



COLLEGE HEIGHTS
BAPTIST CHURCH



Simply Christmas



Daily Scripture Readings for
Nov. 23 - Jan. 3

Simply Christmas. That's our theme for this Advent season. Advent means the coming or beginning. This is the season when we celebrate the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ to the earth as a baby. While Christmas can become overwhelming for many, it is not supposed to be that way. Jesus came in a simple way, to poor parents who found themselves in a barn on the night he was born. That is the Christmas we will celebrate this year. No big pageant, no over the top production. I pray you don't stress about presents or decorations or meals this Christmas. Let's simply celebrate the Son of God coming to earth.

WEEK 1 OF ADVENT: HOPE

Monday, November 23 - Isaiah 40:27-31

Traditionally, the four Sundays of Advent are hope, peace, joy, and love. These are the four candles on the outside of the advent wreath. There is a fifth candle on the inside of the wreath, which is the Christ Candle which is lit on Christmas Eve. This coming Sunday we will light the hope candle. We could certainly use some hope this year and the incarnation of Jesus Christ is exactly the event which gives hope to the entire world even when the world is dark, cold, and unfriendly.

The hope of the coming of the Lord Jesus gives us energy; it gives us the motivation to continue on day by day. There's a story of German General Erwin Rommel in World War II. He was a brilliant motivator of troops with terrible ideals on the wrong side of history. He was in charge of moving tanks across the vast amounts of desert in Africa where all they could see was miles and miles of sand. The soldiers would go an entire day without seeing anything different and morale would be low. Then Rommel had an idea. To keep morale high, Rommel sent soldiers in front of the tanks to put red flags into the sand. This gave the tank drivers a point to focus on; it allowed them to have a checkpoint, a marker to achieve. This practice did its job. Morale rose and the battalion was able to travel faster than before.

Our strength, energy, and motivation should come from the Lord. Isaiah 40:30 says even youths get tired. But if we allow the Lord to lift us up, we will run and never

grow weary. What a great message of hope for us in these frustrating and difficult days. With a cold and dark winter coming, let us hold on to the hope that Jesus gives us. Let us not rely on our own power to push through, but let us allow God to renew our strength. We might be tired, but God never grows faint or weary. Let us put our hope and trust in the Lord.

Tuesday, November 24 - Galatians 4:4-7

Christians use several metaphors for our relationship with God. In certain parts of the New Testament, we are said to be servants, or literally slaves, of God (see Romans 12:1-2; 1 Peter 4:10-11). In other parts of the New Testament, such as our passage today, our relationship with God is described as being his children.

It gives us hope to know that God is our heavenly Father. It gives us hope that he knows our needs and like any good father, God will take care of his children. It gives us hope that “the Spirit of his Son” is in our hearts. We are the adopted children of God. It is often pointed out from these verses that adopted children in the New Testament world had more rights than biological. If a father chose to make one his son, that choice was forever. If a biological son dishonored a father in some way, he could be kicked out of the family. This could not happen with adopted children.

You can never do anything that will make God kick you out of his family. He is all-loving and all-forgiving. You may be having a struggle with a certain sin right now. It is never too late to turn to God. He has not given up on you. You may be struggling with following through on a task God has asked you to do. There’s still time to do it! God has not given up on you. And that gives us hope as we go through life. Pray for one another today that we all live with the hope of God on our minds.

Wednesday, November 25 - Job 5:8-16

When you don’t have power in the world, it is hard to look to the future with hope. At least, that’s how society thinks. Our assumptions about life is that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. It seems as if the poor should have little or no hope. However,

all people can have great hope. The powerful, almighty God humbled himself and became one with the poor and lowly.

One of Job's friends gives these words of hope when Job is so heartbroken that he wants to die. Eliphaz tells Job that God does marvelous works on this earth and that he saves the needy from the powerful. God is so amazingly powerful that injustice shuts its mouth. The hope that God gives is like water for a parched mouth. We have hope that adversaries of the Lord on this earth will be vanquished and the injustices of this earth cannot ruin those in need.

Do you have hope today?

Thursday, November 26 - Romans 8:24-30

Happy Thanksgiving everyone! This passage is a great passage to be thankful for and a passage to give us hope. The universe has been redeemed by Jesus' work on the cross which gives us hope. In our weakness, when we are too tired to wait in patience on the Lord, the Spirit intercedes for us. When we don't know what to say to God, God knows what we mean because the Spirit translates for us. When we don't know why something is happening, we can hold on to the purpose that even what the enemy meant for evil, God can use it for good.

On this Thanksgiving Day, you are probably not celebrating like you did last year because of the Pandemic. Take heart to know that God is here with us and whatever evil happens in this world, God can use it for his glory. Have hope because you have God.

Friday, November 27 - Isaiah 9:6-7

I want you to read these two verses several times throughout the day and make some notes on what you notice. What words stand out to you? Of the four names at the end of verse 6, which one most makes an impact on your life? Why? In verse 7, there is a mention of peace, justice, and righteousness. Which are you most thankful that Jesus brought to this earth? Which part of this passage gives you the most hope?

Write these thoughts down today and pray a prayer of thanksgiving to God for sending the Messiah to us.

Saturday, November 28 - Matthew 1:1-17

How does a genealogy give us hope? Well, if this cringe-worthy group is worthy of being Jesus' earthly family, then it gives us hope that we are allowed in his family too. Tuesday's reading in Galatians helped us to understand that we are co-heirs with Jesus; we are sons and daughters of God. It is clear in the Bible that it is not about what you do or say that leads to salvation. It is not about what we do which leads to being a child of God; it is about your relationship with God through Jesus. And if you needed any more proof, this genealogy gives it.

There is a prostitute, a product of incest, and adulterers on this list. There are kings who made terrible decisions for God's people on this list. There are tricksters and deceivers in this family. I promise you: you are not too terrible to be in God's family. God will accept you into his family if you want to be in the family of God just like he accepted David's family as his own. Praise be to God for this awesome opportunity!

Sunday, November 29 - Luke 1:46-56

Instead of reading a psalm on Sundays during Advent, we will read a passage of Scripture that is psalm-like but it connects with the Christmas story. Today, we read Mary's Song (aka Mary's Magnificat). This song is a beautiful expression of Mary's emotions while being pregnant with Jesus. What is your favorite part of Mary's Song?

WEEK 2 OF ADVENT: PEACE

Monday, November 30 - Micah 5:2-5a

One of my favorite Christmas hymns is *O, Little Town of Bethlehem*. It started being one of my favorites as a child because I found the music beautiful. As I have grown, I have started to appreciate the words. At the end of verse 1, the song

proclaims “Yet in thy dark streets shineth, The everlasting light, The hopes and fears of all the years, Are met in Thee tonight.”

Micah prophecies 800 years before Jesus’ birth that he will be born in Bethlehem. The world can be a dark, scary place, but because of Jesus, there is light. The hope for a Messiah is found in this baby born in Bethlehem. The fear that we have can be replaced by peace because of God’s Son.

These verses in Micah tell us what type of leader Jesus will be. He will be one who returns people to a right relationship with God. He will feed the flock; he will take care of them. His people will have peace. The theme of peace will be our focus this week. What does it mean that Jesus will be the one of peace? Micah was a prophet to the northern kingdom of Israel after Israel split from Judah in the south. When Micah was alive, the Assyrian Empire to the north of Israel was expanding and Israel was under threat of becoming controlled by Assyria (which happens in 722 BC). From this point, Israel ceased from being an independent country. The prayer was that a messiah would come to save them from being ruled by a foreign power.

This is what Jesus does for humanity. He saves us from being under the control of earthly powers. He allows us to realize there is One who is better to follow who brings us peace in our lives. Thank God for the peace he gives you in your life. Thank him for sending his son to that little town of Bethlehem.

Tuesday, December 1 - John 14:27

In somewhat of a farewell address to his disciples before he is arrested and executed, Jesus shares these words to calm their fears about what is to transpire. He reminds his disciples that the reason he was on earth was to bring peace. Most of the disciples and most Jews at that time thought the Messiah would bring peace through a mighty sword against the Roman Empire; we know differently. Peace was given because of Jesus’ death. Our relationship with God is one of peace because of Jesus’ substituting himself for us. This is how he gives us peace.

Peace is one of the main characteristics of the coming of the Messiah prophesied in the Old Testament. The prophet Haggai says “The latter glory of this house will be greater than the former,’ says the Lord of hosts, ‘and in this place I will give peace,’ declares the Lord of hosts” (Haggai 2:9 NASB). The strength and peace of the nation of Israel during the reign of David and Solomon will be overshadowed by a more glorious peace which comes through Jesus Christ.

Jesus came to this earth to give us peace; Jesus died to give us peace. In a world of violence, uncertainty, and anxiety, rest in the Prince of Peace. Do not be troubled; do not be afraid.

Wednesday, December 2 - Philippians 4:6-7

I don’t understand it, but I’ve felt it. That’s the point of Philippians 4:6-7. God gives us a peace that is not of this world. It is not logical. In 2011, my mother-in-law was given a cancer diagnosis: stage 4. The prognosis was not good; however, in a way I can’t explain I always knew that she would go into remission. There was peace about the situation in a season where peace should have been fleeting in our family.

Take time to write down a story about feeling a peace which surpasses all understanding. Think about how God brought you through those difficult times with a peace God can only give. Pray and thank God for the wonderful gift of peace.

Thursday, December 3 - 1 Peter 3:8-12

What does it mean to bring peace to one another? Ways that we do this are expressed in verses 8-9. Verses 10-12 are an extended quote from Psalm 34:12-16. We will use this as our main text concerning peace this coming Sunday. For now, let us look at a few of the ways we can be peacemakers in the world.

One thing that I believe is lacking in the world today is sympathy for one another. We don’t put ourselves in other people’s shoes. We don’t mourn with people who mourn. There would be more peace in this world if people would realize that “the other

side” of whatever we are talking about are people too and deserve to be treated as such. What can you do to sympathize with someone today?

But what can you do when you need sympathy, but somebody is mean to you instead? Don't repay evil for evil but instead give a blessing. How can you be a blessing to someone today who has not been nice to you? Has somebody wronged you this year? Consider sending them a Christmas card to let them know that you forgive them or just to express Christmas greetings.

Let us have sympathy, love, and a tender heart for one another. Let us do good for one another and bring peace to a chaotic world.

Friday, December 4 - James 3:13-18

In baseball, the hitter is always trying to guess what type of pitch the pitcher is throwing while the pitcher is trying to deceive the hitter. One of the hardest pitches to hit is a great changeup. The reason it is difficult to hit is that it looks like the pitcher's fastball when spinning toward the batter, but it is ten miles per hour slower. By the time the hitter realizes this, it is too late and he has swung and missed. The strategy that goes into pitching is one of the parts of baseball I love most. Trying to deceive the hitter is part of the game.

Where there is competition, there will be deceit. In the spirit of competition, this is acceptable. However, sometimes in sports and in life it goes too far. Sadly, where there are winners and losers, there will be people who break the rules in order to win. James writes, “you want something and do not have it, so you commit murder” (James 4:2). When you are selfish and do not care about other people, this type of action makes sense. This is wisdom from the earth or what I would call false wisdom.

True wisdom comes from God and has the best interest of all in mind. I know this is where we all want to be, but this type of action in the world is easier said than done. Pure, gentle, peaceable action cannot have a shred of partiality. I want to be impartial in all of my decisions, but unconsciously I have biases which I must fight against. In order to be peacemakers and further the peace of God on this earth, we must fight this

nature inside of us and allow the true wisdom of God to shine through us. Can you commit to doing that today?

Saturday, December 5 - Isaiah 54:9-10

How can we live life in a violent, chaotic world that seems more violent and chaotic every day? Because of promises that God makes in passages such as this one today. God's love, peace, and compassion will always be with us. Even when the world turns upside down, God will never leave us nor forsake us.

God has sent the Son of God into this world and this gives us peace. This act of sending Jesus is the beginning of God's New Covenant with the world. It is an opportunity for God to not look at our sin with anger, but to only see the perfection of his Son when he looks at us. This covenant of peace cannot be removed; when you become a child of God, you can have faith that nothing you do can take you away from God's love and peace.

Live your life this Saturday basking in the glory of being a child of God. Live life knowing that nothing can take away the peace you have because of the Prince of Peace coming to earth. Praise God for the wonderful gift of his Son.

Sunday, December 6 - Psalm 34:11-14

To prepare for corporate worship, we read the psalm quoted in 1 Peter earlier this week. How can you "seek peace, and pursue it" today?

WEEK 3 OF ADVENT: JOY

Monday, December 7 - Proverbs 12:20-22

When we discuss the four weeks of Advent, I don't want you to think of them as four separate characteristics; instead, think of them as parts of one life. We are to have a life of hope, peace, joy, and love because Christ has come. This proverb today tells us how these elements work together by saying that peace leads to joy, but those who are wicked have troubles.

This makes me think of the difficulty of lying and the peace and joy of telling the truth. When you tell the truth, it's the only truth you have to think of. But when one lies, they must continue to remember that lie and build upon it. Life becomes anxious and filled with trouble.

If you want to have a life filled with joy, you need to have a life that is filled with hope, peace, and love as well. This week we will discuss having joy in our hearts and minds because of the coming of our Lord and Savior. Describe the joy you feel regarding the Son of God becoming human. Write down your thoughts to give your mind clarity. Feel the joy that the hope, peace, and love of Jesus can bring you.

Tuesday, December 8 - 2 John 12

The joy of friendship is impossible to replace. This has been a difficult year for socializing and maintaining personal contact between friends. The absence of getting together with friends, family, and church has made all of us realize the importance of these relationships. God did not create us to be isolated beings; we were certainly created for community. Here in 2 John, John realizes that he must visit this church in order to further their relationship. In order to have complete joy in the situation, they must come together and be united.

What joy we can feel because Jesus did this for us. Our joy in Christ can be complete because Jesus came to this earth. Instead of staying in heaven, he came to earth; he came down to our level in order for us to have fellowship with God. I hope you have not lost the feeling of joy for Christmas. The immense joy of knowing that God loves us so much that he had to come to this earth to make a way for us to have a relationship with him, so that our joy may be made complete. Take time today to bask in the joy you can feel because of Jesus' birth.

Wednesday, December 9 - Nehemiah 8:1-12

There should be joy that comes from following God. That is what Nehemiah tells the people who were assembled to hear the reading of the Law. This is a major moment for the people of Israel. They have returned from exile, rebuilt the walls and Temple, and now Ezra is reading the Law to the people. The people start to hear the Law and realize how little they have followed God's rules. So Nehemiah stops the reading and tells people: "go have fun! Go and eat, rejoice! This is not a day to mourn."

Our relationship with Christ should not bring burden or anxiety to our lives; it should bring joy! A relationship with Christ is not about making sure you are following all the rules, but it is about centering your heart and mind on being like Christ. This heart-centeredness brings joy in life.

Let us follow Nehemiah's example in life. Let us realize that the Law of Christ is not to bring sorrow or heart-break because we don't follow it perfectly. Instead, let us realize that the love of Christ brings joy into our lives and changes our hearts, not just our actions.

Thursday, December 10 - Esther 8:16-17

Joy comes with victory. Have you ever watched a professional sports team win a championship? Of course, most of us have. When the clock strikes zero or the final out is recorded, these adult men and women who get paid lots of money end up acting like children. There is so much joy that it overflows out of them and the world can see it on display. This is the joy that comes from victory.

In the Book of Esther, we see this joy when the Jewish people had victory over those who wanted to commit genocide against them. It was joy that led to celebration, a festival, and a holiday. Victory leads to joy.

The Christmas Story is a story of victory. Jesus being born in a stable is just as much a triumphal entry as Jesus' entry into Jerusalem before he is crucified. We have joy because we know victory has arrived. The boy who is born in Bethlehem brings victory into the world. Death no longer has the final word. Death no longer has victory.

It is life which reigns forever. “Oh Death, where is your victory! Oh Death, where is your sting!” And for that, we can have unspeakable joy.

Friday, December 11 - Luke 15:1-7

Rejoicing over finding the lost sheep. This passage, along with the other parables in Luke 15, show us the proper perspective Christians should have. There is joy over finding the sheep and coin; there is joy over the son returning home. This sheep was once exposed to the evils of the world and in danger of death. Once the shepherd finds the sheep, the sheep has protection, provisions, and life. There is a celebration among the shepherd’s friends about the safe return of the sheep.

This is the celebration; this is the joy we should feel about Christmas. It is because of Christmas that the Good Shepherd came to this earth. It is because of Christmas that the sheep can be found. We truly must exhibit the fruit of joy in our lives. We should express Joy to the World because the Lord has come to rescue us. He sought us out while we were exposed to the dangers of death and destruction and found us to give safety and life.

Saturday, December 12 - Romans 15:13

We have joy and peace because the God of hope gives us joy and peace. If you think you can have joy and peace without God, you are sorely mistaken. Yes, maybe you have moments of happiness or joy. Maybe you have times in your life which are peaceful. But the only way to have ultimate joy and peace is through Christ Jesus. A chapter earlier in Romans 14:17, Paul writes “for the Kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.”

This week, we’ve covered several passages throughout the Bible discussing joy. We have said that the Bible is to bring joy not sadness. We have claimed that we have joy in victory. The Bible does bring joy and there is joy in victory, but we must claim our victory through Jesus. There is no other source which can bring us complete joy. Are

you seeking joy through the Holy Spirit? Or are you seeking happiness in things of this world?

Sunday, December 13 - 1 Samuel 2:1-10

There are a lot of similarities in Hannah's Song and Mary's Song which we read two weeks ago. What verse stands out to you in 1 Sam. 2:1-10? What verse do you need to cry out to God as your prayer today?

WEEK 4 OF ADVENT: LOVE

Monday, December 14 - Matthew 11:28-30

As a parent, you know how much you do for your children. With young children still, LeeAnn and my work with our children is still extremely hands-on: we make them meals, we help them brush their teeth, we help them with getting dressed, etc. This is tiring work but rewarding. It can be exhausting, but that's how you show love to your children. You help your children because even if the task takes more time for you, your children need help. They cannot complete the task by themselves, they are exhausted and need help. We help them because we love them. That's why we come alongside our children to take care of them.

The most loving thing you can do for a person is sacrifice for them. The ultimate way this occurred is when Jesus sacrificed his life for us. However, in our lives, Jesus also walks alongside us to help us. He tells us in this passage that his yoke is easy. That we can be attached to him like two oxen plowing a field, and he will guide us and help us do our work. Why does he do this? Because he loves us.

Love is the theme of this week. It is love from God which gives us life and it is his love which gives us hope for a life after this one. How will you live your life today in the knowledge of God's love? Who will you share God's love with today?

Tuesday, December 15 - 1 John 4:7-21

By my count, love is mentioned 28 times in this passage. The premise is fairly simple. God loves us, so we should love one another. Not only does God love us, it says that “God is love.” This phrase can be hard to explain to non-Christians and Christians alike. To take you back to math class, usually when $A = B$, therefore $B = A$. In other words, $2+2=4$ is the same as $4=2+2$. Typically this extends to grammar so in a sentence such as God is love, you’d think that love is God. **HOWEVER, THIS IS NOT TRUE!** You cannot rearrange this sentence. God is the origin of love. God is love. Love is **NOT** God.

What does “God is love” mean? It means that God’s actions are the perfect example of love. It is the perfect example of what is written about love in 1 Corinthians 13: patience, kindness, slow to anger, not envious, not boastful. By saying “God is love,” John is building an argument about how we are to act in the world. If God is love, and Christians say that God lives inside of us, then love is inside of us and should be shared with the world. Verse 20 is most convicting to me: if we say we love God, but do not love people, then we are lying about loving God! The test of “if we love God” is by how we love other people. This is what is meant by “God is love.”

God loves you! God is love. If God resides in you, then you must show that love to others. Thank God that God loves you. Then, focus on loving others. The week before Christmas can always be a stressful time when people get anxious and unfriendly. Show the love of God to each other in this Christmas season.

Wednesday, December 16 - Matthew 14:13-23

What do you do for someone you love? You make sacrifices. When Jesus went across the lake, he wanted to be by himself; the expressions of “withdrew” and “deserted place” make this clear. To further the point, I added verses 22-23 to this reading. After the miracle of the feeding of the 5000+, he sends the disciples away and goes to the mountains to be by himself. Even though Jesus wanted to be by himself,

when the crowds followed, he had compassion on them. He healed the sick; he taught them all day.

This expression of compassion is the type of love that Jesus had for people and should be the love we show to others. This type of love is like a deep yearning inside your soul. It is a gut-feeling that is difficult to express in words. It is the type of love that is not conditioned on what the other person does and you can't explain why you love them, but you just feel drawn to taking care of them.

What do you do when you have plans, but someone in need of your help comes along? Do you have compassion on that person or do you push forward with what you want to do? Maybe the plans you have are good plans. Maybe you have plans to go to church or pray. Jesus postponed his plans in order to serve and sacrifice for the people in need. How will you show love and compassion on the people around you today?

Thursday, December 17 - Genesis 3:21

The love of God was shown very early in the history of humanity. Adam and Eve had sinned. They had broken the covenant God had made with them. They ate the fruit and were facing the punishment for their action. However, Genesis 3:21 is a breath of fresh air to clear out the odor of sin: God made clothes for Adam and Eve.

This verse is such a beautiful picture of the love God has for all of us. Even when we disobey God, God is by our side and taking care of us. Are there consequences, earthly and spiritual, for our actions? Of course. Does God still love us even when we make the wrong choices? Undoubtedly.

The unconditional love and grace that God gives his people is hard to fathom. God continues to clothe us in righteousness; God sent his son to cover our nakedness from sin. The Son of God became a helpless baby born to a poor family in a poor region of Galilee. God exposed his son to this world in order to cover our vulnerability. God covers our sin. Who will you share this amazing story with today?

Friday, December 18 - Judges 3:7-11

The fullness of God's love is on display in these five verses in Judges. The person or actions of Othniel is not the focus, but the focus is on God. God punishes; the people cry out; God forgives and heals. This is the love of God. This cycle occurs over and over again in Judges. Each story shows the compassion and love that God has for his people. Are there times of punishment due to disobedience? Of course! I don't think it is real love unless there are consequences for disobedience and unfaithfulness. But God has a heart for his people and when they cry out to him, he delivers them because of love.

There is a person in your life who needs to hear this message today. One who has been running away from God and been disobedient to the calling which God has for them. Share with them the eternal love of God. Maybe they feel as if God has abandoned them. Encourage that person to get on their knees and cry out to God for help. Get on your knees with them to pray for God's deliverance from the turmoil they are facing. God is faithful and an ever present help in our times of need. Pray for that person right now. Then call that person to let them know that you are praying for their difficult situation and that you are available to talk anytime, so that they can have rest.

Saturday, December 19 - John 3:16-21

I'm not sure we can have a week's worth of Scripture Readings about love without reading John 3:16. If there is one verse which tells us about how much God loves us, it is John 3:16.

Today is the last Saturday before Christmas. People will be busy getting last minute shopping done for gifts and groceries. Millions of people will be traveling to see family in the midst of the stress of a pandemic. In a world that is feeling stress, be relief. In a world that is dark, be a light.

There are two types of light in the world. One is a lot like the devotion from yesterday. It is a pin light which is laser-focused in one direction. When this type of light shines into the night sky, it can be seen by planes and shines all the way into space.

This type of focus is so important when you are witnessing to one person and expending energy sharing the gospel with that one. The second type of light is more like an overhead light in our house. Energy is not pin-point focused but is spread throughout the house. This can be more helpful to light up an entire room, but is not as helpful if you need a bright light to see something small like a splinter in your finger.

Yesterday, I wanted you to be laser-focused on one person. Today, I want you to spread your light to everyone. Be a friendly face to people you see. Share love and joy with anyone you see who is stressed about gift-buying. Be a light to the world that is spread among all people. God loves the entire world. Spread that love and light today.

Sunday, December 20 - Luke 1:67-80

The story of Zechariah, Elizabeth, and John is a wonderful part of the Christmas story which should not be overlooked. Read Zechariah's beautiful prophecy and consider the love of God as he keeps his promises.

WEEK 5 OF ADVENT: CHRIST

Monday, December 21 - Matthew 1:18-25

Today is the shortest day of the year. There will only be 10 hrs, 1 min, 4 sec of sunlight today. It was dark when you woke up (likely), and it'll be dark before you eat dinner. Of course, it could be worse; we could live in Anchorage, Alaska where there will be only 5 hrs, 27 min, 47 sec of sunlight today with a sunrise at 10:14 am and sunset at 3:41 pm. Today is the Winter Solstice when the Northern Hemisphere has the least amount of light. But tomorrow, the light starts to shine a little longer.

Christmas is in four days and before that first Christmas night, the world was dark. There was darkness for an engaged couple. The woman was pregnant and she claimed it was from the Lord; her future husband didn't believe her. Darkness enveloped Mary and Joseph. Then, an angel of the Lord shined bright in the life of Joseph. He saw the light and believed that this pregnancy was a miracle from God. He

married Mary as was planned. And the light of the world came into the world; Emmanuel, God with us.

Today, light is fleeting; but there are brighter days ahead.

Tuesday, December 22 - Luke 2:1-7

I've tried to organize the days leading up to Christmas in a way that chronologically tells the story of the birth of Jesus. Yesterday was a quick overview from Matthew. Now, we move to Luke and have more details of when the birth took place.

I'm always in awe of Mary in this story. A year earlier, she is just an ordinary teenage girl who is engaged or about to be engaged to be married to a man her family chose for her. Then, everything she planned about her life changed. It's hard to imagine that anyone believed her story about the pregnancy. Joseph had to have an angel come to him to believe her. If there was a teenager in our church who was pregnant and she said she was a virgin, we wouldn't believe her.

To make matters worse, a census comes up. Now, the teen must leave her hometown (which might be a blessing because of the rumors) while almost full-term with her child. She rides for days on a donkey and we should assume she's incredibly uncomfortable. She gets to Bethlehem, and when it's time to birth Jesus, she is not in a private room but a public barn.

What does Mary do when all of this disruption comes to her plan for life? She is a willing servant of God. Not only do we get to experience the joy of celebrating the coming of Jesus at Christmas, we get the opportunity to reflect on one of the noblest servants of God throughout the Bible: Mary.

Reflect on Mary's life today. Think about the trouble she must have faced; then think how she persevered to do as God required her to do. When you face trouble in your life, do you remain a servant of God as Mary did? When God asks you to disrupt your life to serve God, do you ignore God or do you say as Mary did in Luke 1:38: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Wednesday, December 23 - Luke 2:8-20

Do you remember when your first child was born? Did you want to show him/her off to everyone? Did you want to tell the whole world about your new baby? That is exactly what I imagine God doing in these verses of Luke 2. His baby has been born and he wants to tell the whole world! Not only has the Son of God been born, but this is good news for all people, not just the parents. Imagine if when your child was born, you knew the world was forever changed. Now, you want to tell everyone about your child even more! God sends the angels to the shepherds. The world begins to know about this wonderful baby boy that has been born.

And now the onus is on us. We know about this baby who has been born. We know that he is Immanuel, God with us. We know that this baby is the Savior of the World. We know he is the Messiah, Christ the Lord. The angels toward the shepherds. The shepherds toward those they went home to. Who are you going to tell the good news of Jesus to today?

Thursday, December 24 - Matthew 2:1-12

Not only was the birth of Jesus made known by the angels going to the shepherds; it was made known by a star in the sky that the Wise Men saw. These two stories are great examples of God sharing the story in a way that certain people would understand. The term “wise man” could just as easily be translated “astrologer.” These were star gazers, looking for messages from “the gods.” God knew that is what they did, so he spoke to them in a way they would understand. They saw the star appear in the sky; they knew this was not ordinary, so they traveled to see its origins. They believed that the gods would put a new star in the sky when a king was born, so that is what God did.

God shared the message of his Son with the Magi in a way they could comprehend. We’ve been talking about this for a few weeks on Sunday nights, and this Sunday morning, we will continue to talk about sharing the message of Jesus to the world. God used angels for the Shepherds; God used a star for the Wise Men. How will

you share the message of Jesus to your family and friends who don't know that Jesus is the reason for the season?

Friday, December 25: CHRISTMAS DAY - Mark 1:15

Merry Christmas to all of you! I am so blessed to be your pastor, and I am grateful for all of you. Jesus has been born in Bethlehem and we celebrate his birthday today! As Mark 1:15 says, "the time is fulfilled, the Kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news!" God is with us! The Kingdom of God is at hand! Praise God for this indescribable gift.

May you have a merry Christmas surrounded (physically-distanced) with family and friends!

Saturday, December 26 - Acts 17:16-34

I've been thinking about this passage for four months. It was my topic for a research paper for school this past semester. Tomorrow, I will preach this passage and use it to show how we can use Paul as an example to witness to people from different cultures. This sermon is a culmination of what we have been discussing on Sunday nights concerning witnessing to the culture around us. Telling the world about Christ means we know what part of the story of Jesus will resonate with them, so we have a foot in the door to tell the whole story. We start with agreement so we can get to the non-negotiable truths of Jesus as God and Savior.

On Sunday nights, we discussed the necessity of Christians knowing the gospel. We've recognized our ability to be prophet, priest, and our responsibility to be co-heirs with Jesus our King. We've discussed who our neighborhood is and what they might respond to. Let's sum up all of those ideas using Paul in Athens as a biblical example. Let's have a desire for our neighborhood to confess Jesus Christ as Lord. Let us seek common ground to lead them to that decision.

Sunday, December 27 - Psalm 75

I pray you are ready to give thanks to God this morning. Will you be a person to tell about the wondrous deeds of Christ?

THE STORY

Monday, December 28 - Genesis 3:1-25

The Bible is not a puzzle to put together to learn the meaning of life; it is not a collection of rules and regulations either. The Bible is not a textbook that systematically explains the world, nor is it as frivolous as a self-help book you might find at the grocery store checkout.

Above all, the Bible is a story. Yet, it is not just any story; it is The Story. The Bible is the story of God's love for the world. It is not only a collection of stories, but it is one story from Genesis to Revelation that expresses God's love for all of creation. This is the story which we will cover this week. On Sunday, the sermon will cover The Story of God's love as it is seen from Genesis to Revelation. Our Scripture Readings this week will cover the largest points of transition in The Story. Think of these texts as the story moving from one act to another.

Today's transition is when perfection ends. God made a beautiful, perfect creation; however, this perfection ended quickly because of a decision that Adam and Eve made. The decision that Adam and Eve made was based on bad advice; they were deceived by the serpent. Even though they were deceived, it was still a decision that the first couple made. The devil made me do it is not an excuse for sin. You are in control of if temptation affects your soul.

Temptation is constant. There is nothing we can do that will lead to us not facing temptation. If Jesus faced temptation, you better believe we will too. However, Jesus' character led him to withstand the temptation he faced. In his book *Renovation of the Heart*, Dallas Willard states that character is how we act or speak before we think.

Given this definition, what is your character? When we give into a certain temptation easily, that reveals that our character is conditioned to do that thing. When

we anger easily and blow up at people, that reveals our character. When we lie to make ourselves look good, that reveals our character. When we immediately get jealous of another person's possessions, that reveals our character.

If you were to take an honest look at yourself, what is your character? What temptation do you fall into easily? Pray a prayer of confession to God today. Acknowledge to God your character (God already knows, so you might as well admit it). Ask for God to make you aware of times when you give into temptation easily. Ask God for help to change your character and change your initial response to opportunities to sin.

Tuesday, December 29, 2020 - Exodus 15:1-19

The transition we read today is the celebration of the Lord parting the Red Sea for Israel to cross and be freed from Egyptian slavery. This is the moment that Israel becomes a people group which will become a nation, instead of only the family of Jacob. The book of Exodus is the lynchpin in The Story. It is the origins of the nation of Israel and it shows God's love not just to one person or one family. The love and protection of God is shown to all of Israel. Soon, The Story will teach us that this love and protection can be extended to anyone who chooses to be part of Israel (e.g. Rahab).

In this passage in particular, notice verse 11. This rhetorical question expresses what the people of Israel have learned as God has led them out of Egypt: there are no other gods like the Lord. As we talk about the story of God's love for his people, do you recognize in your daily life the supremacy of the Lord? When you need to cross the metaphorical Red Sea in your life, do you trust that God will make a path for you to journey to the other side? Do you believe in the words from verse 2-3 that the Lord is my strength and might; he has become my salvation? If we are to make The Story our story, then we must confess this eternal truth. We must recognize that God's love is not just for one family or even one nation; God's love is for all people if they choose to

accept it. Trust in this truth today: God loves you. God parts the waters for his people; God will take care of you today as well.

Wednesday, December 30 - Hosea 8

This chapter of Hosea highlights the disobedience that Israel showed God throughout the Old Testament. Because of Israel breaking the covenant which God made with them, verse 13 tells us that “they shall return to Egypt.” An obvious metaphor, this pronounces judgment upon the nation; they will no longer be independent. Actions have consequences.

If you look at The Story as God’s love story with the world, Hosea 8 summarizes what could be classified as the end of Act One. Because of God’s love for Israel, he rescued them from Egypt. However, the people’s actions forced God to punish them because even though he is all loving, he is also just. Part of love is punishment. The people of God are forced into exile and while they are allowed to return seventy years later, Israel is never the same as it was. The covenant that God makes with Israel in Exodus has been broken. But because of God’s love, he does not leave us nor forsake us; God chooses to make a new covenant with the world. That is Act Two of this wonderful love story and that is where we will turn tomorrow.

Thursday, December 31 - Luke 23:44-24:12

The death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus is the end of Act Two of God’s love story with the world. God saw that God’s people could not keep the covenant he made with the Israelites in the wilderness in Exodus. He spoke through Jeremiah in Jeremiah 31:31-34 that a New Covenant would be enacted and “I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.” This is the covenant that is enacted through the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ Jesus, the Son of God. As John 3:16 says “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, so that whosoever believes in him will not perish, but have life forever.”

The sad reality is that most people will not accept his gift that is offered to them. Today is the last day of 2020; another year will close with the majority of people not accepting the reality that God is real, Jesus is the Christ, and salvation is a gift from God. A new year will begin tomorrow and people will be just as lost as they were in 2020; the Holy Spirit will not be inside their souls. Let us pray for our lost friends, family, and neighbors today. Let us pray as they reflect on this year, they recognize the love God has for them.

Friday, January 1, 2021 - Acts 1:1-11

If Act One is the story of Israel in the Old Testament and Act Two is the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, then Act Three is the story of the church as God's people. We live in Act Three of God's love story with the world. Act Three is the interval of time when Jesus is not on this earth between Acts Two and Four. Acts 1:8 is our mission: to be witnesses for Jesus Christ to our city, to our area, and to our world.

On a day when New Year's Resolutions are popular, can you resolve to live out Acts 1:8 in the year 2021? How can you be a witness for Jesus in Cleburne, the United States, and the world this year? Write down some notes of what you can do this year to share God's love story with others this year. Keep this sheet of paper in your Bible or Prayer Journal so you can refer to it throughout the year. Let us devote 2021 to the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ and be his witnesses in our hometown, our area, and to the ends of the earth!

Saturday, January 2 - Revelation 21:1-22:7

The promise which Jesus gives us when he ascends to heaven is that he will return one day. His return is Act Four of the Greatest Love Story the world has ever known. It is the end of this story and a new beginning which lasts forever. It is the promise of Act Four which gives us the motivation to stay focused on God during Act Three. Take the time to read our Scripture Passage a few times today. Read it slowly.

Close your eyes and imagine the scene described. Walk the streets; imagine the smells; enjoy the peace.

After you have immersed yourself in this new place, take seriously the words from Revelation 22:6-7. These are the events which will soon take place; he is coming soon! What a marvelous hope for all of God's people. The Story concludes with God coming to dwell with his people. It ends with the best "happily ever after" you can imagine. His happiness, of course, is only for those who are God's people. And that motivates us to do the work of God on this earth today. Go forth today and be his witness to the world; work for the glory of God, so that all can know God's love as he has given it.

We trust in the promise of Revelation 22:20 that "I am coming soon." AMEN! COME, LORD JESUS. Let us do the work of the Lord so that all people can be ready.

Sunday, January 3 - Psalm 76

How glorious and awesome is the God who reigns! How awesome is the God who dwells in Zion! He is a God who is worthy to be praised and worshipped! Let us do that together today.