make your way closer to the building itself, you would come face-to-face with another barrier. Prominently displayed right next to a big curtain was a "Keep Out" sign that kept people from going where they weren't supposed to go. A fragment was discovered in 1871. This is a picture of what it looked like:

Here's the translation, "No outsider shall enter the protective enclosure around the sanctuary. And whoever is caught will only have himself to blame for the ensuing death." This curtain was designed to keep certain people out – I wish we could have had one of these plaques for the basketball team when I was in high school! The whole structure and religious system emphasized the remoteness of God and the difficulty of gaining access to Him.

As you make your way past this curtain (if you were allowed to), and into the Temple, you would see the Court of Women, the Court of Israel and a section called the "Holy Place" where sacrifices were made.

There was another part of the building called the "Most Holy Place." It's the tallest part of the temple. Let's take a look at this picture again:

The "Most Holy Place" was off-limits to everyone, except the High Priest. There was another curtain here, which was also called the "shielding curtain" in Exodus 39:34 because it was designed to keep people away. The High Priest could only enter once a year on the Day of Atonement to make sacrifice for the sins of the people. This was a scary thing for the priest because this was where God dwelt. It was a holy place. A rope was tied around his ankle just in case he died while he was in there so someone could pull him

out.

The New Testament book of Hebrews provides some important insight. Please turn to Hebrews 9:1-3, 6-7: “ Now the first covenant had regulations for worship and also an earthly sanctuary. A tabernacle was set up. In its first room were the lamp stand, the table and the consecrated bread; this was called the Holy Place. Behind the second curtain was a room called the Most Holy Place...the priests entered regularly into the outer room to carry on their ministry. But only the high priest entered the inner room, and that only once a year, and never without blood, which he offered for himself and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance.”

The curtain that separated all the people and the priests from going into the presence of God was blue, purple, and scarlet and was made out of yarn and fine linen. It was 60 feet long, 30 feet high and was about two inches thick. It took 300 priests just to install it. This was a piece of lasting tapestry that was designed to withstand all strains, tears, and rips. It was even bigger than our new church sign!

When Jesus died, this indestructible curtain, that separated people from God, was torn in two -- from top to bottom. The word “top” can also mean “from above,” which helps us see that God did it. Now, instead of just one person having access to the Almighty once a year, the way to God stands wide open to everyone, on every day of the year – 24/7.

The result is that we now have unlimited access to God. Everything has been paid in full -- we have been declared free and forgiven. And, we now have an open avenue to God -- we can contact Him at any time. Friends, all this is possible through the death of Christ!

Think with me about the timing of Jesus' death. While Jesus is on the Cross, a multitude of priests are in the Temple getting ready to make the normal evening sacrifice. Since this was the Passover, there was a heightened awareness and a sense of awe as the Passover Lamb was about to be sacrificed. The Bible tells us that Jesus died at precisely 3:00 p.m. on Friday. Friends, this was the exact time that the priests would have been making the evening sacrifice!

Isn't that cool? Jesus, who is the ultimate and final sacrifice, died at the precise time of the regular temple sacrifice. And, when He died, the thick and heavy curtain was torn in two, beginning at the top and splitting all the way to the bottom. Can you imagine what must have been going through the minds of the priests?

They weren't supposed to even look at the Holy of Holies and now it was right in front of them. Did they run out? Did they cover their eyes? Did they drop to their knees and wait to be consumed by God's righteous wrath? Did the Passover Lamb jump off the altar and scamper to freedom that day because the true Lamb of God had taken his place – and ours?

The symbolism is profound. Let's look again at the book of Hebrews to better understand what Jesus did for us. First, let me read Hebrews 9:12: “He [Jesus] did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but He entered the Most Holy Place once for all by His own blood, having obtained eternal redemption.” Through the blood of Jesus, our sins have been paid and we can now experience forgiveness and eternal life.

Because of what Jesus did for us, Hebrews 10:19-22 tells us that we can now come right into the very presence of the Holy God: “Therefore, brothers, 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 in full assurance of faith.”

Friend, we can come boldly into His presence! Once a year, the high priest solemnly lifted a corner of the curtain and entered in with fear and trepidation. Now, because of what Jesus did, you and I can enter and draw near with confidence – if we come through Jesus.

The tearing of the curtain means at least three things.

1. God is revealed. Jesus came to let us know who God is. John 1:18: “No one has ever seen God, but God the one and only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.” The veil of secrecy is now lifted and God's glory is manifested to everyone who puts faith in Jesus.

2. The barrier has been broken. The doctrine of divine distance has been replaced by the ordinance of open access! Through Christ, everyone has a direct line to a gracious God, who sent His Son to die as our sin substitute. Even Gentiles, who were barred admission to the temple, can now enter into the Holy of Holies.

3. The old order has ended. The curtain was not just opened, but ripped in two, indicating its total destruction. The Temple and its sacrificial system is no longer needed. Jesus was raised from the dead and the temple was razed a few decades later. That reminds me of Mark 13:1-2: “As He was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!’” Jesus replied, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.”

The Offer Still Stands

The Victory Has Been Won and the Way is Now Open. That leads to the final point from this passage: The Offer Still Stands. We see this in verse 39: "And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, heard his cry and saw how he died, he said, 'Surely this man was the Son of God.'"

A centurion normally had one hundred men under his command. But they were also given special jobs to do. On this day, he was in charge of a smaller detachment that had crucifixion duty. He witnessed the scourging, the mocking, the spitting, the nailing, and he heard the last shout of Jesus. When he watched how Jesus died, willingly and powerless, and yet filled with power, he confessed that Jesus was the Son of God. He was deeply moved and drawn to the Savior.

Calvin Miller, in his book called, "Once Upon a Tree," writes this: "God succeeded in validating Jesus' claim to be the Son of God. Standing near the cross was a soldier, whose daring whisper of truth was heard above the clamor of unbelieving slander. He was impressed with Jesus' meekness. He marveled at the calm even on the timbers of death...Life—real life—always begins for us on the dark side of Calvary when we encounter the cross and affirm the centurion's statement of faith. Surely, Jesus was the Son of God...Jesus was not delusional when He claimed to be the Son of God, but we are deluded if we claim to believe anything else." (Page 57)

There were other people near the cross that dreadful day but this professional pagan soldier believed and confessed that Jesus was the Son of God. Luke 23:48 tells us what happened when others saw how Jesus died: "When all the people who had gathered to witness this sight saw what took place, they beat their breasts and walked away."

When someone beat their breast in the first century, it was a sign of guilt and remorse. Their indifference had been replaced with feelings of guilt. As they watched what Jesus went through, maybe they began to realize their role in putting Him on the cross. They came to witness a show, but they left with feelings of woe. The centurion believed when he saw what Jesus went through. The others said, "Let's leave."

What about you? Are you going to believe or are you going to leave? The offer still stands today. The victory has been won and the way is now open. But nothing is automatic. You must respond to the offer if you want the results of His death applied to your account.

Life Lessons

I see at least two life lessons from this passage that we can apply to our lives today. Application # 1 is for those of you who are already Christ-followers. The second action step is for those of you who are still in process on your spiritual journey.

1. Go to God with your concerns. Because of what Jesus did, we don't have to be timid when we approach Him. We can come to Him anytime and anywhere for any reason! Brothers and sisters, don't hold back! If you're in need of grace or mercy, run into the awesome presence of God! Hebrews 4:16 says, "Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."

2. Go to Jesus for salvation. The centurion had a significant role in putting Jesus to death and yet he made a confession of faith when he took a closer look at what he had done. Likewise, you and I had a part in putting Jesus to death. Our sins are what nailed Him to the cross. And, just as this soldier was able to come to faith, even after doing something so reprehensible, so too, you can be saved as well. It doesn't matter what you've done or how you've been living.

Perhaps you feel like there's a brick wall between you and God this morning. Can I give you some good news? The barrier has been broken! The curtain has been cut! A bridge has been made. The victory has been won. The way is now open. And the offer still stands. You don't have to find a way under the curtain or look for a hole in it somewhere. It's been torn completely in two. The entrance is wide enough for the worst of sinners.

The Bible says that when you decide to put your faith in Christ, just like the centurion did, the wall of separation will come tumbling down. Listen to 2 Corinthians 3:16: "But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away."

What are you going to do? Will you turn to the Lord right now? Will you move closer to the cross, or will you walk away? Are you going to believe, or are you going to leave?

I want to close this morning with something that was written by John Newton. He's the guy who wrote "Amazing Grace." He was known as the "Great Blasphemer." He had a reputation for profanity, coarseness, and wild living. And then he discovered God's amazing grace as he responded to God's offer. These words reflect what may have been going through the Centurion's mind that dark Friday afternoon:

In evil long I took delight,
Unawed by shame or fear,
Till a new object struck my sight,
And stopp'd my wild career.
I saw One hanging on a Tree
In agonies and blood,
Who fix'd His languid eyes on me.
As near His Cross I stood.
Sure never till my latest breath,
Can I forget that look:
It seem'd to charge me with His death,
Though not a word He spoke:
My conscience felt and own'd the guilt,
And plunged me in despair:
I saw my sins His blood had spilt,
And help'd to nail Him there.
Alas! I know not what I did!
But now my tears are vain:
Where shall my trembling soul be hid?
For I the Lord have slain!
A second look He gave, which said,
"I freely all forgive;
This blood is for thy ransom paid;
I die that thou may'st live."
Thus, while His death my sin displays
In all its blackest hue,
Such is the mystery of grace,
It seals my pardon too.
With pleasing grief, and mournful joy,
My spirit now if fill'd
That I should such a life destroy,
Yet live by Him I kill'd!

Luke 23:34 Forgiving the Unforgivable

- [Luke 23:34 Forgiving the Unforgivable](#)

Luke 23:39-42 Last Second Salvation

Last Sunday I mentioned that it's much easier to preach about forgiveness than it is to practice it. This was made very clear to me right after the second service when I was talking to a 9-year-old boy. He had a scratch on his forehead and I asked him if he had gotten into a fight. He just smiled at me. I then asked him what the other guy looked like. He continued to smile. Finally, I said, "Did you smack him? Did you let him have it? What'd you do to him?" He looked right at me and said, "I forgave him." Ouch. Not five minutes after preaching on forgiveness I'm trying to incite a boy to take revenge! What's up with that?

As we prepare for the exclamation of Easter, we're focusing on the seven shouts from the Savior as He hung on the cross. Last week we listened to these penetrating words of grace, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing." These seven cries of Christ speak of:

- Forgiveness (Luke 23:32-34)
- Salvation (Luke 23:39-43)
- Family (John 19:25-27)
- Loneliness (Matthew 27:45-46)
- Suffering (John 19:28-29)
- Triumph (John 19:30)
- Reunion (Luke 23:44-46)

Last week we pointed out that this first shout is a precise prophetic fulfillment of Isaiah 53:12: "...For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors." The second cry is from Luke 23:43: "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise." When Jesus reaches out to a sinner in his last minutes on the cross, He fulfills another prophesy from Isaiah 53:12: "... Because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors..."

Erwin Lutzer writes, "The Roman soldier probably had no idea why he arranged the crosses like he did that day...But God had decreed that He who was most holy should die with those who were most unholy...He wanted to demonstrate the depths of shame to which His Son was willing to descend. At His birth He was surrounded by beasts, and now, in His death, with criminals" ("Cries From the Cross," Page 54).

A Terrorist Finds Peace

John Walker Lindh, the "American Taliban," was indicted last week for conspiring to kill Americans, aiding two terrorist groups, and for supplying services to the Taliban. His father, Frank Walker has been very supportive, and is standing by his son.

This got me thinking about the father of one of the criminals who was executed just feet away from Jesus on that first Good Friday. Like John Walker Lindh, his son was accused of being a traitor. Let's look at this second shout from the Savior from the perspective of this faltering father. Imagine with me what it might have been like.

My son was not only indicted for treason, he was convicted and crucified for his crimes. His claim to fame was that he was one of the thieves executed next to Jesus on the Cross. That description is actually quite generous because my son was a cold-blooded terrorist who had murdered many people. He was impossible to control and his pores poured profanity even as a young boy. That's why I started calling him 'Mara,' which means bitterness. He brought nothing but disgrace to my family and me.

Mara had thick skin and was numb to life. He had learned how to take care of himself and take advantage of others. I'm not sure why I showed up to watch the crucifixion parade early that Friday morning. Maybe I wanted him to get what he deserved because bitterness had infected my heart as well. Or, maybe I showed up because I wanted him to know I loved him. Why did his life have to end this way? What did I do wrong?

I knew all about crucifixions. I had watched the procedure many times before...but this was my son. The soldiers seemed in a hurry that day. The guards grabbed my boy and threw a 100-pound beam across his shoulders and shouted, "Carry it." Mara staggered under the weight. His buddy was given a piece of timber as well. Together they stumbled for two blocks, with virtually no one around. I looked into my son's eyes but didn't know what to say. He was taking his last steps down the spiral staircase of failure.

When we turned the corner we came upon a chanting crowd filled with wailing women and shouting soldiers. Everyone seemed to be fixated on the one bearing the cross at the front of the procession. Mara shouted out, "Who's that?" A spear was pushed against

his bruised back and a soldier gruffly replied, "They say He's the king of the Jews. His name is Jesus." Mara picked up his step until they become participants in the parade themselves. But no one noticed the two criminals.

All of a sudden everything stopped. Mara could see the beam lifted off of the king and placed on another pair of shoulders. Maybe someone would carry his cross, too. But no one paid attention to him, except for a few people who spit on him. But it was nothing like the curses and fists that were flying at Jesus. I could tell that Mara wanted to get as close to Jesus as he could.

The parade now started moving faster until we reached the place of the skull. Jesus was thrown to the ground on top of his crossbeam; the nails and hammer were ready. Mara struggled and tried to get away. He started cursing the soldiers. One of the soldiers forced some bitter vinegar into his mouth in order to dull the pain. How ironic that the bitter one was given something bitter to ease his agony.

Mara was nailed to the cross with a brutal precision. He screamed and cursed every time the hammer struck the spikes. He blacked out for a while. In between him and his bandit buddy was the one called Jesus. Unlike the two terrorists, Jesus uttered not a word of complaint. A band of thorns pressed down hard on his head, his hair was thick with dark blood.

My bitter boy then unleashed a stream of speech that made me both blush and cry. I moved away because I didn't want anyone to turn against me. And yet, I wanted to take in everything that was happening. His fatal friend joined him as they both cursed and yelled at Jesus. The soldiers sneered. The people passed by and hurled insults.

Jesus then shouted something in a hoarse whisper that I will never forget. I couldn't believe what I heard: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." I was stunned. Mara's mouth fell open and just stared at the middle cross. I could tell something had jarred him. The criminal was now curious. I saw him look up to read the tract posted above Jesus' head, "This is the king of the Jews."

Their eyes met. Mara saw something he had never seen before. Those eyes had no anger, no bitterness and yet, they shared his pain. I had never given my son a look of love like that before. Just then, his partner in crime broke the holy silence with a shout of sarcasm, "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!"

I couldn't believe what my son did next! He turned to his buddy and rebuked him, "Don't you fear God, since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." My son had never talked like this before! He not only stood up to his friend, but he in essence told all the religious leaders and soldiers that they were executing an innocent man.

But Mara wasn't finished. He pushed down on the spike in his feet so he could take a big breath and then turned toward those loving eyes and blurted out, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." This was the first time my son had ever expressed any faith. He sounded convinced that Jesus was a king and that He could help him. Jesus answered with a promise mingled with love: "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise." My son, a sin-soaked criminal, was received by a bloodstained Savior that day. I hope I'll see him again.

Freeze Frames

Let's go back now and take a closer look at what took place on the three crosses. Let's imagine that Mara's father had taken video footage of everything that happened. We're going to rewind the tape and play it again as we look at four different clips.

1. A condemned man. The first section shows Mara and his buddy as condemned men. It's very likely that they were in the terrorist cell of Barabbas, the notorious criminal who was the leader of a band of murderers.

To help us understand how these men were thought of, Barabbas could have been a 1st Century Osama bin Laden. Unbelievably, the people demanded that Barabbas Bin Laden be set free instead of Jesus. After this account in Matthew 27, we don't hear about Barabbas again. It's likely that he slipped out of the country just like his 21st Century counterpart has done. Two of his cohorts are not so fortunate and are destined to be publicly executed, next to the one who took their leader's place.

Mara was a condemned man and he deserved to die for what he had done. His rap sheet was as long as his arm. He was an assassin who had killed for fun and for profit. He was probably on Jerusalem's Most Wanted posters. It was quite a coup for the authorities to have him and his buddy strapped to crosses on execution hill.

As bad as this guy was, he represents each of us. We don't like to think this way but honesty requires us to admit that we've all robbed God and that we live in rebellion. The criminal was condemned not just because he had broken the laws of the land, but because he had ignored God and broken His laws. He had put God out of his mind and just did that which he wanted to do. He was self-centered, just like we are.

His condition is a portrait of our state before God. You and I steal from God the very thing that is most precious to Him our lives.

While we might not be in a terrorist cell, we have all rebelled against God's greatest law in Matthew 22:37: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." When we withhold ourselves from Him by leading selfish lives, we are in essence stealing from Him.

Romans 3:23: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Romans 6:23: "For the wages of sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." Because we have fallen short and missed the mark of God's perfection, we are all condemned before God. We have dissed the demands of God, and like the thief on the cross; God's commands have broken us. No matter how hard we try, we cannot meet His standards or expectations.

When we come to grips with our sinful condition, we become candidates for salvation. If we don't recognize our own depravity, we'll go to our graves shaking our fist at God, just like the other criminal on the cross did. Friends, we've all been condemned to die. The sooner we accept this the better off we'll be.

Studs Terkel, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author, who is now 88 years old, has just written a new work called, "Will the Circle Be Unbroken? Reflections on Death, Rebirth, and Hunger for a Faith." The book is made up of interviews with a vast array of people who confront death in their everyday lives. One of the most fascinating chapters I read deals with a man who was on death row and has since been released.

Listen to the perspective of a condemned man: "When I meet people now, if they try to make a big deal about me having been on death row, I sometimes gently remind them that we're all on death row. The difference is that here the state's gonna do it, and at some point you're gonna know the date and the hour, but that's the only difference. I mean, if you're walking around here...you're on death row, 'cause you're going to have to leave here. You're going to lay down and they're going to throw dust in your face" (2001, Page 77).

2. A caustic man. As we come to the next scene and hit "pause," we see a caustic man. We know from Matthew 27:44 that both of the criminals started out the day hurling insults and casting blasphemies at Jesus. They simply sang their part in the cacophony of mockers gathered around the cross that morning. They were condemned and now had been crucified, and all that pain and agony made them caustic. The man named "Bitter" unleashed his bitterness on the one who had done no wrong.

It doesn't seem right that these two would taunt and mock the one on the middle cross. Jesus was not responsible for what they were going through. And yet, we often do the same, don't we? When we allow bitterness to take root in our lives, we lash out at God, thinking that He's to blame. Struggles and difficulties force us to become either bitter or better. We can grow through them or we can choose to shrivel up and become caustic toward others and toward God.

I love the contrast in this picture. While the two terrorists lash out at the Lord, Jesus did not yell at them or scold them. He just took it. He was able to do that because He understood their anger, their pain, and their frustration. He knew that sometimes people in pain can get bitter.

Are you in pain this morning? Do you feel like God doesn't understand? Are you mad at Him? Do you find yourself being caustic with others? If so, tune into this clip from the cross. There is no loneliness, no rejection, no betrayal, no stress, no physical pain that you will ever go through that Jesus hasn't experienced. Listen to Hebrews 4:14-16: "Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are-yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."

Many of us carry hurt, pain, suffering, and an unforgiving spirit much longer than we should. One day, two monks were walking through the countryside when they came across an old woman sitting at the edge of a river. She was upset because there was no bridge, and she could not get across on her own. The first monk kindly offered, "We will carry you across if you would like." "Thank you," she said gratefully, accepting their help. So the two men joined hands, lifted her between them and carried her across the river. When they got to the other side, they set her down, and she went on her way.

After they had walked another mile or so, the second monk began to complain, "Look at my clothes. They're filthy from carrying that woman across the river. And my back still hurts from lifting her. I can feel it getting stiff." The first monk just smiled and nodded his head.

A few more miles up the road, the second monk griped again, "My back is hurting me so badly, and it's all because we had to carry that silly woman across the river! I cannot go any farther because of the pain." The first monk looked down at his partner, now lying on the ground moaning, and posed a question, "Have you wondered why I'm not complaining? Your back hurts because you're still carrying that woman. But I set her down five miles ago."

Are you still carrying something that you should have put down a long time ago? Are you still nursing a grudge? Still wounded by some words? Lay it down at the cross. Give it to Jesus. He can handle it. And He can change your heart.

3. A changed man. This is my favorite part. The condemned and caustic criminal, who had committed cosmic crimes against a holy God, is changed! I love this about Christianity. Jesus changes lives. One of the things that trips my trigger is to see life change take place.

To see someone take the steps to restore a marriage, to listen to a man reclaim his purity, to observe a peaceful spirit where there was once anxiety and stress, to celebrate joy where there was despair, to see financial needs met in a miraculous way, to watch wandering kids come back to Christ, to see Christ-followers living out their faith in the workplace, to know that there are many people in this church reading through the entire Bible this year, and to partner with sold-out servants who look for ways to use their time, talents, and treasures. You can't beat it! I don't know of anything other than a relationship with Christ that can cause such wholesale changes in heart, thought, character, words, and behavior!

Sometime between 9:00 a.m. when he was crucified with Jesus and noon when the sky turned black for three hours, the revolutionary totally changed. The Bible doesn't tell us exactly what happened but we can piece together the details. He saw some things in Jesus that stopped him in his tracks.

- He watched how Jesus faced death. He wasn't cursing and complaining like they were. The criminal saw the difference between one ready to die and one who wasn't.
- He wondered why the priests in their flowing robes would be at the bloody crucifixion site. He knew enough about religion to know that this would have made them unclean. If they would risk their own ability to worship for the sake of witnessing an execution, then Jesus must be someone pretty important. Maybe He was a religious rebel. If so, the terrorist would want to pay attention.
- He heard Jesus request forgiveness for the unforgivable. This prayer pierced his conscience because he knew he needed to be forgiven. This short sentence became a saving sermon.
- He heard the inadvertent testimony of the crowd in Matthew 27:42: "He saved others...but He can't save Himself!" Even though these words were shouted with derision, he may have meditated on the phrase, "He saved others." He knew he needed saving.
- He read the gospel tract that was nailed above Jesus' head, "The King of the Jews." He knew He needed someone to reign supreme in His life.

He eventually came to realize that he was in the presence of a King who was also the Savior.

Let's see what we can learn from this freedom fighter's faith development in Luke 23:39-42. Listen carefully to the profound, yet simple way to salvation.

a. Respect God. When he heard his friend utter those ugly words, dripping with sarcasm, "Aren't you the Christ, save yourself and us," he stood up to him for maybe the first, and certainly the last, time. His partner in crime just wanted to be freed so he could sin some more. Some of us do the same. We call out for help and ask God to take away our pain and suffering and then we go on and live the way we want. Look at verse 40: "But the other criminal rebuked him. 'Don't you fear God, since you are under the same sentence?'" We must always start with God by recognizing that He is holy and just. He deserves first place in our lives.

b. Admit guilt. Not wanting to be self-righteous, because he knew he had no leg to stand on (literally), he immediately admits his guilt in the first part of verse 41: "We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve..." He didn't gloss over, excuse, or rationalize his behavior. He came right out and said, "We're busted. We're wrong. We're getting what we deserve." We can't be saved until we first admit that we are as lost and condemned as these criminals were.

c. Confess Jesus. This man knew that Jesus was the key. He could tell that Jesus was sinless when he cried out in the last part of verse 41: "...But this man has done nothing wrong." Even Judas said in Matthew 27:4, "I have sinned for I have betrayed innocent blood." Pilate testified in Luke 23:23, "What crime has this man committed?" And, in Matthew 27:19, Pilate's wife said, "Don't have anything to do with that innocent man." Jesus is the sinless substitute, the Lamb of God who took our sins with Him to the cross. The two criminals were getting what they deserved and the Lamb who had done nothing wrong was paying the price to redeem sinners from the penalty and power of sin.

By the way, Jesus didn't look like He was in a position to save anyone. His enemies were triumphing, his friends had bailed on Him, and He was dying. And yet, the criminal confessed who Jesus was. In addition, this shout of faith took place before the triumphant cry, "It is finished," before the temple curtain tore in two, before the earth quaked, before the centurion's confession, and before the resurrection and ascension! That's amazing!

d. Request salvation. This man not only showed some respect for God, admitted his sin, and confessed Christ, he did something more: he requested salvation. This final step is the step some of you have yet to take. Look at verse 42: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Salvation is not automatic. It's a pardon that must be received if you want it activated in your life. John 1:12: "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God."

In 1830 George Wilson was convicted of robbing the U.S. Mail and was sentenced to death by hanging. President Andrew Jackson issued a pardon for Wilson, but he refused to accept it. The matter went to Chief Justice Marshall, who concluded that Wilson would have to be executed when he wrote, "A pardon is a slip of paper, the value of which is determined by the acceptance of the person to be pardoned. If it is refused, it is no pardon. George Wilson must be hanged." Jesus has issued a pardon as well but its value is determined only when it is accepted.

4. A converted man. The condemned, caustic and changed man was finally converted because he respected God, admitted his guilt, confessed Christ, and requested salvation. We see this in verse 43: "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise." In the midst of Jesus' final hours, in the depths of His intense sorrow, on His way through death's door, he heard the bleating of a lost lamb. And He answered a sinner's prayer, just like He does today.

I love how Jesus fulfilled the man's simple request. He went way beyond what He was asked to do. Divine grace always exceeds human expectations. It reminds me of Ephesians 3:20: "Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine..."

The man was hopeful, but probably not certain. Jesus said, "I tell you the truth."

The man was looking to the future. Jesus said, "Today." In the original the word "today" is the first word in the sentence. It's there for emphasis to show that this very day, the day of his crucifixion, he would be with Jesus.

The man just wanted to be remembered. Jesus said, "You will be with me." We could translate the thought this way: "You will be with me in a very personal way." At its heart, Christianity is not a religion, but a relationship with the living Lord.

The man wanted a destination. Jesus promised a place "in paradise." This was the same promise He had given to His disciples in John 14:2. Scholars tell us that paradise originally referred to the walled gardens of Persian kings. When a king would want to honor his subjects, he would invite them to walk with him in his garden. This same word is used in Genesis 2 to describe the Garden of Eden and in Revelation 2:7 to refer to heaven.

Lessons Learned

I see five lessons that we can learn about salvation from this second shout from the Savior.

Jesus alone has the authority to save. He is the sinless Son, the Lamb of God, who died as our substitute.

No one is beyond His reach. This terrorist had lived an absolutely rotten life and was saved at the very last second. Jesus came to save the lost, the last, and the least.

Salvation is not by good works. Being saved has nothing to do with joining a church or even following a set of religious rules. The guy on the cross couldn't do any of that. He could not walk in paths of righteousness because there was a nail through his feet. He could not perform any good deeds because there was a nail through both of his hands. He could not turn over a new leaf and live a better life because he was dying. He couldn't clean himself up. He was saved by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8-9).

It is never too late to turn to Christ. If you have never reached out to Christ for salvation, do it now. While it's wise to wait, it can be dangerous to delay. The story is told of a famous rabbi who was walking with some of his disciples when one of them asked, "Rabbi, when should a man repent?" The rabbi calmly replied, "You should be sure you repent on the last day of your life." But, protested several of his students, "We can never be sure which day will be the last day of our life." The famous teacher smiled and said, "The answer to that problem is very simple. Repent now." The thief on the cross had just one chance and he took it. This may be your last chance as well.

Salvation is a choice. You can be like the one thief and experience "Paradise Found," or you can ignore Christ and suffer "Paradise Lost." There are only two options you can be pardoned, or you will be punished. The two freedom fighters represent the divine drama of salvation. The dividing line of humanity is not geography, race, economics, or political affiliation, or even if your silver medal can become gold! The line of division is the cross. Those who repent and receive will enjoy eternity with Christ. Those who revile and reject will spend eternity in the never-ending fires of Hell.

I'm told that an Indiana cemetery has a tombstone that has the following epitaph on it:

Pause stranger, when you pass me by,

As you are now, so once was I

As I am now, so you will be,

So prepare for death and follow me.

Several years ago someone scribbled some additional words on the bottom:

To follow you I'm not content,

Until I know which way you went.

I can never read this passage without remembering what happened this past May. I was invited to go to the hospital and talk to a man who wanted to get himself ready to die. He had been fighting some serious health problems and he knew that he was at the end of his life. He wanted to get right with God before it was too late.

As I sat next to him I shared the story of the two terrorists on the cross. I focused on the tender words of grace and love spoken by Jesus, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

I told my friend that it didn't matter how he had been living. It didn't matter how many times he had been to church. What mattered was what he was going to do with Jesus. I then explained how I became a Christian and then walked him through what he needed to do if he wanted to be with Jesus in paradise for eternity. I urged Him to respect God, to admit his guilt, to confess Jesus and to request salvation.

With tears in his eyes he prayed and asked Jesus to save him from his sins as he put his faith and trust in Him for salvation. By the time he was done, we were both crying. His wife, Rita was crying, too. Rita will spend eternity with Jesus as well and be reunited with Bob because she's also placed her faith in Christ.

Are you ready to do the same thing? Do you want to be with Jesus in paradise when you die?

Luke 23:44-46 Born to Die (or here)

Well, it finally hit us. I thought we could avoid it, but we got clobbered by the flu this week. Becca was the first one to fall. A couple days later Beth was wiped out, followed quickly by Lydia and Emily. I prayed that I would be spared [fold hands]. I succumbed on Wednesday and needed a lot of TLC (you know how men are when they're sick). The only one left unscathed was our two-year-old Megan.

While I was far from death's door, there were times I felt like I was dying (you know how men are when they're sick). Thankfully the virus lasted only about a day, but it was a long 24 hours! I don't know about you but I become very philosophical when I'm sick. I think about life and death, about issues that really matter.

While I was moping around the house (you know how men are when they're sick), I heard a news story that the oldest living person died this week at the age of 115 I wonder if she had the same bug that I had? She had just made the Guinness Book of World Records before her untimely demise. According to her family, this woman's life philosophy was, "Live and let live." Whatever that means. Her great granddaughter, when commenting on how long she lived, simply said, "It was just her time." That got me thinking about life itself. It doesn't really matter how long we live if we don't know why we're living. And, it doesn't matter how many records we break if we're not sure where we're going when we die.

As we finish our series this morning called, "The Seven Shouts From the Savior," we've learned that Jesus did not die by accident but by appointment. He certainly didn't set any longevity records when He died at the age of 33, but his death wasn't a mistake either. It was His mission. In fact, we could say that His life philosophy was, "Live to die so that others can live." He came to earth as a human so that He could become the final sacrifice. He was born to die.

We've learned that during the first three hours on the cross, Jesus suffered under the hands of men; during the final 180 minutes He suffered under the hands of God. Let's review the 7 cross cries:

1. "Father, forgive them." (Luke 23:34)
2. "Today you will be with me in paradise." (Luke 23:43)
3. "Dear woman, here is your son." (John 19:26)

4. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46)
5. "I am thirsty." (John 19:28)
6. "It is finished." (John 19:30)
7. "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." (Luke 23:46)

4 Supernatural Signs

Let's set the context for this seventh shout by reading Luke 23:44-45: "It was now about the sixth hour, and darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour, for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two."

These verses remind us that this was no ordinary death. Time was invaded by eternity as heaven touched the earth. When we include what Matthew 27:51-53 reports, we see that there were four supernatural signs surrounding the death of the Savior: "The earth shook and the rocks split. The tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs, and after Jesus' resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many people."

1. The sun stopped shining. We've already addressed this event when we focused on the fourth cry from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Suffice it to say that the sun in the sky was snuffed out for three hours while the Son of God became our sin bearer. This first sign tells us that payment has been made.
2. The curtain of the temple was torn in two. We developed the significance of this sign in detail a year ago. If you'd like to learn more about it, I encourage you to check out another sermon called, "The Case for Christ: His Death."

This curtain was designed to prevent access to God. Because it was torn in two, the veil of secrecy has been lifted and God's glory is now manifested to everyone who puts faith in Jesus. The barrier has been broken and the doctrine of divine distance has been replaced by the ordinance of open access! In addition, the old order has ended. The curtain was not just opened, but ripped in two, indicating its total destruction. The Temple and the sacrificial system are no longer needed. This second sign tells us that the final sacrifice has been accepted.

3. The earth shook and the rocks split. The hardest and firmest part of the world was shaken when Christ gave up His spirit. This earthquake would have reminded the Jewish people of what happened when God gave the Law to Moses at Mount Sinai in Exodus 19:17-18: "Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently." The quake at Calvary signified that the demands of the law were now fulfilled.

The rocks splitting open before the presence of the Lord hearkens back to Nahum 1:5-6: "The mountains quake before him and the hills melt away. The earth trembles at his presence, the world and all who live in it. Who can withstand his indignation? Who can endure his fierce anger? His wrath is poured out like fire; the rocks are shattered before him." God's wrath was poured out on His Son and the entirety of creation was rocked.

The ruptured rocks also tie into the words of Jesus that were uttered on Palm Sunday, which we celebrate today. When the Pharisees became irritated at the spontaneous expressions of joy that erupted when Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey, they asked Him to rebuke His disciples. Jesus turned to them in Luke 19:40 and replied, "I tell you, if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out." When Jesus took His last breath, the rocks were so filled with praise that they exploded with exhilaration.

4. The tombs broke open. Commentators have various views about this mysterious event but at the very minimum it signifies that death has been defeated. Matthew Henry writes, "Jesus Christ, by dying, conquered, disarmed, and disabled, death. These saints that arose, were the present trophies of the victory of Christ's cross over the powers of death, which he thus made a show of openly." Because Jesus has the power over death we have the guarantee that we will live again. It's as if the tombs could not hold their occupants in light of what was happening on the cross. The curse of death from Genesis 3 is reversed by the death and resurrection of Christ. This is but the precursor to what will take place for all believers when we are raised to new life.

Life Lessons

Now let's look at Luke 23:46: "Jesus called out with a loud voice, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.' When he had said this, he breathed his last." I see three life lessons from this verse.

1. Jesus was faithful to the finish. After enduring the physical trauma, the emotional ridicule, and the spiritual isolation of becoming the sin sacrifice, Jesus was able to cry out with a strong voice. We get the word "megaphone" from the Greek phrase that is used here. Jesus wanted to make sure that his final words were amplified and broadcast widely so that everyone could hear them and so

He shouted out loudly. This same word is used in Revelation 5:12 to refer to the worship volume of the thousands upon thousands of angels who are worshipping around the throne of the Lamb: "In a loud voice they sang: 'Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!'"

2. Jesus loved and lived Scripture. This closing cry is a quotation from Psalm 31:5: "Into your hands I commit my spirit." He literally died with the Bible in His mouth. As we've seen during this series, Jesus fulfilled Scripture throughout his life and is now doing so in His death. He loved Scripture, He lived Scripture, and in His dying breath, He made sure His mind and mouth were filled with the Word of God. Shouldn't we do the same?

The phrase that Jesus uttered was a common bedtime prayer taught to every Jewish child. It would be similar to one of our childhood prayers, "Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep and if I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." Every night a child went to bed in Israel, they would kneel and say, "Into your hands I commit my spirit." Jesus not only dies with Scripture in his mouth but with a child's prayer on His lips.

Parents, don't ever underestimate the power of God's Word in the lives of your children. Read to them. Play Christian music in their bedrooms as they go to sleep at night. It still amazes me how much a two-year-old can learn! On a regular basis, Megan comes home from her Sunday School class singing Bible songs and even quoting Scripture! In fact, one day when I was correcting her for something, she looked up at me and said, "Daddy, be kind to everyone!" I applaud those of you who are impacting the children of this church!

This passage from Psalm 31:5 was often recited at the period of the evening offering. Here's the picture. As the priests were preparing to sacrifice the Passover lambs at around 3:00 p.m., people were speaking this section of Scripture. Jesus, the Lamb of God, who had taken our sins with Him to the Cross and was one breath away from making the final payment, shouted loud enough for everyone to hear, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."

3. Jesus surrendered Himself to the safety of the Father. Jesus voluntarily gives Himself to the Father. Every word of this verse is important.

a. Father. While Jesus quotes Psalm 31:5, I want you to notice that He adds something to this Psalm. Do you see what it is? He uses the term of endearment and relationship, "Father." This shows the bond of love that He has with the One who sent Him. Jesus begins his cries from the cross with a prayer to his Father as He pleads with Him to forgive the sins of those who have crucified Him. His final cry is likewise directed to the Father.

Jesus also omits something from this Psalm. Look at the clause that immediately follows in the second half of verse 5: "Redeem me, O LORD, the God of truth." Jesus does not pray this part because as the Son He has no need of redemption from the Father. His relationship with the Father has existed from all eternity. Now that His work on earth is finishing, He can't wait to return home.

Jesus loved to use the word, "Father." His first recorded sentence is found in Luke 2:49:

"Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" In his first formal teaching time on the Sermon on the Mount, He speaks of His Father seventeen times. In his final discourse found in John 14-16, Jesus lovingly uses the word "Father" forty-five times!

b. Into your hands. Just as the sixth day of creation was followed by a day of rest, so too the Savior's sixth utterance, "It is finished" is followed by shout seven as He puts Himself in a place of rest in the Father's hands.

Many people have appreciated the piece of art known as "The Praying Hands." [Show]

While there is some discrepancy as to the background of this painting, the different versions tell a similar story of love and sacrifice. In the late 15th Century, two young art students, Albrecht Durer and Franz Knigstein (some accounts of this story suggest that it was Albrecht's brother, not his friend), worked in the mines to earn money for their schooling. Because the work was long and hard it left them little time to study art.

They eventually agreed that one of them should continue to study while the other one would work full-time in order to pay the school bill. The idea was that after the one would finish his studies, then he would work go to work so his buddy could complete his classes. Durer won the coin toss and went on to become a famous artist. Unfortunately, because Franz had worked so long and hard, his fingers became twisted and stiff and could no longer even hold a paintbrush.

One day Durer walked in on Franz as he was praying and saw his friend's cracked and calloused hands. Durer was deeply moved by the devotion and self-sacrifice that he saw. Those hands became the inspiration for his famous painting that was originally just called, "Hands."

Hands serve as a representative of our whole being. What we are and do is reflected in our hands. We use them to embrace or attack, to caress or choke, to hug or hurt.

If we were able to commission Albrecht Durer to paint a series of “hand” portraits depicting the life of Christ, we would see something like this...

The last days and hours are filled with references to hands. Matthew 17:22: “When they came together in Galilee, he said to them, ‘The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men.’”

In one scene we would see the hand of Jesus holding up the cup at the last supper. In the same painting we would notice Judas reclining at the table, with his sweaty hand wrapped around some silver shekels. Luke 22:20-21 paints it this way: “In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you. But the hand of him who is going to betray me is with mine on the table.’”

The next picture would be a montage of soldiers’ hands as they tear the clothes from the back of Jesus. Other hands are raised to bring a whip that slices into His tender flesh. More hands slap his face. Another pair of rough hands slams the crown of thorns onto his head. And thick hands grasp a hammer to drive the spikes through His wrists and feet.

In the next portrait a pair of hands are furiously scrubbing themselves as Pilate tries to wash His hands of guilt for condemning Jesus to death. Matthew 27:24: “When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. ‘I am innocent of this man’s blood,’ he said. ‘It is your responsibility!’”

The artist would then interject a painting focused on the hands of Jesus with this verse calligraphied on the bottom from John 3:35: “The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands.” One scene would show Jesus’ hands at work touching the eyes of the blind, using His hands to raise a little girl to life, caressing the sores of a leper, and embracing little children. These same hands also hold a whip to drive the selfish moneychangers from the temple.

Another scene would stand in contrast as it shows the hands of Jesus impaled on a rough cross. As we come to the final cry we see that His dying hands are praying hands as He entrusts Himself into the holy hands of his father.

c. I commit. The word, “commit” means to place something with someone for protection. It was used when someone made a deposit of valuables into a safe place. In Acts 14:23, after Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in each church, they “committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.” At the end of his life, the Apostle Paul used this word when he said in 2 Timothy 1:12: “...I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him for that day.”

When He commits Himself to the Father, Jesus is ministering at His own committal service. He is entrusting Himself into the Father’s hands, never again to be at the mercy of the hands of wicked men. He is fully yielding Himself, knowing that He is safe in the hands of God. The victorious Son commits His all to the Father. This is an act of the will and is done voluntarily.

d. My spirit. Now that His physical life is over, Jesus is committing His spirit to the Father for safekeeping. This is a good reminder for us that our bodies were never designed to last forever. We’re all wearing out and running down. When our time here on earth is over, our bodies go into the grave, but our spirit will live forever. Jesus teaches us that death is the door by which we are admitted into the presence of the King.

There’s a tribe in Africa that practices a really cool custom. When a believer dies, they don’t say, “He departed.” Instead, they say, “He arrived.” D.L. Moody once said, “Some day you will read the papers that D.L. Moody is dead. Don’t you believe a word of it! At that moment I shall be more alive than I am now...that which is born of the flesh may die. That which is born of the Spirit will live forever.”

Concluding Questions

The last part of verse 46 is a fitting conclusion: “When He had said this, He breathed his last.” Some day you will breathe your last if the flu doesn’t get you, something else will. You may live to 115, or you may not. But you will take your last breath here on earth. One day it will be your time. Someone has said that we come into the world saying hello, but almost immediately we start saying good-bye. Do you know where you’ll go when it’s your time to arrive?

If you want to live...and die like Jesus did, then the first step is to answer these questions.

Are you going to be faithful to the finish? Are you starting to slack off spiritually? Don’t let things slip. Be faithful. Most of us will die like we live. If you want to die well, then you must live well now.

Do you love and live Scripture? Are you ingesting the Word of God on a regular basis so that it’s on your lips and lived out in your life? If not, read it. Study it. Learn it. Apply it.

Have you surrendered to the safety of the Father? Have you ever committed yourself to God? Some of you may need to surrender

yourself to Him again because you've taken back the reigns in your life.

This world is definitely not a safe place, nor can we ever feel truly at home here. We have been made for another place because Heaven is our true home. Ecclesiastes 3:11 says that God "has set eternity in the hearts of men." God made us to know Him and we won't truly be happy until we are in a Father relationship with Him.

There are really only two options and two destinations. We can entrust our spirit into the Father's hands for safekeeping now or we will go into the hands of God for judgment later. The same hands that provide hope and comfort for believers also deliver terror and punishment for those who refuse to receive the sacrifice of His Son. Hebrews 10:31 gives a strong warning: "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

It's your choice. You can put yourself into God's hands now, or you will fall into them later.

Luke 24:13-36 Seeking the Savior

Seeking the Savior

By Brian Bill

Summary: Today our focus is on two broken-hearted disciples who saw the Savior, and as a result, were never the same again.

This light bulb represents bright hope. It's full of promising potential. But, like your heart, it's also very fragile [drop bulb so it shatters].

We've all experienced the crash of unmet expectations. Some of us have been gouged by grief that won't seem to go away. Many of us have been hit with a wide array of the "deadly Ds" – doubt, disappointment, depression, disillusionment, defeat, despair, and even death. All of these "Ds" were evident in the followers of Christ as they tried to deal with His departure.

During this series we want to go "beyond the tomb" and look at the appearances Jesus made to people after the resurrection. Today our focus is on two broken-hearted disciples who saw the Savior, and as a result, were never the same again. As we study the process they went through, we can get a better view of Jesus, and our lives can change as well.

1. Companionship. If you have your Bible with you, and I hope you're in the practice of bringing it to church, please follow along as I read Luke 24:13-16: "Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing him." That "same day" refers to Easter Sunday. It's probably late in the afternoon and two followers of Christ are making their way home to a town called Emmaus, located about seven miles from Jerusalem. This is about how far away Bob and Linda Caughey's house is from the church. That's the distance from here to the Boys and Girls Club and back. These are two very ordinary people, just like you and me. We know the name of one guy is Cleopas from verse 18 but we don't know anything about the other individual.

These two are enjoying the companionship of each other as they discussed everything that had happened during the past week. They were probably there on Palm Sunday when Jesus rode triumphantly into Jerusalem and no doubt were nearby when Jesus was sentenced to death and then crucified. As they are walking along the road, they are doing what Deuteronomy 6:6-7 challenges all of us to do: "These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts...talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up." Notice that it says they talked about "everything" that happened. The phrase "talking with each other" is where we get the word "homiletics," which means preaching.

As they communed together and questioned each other, they hear footsteps behind them, as Jesus joins their walk. That reminds me of the little boy who was asked by his mother if he knew the name of God's Son. He replied, "Yes, it's Andy." The mother was a bit flustered and wanted to know where he picked that up. Her son answered, "I learned it in a song at Sunday School: 'Andy walks with me. Andy talks with me.'"

Jesus walks with us when we're wiped out, wounded, and worried. When Jesus strolled with these saints, we see the truth of Matthew 18:20 illustrated: "For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them" and John 14:18: "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you." They did not recognize Jesus, but He was there. Likewise, He is with us, even when we think He is far away.

Do you have a companion who will faithfully field your questions and help you process your doubts? While it's good to have a friend like this, never forget that Jesus is closer to you than anyone else will ever be. Proverbs 18:24: "A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother." And when you go through the dreaded "Ds" you can claim the

promise of Isaiah 43:2: "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you..."

2. Conversation. As Jesus walks with them, He also talks to them by asking two questions to get them to open up. The first question is found in verse 17: "What are you discussing together as you walk along?" This stops them in their tracks; literally, as we read they "stood still, their faces downcast." As their feet falter, their faces fall. They're sad because they are in sorrow about their Savior. In their minds, He is gone, and all their hopes with Him. Cleopas can't believe that their walking partner does not know about what has happened in Jerusalem: "Are you only a visitor to Jerusalem and do not know the things that have happened there in these days?"

I love how Jesus keeps the conversation going by asking a second question in verse 19: "What things?" The two then summarize what they know about Jesus, and they get a lot of the details right. Notice how quickly and naturally they're ready to talk about Christ. I'm also struck by their unwillingness to believe that Jesus is alive. Look at verses 19-24: "About Jesus of Nazareth...He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see."

While their synopsis is adequate, their understanding was limited by their own perspective:

They speak in the past tense: Jesus was a prophet. They think it's all over and that there's nothing He can do in the present.

They are disappointed: "but we had hoped." Because their hope has disappeared, their hearts are broken. As they're trudging home from a funeral, they're experiencing the truth of Proverbs 13:12: "Hope deferred makes the heart sick..." We haven't changed much, have we? We want a Savior who will make life a bed of roses, who will take away all our problems and worries.

They were amazed by the reports of the women but discounted them.

They heard about the empty tomb but didn't stick around to investigate. Sadly, they were blinded when the evidence was right there. And, now they don't have a clue that Jesus Himself is walking right next to them. Their problem wasn't with their heads; it was with their hearts.

The resurrected redeemer patiently listens to His children talk, much like He does with us when we pray. He sees them as trapped in their own understanding of the tragedy that has taken place. But He doesn't leave them there. After they unload, He uploads them with truth as the conversation turns toward a time of correction.

3. Correction. Look at verses 25-27: "He said to them, 'How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?' And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself." Jesus refers to his disciples as slow to believe. This was not the first time He said this to His followers. Mark 7:18: "Are you so dull?" and in Mark 8:17-18, Jesus rebukes them for not remembering: "Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear?"

They had missed what all the prophets had said about the suffering servant because they were focused on the redeemer who would reign. They saw the crown but not the cross. In short, they had confused His first coming with His second. Jesus makes clear that He had to suffer before He could enter His glory because suffering always comes before celebration. The disciples missed out because they left the Scriptures out. They needed a fresh understanding of God's Word in order to believe. Romans 10:17: "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ."

Jesus then gave them a Bible lesson they would never forget as He starts with the first five books of the Bible, written by Moses and concludes with what the prophets said about Him. The Greek verb used here for "explain" is where we get the word "hermeneutics," or Bible interpretation. By the way, that's why we give primacy to preaching and teaching here at Pontiac Bible Church. We believe the Word needs to be taught so that we can apply it to our lives through our creative children's ministry team all the way up to senior adults. By the way, over 115 people have been involved in teaching children this past year! If Jesus took time to explain and exegete Scripture, then so must we.

From Genesis to Malachi, the Scriptures point to the Savior. Warren Wiersbe writes: "The key to understanding the Bible is to see Jesus Christ on every page" ("Bible Exposition Commentary," Volume 1, page 279). In John 1:45, after Philip was introduced to Jesus, he came and found Nathaniel and said, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote-Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." In John 5:39, Jesus taught that the Scriptures testify about Him and in Luke 24:44, Jesus said, "Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."

Friends, don't leave the Old Testament out of your Bible reading. Romans 15:4 reminds us that the Scriptures are what give us hope: "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." I'm reading the book of Joshua right now and enjoying how relevant it is to my life today. It's intriguing to imagine what passages Jesus preached from in His sermon to the two disciples. It was without doubt the greatest Old Testament exposition in history. Here are some I think He touched on from the three main sections.

From the Books of Moses:

Jesus probably started by recounting the prophecy given to Satan in Genesis 3:15: "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel." This was graphically portrayed in the Passion of the Christ film, as Jesus crushed the head of the serpent in the garden.

I'm sure Jesus enjoyed making the parallels between the Passover Lamb of Exodus 12:21-23 and the Savior being sacrificed during that year's Passover celebration: "Go at once and select the animals for your families and slaughter the Passover lamb...he will see the blood on the top and sides of the doorframe and will pass over that doorway..." Jesus is linked to this event in 1 Corinthians 5:7: "For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed."

Jesus is the prophet to come in Deuteronomy 18:18: "I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him." This is quoted in Acts 3:22.

From the Psalms:

Psalms 2:7 reads, "He said to me, 'You are my Son; today I have become your Father.'" When Jesus was baptized, a voice boomed from heaven in Matthew 3:17: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

In Psalm 22:1, the psalmist prophesies the very words that Jesus spoke from the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Later in this same Psalm, we read of people shaking their heads in scorn, the piercing of hands and feet, and the casting of lots for clothing (verses 6-8, 16, 18).

Perhaps Jesus chuckled at the very thought of kings bowing before Him at His birth as predicted in Psalm 72:10-11: "The kings of Tarshish and of distant shores will bring tribute to him; the kings of Sheba and Seba will present him gifts. All kings will bow down to him and all nations will serve him."

From the Prophets:

Writing 700 years before Christ, Isaiah 7:14 clearly states that the Messiah would be born of a virgin: "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel."

Isaiah 53 is filled with precise prophecies of both the death and resurrection of Christ. I'll give just two examples, but there are many more. As we know, Jesus remained silent during His trial. This is foretold in Isaiah 53:7: "He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth..." And, as we learned a couple weeks ago, Jesus was crucified with criminals but buried in the tomb of a rich man. This is exactly what Isaiah said would happen in verse 9: "He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death..."

I'm certain that Jesus recited Micah 5:2 as He described the exact location of His birth, grinning as He described how a Roman census was used to get His parents to this little town: "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..."

And as he thought back a week in time, He likely recounted His triumphal entry, describing the importance of Him riding a donkey to fulfill the words found in Zechariah 9:9: "Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

We don't know how long Jesus took to exegete the Scriptures, but we do know that He preached from all of them. I came across something this week called "The Bible in 50 Words."

God made, Adam bit, Noah arked, Abraham split.

Joseph ruled, Jacob fooled, Bush talked, Moses balked; Pharaoh plagued, people walked. Sea divided, tablets guided, Promise landed. Saul freaked, David peeked, prophets warned, Jesus born. God walked, love talked, anger crucified, hope died. Love rose, Spirit flamed, Word spread, God remained.

I'm sure Jesus took more than 50 words to tell the story of redemption but this is a helpful summary of the Bible.

The disciples are corrected by Scripture, which after all is one of its purposes from 2 Timothy 3:16: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness."

4. Communion. After being corrected, they crave additional preaching and so they ask Jesus to spend more time with them, even though they still don't know who He is. Follow along as I read verses 28-32: "As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus acted as if he were going farther. But they urged him strongly, 'Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over.' So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?'"

Jesus is a gentleman; He won't force Himself on you if He's not really wanted. These two guys want to commune with Christ and so they urge Him strongly to stay for supper. This reminds us of Revelation 3:20 where we read that Jesus responds to an invitation and comes in when we open the door. Listen to this familiar verse from the Message paraphrase: "Look at me. I stand at the door. I knock. If you hear me call and open the door, I'll come right in and sit down to supper with you." Matthew Henry writes: "Those that have experienced the pleasure of communion with Christ cannot but covet more of His company and beg of Him, not only to walk with Him all day, but to abide with them at night" (Electronic version, Biblesoft).

Notice that it doesn't take much to get Jesus to stay. A meal is thrown on the table and interestingly, the guest becomes the host as Jesus "took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them." Let me say that this is not communion as we know it, but rather a simple shared supper. Likewise, we must learn to see Jesus in the ordinary. When Jesus broke bread, they were reminded of when He took loaves to feed the 5,000 and when He broke bread at the Last Supper. And then, when He passed the bread to them, they saw His nail-pierced hands...and the light bulb finally came on for them. Interestingly, we read that their eyes are now opened, they clearly recognize Him, and then He disappears.

That reminds me of the story of three guys discussing what they'd like people to say about them at their funerals. The first guy said, "I'd like people to say, 'he was a great humanitarian, who cared about his community.'" The second one remarked, "I'd like them to say, 'He was a great husband and father, who was an example for us to follow.'" The third guy grinned and stated that he'd like people to say, "Look, he's moving!" That would be something, wouldn't it? But Jesus was moving! He was alive and still is!

Have you ever wondered why the Lord didn't stay longer? During the 40 days after the Resurrection, Jesus appeared to people for a specific purpose: He wanted them to know that He was alive! And, He never stayed long because He wanted His followers to manage without His bodily presence...just like us.

We are not left as orphans, however because He gave us at least two things: Holy Scripture and the Holy Spirit. Cleopas and his buddy now remark that their broken hearts have been replaced with burning hearts.

5. Commission. These two guys had spent the day walking to Emmaus, but now they realize that they have a commission to fulfill. The women had found the tomb empty and now they could verify that Jesus was in fact alive because they had seen Him! They probably didn't even do the dishes, as they pushed away from the table and sprinted back to Jerusalem. Remember, it is now evening, and it would have been dangerous to travel on the roads at night, but that didn't bother them. They couldn't contain themselves. Friends, when we have an encounter with Jesus, we must share Him with others! Look at verses 33-35: "They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together and saying, 'It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.' Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread."

Before they could share their good news, the other followers reported about how Jesus had appeared to Peter! I imagine them all jumping up and down for joy! Friend, Jesus has a commission for all of us and we need to deliver the good news, no matter how difficult or challenging it is to do so.

On the Road Again

These two believers had started their walk with broken hearts as they headed home. They end up traveling the same road again, but this time everything has changed. Are you in the ditch of despair today? Let's look at each section of their journey so that we can get back on the highway of hope. Interestingly, the five points from this passage correspond with our IMPACT purpose statement as a church.

Companionship = Caring. Are you unplugging from people? Do you find yourself drifting in your discouragement? If so, it's time to find a companion who can walk the road of life with you, someone who can hold you accountable. If you already have someone like that, as you look around, is there anyone God wants you to reach out to? People who have lost hope need a companion who will love by listening. One of the best ways to experience companionship is by entering into community with other believers in a small group.

Conversation = Praying. I love how Jesus was able to get these doubting disciples to talk. Friend, Jesus longs to hear you put your worries into words. Pray Scripture back to Him. Talk to Him about your life and be specific about your requests. What do you need to say to Him right now? He longs to listen to you, no matter what it is.

Correction = Instructing. Make a decision today to begin reading an Old Testament book. I suggest you tackle a book like Joshua or one of the Prophets and a chapter from Proverbs that corresponds to the day of the month. For instance, today you would read chapter 18. As you open the Word, ask the Lord to give you insight. Psalm 119:18: "Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law."

Communion = Adoring. One of the best ways to stay connected to Christ is by adoring Him in worship. We do that not just by singing songs on Sundays, but by living our lives on purpose for His purposes. Worship Him while you work at your jobs. Worship Him in your giving. Invite Him into your ordinary and routine, recognizing that He is the unseen host at every meal and the invisible participant in every conversation.

Commission = Telling and Mobilizing. Think of one person you know who doesn't yet know Jesus. Determine this week to tell them the good news that Jesus is alive, and how He can change their lives as they walk with Him. Don't delay. I think of the over 20 young people who will be serving as missionaries this summer. May their tribe increase! When John Wesley began his walk with Jesus, he said that "his heart was strangely warmed." Some time later he was asked the secret of his ministry. He replied, "I ask God to set me on fire and let people watch me burn!"

It's time to see the Savior like never before. When we do, we'll move from heartbreak to heartburn; from broken hearts to believing hearts, as we shine forth the light of Christ to a dead and dying world [put new light bulb in lamp and turn on].

Are you ready right now to begin a walk with Jesus for the first time? The best way to start is by simply taking the step of inviting Him into your life. Pray this prayer with me from your heart: "Lord Jesus, thank you that you have been my companion even when I've gone down the wrong road. I want to converse with you right now and tell you that I know I'm a sinner. My dreams and hopes have been shattered as I now recognize that my heart will stay broken until I ask you for a new one. Thank you for correcting my thinking through your Word. Help me to become a student of Scripture so that it will burn within me. I now desire to commune with you and so I ask you to come into my life and save me from my sins. And help me to fulfill the commission you have for me by telling others about you. I pray in Jesus' name. Amen."

Luke 24:38 (et al) Dismantling Our Doubt

Dismantling Our Doubt

By Brian Bill

Summary: Jesus walked through a wall, and the disciples went from fear to freaked out to faith.

Drowning in Doubt

It was a hot, humid Mississippi night nearly ten years ago, but I remember it like it was yesterday. I was sitting on the third step of the swimming pool at my apartment complex. I was twenty-six years and had just completed a very difficult seminary program. For nearly three years I had written papers about God, took tests on the Bible, and debated other students on the finer points of theology. Now, sitting in that pool that night, I was drowning in doubt.

My mind was flooded with questions like:

"I know a lot about You God. But do I really know You? Do I have the information without the inspiration?"

"If you are in control, then why is my mother dying?"

"Why do You not answer my prayers?" and "If You know everything anyway, why pray at all?"

"Why, when I need you the most, do you seem most distant?"

The most haunting question of all was:

"How can you use me? If people really knew my doubts, they wouldn't listen to me. How can I be a minister for Your Kingdom with all these doubts?"

Thoughts of joining the circus seriously entered my mind.

We are in Good Company

I have a question for you this morning. Have you ever felt the same way? Have you ever felt dogged by your doubts? Have you ever asked some of the same questions of God I did? If you have, would you please raise your hands?

Doesn't it feel good to be honest in church? For those of us who have doubted, be encouraged, we are in very good company.

In his classic book, "Devotions", Augustine wrote of his desire for certainty: "I wish to be made just as certain of things I could not see, as I was certain that seven and three makes ten"

The great Reformer Martin Luther battled constantly against doubt and depression.

A church in Boston delayed evangelist D.L. Moody's application to join because his beliefs seemed so uncertain.

The great novelist, Fyodor Dostoevsky, wrote: "It is not as a child that I believe and confess Jesus Christ. My hosanna is born in a furnace of doubt"

Billy Graham tells of a time of desperate prayer in which he wrestled with his doubts about the truth of the Bible.

Philip Yancy, the author of such Christian classics as "Where is God When it Hurts?" and "What's So Amazing about Grace?" was asked to sign Christianity Today magazine's statement of faith "without doubt or equivocation." He refused, writing "I can barely sign my own name without doubt or equivocation."

Feeling better about yourself yet?

What about the Biblical examples of individuals who doubted but never-the-less remained committed to the cause: Adam, Sarah, Abraham, Jacob, Job, Jeremiah, Jonah, John the Baptist, Martha, Peter, and Thomas.

As Yancey puts it in his book on doubt, "Reaching for the Invisible God," "God appears far less threatened by doubt than does his church."

Defining Doubt

Before we move on to our text for this morning, I think it is imperative that we define doubt. Many believe doubt to be the opposite of faith. That is not the case. The opposite of faith is unbelief. Doubt comes from the root word that we get our English word double. James, the brother of Jesus, put it this way:

"He who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does." (James 1:6-8)

Os Guinness gives a helpful definition of doubt: "When you believe, you are in one mind and accept something as true. Unbelief is to be on one mind and reject something to be true. To doubt is to waver between the two, to believe and disbelieve at the same time... there is a Chinese proverb that says 'Doubt is standing in two boats, with one foot in each.'"

It is not a sin to doubt. Perhaps many of you thought it was. Doubt does not show an absence of faith. Listen to the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia: "doubt does not indicate a lack of faith, but a state of 'qualified faith': it's weakness, but not it's absence."

To doubt is to seek more information, to seek illumination, and recognize your limited knowledge. As Ian Johnson puts it, "Doubt is the sincere question; unbelief is the unwillingness to hear the answer."

Doubt is a place I visit from time to time, but it definitely not a place I want to live. So what do we do with doubt?

Let me quote Yancey again: "Doubt is the skeleton in the closet of faith and I know no better way to treat a skeleton than to bring it into the open and expose it for what it is: not something to hide or fear, but a hard structure on which living tissue may grow."

That evening in the pool, I dealt with my doubts and it changed me and the way I approach ministry. Those who doubt most, and yet strive to overcome their doubts, turn out to be some of Christ's strongest disciples. Let's meet one those disciples this morning by turning in your copy of God's Word to John 20:24.

Short Bio

We know very little about our subject today, Thomas. We know that the name Thomas was Aramaic and that his nick name was

“Didymus.” Both Thomas and Didymus meant “twin.” It is obvious that Thomas was a twin. Now, my wife is a twin and we know that twins are very unique. Have you ever wondered why Jesus picked Thomas and not his brother? We know that Jesus prayed all night before choosing his closest associates (Luke 6:12-16). He was the seventh apostle called, he was a fisherman, and probably knew the other disciples. We know very little about his background, his physical appearance, and the gifts that he brought to this group of rag-tag followers.

One thing that is for certain, only Judas Iscariot has been criticized more. We do know a little bit about his personality. He tended to be pessimistic and emotional. In the deeply spiritual “Winnie the Pooh Personality Test” Thomas scored high on the Eeyore chart. This was a “glass half empty” guy.

He also was prone to ask hard questions and demand proof. For that he has earned the unfortunate nickname, “doubting Thomas.” By the end of this message, I hope to show you from Scripture that his nickname is not only unfair but does not describe the heart of this great disciple.

There are three texts we will cover this morning. The first two, we will take a jog through. The third we will stroll through, learning some valuable lessons along the way. Keep your place in John 20 and turn to John 11:1.

Thomas Was Willing to Die for Christ

Jesus loved people and invested in individuals from a wide range of social, political, and economic standing. One of the families He befriended over the course of His ministry were two sisters, Mary and Martha, and their brother Lazarus. In fact, it was more than friendship. Mary had worshiped at Jesus feet and Martha had learned to relax in His presence. But Lazarus was called “the one you love.” Jesus and Lazarus were close friends.

The news was bad. Lazarus was very ill. But Jesus does curious thing. He delayed going to see his friend for two days. He also said something the disciples could not understand.

“Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days. Then he said to his disciples, “Let us go back to Judea.” (John 11:5-7)

The disciples did not want to go back to Judea. The wilderness ministry was booming. The Jewish leaders wanted to kill Jesus. There was a bounty on his head. The disciples thought it best not to tempt fate.

“But Rabbi,” they said, “a short while ago the Jews tried to stone you, and yet you are going back there?” (John 11:8)

Jesus told them that He had to go back. He would not skulk about in the dark but go in broad daylight. He had a mission. He had to give a friend a “wake up call.” This would give the dense disciples another “opportunity to believe.”

The group stared at each other. Going back meant the possibility of arrest and execution. Verse 16 tells us of Thomas’ reaction:

Then Thomas (called Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” (John 11:16)

John McArthur writes: “Thomas could see nothing but danger ahead. He was convinced that Jesus was headed straight for a stoning. But if that is what the Lord was determined to do, Thomas grimly determined to go and die with Him.”

This was courageous leadership. The rest of the disciples followed Thomas’ lead and accompanied Jesus back to Bethany. There they witnessed one of Jesus’ most spectacular miracles, the raising of Lazarus back to life.

Thomas loved Jesus enough to be willing to die for Him. Do you have that kind of passion? Is your commitment to Christ that strong?

I read a story some time ago of a church in China that was surrounded by armed men. After barging through the door and threatening the congregation, they told each member how they could save their lives. One of the soldiers put a Bible on the floor and told the group that if they would renounce Jesus and spit on the Bible they would be set free. There was silence and then, one by one, men and women, approach the altar and spit on the Bible. An eleven year old girl walked defiantly up the stairs, knelt down, and began to wipe the spit of the Bible with her long hair. The sacred silence of the moment was broken by a gun shot. Her blood spilled on to the Bible, her body draped over it. The Jesus she refused to renounce welcomed her with a compliment, “Well done, my good and faithful servant.”

Thomas is an example to us all. If called on, would you be ready to die for Jesus? Here is the more relevant question to our culture. If called on, are you willing to live for Him?

Thomas was Willing to Ask the Hard Questions

We see the next picture of Thomas in John 14. Follow along as I read:

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going." (John 14:1-4)

Jesus' ministry was in full swing. The disciples have witnessed the raising of the dead, the healing of the deaf and blind, and feeding of the five thousand. They are on a roll and Rome better be worried. But then Jesus shifts gears and begins talking about His imminent departure. He tells the disciples of his plans to "go away to prepare a place for you." The disciples were dumbfounded. "Where could he be going?" they whispered quietly to each other.

Finally, Thomas spoke and asked the question that everyone wanted to:

"Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" (John 14:5)

In seminary, I had a professor who had two Ph.D.s and is probably the most intelligent human being I have ever known. He would lecture with his back to us writing on the chalk board. As he taught, usually without notes, the students in the room would begin looking at each other in confusion. Finally, my friend Rick spoke and asked the question everyone wanted to – "What in the world are you talking about?" Our professor would smile and go back over the material slowly making sure everyone understood. Rick, unlike me, was not afraid to ask the hard questions.

This is what Thomas did. In essence, he said, "Everything was going great but now you are talking about leaving. Why in the world would you leave? Where are You going? I don't understand this at all. If you don't give us a map, how can we know the way? I am confused. I love you. I have left everything to follow you. My heart is breaking. Please tell me the way."

Jesus did not rebuke him or make light of his confusion. Because Thomas asked for clarification, Jesus gave one of the most memorable responses in all of Scripture:

"Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6)

Maybe you have some questions this morning. Maybe they are hard questions. That does not necessarily mean that you are doubting God. Thomas just needed more information, clarity, and light shed on his fuzzy understanding.

Pastor Rob Bell states, "A question implies that there are things I don't know. So bringing questions and doubts are a form of respect for God."

I talked recently to a student who had walked away from his Christian beliefs because he had too many questions. I encouraged him to seek answers. Christianity can stand up to his scrutiny. I heard just recently that he had recommitted himself to the Ultimate Answer, Jesus Christ. Does he have all his questions answered? No, but he is seeking.

Jeremiah wrote:

"You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart." (Jeremiah 29:13)

Two excellent book resources are:

Evidence that Demands a Verdict by Josh McDowell. This book is a classic and looks at questions that have been asked by skeptics over the centuries.

"Now that's a Good Question" by R.C. Sproul. In this easy to read book, Dr. Sproul answers three hundred questions about life and faith.

Both of these books are in our church library.

Also, the Billy Graham Association website (billygraham.org) has hundreds of "Questions and Answers" sent in by readers just like you and me.

Seeing is Believing

Now we have reached our main text for this morning. Please turn with me to John 20.

Last week, Pastor Brian walked us through verses 19-23. The disciples were hiding in an upper room, afraid of the Jewish leaders. They were consumed with fear. Their Master and Commander was dead. They had heard the rumors about Jesus being alive and they wanted to believe it. But they didn't. They were afraid and hiding. Jesus walked through a wall, and the disciples went from fear to freaked out to faith. There was one disciple missing though. Where was Thomas?

Thomas was probably off by himself, serving as MC at his own private pity party. I'm sure that the other disciples encouraged him to

hide with them. But Thomas just wanted to left alone. His Lord was dead and his heart was paralyzed with grief.

"Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" (John 20:24-25)

The Greek tense for the word "told" means the other disciples kept telling him again and again. Can't you just imagine Andrew running as fast as he can to where Thomas is and telling him the good news? Can't you imagine Thomas' reaction?

"Andrew, you and I have been friends for a long time. I care about you. But, I want you to listen to me. Jesus is dead. Dead, you hear me?! It's over. It's all over. All our dreams are dead, just like Jesus. You can say you have seen Him. Sure you have seen Him. He and Elvis are working at a Burger King somewhere. I don't care what the women say. They are emotional women. I thought I knew you better than this, Andrew; Jesus is the only person who ever picked me for anything. I miss Him. When He died a part of my soul died too. Just leave me alone."

He then adds, rather caustically:

"Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it." (Luke 20:25b)

Before we are too hard on Thomas, let's remember an important thing. First, the other disciples did not believe until they had seen. The empty tomb, the women's reports, the Emmaus disciple's stories had fallen on deaf ears.

In Luke's telling of this account, Jesus appears to the disciples and sensing their uneasiness asks, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your mind?" (Luke 24:38). He knew that doubts that are unattended to leads to the rise of unbelief.

John McArthur states, "What set Thomas apart from the other ten was not that his doubt was greater, but that his sorrow was greater."

The story does not end here though.

"A week later his disciples were in the house again and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." (John 20:26-27)

There are several important lessons to learn from these verses.

* The first time that Jesus appeared, Thomas had been noticeably absent. Thomas missed Jesus because he missed the meeting! The writer of Hebrews cautions:

"Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another-and all the more as you see the Day approaching." (Hebrews 10:25)

In the student ministry, we are trying to teach the students to have a "holy anticipation" of what God is going to do in our midst on Sundays as we meet together. God speaks every time His Word is open and His name is praised. The problem is that it is very hard to hear God speak through Pastor Brian when you have decided to attend "bedside Baptist," "mattress Methodist," "lazy-boy Lutheran," or "Our Lady of the Sheets." As we learned during the 40 Days of Purpose Journey, we were created for community. Jesus said in Matthew 18:20:

"For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."

Make a commitment to be here every Sunday, with your ears open to what God has to say.

* "Thomas was with them." It is a week after the first appearance to the disciples and they gather again in the upper room to pray. This time though Thomas is present. Maybe he was sick of them nagging him. Maybe the initial shock of the crucifixion had worn off and he needed to be back around his friends. What we do know is that the disciples accepted him, doubts and all. At Pontiac Bible Church, you do not have to have all the answers to be a part of our family. Bring your questions and your doubts, you are welcome.

* "Though the doors were locked." Although the disciples had seen the risen Lord, they still had the doors locked. They are so human. They still were controlled more by fear than by faith.

* "Peace be with you." I believe this was said for Thomas' benefit alone. The other disciples had already had this experience. Now it was Thomas' turn to freak out.

* Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side." Thomas couldn't

believe what he was seeing. His Lord was alive! He also couldn't believe what he was hearing. How did Jesus know about his demands for proof? He started to feel small and ashamed.

"Stop doubting and believe." Jesus challenges Thomas to act on his belief in spite of his doubts. Jesus is gentle though. He doesn't belittle him or attack him for his doubts. Just as in the case of Peter's betrayal, Jesus gently restores Thomas. Jesus moves Thomas from unbelief to faith. Belief does not imply perfection, but a continual trust. This event changed Thomas forever. Tradition teaches that Thomas took the Gospel to Babylon (modern day Iraq), Persia, and then into India. Most of the churches in southern India can trace their heritage back to Thomas who is said to be buried near Madras where he died as a martyr in AD 72.

Remedies for Doubt

How do we deal with doubt? Pastor Steve Kilson lists five "reasons and remedies for doubt."

Be patient with the slow heart. Some people have doubts because they lack information. They do not know the facts that could help them believe. Two weeks ago Pastor Brian introduced us to two disciples walking the road to Emmaus. Jesus said to them, "How foolish you are and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken." (Luke 24:25)

Pray for the troubled heart. There are some who doubt because they are simply overwhelmed with confusion. David asked a question that many of us at one time has asked: "Why are you down cast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me?" (Psalm 42:5) Paul wrote to the church at Corinth: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God" (2 Corinthians 1:3-4)

Refresh the faint of heart. Often doubts can arise from being tired or emotionally exhausted. In I Kings 19, Elijah wins a show down with eight hundred and fifty false prophets. The next scene we find Elijah hiding in the desert, depressed, asking God to kill him. God responds to his doubt by directing him to eat dinner and take a nap. John the Baptist was languishing in prison when he sent some men to ask Jesus if He was really the Messiah or should they expect someone else. Jesus answers them, "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me." (Luke 7:23)

Encourage the fearful heart. A lot of us doubt because of self-esteem issues. Moses tried to turn down God's proposal to lead the Israelites out of Egypt because he stuttered (see Exodus 4:10-13). Jeremiah thought he was too young (see Jeremiah 1:6-8). God had to encourage Joshua again and again to be "strong and courageous" (Joshua 1:9). Each time Jesus appeared to the disciples He had to calm them down by saying "Peace to you." As we learned last week, Jesus offered the disciples peace in the midst of their fear. He still does the same today.

Love the Wounded Heart. My mother rarely went to church in the last years of her life. She had a saying that I still hear in the back of my mind, "If you want to get your heart broken and your back stabbed, just join a church." My mother had a wounded heart. I believe most people's doubts fit into this category. While some of us have serious questions about doctrine and theology, many people simply are disillusioned. They have been let down by another Christian or a church leader. They put up walls to protect themselves from further pain. What is the answer for such people? Jude, the brother of Jesus, tells us, "Be merciful to those who doubt." (Jude 22) Do you know someone who has been hurt by the church? Love them! In Jesus name, love them! In time, your acceptance of them may open the door to a relationship with Jesus.

Thomas Worships

Jesus offers his hands and side as evidence for Thomas. Interestingly, Thomas disobeys Jesus. He is told to reach out and touch. He does neither. He bows and worships.

"Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28)

First, Thomas calls Jesus "my Lord" or, in the Greek, "kyrios." It was a way of saying "I surrender to You completely...you are the Lord of my life...you are the leader of my heart." Then he says something that was incredible for a good Jewish boy to say. He calls Jesus "Theos." He calls Jesus "God." Thomas, who we call the "doubter", understood the resurrection better than all of the other disciples. Jesus is raised. He is Lord. He is God. Thomas assigns two of the Old Testament names for God to Jesus. This would have been considered blasphemous and punishable by death.

Communion

When Thomas looked at Jesus' hands and the scars on his body I wonder if his mind did not immediately go back to a small upper room. They are finishing dinner and Jesus takes the bread, breaks it and says, "This is my body, broken for you."

As children of an invisible God, we interact with a God that we can not see or hear or touch. We have no pictures of God, or idols set up to worship. God knows our propensity to doubt and that is why He gave us a word picture called communion. In communion, the bread represents Jesus' body broken and battered for you and me. It is a physical symbol of an invisible reality. The grape juice represents the blood that was shed on the cross, as He died in our place to pay for our sins. This table represents the sacrifice of Jesus. Our response should be that of Thomas when we approach the elements: "my Lord and my God."

Paul states adamantly that we must examine ourselves before participating in this act of worship (1 Corinthians 11:27-29). Are you right with God this morning? Are there any relational ruptures that you need to take care of today? If you need to pull someone into one of the empty rooms, do it.

[Silent reflection]

"And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." (Luke 22:19)

[Together] My Lord and My God.

"In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. (1 Corinthians 11:25-26)

[Together] My Lord and My God.

We will be taking the mercy fund in just a few minutes. First, let me give you some action points.

Action points

Be honest about your doubts. There are some people who think that they have to have all the questions answered before they will come to Christ. Not true. In fact, if you wait to have all your questions answered, you will never come to faith.

Bring your doubts to God and seek answers. Remember, it is not a sin to doubt. Max Lucado writes, "Disbelief is a sin, but questioning – sincerely seeking – is acceptable to God, because in the presence of God you may ask any question you want." He goes on to say, "God never turns his back on those who ask honest questions. He never did in the Old Testament; He never did in the New Testament. So if you are asking honest questions of God, He will not turn away from you." Isaiah said: "Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near." (Isaiah 55:6)

Remember the equation Faith=Doubt + Belief. Faith is put into motion when I chose to act on the belief in spite of the doubts. Ray Pritchard colorfully describes doubt as "the ants in the pants of faith." The writer of Hebrews writes of the importance of faith: "And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him." (Hebrews 11:6).

Even when you do not see God or understand His plan, trust Him. Solomon says in Proverbs 3:5, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding" Let me end with another Lucado quote: "Perhaps the reason that God does not always give us the answer to the whys of our existence is that he knows we haven't got the capacity to understand the answer. In learning to depend on God, we must accept that we may not know all the answers, but we know who knows the answers."

Mercy Fund

Jeremy Camp is a new contemporary Christian artist/worship leader. Wednesday night he took home two Dove Awards, one for best new artist of the year and the other for best male vocalist of the year. Jeremy lost his wife of five months to ovarian cancer. Melissa was only twenty years old.

During her sickness, Melissa shared a unique perspective with Jeremy. She told him if she ended up dying from her disease that as long as her death led one person to Christ that it would all be worth it.

During their honeymoon, Melissa started having stomach problems and when they returned the doctor delivered the news they dreaded. She had mere months to live. On Feb. 5, 2001, Melissa went to be with the Lord. As she took her last breath, Jeremy stood with her family and began worshipping God singing the same songs they had played so often for Melissa during her hospital stays. "I didn't want to do it," he says, "but I knew I was learning something about obedience."

Melissa's life and death changed Jeremy's perspective on the music he makes. "Watching Melissa go to Heaven made me realize what's important. Music is not my life. Christ is my life. The only thing that really matters is what we do for Jesus on this Earth, and as a result of what I've been through, I express even more the goodness of God and how faithful He is."

One of those songs that reflects that perspective is "I Still Believe," the first song Camp wrote after Melissa's death, a declaration of faith from one who has walked through the fire.

In the very moments when he could have doubted God the most, Jeremy wrote these words:

"I still believe in your faithfulness/I still believe in your truth/I still believe in your Holy Word/even when I don't see You I still believe."

Jesus responded to Thomas' spontaneous act of worship with a blessing, for him and for us:

"Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." (John 20:29)

That's us, folks. Jesus is blessing the billions that would follow in Thomas' footsteps. Sincere seekers who choose belief, in spite of doubt.

We are going to play Jeremy Camp's song, "I Still Believe", and the words will be on the screen. Kara and Leigh will sign the words as well. As the music plays, some of us need to surrender our right to know all the answers. Some of us need to surrender our lives to Christ. Some just need to be encouraged to trust even when we are drowning in doubt.

Scattered words and empty thoughts

Seem to pour from my heart

I've never felt so torn before

Seems I don't know where to start

But its now I feel your grace fall like rain

From every fingertip washing away my pain

I still believe in your faithfulness

I still believe in your truth

I still believe in your holy word

Even when I don't see I still believe

Though the questions still fog up my mind

With promises I still seem to bear

Even when answers slowly unwind

It's my heart I see you prepare

But its now that I feel your grace fall like rain

From every fingertip washing away my pain

I still believe in your faithfulness

I still believe in your truth

I still believe in your holy word

Even when I don't see I still believe

The only place I can go is into your arms

Where I throw to you my feeble prayers in brokenness

I can see that this is your will for me

Help me to know you are near

- Jeremy Camp, from the CD "Stay"

Luke 24:50-53 Focusing on the Future

Focusing on the Future

By Brian Bill

Summary: want us to look at three primary passages this morning. These three texts, taken together, form a composite picture of the Ascension.

I heard recently about a church that was putting on an Easter Cantata. When they came to the climactic scene of the Ascension of Christ, the actor playing Jesus was to be slowly hoisted out of view through an opening in the ceiling. The cue for the guys pulling the rope was when he said, "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

The flight upward was progressing smoothly, until the stage crew briefly lost their grip on the rope and the actor nearly dropped back to the stage. With enviable stage presence, he remained in character as his feet dangled inches from the floor and his bewildered disciples looked on in horror. Without skipping a beat he said, "Oh, and one more thing...love one another." Immediately the rope yanked him up into the ceiling and out of sight.

We don't think much about the Ascension of Christ, but we should. It's not just an afterthought but a cornerstone teaching of Scripture. We celebrate the Incarnation on Christmas; we recognize the Crucifixion on Good Friday; we rejoice in the Resurrection on Easter; but we don't really give much attention to the Ascension. Actually, I found out that some churches do include this on their church calendar, but because it's normally celebrated 40 days after Easter, and it falls on a Thursday, it doesn't get the prominence it deserves.

The Bible records two other ascensions. Both Enoch and Elijah detoured death and went straight to heaven (see Genesis 5:24; 2 Kings 2:11). One day a girl in Sunday School was asked to tell the story of Enoch. This is what she said: "Well, one day God and Enoch were just walking together and it came close to the end of the day. And God turned to Enoch and said, 'We're closer to my house than to yours. So why don't you just come home with me?'" It may have happened just like that (story from Melvin Newland).

When Jesus ascended into heaven it was unique. First of all, He actually died. Secondly, He came back to life. Third, He was taken up into heaven. 1 Timothy 3:16 contains a brief synopsis of the Savior's work: "He appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory." One way the early church determined to never forget what their faith was based on was by putting together the Apostle's Creed. Let's stand and recite this summary statement of Christian belief together. Believers first stated this right before they were baptized as part of their confession of Christ. What we read may be a bit different from what you remember because this is the "Modern English Version."

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy universal church,

the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. AMEN.

I want us to look at three primary passages this morning. These three texts, taken together, form a composite picture of the Ascension.

Luke 24

Let's first turn to Luke 24:50-53: "When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God."

1. They follow faithfully. Jesus has led them out to the area of Bethany. The picture that comes to mind is that of the Good Shepherd leading His sheep. He's not behind them, forcing them to go where they don't want to go; He's ahead of them, calling each of them by name. This is another example of what Jesus said in John 10:27: "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me."

The area around Bethany was special to Jesus because it's where Lazarus and his two sisters, Mary and Martha lived (John 11:1). Bethany was about one and a half miles from Jerusalem, and Jesus often spent the night there (see Matthew 21:17; Mark 11:11). It

was at Bethany, when Jesus was at Simon the Leper's house, that a woman anointed his head with very expensive perfume (Matthew 26:6). According to Acts 1:12, the ascension took place on the Mount called Olivet. This is not a discrepancy because the Mount of Olives was right next to Bethany. Luke understands their proximity when he writes in Luke 19:29: "As he approached... Bethany at the hill called the Mount of Olives..." Jesus often met with his disciples at the Mount of Olives (Luke 22:39). And it was here, at the place of the Olive Press, that Jesus agonized in prayer the night before his death. Perhaps they are standing on the very ground into which six weeks earlier Jesus had sweat blood.

2. Believers are blessed. After leading them, Jesus then lifts up his nail-pierced hands and blesses them. The last thing Jesus does is to give them His blessing. As the high priest did when he blessed the people in Leviticus 9:22; the Great High Priest pronounces peace to His followers. Like Jacob blessing his 12 sons before he left this earth in Genesis 49, Jesus blesses this band of believers. I want you to notice how much Jesus loves those who follow Him. He could have scolded them for all their sins. He could have expressed disappointment about their doubts. He could have given them grief for the ways they had let Him down. But instead, He blessed them. To bless means to bestow good on someone. It's to grant grace and measure out mercy to the undeserving. It's also used to convey thankfulness. Wouldn't it be fascinating to know exactly what Jesus said to the disciples? Friends, Jesus is thankful for you today as well. He is giving you grace and goodness.

3. Jesus is hoisted to heaven. While Jesus is blessing them, he is taken up into heaven. Jesus not only blessed them when He was physically present; He continues to bless them even on His way up! And He continues to bless believers today. This is a supernatural event, beyond scientific explanation, much like the Incarnation and the Resurrection.

4. They adore the authoritative One. Notice that verse 52 says that they worshipped after he was taken up into heaven: "Then they worshipped Him..." They are not downhearted but are instead filled with praise as they worship the One they can no longer see. That reminds us of the words of Jesus to Thomas in John 20:29: "...blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

5. They return with rejoicing. Even though Jesus is now gone, they are filled with great joy. Why is that? I think it's because they remembered the promise of Jesus in John 16:7: "But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you." Peter put it this way in 1 Peter 1:8: "Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy."

6. They praise Him perpetually. Verse 53 shows us that they magnified His mercy in protracted praise as they stayed in the Temple. We know that they remained there for ten more days, until the day of Pentecost, as recorded in Acts 2.

Acts 1

Luke actually gives two reports about the Ascension. The one here in Luke 24 is fairly brief. In Acts 1, he gives us more details.

1. 40 Days of Appearances. In verse 3, Luke mentions that after the Resurrection, Jesus appeared over a period of forty days, giving many convincing proofs to the disciples that He was alive. There are several reasons why Jesus chose forty days.

It's a common time frame in Scripture. By the way, the First Baptist Church in Pontiac is having their "Celebration Sunday" today.

Disciples needed multiple exposures so they would no longer doubt. It was during this time that He established His Lordship over their lives.

Jesus endured the Devil's temptation for 40 days in the wilderness, and now the tables are turned as Jesus triumphantly parades His victory over the evil one.

In verses 6-8, the disciples want to talk about end times and the restoration of the kingdom. Jesus instead hones in on the Holy Spirit and their work of witnessing, beginning where they are and extending to the ends of the earth.

2. The Lord leaves. Look at verse 9: "After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight." Jesus was taken suddenly, right before their eyes. The phrase, "to lift up" is in the passive tense and was used of the hoisting of a sail. The Father took Him up and it was unexpected, visible, and tangible. They were eyewitnesses. The mention of the "cloud" is fascinating, with many suggesting that this was the Shekinah glory of God that filled the Temple in the Old Testament and appeared to Jesus at the Transfiguration. This cloud conveyed the presence and power of God, first seen in the wanderings of God's people en route to the Promised Land (Exodus 16:10).

This cloud also is seen hovering over the holiest part of the Mercy Seat, resting between the Cherubim on the Ark of the Covenant. Robert Leroe perceptively points out: "Just as the blood of the Temple sacrifices was brought into the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement and sprinkled upon the Mercy Seat, so Jesus ascended into Heaven as both Priest and Sacrifice. His sacrifice was accepted, and it satisfied divine justice" (www.sermoncentral.com).

In verse 10, we read, "as He was going." In the Greek this meant "to go on a journey." Friends, Jesus didn't disappear; rather, He

arrived at His destination. After Jesus ascended, the disciples were “looking intently” into the sky. They were gazing into glory. This is the same phrase that is used in Luke 4:20 when we read that everyone “fastened their eyes” on Jesus after He read from the prophet Isaiah. I can’t imagine what that was like to be staring into the very Shekinah presence of God. Their Lord has been lifted away and they can’t break away. I’m sure their eyes were big, their mouths wide open, and their hearts racing.

3. The Redeemer will return. And then two angelic messengers dressed in white stand beside them and bring them back down to earth in verse 11: “Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.” Twice in this verse the word “same” is used. The very same Jesus who left will one day return, in the same way. In Matthew 26:64, Jesus indicates that in the future He will be “coming on the clouds of heaven.” Revelation 1:7 says the same thing: “Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him.” His departure is not final; there will be a reunion.

His return will be personal (it will be Jesus and not some substitute), literal (not a vision or a dream), visible (every “eye will see” Him), sudden (not a gradual return), and unexpected (like a thief in the night). You might be surprised to know that the New Testament refers to the second coming of Christ in over 300 verses. That means one out of every 13 verses deals with some element of the Redeemer’s return to earth.

Ray Pritchard writes: “The same Jesus who walked on water is coming again. The same Jesus who raised Lazarus is coming again. The same Jesus who was betrayed by Judas is coming again. The actual, historical figure that lived 2000 years ago on the other side of the world is returning to earth one more time”.

Incidentally, according to Zechariah 14:4, when Jesus returns, He will come back to the Mount of Olives: “On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem, and the Mount of Olives will be split in two from east to west, forming a great valley, with half of the mountain moving north and half moving south.”

Mark 16

While Luke 24 and Acts 1 help us see the details related to the Ascension, Mark 16:19-20 tell us where Jesus is now, and what we should be doing now: “After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was taken up into heaven and he sat at the right hand of God. Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it.”

Where Jesus is now. Jesus is now seated at the right hand of God the Father. To be on the right hand is a metaphor for power and authority. There was no greater honor among earthly kings than for a trusted advisor to be seated at their right hand. Psalm 110:1: “The LORD says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.’” In the ancient near east culture, a king would place his feet upon the neck of his enemy to symbolize complete subjugation. This is a sketch where Pharaoh Ahmenhotep II (1448-1420 B.C.), places his feet upon his enemies. Notice that their hands are tied behind their backs and they have been made his footstool.

Jesus is ruling. The fact that He is sitting down indicates that His work has been accomplished. Everything He came to do is finished. The price has been paid. Forgiveness has been purchased with His blood. He is both ruling and at rest. 1 Peter 3:22 states that Jesus: “has gone into heaven and is at God’s right hand-with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.” Everything is subject to the Savior. The King has been coronated. There is nothing outside of His sweet and sovereign control. Nothing.

What we should be doing now. After observing the ascension, the disciples worshipped and then they witnessed, as they “went out and preached everywhere.” They were doing what Jesus had commanded in the Great Commission. Notice that the Lord worked with them, confirming His presence and His power by accompanying signs. I’m confident that Jamie and Lindsay Carley are experiencing that right now in India and that Sarah Reynolds will as she prepares to leave for Kenya this week.

Implications of the Ascension

In John 6:62, after some of the disciples complained about the difficulty involved in accepting His teachings, Jesus asked a question: “What if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before!” In other words, if you think what I’ve said so far is hard to believe, what will you do if you see me ascend to heaven? What will the Ascension mean to you? What difference will it make in your beliefs and your behavior? Those are good questions for us to ponder as well. I can think of at least six implications of the Ascension that apply to our lives today.

Jesus has authority over all. As we learned last week, “all authority in heaven and on earth has been given” to Jesus. He is the ascended and seated Lord of our lives, this church, our country, and the entire universe. He has defeated the devil! Ephesians 1:20-23: “Which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.

And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church.” That leads to some questions. Have you surrendered yourself fully to His right to reign supreme in your life? Is He your Lord? Are you leading your life, or is He?

Jesus has opened the way for us to follow. Because He has been raised to new life and has ascended to heaven, He has prepared the path for us to do the same. John 14:3: “And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.” The only way to get to Heaven is through Christ. Have you received Him yet as your Savior?

We have an advocate in Heaven. We know that Satan is the accuser of believers (Revelation 12:10), but according to 1 John 2:1-2, we have an advocate in Heaven: “My dear children, I am writing this to you so that you will not sin. But if you do sin, there is someone to plead for you before the Father. He is Jesus Christ, the one who pleases God completely” (New Living Translation). Did you know that one of the activities of Christ right now is to pray for you? Romans 8:34: “Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.” Hebrews 7:25: “He lives forever to plead with God on their behalf.” Friend, you are not alone and you’re not on your own. The ascended, all-authoritative one is your advocate!

We have power and authority. Jesus is seated in the heavenly places and those who put their faith in Him are seated with Him. This kind of blows our minds but it’s true. Listen to Ephesians 2:6: “And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.” That’s our position. And we’ve also been given power according to Acts 1:8: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you...” Colossians 2:10 reminds us that we are not meant to walk around timidly or wonder why we feel so empty: “You have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority.” Are you accessing the power and authority that is yours in Christ?

The Holy Spirit is with us forever. In John 16:7, Jesus actually said that it was good that He was going away, for when He did, He would send the Holy Spirit to be with us forever. I really like how Augustine put it in one of his prayers: “You ascended before our eyes, and we turned back grieving, only to find you in our hearts.” Phillip Yancey perceptively adds, “Ever since the Ascension, Jesus has sought other bodies in which to begin again the life He lived on earth.”

Barbara Taylor writes: “If they wanted to see Jesus again, it was no use looking up. Better that they should look around instead, at each other, at the world, at the ordinary people in their ordinary lives, because that was where they were most likely to find Him...not in his own body but in their bodies, the risen, ascended Lord who was no longer anywhere on earth so that He could be everywhere instead... with nothing but a promise and a prayer, those 11 people consented to become the church, and nothing was ever the same again, beginning with them...and once they did that, surprising things began to happen. They began to say things that sounded like Him, and they began to do things they had never seen anyone but Him do before...it was almost as if He had not ascended but exploded, so that all the holiness that was once concentrated in Him alone flew everywhere...” (<http://ctlibrary.com>).

Communion Questions

As we prepare to celebrate communion, I want to ask you some questions. When you think of Christ, how do you think of Him? Is He the babe in the manger? Does your mind focus on His words or His works when He was alive? Do you see Him sacrificed on the Cross? Or perhaps you think of Him talking to His followers after the Resurrection. There are many ways we may (and should) think of Christ, but I’d like to invite you right now to think especially of Jesus Christ as the One who ascended into Heaven and who is now seated at the right hand of God the Father.

As we prepare for communion, let’s meditate on Hebrews 10:11-14: “Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.”