

# *Simply* Christmas: Week One

## First Sunday of Advent



Christmas is coming. Already I am tensed and don't even want to look at the calendar. So much to do to get ready.

Or is there? Perhaps we're missing something here.

Christmas came to a stable, a straw-strewn and animal-bedded stable. If it started in a stable, how complicated should Christmas be?

Have we forgotten that everything special about that night? God added angels, a shepherd's visit, and God in the flesh as a newborn.

I wonder what would happen in our hearts and homes if we returned to a *stable* kind of Christmas? I don't mean bring in straw and animals. What if we emphasized the Christmas God already gave us instead of the Christmas our culture pushes? What if we move into Christmas with the goal to make it *simply* Christmas and keep the integrity of the first story.

Here's the warning: If we come away from December tired, cranky, and broke, we've misused Christmas in the worst way.

Don't get nervous. I'm not suggesting you can't decorate, exchange gifts, or enjoy some activities that create a fun and focused canvas God can use to bring Christmas to our hearts and homes. However, maybe it's time to rethink some things that take more out of us than they give back.

Let's remember Joseph, a carpenter minding his business when God interrupted everything normal to share something outrageously profound.

Let's remember Mary, who probably wouldn't have been noticed for anything special before God recruited her for an assignment that would change her life and everyone who came to know her son.

Let's remember that the night was ordinary until the angels appeared to shepherds and sent them on a mission to find a baby in a stable.

Let's remember Eastern travelers who tracked a star that no one else noticed.

Let's remember why this simple night changed everything for us and make every effort not to let any tradition or activity sidetrack us from celebrating the simple truth: *God loved us so much that He refused to make it hard to find Him.*

We need to come to this first Sunday in Advent remembering that if Jesus came to a stable to change the world, what might happen if we let Him come to us the way He wants. Maybe if we focus *simply* on what God did that first Christmas through simple people, in a messy stable, and a broken, mixed up world; maybe we'll have Christmas so fresh and new that it will take our breath away. Perhaps it will make us new pilgrims to the stable where we will bow in simple wonder at what God did.

Advent is our opportunity to let the first story of Christmas teach our hearts the simple, timeless truth of obedience, humility, and the journeys that change our lives. Our hearts need this Christmas to take us deeper than decorations and parties can. So whether you need a Quiet Circle at the beginning of the day to hear from Jesus or you think it's time for changes and you want to make the right ones, make this December, *Simply Christmas*. Remember the One who came to rescue us from ourselves and overthinking. He wants this Christmas to do for our hearts what we've tried to do all these years: bring His light into our world in such an unmistakable way that Christmas leaves us awe-struck and hopeful.

Remember, Christmas started in a stable so that we would know that Jesus can come anywhere we give him room. But when He comes, that's when the real Spirit of Christmas begins!

## **Simply Christmas Strategy No. 1**

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Take time to talk with family. Let each in your household name at least 2 activities or events that will make their Christmas complete. Make a list of them. Schedule them on your calendar. This list becomes your priority.

Do this even if you live alone. Make the same list of 3-5 activities or events that you want to make sure happen as a part of your Christmas.



## **Monday: This is How it Happened**

*This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. Matthew 1:18*

When Matthew begins his account of Jesus' birth, he begins with the simple facts. He doesn't embellish it with details. But look at the facts he chose to begin with: a pledge of marriage, a pregnant fiancé, a righteous man. Right there is a story we tell too quickly. Everything a young couple had planned was torn from their dreams. Whatever they expected or hoped for; none of it would be theirs. Instead, there were questions without answers. There were whispers and accusations. Sometimes I think we too easily substitute the end of the story for how it began with these two simple young people.

And yet, it makes the story more compelling to know how they responded to God, giving up expectations and convenience to obey what they could not completely understand.

What are your expectations about this season? What do you expect of yourself? Perhaps the biggest gift God gives us from the very beginning is to relieve us of expectations that do not bring His peace and joy. Are we willing to follow His lead?

### **Simply Christmas Strategy No. 2**

List expectations you have for yourself this Christmas. Let God review them and tell you what He does not expect. Then, cross off any attitude or activity that He doesn't expect or revise it so that it leads you to more gift than burden.



## **Tuesday:        The Right Choice**

*Because Joseph . . . was a righteous man . . . Matthew 1:19*

Righteousness is a big word that covers everything God calls right. This can be different from what seems right to us. God's rightness is a fulcrum for all the balance we long for in this world and in our personal lives. For Matthew to call Joseph righteous did not mean Joseph was perfect. Joseph's heart leaned toward everything God said was right even when it didn't make sense or fit what the people in his world expected.

Do we cave to cultural expectations instead of God's balanced rightness? "Lean not on your own understanding" Proverbs 3:6 tells us. Why? Because it will get us into trouble. Because it will skew things the wrong way.

Joseph leaned into God's perspective and kept leaning. Where do you lean today as you think about Christmas?

### **Simply Christmas Strategy No. 3**

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Consider carefully what seasonal addition you bring out first. Use it to declare which way you are leaning this Christmas. Suggestions might include: A nativity scene, an Advent wreath, a special candle you light every night leading to Christmas. Make it special. Announce it. Start Christmas with meaning.



## Wednesday: When God Shows Up

*The Lord appeared to him in a dream . . . Matthew 1:20*

Joseph was trying to do the right thing by dissolving the promised marriage to Mary quietly. Then God showed up to tell him something different. When what we think is right becomes what God says is wrong, how do you respond? Joseph listened. The message from the angel through a dream confirmed everything Mary had already told him. Did it make sense? It didn't have to. Joseph only knew that God came to him in a dream. He kept leaning into God as his best direction.

If you voiced your greatest desire for this Christmas, wouldn't it be that God would show up somewhere in an unmistakable encounter for you and your family? I mean, if you're going to go to all the trouble to decorate, cook, and shop; don't you want a high return on all that effort? God always accepts every invitation we make of Him. Invite Him more and see what happens when God shows up!

### **Simply Christmas Strategy No. 4**

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Write out your invitation to God for this Christmas. Slip it into your Bible where Matthew tells his story. Underline the words from 1:20 *the Lord appeared*. Keep thinking about your invitation during everything you do to prepare for this season. It will either change *what* you do or *how* you do it. It won't leave you the same.



## **Thursday: Do Not Be Afraid**

*Joseph son of David, do not be afraid . . . Matthew 1:20*

The angel came to Joseph with the same message he gave to Mary and would give to the shepherds, *Do not be afraid*. Wherever life tangles or holds you hostage, where fear and uncertainty are unwelcome participants in this season; listen for God's message of hope to you: Do. Not. Be. Afraid. Fear never makes a celebration brighter only more stressful. Fear isn't God's gift to you. In fact, it prevents His most important gift: peace.

God's invitation to fear-less life is not a way to minimize hard times or ignore them. God's invitation is that we access His unending supply of everything we need. There are enough answers in living by God's daily resources. Besides, whatever waits on the other side of *Do not be afraid* will always be reason for a new celebration.

### **Simply Christmas Strategy No 5**

Decide on reasonable deadlines for your most time-consuming and energy-draining activities. Promise yourself (and God) that you will do what you can before the deadline and then stop. Prioritize carefully without becoming your own task master. Live in the release that you did what you could and do not be afraid that it isn't enough.



## **Friday                      When Joseph Woke Up**

*When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him.  
Matthew 1:24*

What Joseph dreamed was so vivid and real that when he woke up, he knew God had spoken. The dream had not been some reality broken into unrealistic pieces as many of our dreams are. This dream was a reality come to take him on a new journey. He knew in the deepest place where his mind and heart processed reality, that this dream was a call to obey. According to Matthew's account, he never questioned it. He woke up to his new reality. He woke up to his next step of obedience. Because he took God at His word, he took Mary as wife.

We need to wake up to whatever God wants to say to us this Christmas. It probably won't come in dreams. More likely it will come as a quick nudge or a whisper to our heart. The message could ask us to take some action that feels counterintuitive or it could ask us to address some frantic push that won't help us celebrate. Wake up! What is God asking you to do?

### **Simply Christmas Strategy No 6**

Wake up to the reality that most of us can't possibly accomplish everything we think we should do each day. Here's one way to address this unrealistic thinking. For every activity we add to our normal schedule, subtract something. Make no exceptions.



## **Saturday: Living the Fulfillment**

*All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: Matthew 1:23*

Christmas is a fulfillment of everything God had been trying to say to our world. We live in the fulfillment of how Jesus made God's promises come true. But do we live there fully?

Joseph reminds us that God's fulfillment doesn't occur in a vacuum. God fulfilled promise after promise as Joseph simply obeyed what God asked of him. Simple doesn't mean easy. It requires rising above expectations, traditions, control, and self-centered perspectives. But when we do, we can live the fulfillment of every promise God made to us through Jesus—hope, peace, love, joy. God's promises are not empty unless we empty them.

### **Simply Christmas Strategy No. 7**

As the decorations go up, let these early days help you review how God wants to fill your Christmas full of Him. What could you change to give God more room to fill this time with what God knows you need?





*Simply* Think about Joseph . . .

## Joseph the Carpenter

We don't make much of Joseph. He comes into the first Christmas scene only briefly. He was engaged to Mary and obeyed an angel in a dream to take her as his wife. He took Mary to Bethlehem because he had to register in the census. He accompanied Mary when Jesus was first presented at the temple. He arranged their escape to Egypt when baby Jesus' life was in danger because of Herod's cruel decree. He arranged their return when danger was over. The last time we hear about him, he and Mary are looking for Jesus when he was missing on their return trip from a festival visit to Jerusalem. Most of the time it is Mary's thoughts that are recorded, but it is Joseph's actions that set the scene.

Joseph became known as Jesus' father. Does that mean that the village never believed the outrageous story of Mary's supernatural pregnancy? Does it mean that Joseph never explained himself?

People knew Joseph as a carpenter, a man who worked with wood. Joseph knew about the strong and defined grain of olive, the orange bark of Jerusalem pine, the pungent scent of cedar and how it planed well without splintering. He knew how to measure and cut and miter. Whether he made tables and chairs, wagons and fences or carved his own creativity into bowls and utensils, we don't know. We simply know that Joseph was a carpenter, a man familiar with wood.

There is something honest and vulnerable about a man who works with his hands using the raw materials from God's creation. It makes him a co-creator with God. What an interesting thought as we look at Joseph taking Mary as his wife, understanding that she is pregnant by God's innovative action and is not tainted by immoral behavior. It was his first leap of faith, but what a leap!

He is called righteous because he let God's right ways lead him at every turn. Joseph is a bold model for the obedience that reminds us how important it is to

follow God quickly and specifically, no matter how difficult the journey. Joseph never tried to control his circumstances because He knew that God had embedded something into the grain of his journey. Just as he would not work against the grain of wood, he did not work against what God had ordered.

We come to Christmas as something like carpenters before a fresh piece of wood. If we create something God never intended out of a simple stable, unexpected visits, and the mysteries of its continuity; we will leave Christmas without the gifts God intended we receive. We work against the story, not with it.

Like Joseph, we need a new commitment to obedience. We need to be ready to change our plans when God points in another direction. We need to be less tied to the Christmas we want and more connected to the Christmas God has already given. While predictability may escape us this season because of the pandemic, Christmas should not. Stand with Joseph, silently attentive, wholly committed, ready to do whatever God asks. Become the wood in the hands of a Master Carpenter. Let God help you create the Christmas celebration you didn't know you needed.

# Simply Christmas: Week Two

## Second Sunday of Advent

### Mary



Mary was doing her work on an ordinary day when her life changed. Nothing was normal after her angel visit. She was misunderstood, questioned, rejected, and judged. And yet, this visit from God's messenger was the stabilizer she needed when everything in her world turned upside down.

The Messenger knew where to start: *The Lord is with you.*

If Mary could believe these words, if she could apply them to every question and assault, she would find a security and balance that did not come from her circumstances.

These days, we live with so many words that steal normal, divide us, scare us, and change what we never thought would change; we need to hear words that settle and restore. There are none better than . . .

*The Lord is with you!*

The High King of Heaven is with you. The eternal Father, Son, and Spirit is with you. The never-sleeping watchman, the ever-present Helper, He is with you.

This is the Advent message we need right now. There is no place where this message doesn't bring healing, purpose, or security. Looking for what we need from any other place, person, or tradition will keep us fretful and unhappy.

*The Lord is with YOU!*

You, as you take new purpose in this season of waiting. You, as you make this your morning mantra and evening lullaby.

He is with you to lead you to a place where your heart can worship, maybe not in gathered places like before, but in simple stable form, where the surroundings are not like you have always known. Where you let God fill the space with His

presence before you expect that any added decoration or activity will make a bigger difference.

This is the year of *Simply Christmas*. This is the year when you do things differently, but with a new purpose that gives space for God to add what He knows you need.

As we walk with Mary this week, be reminded that in the middle of her simple life, her simple faith took her to new place where God brought all the extras. Can He do it again? For me? For you?

Of course He can.

## **Simply Christmas Strategy No. 8**

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At a family meal, talk about Mary's understanding of "the Lord is with you" as she faced everything different. Go around your family circle and say, "the Lord is with YOU." Commit to sharing this statement during the week with anyone who is having a hard time.



### **Monday:      What's Troubling You?**

*Mary was greatly troubled. Luke 1:30*

Mary heard the words of the angel, that the Lord was with her. She took them first as a warning that something more was coming. They troubled her before they comforted her.

We are not unlike Mary. We trouble easily. Something unexpected pushes us off balance, like this pandemic. We know how to do what we plan and expect, but nobody plans for what will change what they want.

Today we are asking questions about what these strange times mean, what we are waiting for, and what will happen when this great cloud lifts. We are

troubled. Remember that the angel did not leave Mary troubled. He left her favored, held, loved, strengthened, and called for a special purpose. If you are troubled today, don't just throw yourself into Christmas chaos; keep listening so that the message God has for you today can take you to the next step.

## ***Simply Christmas Strategy No. 9***

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Remember last December when your calendar filled up quickly? Think about how much unscheduled time you have this year compared to last. How does God want to fill those empty places this year? Whenever you are troubled because of what you can't do, ask God to help you remember what you can do.



### **Tuesday: Asking How, not Why**

*How will this be? Luke 1:34*

Mary makes a change here in the way she processes the angel's message about becoming pregnant. There is no why in her question. Only how. She's turned a corner more quickly than we do. She has accepted the strange news. She doesn't understand it, but she isn't fighting against it.

*How* questions will always take us further than *why* questions. *How* questions give us something to do, something to hold on to. *Why* questions lead us down rabbit holes searching for answers out of our reach.

What could happen this Christmas for you and your family if you ask God, *How will Christmas come this year, in this pandemic?* *How* has an openness to it where *why* easily disintegrates into a whine. Try more *how* questions and see if there aren't more answers to your prayers.

## **Simply Christmas Strategy No. 10**

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Ask your *how* questions today. Ask how of yourself as well as God. How should we celebrate? *How* much should I decorate? *How* can I involve my family in the meaning of Christmas? See what wonderful opportunities wait on the other side of *How*.



### **Wednesday: Christmas Possibilities**

*Nothing is impossible with God. Luke 1:35*

When Mary wanted more details about these changes in her life, the angel settled her with the reminder that nothing is impossible with God. Remember that this message came on the heels of what God was going to do that Mary didn't understand. This was the message sent to settle her spirit. What sounded impossible to her was possible because God was doing it.

I think we sometimes get it backwards. We decide what God *could* do to change our circumstances. Then, we attach this verse as if to remind God of its possibility. Isn't that out of order? Instead, we need to rest in the truth that what God orchestrates is always possible. Our responsibility is to cooperate with whatever He is planning, just like Mary did.

## **Simply Christmas Strategy No. 11**

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Take a long look at the stable of your nativity scene. What possibilities would you have seen there? Be reminded that simple, empty spaces become holy ground when God fills them. Isn't that what you want this Christmas? Then, leave some stable space for Him to do His impossible work.



## **Thursday: Serving the Message**

*I am the Lord's servant. Luke 1:38*

No other statement clarifies Mary's response as much as this. The son she will bear said of himself, *I have come to serve, not to be served*. Here is the one chosen to bring him into the world saying the same thing. How else can you accept an assignment from God but as His servant?

We need a mind change in our Christmasing. We must come to this season as servants of God's message about Christmas. While good memories are important, they are not the most important. It is the message God sent at Christmas we need to serve. This year above all, we have more time to serve the message. Will we?

## **Simply Christmas Strategy No. 12**

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Remember the invitation you wrote last week? Look at it again. How has God filled the spaces you invited Him into? How has He changed your goals? Look at one place where you might be off track. Ask God "How can I server your Christmas message here?"



## **Friday: Blessed Best**

*Blessed is she [or he] who believes. Luke 1:45*

When Mary visited her cousin Elizabeth, pregnant with her own miracle, Elizabeth affirmed Mary's faith. She blessed her for believing God in the face of so many reasons not to.

There is more blessing in belief than doubt.

Who doesn't want more blessing in their lives? But blessings aren't gifts that come from nowhere. They are God's reminders of His unfailing love and unmerited favor. They are targeted faith-builders. They come with a purpose. Finding that purpose takes more than a grateful heart. It takes discernment, discovery, and perseverance. How does God want to bless you this Christmas? Don't give Him your list; let Him give you His. Remember, the most important blessing our world has received was born in a stable. Don't overlook unexpected places where the best blessings wait.

## ***Simply Christmas Strategy No. 13***

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Keep a blessing list during December. For every blessing, ask God how to help you understand His purpose for sending it. Review the list every few days. Beside the blessing, share how you let it help you grow your heart and character to be more like God's.



### **Saturday:      God's Mindfulness**

*God my Savior . . . has been mindful*

As Mary and Elizabeth share their stories about angel visits and morning sickness, Mary bursts into song about who she knows her God to be. One of the characteristics she was most thankful for was His mindfulness.

Today, mindfulness has come to mean being present in the moment. We tune out what distracts to focus on what is before us. God's mindfulness is another matter. His is a past-present-future mindfulness. He brings His past-present-



future knowledge into our present. No one else can do that. To be conscious that God is mindful of you and me is a matchless gift and all grace. Nowhere are we lost to Him. Nowhere is there an unknown way. On any day that brings unpredictability or crisis, already He knew. His mindfulness brings the resources we need to meet any challenge.

The question left for us to answer is whether we are mindful of Him. Today is a good day to be sure that we are.

## ***Simply* Christmas Strategy No. 14**

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Sometimes so many things crowd our minds, it is difficult to be mindful of the most important things. Learn to practice this simple habit. When you are overwhelmed, write it down. When it is on paper, it takes up less room in your mind. Then, let God help you know how much you are on His mind. Thank Him for His mindfulness of you. Live this day more mindful of God's mindfulness.

## ***Simply* Think about Mary's Mother . . .**

### **If I Had Been Mary's Mother**

We don't know much about Mary's mother except that she had one. There are several ways to interpret the silence. Maybe she had died before the angel came to Mary. Maybe that's why Mary traveled so quickly to Elizabeth: she needed a mother figure. Or perhaps the silence comes simply from the choice to keep Mary's story central and uncomplicated.

Still, I wonder about Mary's mother. Did Mary tell her quickly or after she returned from Elizabeth? What did Mary's mother think? How did Mary's mother respond to the news about her loved and obedient daughter? How would I have responded if I had been her mother?

It is a sobering thought. I think I would have wanted my own angel visit. Wouldn't you?

I'm in the nether lands with my questions. I ask them anyway because there are countless parents who have received information about their children that they don't know what to do with. The information seems to come from nowhere, but has seismic force to change their dreams forever.

That's why I want to put myself in the position Mary's mother found herself in. And here is what I hope I would have done.

I would grieve whatever I thought I was losing. I would have cried my tears and asked my questions of God. I hope I would have remembered what the Psalmist said when he wrote that God, Himself, bottles our tears.

I think a sadness would have held me like a straitjacket for a while. Then, with a determination that comes from the purest place in a mother's heart, I hope I would have refused to withdraw any part of my love. I hope I would have found a way to submit to God what I could not understand so that I could do what I only I could have done--mother my daughter. with the support only a mother could give.

I hope I would have followed Joseph's lead. After all, what do you do with two messages from God that say the same thing? I know I would have been grateful that Joseph wanted to marry my daughter, whether I believed their angel stories or not. Other possibilities in that time were very limited and much less hopeful..

I hope I could have found it in my God-tended heart to extend the same love to my daughter and her intended *after* adjusting to the news that I would have given before.. I know I would have wanted to give nothing less than unconditional love that can only be strengthened if I would let God take care of anything I didn't understand.

While there are hopeful apocryphal stories that point to a mother named Anne who had a daughter named Mary, I believe they simply reinforce the possibility that she fulfilled the role God gave her to love and support the daughter who was His before she was born.

I hope I would have done the same.

Christmas always uncovers weak places in family relationships. That's reason enough to review and reflect on the story of Mary's parents. Whatever the issues, we must let love lead. Not dreams. Not expectations. We must always remember that God has a story to write in our family circle and it always begins and ends with love.

# *Simply* Christmas: Week Three

## Third Sunday of Advent

### Invitations and Journeys



What invitations and journeys wait for us this Christmas? Think about the way God gathered the participants for the first Advent of Christ. He used angels to invite Mary and Joseph and the shepherds. He invited the Magi with a star. God knows how to send personal, pointed invitations. Each was a unique experience that not only got the attention of those invited but changed where that attention focused.

Have you received your invitation yet? What is God using to get your attention? He can use the strangest circumstances. Sometimes they are loud and boisterous invitations. Other times, they are quiet whispers. What always surprises me is how God uses interruptions that we want to dismiss as unruly intrusions.

When our daughter, Lisa, was hospitalized over Christmas in 1999 with a heart infection that threatened her life, everything changed for us. The interruption left the house half decorated with open boxes still waiting. I hadn't even started shopping, let alone cooking. Nothing was normal that Christmas. And yet, I will always remember that Christmas Eve. Lisa, still weak and feverish, wanted our own Christmas Eve service while Mark led the regular one at church. I placed battery candles around, used a favorite Christmas CD, and read the scripture. I remember connecting with the journey of Mary and Joseph more intimately than ever. The inconveniences. The interruptions. The unplanned complications. They were all there in our hospital room. And yet God visited us because we accepted His invitation to be present in spite of the interruption.

God also uses the insignificant pieces of our lives. A family meal. Clean laundry. A child's wonder. Laughter. It could be anything so normal and unexpected that we could miss it like an unmarked envelope that contained a bonus check. But when God uses it as an invitation to see Him present in the moment, it has incalculable worth.

Be ready to use anything God brings. That's the imperative of this season. It's more important than decorations or getting a right gift. It challenges us to go into each day looking for His invitations, to see Him come to us again and again and again. Come to rescue us from anything He knows will not help us enjoy the reason for the season. Come to sit with us, hold us, lead us, take us on His journey; not ours.

Even in this Christmas season when so much has changed what we depended on to bring Christmas close and personal, even now God has already sent many invitations. They are personal, perfectly timed, and uniquely fit to our deepest need this Christmas. Of all the things we do this Christmas, we must keep looking for God's invitations. For on the other side of our acceptance waits the Christmas our heart needs to prepare us for our next journey.

## **Simply Christmas Strategy No. 15**

Remember that worship is always God's way to request the honor of your presence at His gathering. Even virtual worship gatherings can be God's invitations, if you let them. However you gather for worship today, accept God's invitation to meet Him. Remember, He can fill a streamed service as easily as an in person one.



### **Monday:      Looking Everywhere**

*Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? Matthew 2:2*

The Magi are incongruent participants of the Christmas story. They are gentiles, after all. The fact that they had studied prophecy and connected the birth of a new king for the Jews with a star is, by itself, a miracle. No one else in the story took as long to study and prepare nor traveled as far to find this new king.

“Where is he?” they asked? This had been a trek that covered 400 miles and more, took anywhere from 6-9 months, depending on their stubborn camels. The difficult journey did not stop the magi. Herod’s twisted interest did not stop them. They saw their invitation in a star and would not stop until the star stopped.

Are we that determined, focused, and unstoppable about the journey to find all that Jesus came to be to us? What will it take to draw us into *that* journey?

## **Simply Christmas Strategy No. 16**

Review your Christmas count down. Think about the desires you had as you entered this season. What is skewing your focus away from the journey God has for you? Eliminate it or revise it.



### **Tuesday:       Where Does Herod Fit in Christmas?**

*As soon as you find him, report to me . . . Matthew 2:8*

Herod is the villain in this story. No one puts him at the stable. His self-centered paranoia offered an invitation, encouraging the Magi to continue their search and report back.

We live with many Herods who threaten to change our Christmas journeys. Sometimes he shows up in institutions, public opinion, empty traditions, or cultural chaos. Just as God did not let Herod change the Magi’s mission, God will help us find Jesus.

Where does a Herod threaten your Christmas? Listen for God’s instructions to take another way. We must never succumb to any Herodic pressure that will leave us empty-hearted. Stripped of so many Christmas festivities this year, perhaps we can find the journey God always wanted us to take.

## **Simply Christmas Strategy No. 17**

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Where are you in danger of listening to push and ought-to messages that sound more like they come from Herod than God? Ask God to help you reject them so that you can take a different journey this year.



### **Wednesday: Government Intervention**

*In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree . . . Luke 2:1*

How did Joseph tell Mary that they had to make a 90-mile trip because of a government decree? They would make it on foot with a donkey and probably couldn't make more than 20 miles a day, if that. Do the math. It was going to take at least 4-5 days. Mary's time to deliver was uncomfortably near. She wouldn't have her mother or the midwife the village women usually called on. Everything familiar and comfortable was stolen from her and all because of a government decree.

Sound familiar? We've been up against government mandated closures and restrictions since March. We'd like to blame the government for the lack of Christmas cheer in these days. But if God could use a government decree that required an inconvenient journey at the worst possible time and still bring about His best answer for hope and peace; what can He do with the government decrees we are up against?

It is our best Christmas truth that God always has a way to come to us. The question we have to answer is what do we allow to get in the way?

## **Simply Christmas Strategy No. 18**

Make a list of the opportunities this Christmas offers that no pandemic or decree can prevent. Assess how well you are taking advantage of what this time offers you.



### **Thursday: Let's Go to Bethlehem**

*Let's go to Bethlehem . . . so they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph and the baby. Luke 2:15, 16*

Shepherds were a scruffy group of watchmen camping out on the hillside outside of Bethlehem, watching a flock of sheep. It was monotonous work, like an all-night security guard. The hours moved like sandals through mud, so very slowly. They didn't know that their thankless work placed them on the front row to the changing of the world. God, Himself, invited them to see a miracle.

They didn't refuse. Whether it was curiosity or faith that took them on the journey didn't matter. They hurried to Bethlehem. *Hurried.*

We hurry at Christmas, but not to Bethlehem. Not to kneeling places. Not to worship. So where is the invitation we missed? Maybe we have responded to the wrong invitations?

But there is still time to change that.

## **Simply Christmas Strategy No. 19**

Where might *hurry* keep you from being present to your family or someone else who needs your attention? Where might *hurry* change the way to address worship or prayer? Make sure you are *hurrying* about the right things and *hurrying* to the places where God waits to show you a miracle.





## **Thursday: Return Differently**

*The shepherds returned glorifying and praising God. Luke 2:28*

I know one thing about the shepherds: what they talked about on the way to the stable was different from what they talked about when they left. They went into Bethlehem wondering what the strange hillside phenomenon was all about. God rewarded their simple curiosity. They left praising God for including them in His message to the world.

Shepherds became unexpected evangelists. They wanted everyone to know what they had seen and heard. I'm surprised the stable wasn't overrun with people trying to find out what the shepherds told them had happened.

Have we become so used to the story that there is no curiosity left to take us where God wants to show us what He is doing? Even now, in the middle of this strange time, God is at work. Have we tabled our praise until everything gets back to normal? God is the normal we seek. Make that journey and no one will be able to silence your praise, either.

### **Simply Christmas Strategy No. 20**

Do something different today that will help your heart focus on God's invitation to see where He is working His Christ-come-to you miracle. Take a quiet moment break. Stand at a window and see how little effect this pandemic has had on God's created world. Refuse to be distracted by Christmas tasks and give yourself to Christmas journeys only your heart can take.



## **Friday: Another Inconvenient Journey**

*Get up . . . take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt.*

Mary and Joseph had already made one inconvenient journey. Now it was time for another. The bounty on the head of their infant was too dangerous. They had to leave. Did they think about Joseph's namesake, sold into Egyptian slavery? Did they borrow confidence from the happy ending of that story?

Many faith journeys come at inconvenient times to take us to unfamiliar places to grow new faith not based on what we already know. Does that describe this Christmas for you? Then, you're in for an adventure. God will not waste inconvenient journeys. Sometimes they are His best vehicles for teaching new lessons. If God says its time to move on emotionally, spiritually, or geographically; don't drag your feet.

## **Simply Christmas Strategy No. 21**

Isn't inconvenience simply an assault on our expectations? If you find yourself frustrated by inconvenient changes or additions to your day, reframe them as opportunities for God to take you somewhere new.



## **Saturday: Do Not Be Afraid**

Do you know how many times God sent this introductory message when he recruited the first participants of a Great Advent? He told Zechariah, Mary,

Joseph, and the shepherds not to be afraid. They were not to fear the message, the journey, or anything that resulted. This was God announcing His complete control of every variable that could make them afraid.

We are slow learners. We've missed so many of His "Do not fear" messages. It's so much easier to fall into fear than to walk in faith. Stand with any of these characters as God plucks them out of what they know and takes them on journeys they could not know. God wants to do the same for us. He would take fear out of our faith vocabulary. He would make submission and obedience the key words for new journeys.

## ***Simply* Christmas Strategy No. 22**

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Use this acrostic reminder to define fear: **F**-alse **E**-vidence **A**-ppearing **R**-eal. See how it might help you recognize how fear skews your perspective away from God's realities. Whether it is a big fear or several small fears, don't let fear have the loudest voice.

## ***Simply* Think about the Magi . . .**

### **Hope from Star Seekers**

The Magi give me hope for every secular-minded, God-ignoring person on this planet. The Magi were God's first clue that He sent His son to the whole world. They are reminders that God knows how to break into any stubborn, culturally comfortable person given to logical and intellectual pursuits over godly ones, even when they don't believe God is in them.

Too many in the nation God had called and set apart to be His evangelists for the world had become arrogant and self-centered. So He opened the circle wider when He sent the Magi on a star journey. Think about it. Angels didn't have as much credibility with these intellectuals. But stars . . . they would follow a star.

How long did they study the skies and the drawings before they recognized the phenomenon that would make them change everything they were doing? They

were old world scientists discovering something new. It was enough reason to pack for a 400-mile journey, study literature outside of their intellectual leanings, and leave family and friends for a year or more.

We miss one of the most important truths about this invitation. It is this: if God knows how to get inside the heads of eastern world magi, He knows how to reach someone you love who rejects God for any reason. He knows how to send a targeted invitation better than the best marketer that exists. If anything will make a difference, God will send it. His rescue mission is at the forefront of His heart.

Even the Magi missed it at first. But God didn't give up on them. He sent a dream that made all of them agree not to return to Herod. Their journey to Jerusalem had been a journey to find a new king. Their journey home had introduced them to a King of new journeys.

If you are carrying a long-held burden for someone in your family or circle of friends, read the story of the Magi again. God called them despite what they didn't know about Him. Ask God to do it again for the one you love. Thank God for your front row seat where you can watch Him work and support any turning you begin to see. Love, listen, and support; but let God do the work He does best.

Only God can send a star!

# *Simply* Christmas: **Week Four** Fourth Sunday of Advent

## The Gift



What is the best gift you ever received for Christmas? The first that always comes to my mind is the Tiny Tears doll I wanted as a little girl. The advertisements had convinced me that this doll was the closest thing to a real baby. I rocked her, fed her, and changed her. I even made her a makeshift crib near my bed in case she cried during the night. It was a sad awakening when I realized that the doll wasn't as "real" as all the advertisements had led me to believe.

Isn't it interesting that when someone asks us that question, we usually answer with a gift someone in our circle of family or friends gave us? However, the first gift of Christmas was Jesus, come to take away our sin.

We should know by now that left to our own logic and best human intentions, we are not who God created us to be. We lose connection to the imprint of our Creator's image and replace it with an attempt to be who we think we are or want to be without understanding the dire results.

But God offered to rescue us from ourselves when He sent Jesus. The problem is, we don't usually think we need rescuing from ourselves. We want God to change the world, get rid of evil, make all things fair according to our definition of fairness.

Instead, God comes to us as a baby, divinity in a heartbeat, unconditional love in a manger, salvation in the most unassuming, unexpected way possible. God's gift threatens our autonomy in the same way Herod was threatened. God doesn't want us to simply ooh and ahh over the innocence and sweetness of a newborn like we usually do. This God-in-baby-flesh is an assault on everything that would keep us from returning to who God created us to be—His. His children, born from His desire for intimate relationship. Born to be His in a world that shouts their self-centered me's.

The best gift we could ever receive is to be saved from every act and attitude we harbor that undoes everything God wanted to give us in a world He created for beauty, peace, and oneness with Himself.

Christmas should help us take another look into the heart of God that gave us Jesus, where we recognize in a deeper way how much love it takes to turn our hearts around. We need to find our kneeling places at the manger with thanksgiving and an ongoing pursuit to become all God created us to be. We need to understand how deeply this gift of God must invade every part of our selves. Jesus came to take away anything that separates us from who God is and wants us to be.

The Advent journey is designed to awaken a new longing for the best gift of Christmas, a new minting of everything we call human. We grasp new understandings of our poverty so that we can receive our King.

This fourth Sunday in Advent takes us closer to the day we celebrate as Christmas. Will it take us closer to everything God wanted to give us in Jesus? This week we'll dig deeper to know whether we are fully accessing the Great Gift God sent us. Nothing will prepare us better to celebrate Christmas!

### ***Simply Christmas Strategy No. 23***

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If you need a visual reminder of the Greatest Gift, select a gold gift bag and tie it with gold ribbon. Place it where you will see it every day. As you read each reflection this week, write the scripture and the gift on piece of paper and slip into the bag. Review them often, even after Christmas. Make sure this Christmas, the Reason for the Season is your reason, too.



## **Monday:       The Gift of Grace**

*But even greater is God's wonderful grace and his gift of righteousness. Romans 5:17*

We cannot talk about God's gift at Christmas without using the word *grace*. God saw our world coming apart and refused to fix it with a Band-Aid. He sent His own son into the fray, understanding the cost He was paying. Love overruled what we deserved. God built a bridge that would always take us to God's heart. It's called grace.

I've taught the meaning of grace as the "extra" God adds when we ask His forgiveness for any attitude or action that displeases Him. We try to reach God, but the truth is that it is God's grace that reaches out to us to forgive, redeem, and make new.

When we understand the height and depth, length and breadth of God's reach; why would we tolerate anything that would take us away from God's Amazing Grace? We cannot truly celebrate Christmas without celebrating with grateful hearts God's Amazing Grace.

### **Simply Christmas Strategy No. 24**

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God's grace makes us grace-givers. Where do you need more of God's grace so you can give more grace to others?



## **Tuesday:       The Gift of Acceptance**

*Accept each other just as Christ has accepted you. Romans 15:5*

Accepted people have open hearts. They don't see the world through their insecurities. Acceptance makes them feel loved and valued. They don't have to find it in perfection, image, or control.

God gives us the acceptance we need the most. His acceptance begins in the heart He forgives and cleans. He gives us full status in His family complete with an inheritance we can never earn for ourselves. He grieves the places we act out of feelings of unacceptance. Scripture reminds us of the bold and empowering ways God describes our worth to Him: treasured, loved, priceless, worth searching for, worth dying for.

How do we thank Him for this gift we cannot buy for ourselves? By sharing that acceptance with others.

## ***Simply Christmas Strategy No. 25***

Who needs your acceptance today? Just like God, be the initiator of acceptance. Never substitute it for condoning anything against God's commandments and instruction. Simply accept them with the love God wants to reach them with.



## **Wednesday: The Gift of a Sure Foundation**

*For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. 1 Corinthians 3:11*

What supports your life? Your career? Your family? Your finances? God says-- not strong enough. While those components belong to the structure you're building, they will never substitute for a foundation. Any homeowner knows that cracks in a foundation is a serious problem that will take more than wish and prayer to fix.

God sent Jesus into the world so that we could build our lives on a sure foundation. It is a foundation that lasts the test of time, economic depression,



stock market plunge, war, divorce, job loss, disease, or anything else that threatens to take away our stability.

This is no small gift during these days because it feels like so much of what we depended on is shaking from the core and ready to implode. We must gather this Christmas to sing: *On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand; all other ground IS sinking sand.* The sure foundation has come! Don't expect anything else to last stronger or longer.

## ***Simply Christmas Strategy No. 26***

Think about how you want to retell the story that reinforces the foundation Jesus came to share. Tell it with a nativity scene. Use Christmas cards or pictures from a Bible story book. Sing it in a carol or two. Do whatever fits your family to make the story come alive.



### **Christmas Eve      The Day Before**

*While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born. Luke 2: 6*

Today we celebrate the day before Christ came. It is the day Mary and Joseph entered crowded Bethlehem. It is the day they tried to find lodging more difficult than they expected. It is probably the day Mary began to feel the baby turning, restless, beginning a new journey.

It is the day before for us, too. The day you finish preparations. The day you may also find that some things don't come together like you planned. It is the day you find substitutions. It is the day you hope that everything you have done will work.

But the most important thing you can do this day before is to be ready for Jesus before you are ready for family or food, presents or anything else you expect Christmas to bring. This is *your* day to find a *stable* moment, when you *ponder*

*anew what the Almighty can do* and remember that a perfect Christmas is always the one where your heart makes room for Jesus.

### **Simply Christmas Strategy No. 27**

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Examine anything that pushes you to rush today. Prioritize carefully to allow for the unexpected that God wants to bring to your Christmas. Listen carefully for the unspoken needs of your family and make sure your day makes room for them. To emphasize your heart's readiness to *simply* celebrate Christmas, repeat the simple prayer often, "Come, Lord Jesus."

**Christmas Day**

**A Christmas Prayer**

# A Prayer for Christmas Day

God of Christmas Past and Christmases to come,

Protect us from a celebration  
where you are not the reason.

Remind us in every tradition, gift, and activity  
That we have come to worship You.

Take our stable-homes  
and make them new birth places  
For your transforming work.

Whatever we are missing this year  
Fill that space with more of You  
That we may know a joy  
we cannot make for ourselves.

Though we know the end of the story,  
Let us see its beginning with fresh eyes  
To take us deeper into the miracle reach  
You mastered to give us Jesus in human flesh.

And when this day is over,  
May we leave like the shepherds who could not keep  
the Great Gift to themselves

Amen.



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## **Simply Christmas Strategy No. 28**

Think of ways to keep Christmas very present in your home. Don't talk about Christmas being over; talk about putting decorations away. Keep these Advent reflections near and read from them occasionally. Find ways to celebrate Christmas every day!



*Thank you for taking this Advent journey with me. I hope it softened your heart in ways that God had more room to direct, encourage, heal, and help. That's why He came. You are important to Him. You were the reason He made the journey from Heaven to earth. You are the reason He sent angels and shepherds and wise men. You have always been at the center of His heart. That's why He wants to occupy the center of yours.*

*If you want more encouraging words for your journey, sign up to receive my Quiet Circle weekly message I send to your email. Go to [www.debbiegoodwin.net](http://www.debbiegoodwin.net), scroll down to the "Let's Connect" box and enter your information. You'll also receive a special gift when you do:*