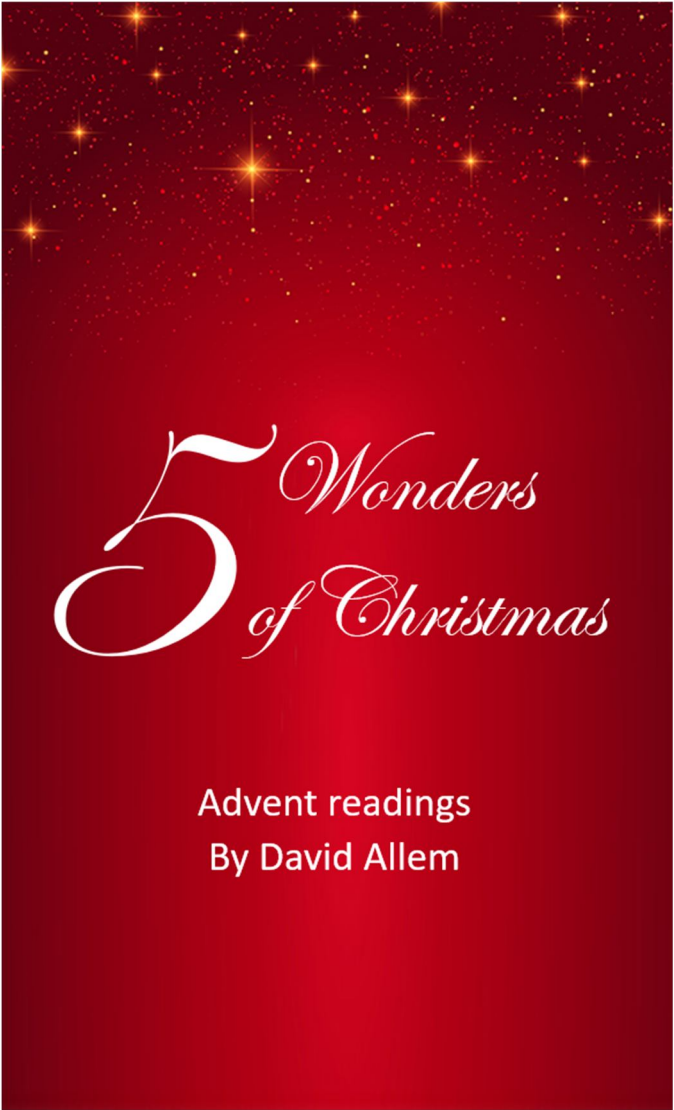




5 Wonders of Christmas

Advent readings
By David Allem



“Mr. Allem, you don’t look anything like 50! You look more like a hard 35.” So a student told me on my 50th birthday. I think he meant it as a compliment. I think. I hope he did.

I’ve celebrated more than 50 birthdays. That means I’ve enjoyed more than 50 Christmases! I’m sure I’ve read the Christmas stories from the Bible close to 1000 times.

You may have read the story of the birth of the Messiah Jesus 1000 times too. We’re fairly familiar with the wonderful story of Jesus birthday.

But I gotta tell you. I still have a lot of questions about the first Christmas. I wonder a lot about certain things. Maybe you do too. Let me share my top five “I Wonders” of Christmas.

Each “Wonder” is accompanied by a short Bible reading and a prayer. I encourage you to steal the little prayer for yourself.

Five wonders – Five readings – Five prayers -
Five minutes. You can do this! Look at your life.
You need this. I need it. Let's begin.

Here's the Christmas story. Now don't skim it because you think you know it already. Let the sights and sounds and smells of every scene linger for a few moments as you take it in – once again.

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 their 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 guest room available for them.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

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." So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.

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. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.

The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

Luke 2:1-20

Now it's time to wonder.



1

**If the first advent of Christ happened today
instead of 2000 years ago, what would
it look like? I wonder....**

His parents would still be in high school. They'd arrive to town in a beat-up Datson not a donkey. Every Best Western and Quality Inn would be flashing "NO VACANCY" signs. In the last hotel they stop at, the person behind the counter offers a cot and the garage outback.

Surrounded by workbenches and snowblowers, the Messiah is born. The night-shift workers are on a smoking break when the sky brightens, and a booming voice announces His birth. They tell their manager, "Sorry, we gotta go and you'll never believe why!"

6

Can you sense a little more how unusual an entrance this was for the King of Kings in the bustle of Bethlehem? If the origin of His story was human, it wouldn't be written this way! It would be in Jerusalem, not a backwater town like Bethlehem. His parents would be famous, not two travelling teenagers.

But this is God's story, God's doing and God's way!

How often we think God ought to do things this way, our way, in a manner that's more suitable for our situation. And He has something else in mind for us. A different storyline.

How often Joseph must have thought, "Really, God? This is the way we must go?"

We can't have the baby at home in Nazareth?
We have to go and register in Bethlehem? My wife must ride 80 miles on a donkey - pregnant?
Are we even going to make it to Bethlehem before her water breaks?

And we don't get a room or a bed. We get a stable and some hay.

Joseph and Mary learned God's way is always best even if at the time it looks the worst. He is faithful in the midst of difficult, unexpected circumstances.

Look at Mary's first response to the news that she would be carrying the Messiah. It would serve her well for the rest of her pregnancy, her parenting and all her future circumstances:

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." And the angel comforted her with these words, "For no word from God will ever fail." Luke 1:37-38

Mary would say that He won't fail you either. Right here and right now, it may look dismal. Looking ahead, it may look mirky. But God has a word for you, a plan for you. And for starts, Mary would say, "Count on His Word. Let's see where this goes. Because no Word from God will ever fail."



Reading

Luke 1:35-38

Prayer

Lord, I come to you with potholes in my plans.
The unexpected curves on my road have taken a
toll. I need You. I need you to lead me in Your
way. And please travel with me. I need Your
company. Give me the heart of Mary who trusted
You without knowing what's around the bend.
“May Your word to me be fulfilled.” Amen.



2

**I wonder if the shepherds did a double-take
when the angel said, “A Savior has been born
TO YOU!”?**

A Savior for shepherds? These men and women worked outside, ate outside, slept outside, moved around daily to find pasture and water. They might have had their own sheep, but most were hired to take care of other people’s sheep. They weren’t wealthy and didn’t move in the popular circles.

But the angel said the Savior was born TO them, FOR them! Standing alongside their fear of this lightning-bright figure, was the astonishment that the Messiah was for them too!

You'd expect God's Son would arrive for the religious people, you know, the ones who went to synagogue every week. You'd expect God's Son to come help solve big problems like world peace.

But the angel said a Savior has been born FOR YOU, you sleep-with-the-sheep marginal outsiders.

God sees the shepherds. He sees the unpopular, the marginalized, the ones scraping to get by, the non-religious.

God sees you, religious or not, attender or not, believer or not. He arrived FOR YOU. A Savior has been born – for you. The shepherds would tell you it's true. The Savior is for you too.

Heaven's brightest came to live, meet and speak with the earth's lowest. And that means hope and love for everybody in between!



Reading

Luke 2:17-18

Prayer

Today, Lord, I lay down my religion, formulas and spiritual score card. I know they can't change me or save me. Only You can. I praise you like the shepherds, that You came for me. Me – with all my hurts, habits, and hangups. Comfort me with the light of Your love. Fill me with the good news so I can become good news to the people I meet. Amen!



3

I wonder if Jesus felt cramped in the manger?

He was wrapped in swaddling cloths and placed in a cattle food trough. That's how the Son of God started His human life on earth. Swaddled.

Before we had kids, I didn't pay attention in the class that taught us how to wrap a newborn. Now I hear you have to wrap them just right to keep their arms tight against their little bodies when they sleep, sort of re-enacting the womb experience. I wrapped my babies like I was wrapping up an extension cord. Same thing, right?

This swaddled, wrapped-up baby in the manger is the One the prophecies said had origins of old, from ancient times.

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

John the disciple tells us that at Christmas the
Word became flesh. When John describes Jesus,
he calls Him “The Word”, God’s fullest
expression of Himself:

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

In the same chapter he says:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word
was with God, and the Word was God. He was
with God in the beginning. Through him all
things were made; without him nothing was
made that has been made.”

“In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” John 1:1-5

Do you understand my question better now?

When the stars were stirred up in space, Jesus was there.

When the formless Earth was shaped and planted, Jesus was there.

When the breath of life was breathed into the first human frame, Jesus was there.

And now, He Himself is in a body, confined to a bassinette of hay.

So, did He feel cramped in this human body, in a barn cave on Planet Earth?

Why did He willingly, painfully, miraculously confine Himself to our human experience?

“Christ Jesus, who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.”

Philippians 2:6-7

Why did He take on human nature – baby, child, teen, teacher, healer and servant? Why?

Because of what happened decades later. Fully God and therefore without sin, He died fully human and therefore our perfect human substitute – so that our wrongness would be atoned, and we could receive His rightness.

“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” 2 Corinthians 5:21

Jesus, was it worth being cramped for a few months? Was it worth confining your Divinity to humanity for a few decades? How would He answer that question? Well, he did – to an old rabbi who was full of questions:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” John 3:16

That’s why He came so humbly, so humanly, so willingly. Because He loves you so much, he gave Himself, His body and flesh, for the forgiveness of sins. So you could live beyond death.

Thank you, Jesus.



Reading

Philippians 2:6-11

Prayer

Jesus, I’m amazed You are the One who made the wood for Your own cradle! And the beam for your own cross. And the stone for Your own tomb. But You overcame them all! Author of Life, I worship You. Amaze me all over again this Christmas! Amen!



4

Now before we get to the fourth wonder, we've been going around for a few weeks now wishing people a Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays. I know of someone who thinks the birth of Christ was anything but merry or happy. So...

I wonder what Satan was thinking on the night of Christmas?

Years ago, when he deceived our first parents in the Garden of Eden, God told him:

He will crush your head,
and you will strike his heel." Genesis 3:15

"You will strike the Messiah's heel, but He will crush your head." This means when the angels

announced Christ's birth, they also announced Satan's head-crusher. Whoa!

A few months after Christmas, the Enemy of all that is good, inflamed King Herod with anger and fear. Herod was the one who ordered all boys two years old and younger to be killed in his jurisdiction which included Bethlehem. He heard of this child king and wanted no competitors to the throne.

In the desert, he tempted Jesus to doubt His heavenly Father and go off-mission. "There must be some way to accomplish Your mission without dying."

He tried to get Him to give up on His mission in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Jesus stayed true to His Father and His mission and did die - but not because He lost; He died in order to win! He destroyed Satan's best weapon against you and me and all humanity. Christ destroyed death. And the fear of it.

“God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.” Colossians 2:13-15.

Satan wasn't merry or happy at Christmas. He was furious! But we know, with the entrance of Jesus the head-crusher, he was finished.



Reading

Isaiah 9:6-9

Prayer

Lord, thank You for coming - gentle Lamb in a manger. Don't allow me to keep you in the manger though. Open my eyes to your second advent when You come as Lion and King – bringing justice and lasting peace. Word of God, Word made flesh, speak Your peace and Your victory over me. Amen.



5

I wonder if the angels were disappointed the night after Christ's birth?

Why? Because after their hillside concert with the shepherds, they went back through heaven's door. Silence. Concert over.

What an amazing night that was! First one angel speaks, while thousands of others were on cue, backstage waiting to flood through Heaven's portal. The cue was given, and the sky was on fire with angelic light and joyful sounds – an ethereal expression of happiness for this moment in God's loving plan for humanity's rescue!

And just like that, darkness once again, a very silent night and breathless shepherds with ringing ears.

Why didn't the Father schedule repeat performances every night? After all, this is the birth of the Son of God! Do angels think this way?

The apostle Peter tells us that the angels don't know everything the Father is doing. But they DO wonder:

“It was revealed to [the prophets] that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things.” 1 Peter 1:12

The angels try to comprehend the magnitude and the wonder of the good news. So why not more nightly celebrations?

Jesus' purpose on His first arrival was to be the humble servant, the loving healer. Not a political revolutionary or conquering King. Not on His first arrival. To save humanity, he aimed for the

heart. Not recognition or power or position. He is after our hearts.

Now, the angels are still celebrating, just not nightly in the skies above earth. In fact, they are celebrating - daily. How is that? Well...

Jesus tells a story about the lost and found. A shepherd who finds a lost lamb, a widow who finds a lost coin, and a father who welcomes back a lost son. In each case, an invitation is offered to celebrate for what was lost is now found. And we discover this amazing truth:

[Jesus said] “In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” Luke 15:10

That was an amazing angelic concert on Christmas night. They'll be more concerts in the future. But there are daily concerts among the angels every day every time one person turns around from going their own way, trying to find peace their way, trying to erase shame on their own.

When one person turns around and says, God I am done. I am lost. Rescue me. Find me. That's when the singing begins among the angels. Again.

If that's you today, right now - there's a concert scheduled for you in heaven. The angels still sing, and they'll sing for you when you turn – lost but found by the good shepherd Jesus.



Reading

Luke 2:8-15

Prayer

Lord, I must confess – many days I only see this old earth from down here. And it's pretty depressing. Lift me up to see this dark world from where angels stand. Shining brightly in the dark, singing the song of rescue and goodwill. Bring me your peace and light. Make me a willing instrument of Your peace and a smiling light in the darkness. Amen.



The next time you say Merry Christmas, pause and remember why it's merry, why there is such joy. It's because God came near. And He is near now, right now as you read. My prayer for you is that you will know...

...like Mary, that God's Word never fails.

...like the shepherds, He loves you – that's why He came. The good news is **FOR YOU** no matter your background or mistakes.

I pray you will find that Your greatest Enemy is defeated...

...and the angels still sing, every day, and I pray that they're singing for you.

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