

Where Christmas Happens

On the Unexpected Journey

At the Doorstep of Heaven

In the Barn of the Ordinary

At the End of the Road



In the middle of a hot summer in the backcountry of India, under the roof of a grass hut, sitting cross-legged on a dirt floor, Christmas happened. I was nineteen years old.

My friends spoke English. Our hosts spoke only an Indian dialect. A single dangling light bulb lit a blanket on the floor – our Christmas table.

Spread across the colorful mat were food items unrecognizable to my American eyes. Our translator told us that our hosts prepared their Christmas meal for us – in July!

We were blessed with tasty pastries and other dishes I couldn't possibly describe. But most of all, we were blessed with genuine prayers whose only words we understood were our names.

These dear people, brothers and sisters in Christ, prayed blessings on us at a Christmas meal on their single-room dirt floor in July.

It's a Christmas I've never forgotten. On the opposite side of the world. Warm hearts, wide smiles and a Spirit of love wrapped around each person. It made me believe that Christmas could happen any day anywhere at any time.

Where Christmas Happens ~ On the Unexpected Journey

If you were reading a map, and you saw a location named, “Death Canyon”, how would you react?

I said, “Let’s go - there!” Janice and I and our friends, Phil and Laurel, were entering the Grand Teton National Park in our all-wheel drive rental car and we headed for Death Canyon. The blacktop road from the visitors’ center was about 2 miles long. Then it turned to gravel. Then to dirt. That’s when we started seeing signs that said “4-wheel drive only beyond this point.” All wheel drive – 4-wheel drive – same thing, right? I was driving and the road didn’t seem that bad. So we kept going. The potholes started soon thereafter and then the craters appeared.

You know how in the traditional Christmas story, there were three wise men? Well, in our car there were two wise women and one wise man and then there was me. They recommended stopping and hiking in. I said, “Just a little further.” That’s when we bottomed out. Flat tire.

No big deal. Change the tire. We open the trunk to find no spare tire. Just a tube of “Fix-a-flat” and a mini air compressor. No problem. Except the tire tore on the sidewall. Fix a flat won’t fix that.

To make a long story a little longer, it was blazing hot and we had no cell signal. We couldn’t call for help. The women started walking back while Phil and I did some problem

solving. Eventually, we figured we could pump up the tire and travel about 300 yards before the tire went flat again.

So that's what we did - about 8 or 9 times. I would pump up the tire with the compressor, jump in the car and Phil would drive. My head was out of the window looking and listening to the tire go pst pst pst and declaring the tire flat again.

We made it back safe and sound, but we never made it to Death Canyon. We didn't have to – I think for four hours, we lived it.

Our plan was to hike in Death Canyon. Things did not go according to plan. Emotions ran the gamut as you would expect – anger, confusion, disappointment, helplessness, embarrassment – and that was just me!

It wasn't funny going through it AND keeping the right attitude was, to say the least, difficult.

As we journey on the road of life, we face bumps, where the road gives way, where plans fall through, where there is no plan, or when everything stops because of adversity or tragedy.

- The medical report you didn't expect
- The accident you didn't see coming
- The job terminated
- Having a baby
- Losing a baby
- Needing to move
- Having to wait, and wait some more

The parents of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, knew about curves in the road. In fact, the Christmas story is a story with unexpected events and one flat tire after another. Let's join the journey of Mary and Joseph as we explore how to deal with the unplanned, how to move ahead with unanswered questions and still find Christmas on the unexpected journey.

How about the well-known journey of Mary and Joseph?

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. Luke 2:1-7

Nearing the end of her pregnancy, the couple were required by law to travel to their ancestral home to register for the census.

Did Mary And Joseph have an idea of how the birth was to happen? Who would come visit? What signs and wonders would announce the King of Heaven and Earth? No, not at all.

They only knew that God said they were carrying the Messiah. The road map of how it was all to transpire was unavailable to them.

Their journey was unplanned. It came as a decree from Rome not from God. A roman emperor made a decree that set things in motion for a very pregnant couple.

Once Jesus was born, think of the questions that arose. How will we support ourselves? Where will we live because we can't travel back to Nazareth with a newborn?

This was not in the plan. Have you ever heard yourself saying that? I have. When I think about it, isn't much of life a ping pong match of unplanned occurrences that happen in the middle of our well-laid out plans? Like Joseph and Mary, we have His promises, but the current plan doesn't really match His promise. Our journey seems off the plan.

I got a call from the hospital. What I expected was an exuberant announcement from my son about the birth of our first grandchild. Instead, in hushed and panicked words, I learned my grandson wasn't breathing when he arrived and most of his organs weren't working either. For ten days, he lived in a glass box with instruments and IVs hooked up to him as we prayed.

Today, he is rowdy four-year old who loves to wrestle with PaPa. His kidneys were the last to get an all-clear signal from

the doctors and he is functioning as any little boy would – trucks, tackles and tantrums.

But that first year was not according to plan. Especially since it was during COVID. I couldn't kiss him for his first six months!

Not how his arrival was planned. Very scary and prayer-filled.

Mary and Joseph's journey was more than unplanned. **Their journey was uncomfortable.**

Mary was clearly nearing the end of her pregnancy. The women reading right now who have had children: you certainly know what those last few weeks were like. Sleeping is difficult. The extra baby weight tires you out. Aches and pains pop out.

Do you realize it is entirely possible that Mary was in pain while they searched for lodging in a crowded Bethlehem?

And poor Joseph. Trying to keep her comfortable, at the mercy of the already crowded town.

It's when we are uncomfortable that our questions regarding God's goodness arise. It's when we are in pain and waiting for it to stop that we struggle with understanding God's care.

As a couple, I imagine their nerves were shot, their feet were sore and patience was in low supply.

Add to their situation: **their journey was unsafe.**

Certainly less safe than staying at home to have the baby! With family, and midwives they knew by name. Where Joseph had work to support his wife and baby.

This trip by foot is between 32-35 hours. Add sleeping and eating and finding lodging. It's a multi-day trip. They were at risk from robbers and swindlers. Remember, they were a very young couple on the road and very pregnant.

This was NOT in the plan, surely uncomfortable and dangerous. Where is the God of promise in this journey?

Well, it was in the middle of the unplanned, the uncomfortable and the unsafe, that Christmas happens. And this can be true for you too. In the middle of a hard journey of confusion and questions, of problems and pain, Christmas can happen for you.

I want you to think of the depth of their faith. For Mary and Joseph to put one step in front of the other, to complete this unplanned, uncomfortable and unsafe journey, it took a true depth of trust. A simple but strong faith in a God who knows.

What did they know? What could they count on? What had they come to experience with God?

God's timing is impeccable.

What we see as unplanned is already planned by God. And His timing is perfect.

But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. Galatians 4:4-5

It was a set time in history. A perfect time from God's sovereign perspective. What seems to us as untimely, is perfect timing to our Loving Heavenly Father.

Did you know that the Roman Empire during Christ's life was at peace? The Romans defeated the Greeks and had no real adversaries at the time of Jesus' birth.

Though the Greeks were defeated politically, their language was nearly universal throughout the empire. Why is that important? What language was the NT written in? Greek. Everyman's language.

Why is that significant? When God's story about His Son began, the telling of the story travelled fast and far because God prepared the world for its transmission - in Greek.

Also, don't miss this point. To prepare the way for Christmas, God used a secular, I would even say pagan, government dictator to move the Messiah's guardians from Nazareth to

Bethlehem in order to fulfill His Word. The prophecy of a Bethlehem birth was made 800 years prior to their trip to Bethlehem.

God supersedes and even uses government officials and decisions to orchestrate His timing for His purposes.

The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, Like the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes. Proverbs 21:1

When you're struggling with God's timing, know not only that His timing is perfect but also that He is at work in all types of places and persons that you don't even know about - to work out His plan for you.

Mary and Joseph knew the story of God working out the history of their people. It's in the Old Testament. Talk about twists and turns! And now, on this unplanned journey, they watch as He works out His plan for them, their new baby and their new future.

I place my best-laid plans in Your hands, Lord. Because I know You want to work out something good – even better than what I might have planned. Teach me to trust Your timing, to roll with the unexpected. Convince me that nothing is unexpected to You. And because of that, I can be at peace. Amen.



The second truth Mary and Joseph discovered on this unexpected journey is that **God's purpose is infallible.**

They received specific words from God that they could count on, that they could trust. How important those words were when they prepared to leave their home - packing and pregnant. How important those words were when Mary's labor pains began, and they still had no place to stay in Bethlehem.

How important those words from God became when the king of Kings was born far from home, not in a comfortable bed but in scratchy straw, not surrounded with family but with cattle instead. "God, what are you doing? This can't possibly be what you were planning!"

I'm reminded of this OT conversation:

You turn things upside down, as if the potter were thought to be like the clay! Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, "You did not make me"? Can the pot say to the potter, "You know nothing"? Isaiah 29:16

I'm also reminded of these NT words:

Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.
Philippians 1:6

When uncertainty infiltrates our lives, our arguments and protests toward God melt away when we acknowledge that He is working. He is carrying on His work in us. The work will not be over or complete until the Day of Christ Jesus, the Day when He is revealed.

Researchers tell us that adversity early in life can either decrease a sense of purpose or inspire a sense of purpose. One person may resign to the fact that he is merely a victim of circumstances he cannot change. Another person, while still experiencing adversity, acknowledges that something else is happening behind the scenes. The story isn't over yet.

This is exactly what Mary and Joseph learned, piece by piece. God was forming a new chapter in their lives, as uncomfortable as it was, with all its adversity. God was working behind the scenes with purpose.

Even as the Father was forming His Son in Mary's womb for a grand purpose, He is forming you for a grand purpose. The unplanned is part of the plan to form you! The uncomfortable, if you allow it, is shaping you into a vessel of purpose! You may not see it because of the uncomfortable position you're in. His purpose for you is infallible and guaranteed, right up to the Day of Christ.

It's the difference between saying, "Well, this is another dead end," and saying, "I wonder what's going on behind the scenes?"

Acknowledging His purpose behind the scenes - that's where we find confidence when we are confused. That's where we find peace when we are perplexed. That's where we find hope when we are helpless. Why don't you pray along with the holy couple on their unexpected journey?

God, You know I don't welcome the uncomfortable. Change my heart so I can receive the uncomfortable squeeze of the Potter's hand on my life. Show me Your purpose in the pressure. Thank You for the new chapters and your promise to finish my story with purpose. Amen.



The third truth the couple learned - over and over again - and especially on this journey is that **God's light is inextinguishable.**

No circumstance can snuff it out. No person can douse the light of God. No difficulty can put out His lamp.

I walked into the living room this morning while it was still dark outside. We have our Christmas tree on a timer, and it had just lit up. I realized that the Christmas tree is prettiest in the dark. Because of the lights.

Just because it is dark outside, does not mean that the sun ceases to exist.

Think of this: In Isaiah, God promised His servant will be a light to the Gentiles:

It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.” Isaiah 49:6

Later he predicted that the people living in darkness will see a great light; The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. Isaiah 9:6

The shepherds saw a great light surrounding them. The Magi followed a strange star in the astronomical charts. And Jesus Himself declared,

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” John 8:12

Who among you fears the LORD and obeys the word of his servant? Let the one who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the LORD and rely on their God. Isaiah 50:10

Whatever fog or darkness you encounter, trust in the name of the LORD and rely on Him and you will find light and find your way through the darkness.

Life in Christ is not so much following a map, with certain locations, direct routes and plottable points. Life in Christ is not following a perfect map – it is following a compass. Jesus is our compass.

When the uncertainties come, when the road bends and it seems things are all going sideways, we can't go to God and ask or demand that He show us the entire path. We go to God and say, "Point me in the right direction. Point my heart and my attitudes in the right direction. You are my compass. I will follow You through this uncertainty, this unexpected turn."

What does the Word say about Mary, lying exhausted in the stable?

Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. Luke 2:19

Treasure these three truths when life turns sideways on you:

Know His timing is impeccable, and you'll find patience.
Know His purpose is infallible, and you'll find confidence.
Know His light is inextinguishable, and you'll find hope.

Three types of people are reading these words today.

#1 You may be a person where everything is going as planned right now. And that's great! Praise God! Just know, an unexpected event is coming. Be ready. Treasure these truths so that you are ready.

#2 You may be a person on the tail end of very hard times, and you are exhausted, but you can look back to see God had your back. He was with you all the way, even when it didn't feel like He was. Rejoice in Him and find rest.

#3 You may be a person in the middle of a difficult journey. If your next step is unknown, then take this step: Pray. Your next step in your journey is prayer and I invite you to take that step today. And watch God show up.

Whatever you're going through, God is not late. His timing is perfect. Whatever you're going through, God has not forgotten you. His purpose for you still stands. Whatever you're going through, the darkness is not God's doing. He is your light to find your way through.

Lord, in my confusion, I give You my trust. I want to see Your grace but the unexpected and difficult cloud my vision. Clear it for me by Your Spirit so I can praise you in the storm as well as I do in the light of day. Amen.

Where Christmas Happens ~ On the Doorstep of Heaven

Well, the Christmas movies have begun! Personally, I love it. I love this time of the year. I even love watching the same movies for the 100th time. Christmas movies all have that one magical moment, that pivotal point when Christmas happens.

In the Grinch, that moment occurs when at the top of Mount Crumpet, the stolen sleigh of toys is about to fall and hearing all of Whoville singing joyfully without any toys, the questioned is asked,

“And what happened then? Well, in Whoville they say that the Grinch's small heart grew three sizes that day! And then the true meaning of Christmas came through,
And the Grinch found the strength of ten Grinches, plus two!
And now that his heart didn't feel quite so tight,
He whizzed with his load through the bright morning light
With a smile to his soul, he descended Mount Crumpet
Cheerily blowing "Who! Who!" on his trumpet.”

That was a magical moment!

Have you seen the movie, “ELF”? Remember when Santa's sleigh was bouncing through Central Park, unable to get airborne because there's not enough Christmas Spirit to fuel his flight? So crowds start singing and when Buddy's real dad finally gets the words out, Santa's sleigh takes off and swoops right over the crowd of carolers and into NYC on his mission

to deliver toys to all the children. That was a magical moment when Christmas happened.

In the classic, “It’s a Wonderful Life,” that moment occurs when George returns home to Mary and Zuzu, grateful he’s alive and reunited with his family. Remember Mary says, “They’re coming, George, they’re coming!” And she drops an empty basket on the table. Neighbors and friends flood the living room and pour into the basket what little cash they have, grateful for the kindness shown to them over the years by George Bailey. And even though he is staring bankruptcy in the face, his brother Harry makes a toast, “To my big brother George, The Richest Man in Town.”

That’s the moment when Christmas happens – and from that moment, in all these movies - from that moment flows joy and peace and happiness.

That’s the way it works in the movies. Does that happen in real life? Are there moments like that in the real world? That’s what draws us to these movies. We hope that the dismal gloom in life can be changed into something wonderful!

Does that happen? Has it happened to you? I am here to tell you, to remind you – that Christmas has happened, it continues to happen and you can see Christmas happen each day. You don’t have to wait for the right season. Or for a movie to be made of your life. And who in their right mind would want that!

If you were asked, “When did Christmas happen?”, I am sure you would point to that dusty smelly stable in Bethlehem. That’s when the God of the Universe, broke through the veil of heaven and landed on earth through the womb of a humble teenage girl. And Christ was born to be one of us, to be a Savior for us. Our glad tidings, our good news.

But in another sense, Christmas had been happening for a long, long time. God had been breaking through the veil of heaven to enter our world, to speak to us since ancient times. Can you think of moments when God entered our world to tell us about Himself, to tell us about Life, its source, its meaning, its destiny?

The Garden and the Sea

In the garden of Eden, there was no veil. It was literally heaven on earth. Man and woman were in perfect harmony with God, with each other and with the world. It truly was Paradise.

What was God saying to us in the Garden – “This is what you are made for. You were made to be with Me.”

Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker. Psalm 95:6

Saint Augustine stated, “You have made us for Yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You.”

Every individual is made in the image of God. God engraves Himself onto each human, leaving an impression that can only be filled and fitted with Himself.

That's why finding fulfillment in anything else – relationships, substances, accomplishment or even entertainment – will always leave us empty. His image in us longs for us to invite His filling.

After the garden, we can fast forward to the new nation of Israel, ferociously pursued by the Egyptians, at a dead-end on the shores of the Red Sea. Here, God breaks through again and enters our world in the sea.

The reaction of the pursued people is classic. “As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified and cried out to the LORD. They said to Moses, ‘Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die?’”

But God was about to open the doors of heaven and step onto the scene.

“Moses answered the people, ‘Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still.’”
Exodus 14:10-14

God broke through the natural with His supernatural hand and worked a miracle. He changed an impending disaster into a resounding victory. The sea parted, the people ran through on dry ground and the waters folded back up just as the enemy was racing in after the people. Complaining and despair turned to worship and celebration!

What was He saying? “I am here to protect you.”

You are made to be with God. It's in your DNA. And He is here to protect you. He's broken the veil between the natural and the supernatural just to tell you this!

You are fitted for friendship with God. Intimate friendship. And it's a friendship God will fight for. What an amazing breakthrough!

God, today I invite you into my life. Fill in Your image that You impressed upon my heart. Make me complete. Thank you for fighting for this moment – redeeming me - so we can be friends. Amen



The Mountain and the Battlefield

In the darkness of the first Christmas morning, God broke through. Centuries earlier, as His people were wandering in confusion and even in rebellion, God broke through. You might remember, He did it on the mountain.

“On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. 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, and the whole mountain trembled violently. As the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and the voice of God answered him.”

Exodus 19:16-19

God broke through in a spectacle of power that overwhelmed the people. It was in that display of His sovereignty and power that He gave them the ten commandments – the truths and values of a Perfect God-honoring society. The way life is to be lived and enjoyed.

He gives the guardrails that guarantee goodness – individually and communally.

Talk about breaking through the veil of heaven! Wow! That must have been intense!

What was God saying on that mountain? “I am here to teach you,” He declares loudly, fiercely, powerfully.

Before we go further, I want you to notice something. In every situation I’ve mentioned, in biblical history and even today - in every situation - God initiates, God descends, God reaches out to us. Why? Because there is no way we can navigate this chasm between heaven and earth, between God and us. We cannot break through the veil. We cannot build a stairway to heaven and open its door.

How could the finite perceive or pierce the veil of the infinite?

Our sin leaves us inadequate, powerless to reach up and break through. The letter to the early Roman Christians says we literally “fall short”.

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Romans 3:23

No matter how hard I try, I cannot leap over the Grand Canyon from the North Rim to the South Rim. The chasm is too great.

So is the chasm between a Perfect, Holy God and me – definitely imperfect and less-than-holy. My efforts would always fall short.

So, God must move toward us. God must reach out to us. It's as if, when He wants to enter our world, he moves the doorstep of Heaven toward Earth. We can't get to the door of Heaven because of our sin. So, in His great love, He moves the doorstep of Heaven to us.

That's exactly what happened on the mountain. The doorstep of heaven moved and opened wide! It happens again on a battlefield where all hope is lost.

Against overwhelming odds, a prophet speaks with the Spirit of the Lord, "Listen, King Jehoshaphat and all who live in Judah and Jerusalem! This is what the LORD says to you: 'Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not yours, but God's.'"

"...You will not have to fight this battle. Take up your positions; stand firm and see the deliverance the LORD will give you, Judah and Jerusalem. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Go out to face them tomorrow, and the LORD will be with you."

The next day, the army and the worship team approached the edge of the cliff to look over the battlefield and freaked out about what they saw.

“When the men of Judah came to the place that overlooks the desert and looked toward the vast army, they saw only dead bodies lying on the ground; no one had escaped.”

2 Chronicles 20:20-24

God sent confusion and animosity into the coalition bent on destroying His people. They turned on each other and destroyed each other.

What was God saying when He moved Heaven’s door onto the battlefield that day? God declares, “I am here to fight for you.”

Are you facing a battle today? Can God bring the door of heaven to your battle today? I believe He can and I believe He wants to – just for you!

You see, there have been many times when God brings heaven’s doorway close to earth, close to us. And when He opens the door, He says,

“You were made to be with Me.”

“I am here to protect you.”

“I am here to teach you.”

“I am here to fight for you.”

Maybe you need to see that door open right where you are.
The battle you're facing is intense and the odds are against you.

Remember what God's been saying through the years when Heaven's door opens onto the scene. Maybe you also need to pray for a friend who is in the battle right now. Remind them what God is saying.

God, remind us in our battles that You are our closest Friend. Comfort, please. Tell us again what You're trying to teach us and protect us from the Enemy. You are our Warrior-Friend. Fight for us we pray. Amen



He opens Heaven's door and shouts,

"You were made to be with Me."

"I am here to protect you."

"I am here to teach you."

"I am here to fight for you."

In this season, we remember this one night, in the dark hills surrounding Bethlehem. No streetlights, no roads – only trails through the meadows. Sleepy sheep and lonely shepherds. Both sheep and shepherd smell like life lived outdoors, far away from everybody else.

And then - another moment when God broke through! Isn't that exactly what happened in Luke Chapter 2 in the windswept fields on the outskirts of Bethlehem?

The Fields and the Manger

“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.”

Up until this moment, it was a normal boring lonely quiet night – but God moves Heaven's doorstep toward the small campfire and God's messenger, an angel, steps through. And Heaven's glory like a blinding spotlight blanketed them and scared them.

“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...”

The door opens wider and wider and a stream of angelic beings rush through, joining the first. And together they flood the sky with glory and light and the shepherds are thrown to the ground in fearful wonder and amazement.

They look up through the blinding light and witness a crowded night sky. Angels everywhere! To the north, south, east and west!

“...praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

What a sight! What a sound! Then the angels left them, went back to heaven and closed the door.

“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.’” Luke 2:8-15

What did God say in this moment? “I am here to save you.” A savior has been born to you in that town right over that hill.

The shepherds knew they needed rescuing. Stuck in a job with no social mobility. Considered unclean, they couldn’t worship in synagogue. Paying too much tax to a Roman official who couldn’t care less.

And in their hearts. They knew they didn’t measure up to the greatness and the power of the God they saw every day in creation.

To hear a Savior was born and **FOR THEM**? This was a sight to see!

“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 2:16-20

What did God say at the manger? Simply and powerfully – “I am here.”

The doorstep of Heaven moved from flocks and fields to the straw and the stable and God proclaims in baby Jesus – I AM HERE! Certainly this is the ultimate entrance, when God takes on flesh and physically enters our world!

The letter to the Hebrews says:

“In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways...”

Like in the Garden and in the Sea, on the Mountain, on the Battlefield and in the Fields.

“But in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and

the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. Hebrews 1:1-3

His was the only birth of a Person who already existed according 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.”

His was the only birth to a woman unimpregnated by a man.

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

His was the only birth to a child named, “God” and “Everlasting”.

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” Isaiah 9:6

What an amazing entrance of God into our world! Certainly, THIS was the most amazing entrance God has ever made to our world. Well, I’m going to say something that may sound radical to you or even out of place at Christmas time.

This manger was not the ultimate entrance of God. It is not God's biggest break through.

Yes, God took on flesh in the person of Jesus! And yes, hundreds of prophecies were fulfilled in that moment - but it's not God's biggest Christmas entrance.

What do you mean, Dave? The purpose of Christ's birth goes beyond prophetic proof, beyond incarnation, beyond the amazement and wonder, the glory and light of the shepherds.

Jesus was born so that you could be born – not physically, but spiritually born. And that friends, is the **ULTIMATE** entrance. When God breaks through your heart - and enters **YOU!**

The birth of Jesus makes possible your second birth.

Think about this: You were born physically into this life, this physical life. Prior to your physical birth and your appearance on the world stage, you did not understand the physical world because you were in utero. You only heard muffled sounds but couldn't understand them.

Then, you were born and the undiscernible sounds began to make sense – the sound of your mother's voice was clearer, the smells and the touch of the world around you set your mind on fire with learning and discoveries. To understand and enjoy the physical world, you must be physically born.

To enter into and enjoy the spiritual world, you need a second birth. Until then, your spiritual understanding is dark and muffled and undiscernible. And Jesus' birth makes your spiritual birth possible.

“Jesus replied, ‘Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.’ ‘How can someone be born when they are old?’ Nicodemus asked. ‘Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!’ Jesus answered, ‘Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying you must be born again.’” John 3:3-7

Christmas happened so that Christmas would keep on happening. When God makes His entrance into your heart – and His Spirit marries your spirit, He's doesn't walk through the door of Heaven, mingle a bit and then leave until a later date.

God's not using the front door anymore. He's living inside. When you hear His voice, it's not from outside – it's from the kitchen, or the living room. It's from inside!

Leonard Ravenhill tells the story of a Chinese scholar who was given a New Testament. He already read the Quran, the Vedas and all the other sacred books.

After he read the New Testament, he was asked, “What’s the most amazing thing you read?”

The giver of the New Testament thought the scholar would say something about Jesus born of a virgin, living, dying and physically rising from the dead.

Instead of that the scholar said, “Do you know in Ephesians 2 it says that you used to follow the ways of this world. And at the end of the chapter it says now you’ve become the habitation of God, ‘a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit.’” (Ephesians 2:22)

He said, “Sir, does your God live inside of you? If so, that’s the most amazing thing I’ve ever read! I’ve read the Quran. I’ve read the Vedas. I’ve read all the sacred books. But I never read where a man’s God comes and makes the man His habitation, the dwelling of God.”

When a person is reborn spiritually, God moves in. He’s not walking beside – by His Spirit He walks inside. Let me try to illustrate all of this.

Imagine a white rope attached to the ceiling of your room. It’s up high so we let it represent Heaven, God’s dwelling place.

Imagine a black rope on your floor. It represents our world. Remember, we cannot reach God. So these two ropes are parallel.

Because He loves us, God reaches down to us and occasionally intersects our world like in the Garden, the Sea, the Battle and the Fields.

The ropes touched in those moments.

And on Christmas day, in the manger of Bethlehem, God became flesh, one of us and walked through our world. The ropes touched for 33 years as Jesus taught and healed, died on the cross and ascended into heaven after the resurrection.

But the greater moment I'm pointing you to is here. A personal Christmas-moment begins when a person realizes the chasm is impassable for her because of her sin. So, she trusts Jesus to forgive her sin and enter her life. That's when Christmas happens – not just Jesus entering this world; but Jesus entering her heart and her life.

And from that day, Jesus' death becomes our death, and His life becomes our life. He promises to make His home with us:

“The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them...Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.” John 14:21,23

The white rope of Heaven and the dark rope of our heart intertwine in a forever friendship that has no end. To extend the metaphor a little more, Jesus transforms our dark rope into a blinding white weave so in Him we are clean and we are conformed to His image!

The glad tidings that bring great joy are not simply that Christmas happened – but that Christmas can happen for you. What did the angel tell the shepherds?

For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. Luke 2:11

Unto YOU – A Savior. Has Christmas happened for you? Have you given Christ entrance into your life? To make His home in your heart?

You don't have to clean it up first – after all, He entered the world in a dirty stable. You don't have to get religious – the shepherds weren't. In fact, they weren't allowed inside the Temple. If that is you, let today be the day Christmas truly happens in you.

For others, the good news has become old news. In your heart, the light and glory of Christmas has dimmed. There are lots of reasons this happens. I understand. It's happened to me.

Like the old Christmas movies, you need to go back and watch it again and again and again. We need the story of glad tidings and great joy every day. We need Jesus every day.

We need Him in the family room, the living room, the workshop, our kids' rooms. If you've invited Him to make His home with you, give Him access again to every room. He'll walk you through a transformation of your home. You'll be delighted and grateful for the new look.

My brother was born on December 26. Not a great day for a birthday. Because it was a day after Jesus' birthday. We were in no mood to celebrate our brother's birthday – we had brand new toys to play with.

It was like, “Oh yeah. It IS your birthday - cause yesterday was Christmas. Happy birthday, dude.” I don't think he needed any therapy because of it. My birthday is December 20th. I was lost in the hustle and bustle of Christmas, too. Sadly, my first birthday party with friends wasn't until I was in college.

We both grew to realize there's a day that's more important than the day we were born – it's the day we were spiritually born. Because from that day, from that new birth, each and every day we have the opportunity to experience the glad tidings of great joy as we walk with Jesus and make Him more and more at home in our hearts. That's when Christmas truly happens for each of us.

*Renew in me the excitement that You came. You came near.
And You are here! God-in-the-flesh, born on my planet so I
can be re-born. Befriended, Protected, Taught by You. I am so
grateful. I bow with shepherds in awe of You, my Savior. Send
me like you sent the shepherds to tell my friends what they're
missing – glad tidings or great joy! Amen*



Where Christmas Happens ~ In the Barn of the Ordinary

My first job was on a farm. I worked for Stanley and Esther Barndt. I bailed hay in the field and stacked hay in the barn. I shoveled a lot of - waste material and learned to drive tractors.

I liked it. Now it didn't have the glamour of a McDonald's cashier or washing cars for Bergey's. But I really liked working for Stanley, waiting in the field for hand-delivered iced tea from Esther. I enjoyed working outside. I still enjoy the smell of hay and animals and freshly-turned dirt.

Those are three smells I did not find in the maternity wing in Grand View Hospital where my three boys were born.

However, they permeated the maternity room where Jesus was born.

“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. Luke 2:6-7

Three times the manger, Jesus' bassinet is mentioned. The significance of the manger is its insignificance. The importance of the manger was its ordinariness. It was a barnyard birth for the King of kings. God breathes with human lungs, God sleeps in a make-shift baby blanket, in a box where cattle feed. How ordinary AND extraordinary at the same time.

We've seen that Christmas happens along the unplanned journey when in our uncertainty, we realize the unplanned is actually a piece of God's sovereign plan. We've also learned that Christmas happens at the doorstep of Heaven when God enters our world. Now let's look closely how Christmas happens in the Barn of the Ordinary.

When I use the term barn, don't imagine Jesus' birthplace was like a barn today where only animals stay. In fact, it probably wasn't even stable, like a horse stable today.

Archeologists tell us that many Judean homes were built with the bedrooms upstairs off the ground and the living space and working space on the ground floor. Some were even built into the side of a hill so that the upper room was ground level on the hill and the lower room was ground level at the base of the hill.

The ground floor was the workspace. Often certain animals would be allowed to come into the workspace on harsh evenings because of rainy or cold weather or to keep them from being stolen.

Now why am I telling you this? I want you to realize that Jesus was born into very ordinary circumstances. Into an ordinary environment, in an ordinary manner to an ordinary family. And if you know who Jesus is, this event we celebrate as Christmas is one of the Universe's greatest paradoxes. Finding the extraordinary in the ordinary. Seeing the supernatural in the super simple. The miraculous in the mundane.

I want to show you three ORDINARIES that Jesus makes EXTRAORDINARY. And I want to show you how Jesus' birth can make ordinary generic you into an extraordinary treasure so valuable – that you're worth dying for.

First of all, on that first Christmas, the whole environment was terribly ordinary.

An *extraOrdinary Environment

His was an ordinary environment – not in a palace or birthing room with pillows and clean sheets.

Also, Luke 2:6 implies that they were in Bethlehem for a while before Jesus was born ("while they were there, the days were completed"). The Bible makes no mention of any innkeeper who told them that the inn was full for the night.

The reason we imagine this scenario is because the translators of most English versions have chosen the word "inn" to translate the Greek word καταλυμα (kataluma), which gives modern readers the wrong impression. Jesus used this same Greek word in Luke 22:11 to refer to a "guest room."

This room is now known as the Upper Room—the scene of the Last Supper, the meal that Jesus ate with His disciples the night before His Crucifixion.

The Greek language has a word for hotel or inn. In fact, Luke used it in Luke 10:34, when he wrote about the Good Samaritan who took the beaten man to the "inn" (pandocheion, πανδοχειον) and paid the "innkeeper" (pandochei, πανδοχει, v. 35) to care for the man.

The Bible states that there was no room for them in the "kataluma", which would be better translated, "the guest room".

This is where the ordinary manger comes into the story. Mary likely gave birth to Jesus in the lower level of a crowded house, not around the corner from a hotel with no vacancies. Every nook and cranny of this home was full, and some of the animals gathered in for the night. Looking around, she wrapped Jesus in what was available, strips of cloth and laid Him in the cattle's feed box.

When Jesus was born, Mary would not have wanted to lay her infant on the hard, cold, stone floor. Instead, she had to make due with what was available and the manger proved to be a convenient alternative. The hay was soft, the box was up and off the ground, and the sides tall enough to keep her child safely inside. Painfully ordinary environment.

But if we look closer, this is an Extraordinary environment if we consider the environment from which He came and to which He will return! Look at what He said in the last days of his earthly life:

“I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began. I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me. I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours. All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And glory has come to me through them. I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name... I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them.” John 17:4-11,13

What makes the setting of the manger so extraordinary is the setting from which Jesus came. He came from immense glory at the Father's right hand. How extraordinary the barn was compared to the beauty of Heaven!

Jesus' first bed tells us something about His nature and His purpose. Rather than coming to earth wrapped in fanfare and plush surroundings, the King of Creation and God's own Son was born among animals, his first visitors lowly shepherds from the fields.

This King was humble and ready to meet every person – high status, low status and everywhere in-between. He humbled himself even in His death. Beaten, naked on a cross, a sacrifice for sinners. Three days later, he would rise again, and then return to His Father's side. Once again, seated in power and glory.

Glory to humility to glory again. From a throne of purest light, to a bed of smelly straw. All to reach you and me, living in our mundane. All to bring God's full measure of joy into our lives. "Majesty in the mundane", as Max Lucado once said. Indeed, the stable was extraordinarily ordinary.

Jesus, thank you for leaving the glory and entering my mundane. That You would look at me as so valuable to take that journey amazes me. And humbles me. Pour Your love over me and wash away my protests. Let me taste the fullness of Your joy this season. It's why You came. It's why I bow even now. Amen.



An *extraOrdinary Manner

In Britain, royal babies got the royal treatment. They were born in palaces and castles. Queen Victoria was born in the dining room of Kensington Palace because the staircase that connected the room to the kitchen was convenient for fetching supplies, like hot water.

Princess Margaret was the first royal baby born in Scotland since 1600 when she was born at Glamis Castle. Her sister, Queen Elizabeth II, was born in the London home of her grandparents, an Earl and Countess Elizabeth's son, Prince Charles, was born at Buckingham Palace. That sure beats any birthing room at any hospital I've been in.

But even the rooms my kids were born in were like palaces compared to the ordinary birthplace of our Savior. Straw, stone and dirt floor.

An ordinary birth – born like every girl and every boy was ever born. Through pain, blood and messiness. No special treatment, other than the special treatment we know that you moms give to your newborns. This was the birth of the king of kings with no special treatment.

However, this ordinary birth is actually extraordinary because He existed before He was born.

Jesus is the only person who existed before He was born. Listen to His words when He was confronted by the religious leaders:

“Then Jesus, still teaching in the temple courts, cried out, ‘Yes, you know me, and you know where I am from. I am not here on my own authority, but he who sent me is true. You do not know him, but I know him because I am from him and he sent me’...Jesus said, ‘I am with you for only a short time, and then I am going to the one who sent me. You will look for me, but

you will not find me; and where I am, you cannot come.” John 7:33-34

Jesus is coming and going, arriving and leaving. His opponents were confused.

“Are you greater than our father Abraham? He died, and so did the prophets. Who do you think you are?” Jesus replied, “If I glorify myself, my glory means nothing. My Father, whom you claim as your God, is the one who glorifies me. Though you do not know him, I know him... Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad.”

“You are not yet fifty years old,” they said to him, “and you have seen Abraham!”

“Very truly I tell you,” Jesus answered, “before Abraham was born, I am!” At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds. John 7:28-29, 33-35; 8:53-59

That’s why what seemed like an ordinary way of being born is so extraordinary! And his opponents knew exactly what He was saying. He was claiming to know God as His Father and that He existed before He was born. He claimed He knew Abraham and Abraham couldn’t wait to see this day!

Now I don't claim to know how Jesus came from Heaven, restricted Himself to a human womb and subjected Himself to human joys and sufferings.

I can't explain how he died, breathed again and resurrected with a new body. I can't tell you how He rose into the portal of Heaven and waits there for the right time to return.

But I can worship Him and thank Him for his sacrificial journey to us. And I can eagerly await His return to make all things right and all things new.

You, Jesus, are the One and Only. The One and Only Son of God and the One and Only to exist before You were born. I am in awe. I am almost speechless if it weren't for this praise. You restricted Yourself to bones and flesh to get to me – me. I look forward to my own new body at Your return. I look forward to a new star, the Morning Star and a new day, the Lord's Day when you make all things new. Amen.



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 1:1-4, 14

Jesus was born into...**an *extraOrdinary Family.**

Mary and Joseph were a working-class couple. Mary was young and some traditions say Joseph was older, possibly a widower. We know that he was not around when Jesus began His ministry as an adult. We assume that he died prior to Jesus introduction to the world.

Joseph was a carpenter - someone who made his living, supported his family with his hands. How do we know this? When Jesus began his public ministry, his hometown reception was very cold as his neighbors jeered:

“Isn’t this the carpenter’s son? Isn’t his mother’s name Mary, and aren’t his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas?”
Matthew 13:55

That statement is only half-true. Mary was His mother; but Joseph was His step-dad, not His Father. He had an extraordinary Father.

“But the angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.’” Matthew 1:30-32

In His own words, Jesus said, “Everyone who has heard the Father and learned from him comes to me. No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only he has seen the Father.” John 6:45-46

And Jesus prayed, “Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you.” John 17:1

What appeared ordinary, is in fact the most extraordinary event in human history. The advent of Jesus at Christmas was the most personal and supernatural entrance of God Himself onto the human stage. The story of God is all about God entering our world to reveal Himself. But the advent of Jesus was more than just a display of His power and revelation.

God’s purpose in coming down is greater than just to reveal His glory. He is revealing our desperate need for Him and He is inviting us into relationship, into friendship, into His family.

What He wants for you is **for His advent to be an invite** – an extraordinary invitation to receive Him personally.

“To all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God — children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.” John 1:12-13

His advent is the invite to admit our desperate need for Him and to live in relationship, in friendship with Him. To live in a community of believers – to become more like Him.

When we accept that invitation – the advent invite – it transforms our ordinary days. Knowing Him makes ordinary days into extraordinary days. Being wrapped up in Him

changes the stresses and struggles in our lives. He gives hope and adds strength for the difficulties. He gives depth and meaning to our lives.

Am I worth all that? Are you worth all that? I mean, we are just ordinary, flawed, fickle people.

Jesus stopped for the sick and helpless. He silenced His disciples so He could sit with the children. He encouraged a woman with five broken marriages. He patiently disciplined eleven deserters and one betrayer.

Are you worth it? Most definitely. You're worth dying for, because:

“God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us...” Romans 5:8

His advent is your invite.

Now, quite possibly your experience with Jesus has faded. Like the holidays fade with the march of the calendar. I get it. Disappointments and unanswered questions tempt us to drop Jesus. Difficulties pressure us to give up.

Let this advent be your invite to rediscover the glory and joy of knowing Jesus in the ordinariness of your life. Respond to His invite with a “Yes”, and He will enter into your daily as certain as He entered into our history.

Remember the white rope and the black rope? If you have never accepted His invitation - to braid your life with His, to receive Him by faith and walk through life with Christ - today is the perfect day to begin.

If you've been walking with Christ but your braid has loosened – recommit yourself to Him today. He's waiting and He loves you.

God, we'll never forget your extraordinary grace toward us ordinary people who are so valuable to you – that you gave your Son. Truly, He is the greatest gift of Christmas. Father, You wrapped Him in flesh and blood, offered Him to each of us - the ordinaries. And He raises us up to be dignitaries. For that is what a child of God really is. Thank you. Amen.



Where Christmas Happens ~ At the End of the Road

The road was long and dusty and no longer on our GPS. The sun was fading and we were wondering, “Is this where we’re sleeping tonight?”

A few years ago my wife and I planned an adventure through Utah. Phil and Laurel travelled with us – and wondered with us, “Are we lost?” When we made the last turn, the GPS stopped working and the road wasn’t on the map. We drove to the literal end of the road. We faced a normal looking home and a scrappy barn in the middle of nowhere. Anxiously we approached the porch. I was certain a scrappy dog would soon dart from the barn to attack us!

Thankfully we found a lockbox with keypad attached to the door handle. It was the right place – just way, way, way out of place.

The end of the road can be a scary place to land. Directionless. Maybe loss. At the least, disoriented.

Graduating from high school with no clue what to do with the rest of your life. College, work? What occupation is calling me?

Retirement looming. Excitement, yes. But what to do now? Does anyone still need my help, my expertise, my ministry?

Like a toy that’s lost its luster. On the shelf.

A tool that's no longer needed. It's been improved on, so it too sits on the shelf.

Is there anything waiting for us at the end of the road? Is the only thing at the end of the road – the end?

Two characters of the first Christmas tell us. They tell us that the end of the road can be a culmination of every good thing in life. The end of the road can be a catapult into the greatest joy ever! The end of the road can be the prize, the present – so highly anticipated.

Christmas eve and morning in the Allem house was all about anticipation and imagination. I slept in a bedroom with three of my brothers at one end of the hallway. At the other end was my parents' room.

The anticipation was almost unbearable.

That was true of the very first Christmas as well. But just with a select few who knew the wait was nearly over.

The ones whose ears were tuned in. The ones who were ready to hear from God. The ones who read the prequel in the OT. They were anticipating something fresh, something not-here-but-promised.

But they never imagined this.

What can you imagine at the end of the road?

*Lord, readjust the tuning of my heart so I hear and anticipate
Your work – even at the end of the road. When I feel set aside
or stuck, lift my eyes to see You on the horizon – beckoning.
And will me to follow – anticipating.*



Mary, Elizabeth and their husbands, Joseph and Zachariah, received babies. Mary was very young and Elizabeth too old - and barren. But the babies arrived anyway! Two miracles!

A choir spilling out of Heaven clued in the shepherds.

Mary treasured everything that was said to them from the angels to the shepherds to her cousin Elizabeth and even from a random old man a month after the birth. Such great anticipation.

The anticipation only grew after Jesus was born. What will he be like? How will he bring light to the darkness in the world? How would he fix things? There was so much to look forward to.

The Old Man Simeon

A month after the child Jesus was born, his parents took him to the temple. In the courtyard, they were approached by Simeon. He was old and devout and somehow God had told him he would not die until he saw the Messiah.

That's right. He was going to physically see the Messiah! Talk about anticipation! On this day, God's Spirit moves Simeon to the couple and...

"Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: 'Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation...'"
Luke 2:28-30

He spoke into the young and fragile lives of Mary and Joseph. He spoke hope and wisdom and warning.

Here is Simeon – at the end of his road – probably shuffling his feet, retracing his steps at the temple day after day. Praying and praying. Watching and watching. On this day, he steps onto the celestial stage to play a major part in the story of God. What would he teach you and me about the end of the road?

Simeon learned **the priceless art of waiting**.

Looking back, he had waited for years. How many? We don't know. But I am sure his head was on a swivel as he paced the crowded streets, climbed the courtyard stairs and knelt in prayer at the temple. He would pick up his head and look – "IS he the One?" And his spirit would say, "No. Not him. Not yet."

Not yet. Those words stir up so much frustration in me. How about you?

The kids ask for the hundredth time from the backseat, “Are we there yet?” “Not yet.”

Have we reached our financial goal? Not yet.

Are we getting any snow? Not yet. I love snow.

God promised. Has your prodigal returned? Not yet. Is that prayer for healing, for revival, for wisdom been answered? Not yet.

Now you know what Simeon felt every day. The art of waiting, though, goes beyond just counting the hours. It surpasses the frustration of no word or no movement. Waiting on God takes on faith. A trust that covers the uncertainty like a promise-blanket.

You see the promise is only as good as the promise-maker. Simeon knew the story of God through his people’s history. God is the Promise-Keeper. And so Simeon could wait – not in anxiety but in anticipation.

The prayer today comes from the lyrics of a new song recorded in 2024 by the worship team at Faith Church in Bethlehem (PA). I strongly encourage you to download their song, “The Promises You’ve Sown” by Faith Church Music. The chorus is our prayer today:

*I'll sing before the harvest comes.
I trust the planting has been done.
I'll rest facing toward the sun.
I'll stand in faith in what's to come.
I trust the seed will grow
and I will come to know
the promises You've sown. Amen.*



Simeon tells us that the art of waiting is a two-sided coin. Waiting is one side – and watching is the other. Waiting is resting in God's promises; watching is expecting God's provision. Waiting is praying for God to move; watching is seeing when God moves.

Eight days after the manger birth, Simeon sees God move.

“Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms.”
Luke 2:27

God moved in Simeon. God moved Jesus' parents. And the Holy Spirit lit the fire that drew them toward each other in a holy moment, ordained from ages past!

Old man Simeon scooped up Jesus and praised the Promise-Keeper:

“Sovereign Lord, as You have promised, now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen Your salvation, which You prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to Your people Israel.” Luke 2:29-32

“I’m ready for Heaven!” Simeon said because the Promise-Keeper kept His promise. And the promise is for all races - to experience light, glory, revelation and salvation!

Our world needs them as much as Simeon’s world did. Maybe even more.

Simeon, at the end of his road – satisfied. He literally holds the Promise for the nations in his elderly arms. It was a jubilant day for this old man.

But his road went on a few more steps. And they weren’t easy ones. The Spirit gave him words to deliver to Mary and Joseph about the road ahead of them.

Often I believe those of us nearing the end of our road are given words to deliver to people who have a lot of road in front of them. Our roads are getting narrower and shorter. But so many around us have lots of road to travel yet.

God uses the well-worn and heavily travelled to encourage and caution the newer sojourners.

What did Simeon say to Mary?

“This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

Jesus will stand as a fork in the road. Some will rise and some will fall. Because of His stand, people will oppose Him, revealing their hearts. His life will cause Mary deep pain.

Wow! Simeon's part on the stage of God's story is short and small but profound and powerful! This child will bring light - but for some it will be blinding, not illuminating. He will bring glory – but for some His glory causes envy and jealousy.

Jesus' parents needed to hear both messages to prepare them for their road.

And with that blessing and warning, Simeon exits the stage. His road comes to an end.

Do you believe God has plans for you when you're at the end of the road? Or when you feel like you're at a dead end and nothing is happening?

Maybe this is right where God wants you – to teach you the transforming art of listening.

Waiting and Watching.

Waiting, resting in God's promises.

Watching, expecting God's provision.

Waiting, praying for God to move.

Watching, seeing when God moves.

Learn the art of waiting from the Promise-Keeper. And He will draw you in like Simeon did. He will scoop you up into His arms and bring the Promise close to you.

Simeon will tell you – you can trust Him. Even at the end of a long, long road.

God, I know Your story of rescuing people is a big, grand, century-stretching true-to-life saga! I also acknowledge that You have a part for me in this amazing story. Forgive me for when I sit on the side of the road, thinking I'm out of it. I want to be in it! Instill in me the faith in You, my Promise-Keeper, to move me into the story. To meet the people You have for me. To speak the words You give to me. To wait and watch, all the way to the end of the road. Amen.



Anna the Old Widow

Only three sentences tell her story. This final character in the Christmas story, an 87-year-old widow named Anna.

There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem. Luke 2:36-38

Anna's story begins as a story of **loss and loneliness**.

Married 7 years and her husband dies. A young widow with no means to support herself. The welfare system in her culture was her community of faith. The government was Roman, and she was a Jewish widow.

I am sure at times her loss was unbearable. Her loneliness insufferable. Hope seemed to fade - but we know somehow, she learned to depend on God, to trust his care while on her own.

Christmas brings joy, lots of it. However, the season can also remind us of loss and loneliness.

Janice and I put some flowers on her parents grave this week. And she reminded me of how much her dad loved Christmas. He did all the Christmas shopping. When the kids were little, he would jingle his keys on the front porch and tell the kids he heard Santa's sleigh. It was sad thinking of the Christmastimes he's missed since 2000.

But you know what? This baby changes everything including how we deal with loss and loneliness. This child would remind us 30 years into his adulthood that the grave is not the final chapter. He defeated the power of death and imparted that victory to us, his followers. And to Janice's parents. He changes everything.

Where did Anna find strength and purpose and the stamina to retain her anticipation of what God can do after decades of loss?

We know a few things about her. A few very important things.

She stayed close to the temple. Here she heard the Word of God and met the people of God. Her lifestyle involved fasting and prayer. She worshipped so much that Luke, the chronicler of Christ's birth, said she did it "night and day".

She lost her husband, but she didn't lose her faith.

She became a **Listener** - That's what is meant so often when we encounter the practice of fasting and prayer. Fasting is simply temporarily giving up what we use to sustain our bodies – food – in order to focus on what sustains our spirit – God.

Fasting and prayer is often found in the Bible when people are waiting for an answer from God or for direction from God. And this was Anna's lifestyle. **A lifestyle of listening.**

She was also a prophet, one of several females with the gift of prophecy in the Old and New Testament. It seems her gift was

used in speaking God's word to others (verse 38), not necessarily predicting the future.

So Anna the widow was a Listener **and she spoke for God.**

Can you see her, sitting at the feet of a rabbi listening to him explain the Psalms and Prophets? Can you see her standing in the corner of the courtyard praying alone for God to meet her needs, to give her encouragement to help others, imploring God to fulfill his promise of a hero-redeemer?

Can you see her greeting temple-goers, putting her hand in theirs and encouraging them with a psalm? This was the lifestyle that helped her bear the burden of loss and make a difference with what little she had.

Anna wasn't a first-time caller but she was a longtime listener. 60+ years on her own - but not really on her own. She made sure of that with a lifestyle of listening to God.

How are you at listening? Well, hopefully, right now you're working hard at it.

I'm not a very good listener. At least I'm told I'm not a very good listener.

I've even had friends give me examples of my poor listening.

But I can never remember them because I'm usually not paying attention when they're telling me.

If we can't listen, how can we have a conversation? The same is true in our relationship with God. How much requesting do we do in comparison with listening?

Are you listening to Him today? You're reading this for a reason. It's not an accident that you are here any more than it was an accident that Anna was standing nearby Mary, Joseph and Simeon. Are you listening to what God wants you to hear right now, this Christmas?

I'm telling you – this baby changed everything for the old widow. And He's still changing things today.

So...Anna is in her normal routine. She's in the vicinity of Joseph and Mary at the very moment Simeon was blessing the couple and the baby. She hears Simeon saying, "My eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel." (30-32)

She begins to give thanks. We're not told how – maybe she prayed a blessing like Simeon, maybe she shouted like Elizabeth, maybe she sang a song like Mary.

Regardless, I want you to see this Divine Coincidence! This widow works through her loss and loneliness and - her anticipation of God's work has not faded in over 60 years. As a prophet, she encourages whoever she can while in the temple – breakfast, lunch, dinner or evening. She served God and others.

And one day, she is drawn to a couple, who is speaking with Simeon who she probably knew because he lived in Jerusalem like she did. A flame of excitement flickered inside of her as she watches the three converse.

And when Simeon starts his blessing over the child, Anna makes a beeline for them.

“This is the child of promise, the fulfillment of Scripture, the redeemer we’ve been anticipating for generations!”

This woman who spent her life in the temple, following the ceremonies, saying the prayers, serving others.

She kept the law but knew the law wasn’t enough. She knew it was all pointing to something else, someone else. And now, here - He – is!

And she bursts out with “Thank you, thank you, thank you, God!”

Lord, I echo Anna! Thank you, thank you! Grant me the same faithfulness to follow – even through loss and loneliness. With Your Spirit, soothe the wounds of my loss. With Your Presence, walk with my in my lonely hours. Keep my ears open and attuned to Your unfolding plan for me, especially when it unfolds too slowly for my taste. Amen.



She gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem. Luke 2:38

God had a plan. She knew it. And now she sees it - in the person of Jesus. Let me tell you briefly what that plan involved.

God's plan was accompanied by 300 references to 61 specific prophecies concerning the Messiah's life, including his place of birth, his family of birth, his type of birth. Prophecies written in specifics, centuries before they happened.

BY the way: The probability that only 8 specific prophecies could be fulfilled in one man is 10^{21} . That's 1:1,000,000,000,000,000,000,000! And you think the lottery is a long shot!

God's plan created an intricate system of ceremonies and practices that find their full meaning and fulfillment in the life of this baby she meets.

God's plan brings heaven to earth, places God on the planet in a human body so that Jesus - being fully human, can represent each of us humans before God. And being fully God, he can become a sinless sacrifice for each of us.

AND God's complex, magnificent plan involves an 87-year-old widow, who suffered loss early in life and who NOW becomes a spokeswoman for the King of Kings!

God is like that – complex plans with infinite wisdom that can also meet our personal needs.

She bursts into thank you's to God and then goes from person to person on the temple grounds, energized and excited to tell them of the Redeemer that they've been looking forward to. He is here. He's finally here!

What was the last bit of news you were so excited to hear that you couldn't wait to tell, text, call or email someone?

If Anna had a cell phone, imagine that text blast! Imagine that Facebook post or Instagram.

And here is why we know about her 2000 years later. This is her legacy.

How beautiful on the mountains
are the feet of those who bring good news,
who proclaim peace,
who bring good tidings,
who proclaim salvation...
for the LORD has comforted his people,
he has redeemed Jerusalem.
Isaiah 52:7

The Lord who redeems. We know what redemption means. In the movie Braveheart, William Wallace redeemed Scotland so the country could be free from the tyranny of England. Rosa Parks experienced redemption in her fight to free her people from discrimination.

We know what redemption looks like. Anna acknowledges that Jesus redeems the people of Israel, represented by its capital Jerusalem and Simeon quotes the Old Testament that says his redemption extends to the Gentiles too!

Jesus redeems us from ourselves, from our self-centeredness, from our inability to reach God on our own merit. Anna runs through the temple courtyard pointing to the Lord who redeems. I'll bet for the rest of her days, this was her to-do list.

We don't know how long Anna lived after meeting Jesus. But her legacy lives on.

My friends, I'm telling you what Anna told everyone she could find who would listen – “He is here!” He is here.

Heaven's door is open now! Can you hear His voice:

“You were made to be with Me.”

“I am here to protect you.”

“I am here to teach you.”

“I am here to fight for you.”

He's ready to journey with you even when - especially when – you fell it's unplanned, uncomfortable or unsafe. His timing is impeccable, His light indistinguishable!

If you listen to God's word today, you will find that Jesus fills every empty part of you. Loss, loneliness, discontent, brokenness. The end of the road turns into a new beginning.

If you put yourself in a posture of listening, and make it a lifestyle practice, you will meet Him. He will lead you and He will fill you.

Do you have a relationship with Him? Without Him not only is your Christmas incomplete, but your life is as well.

2000 years ago. It all happened in a moment. God became flesh. Right now, you are holding a moment in your hands, a moment in your heart. What will you and Jesus do with this moment?

God, make me run with the shepherds to tell others how amazing you are. Loosen my tongue as you did with Zechariah, so I can tell how great you are. And, like Anna, help me listen better so I can know you better and thank you for your redemption. Carry my burden of loss and loneliness so I can tell of your grace and your companionship in my heart. Open the door of the stable so I can meet You today and every day forward. Amen.



Acknowledgements

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