

Simple Christmas

Reminders for Complex Times

by members of the WorldVenture family



Unprecedented Times

DAY 1

Merry Christmas

May these words remind you of the greatest gift of all, Jesus Christ, and help usher in a simple time of celebration and reflection.

#WVSimpleChristmas

The word of the year is **unprecedented**. But is Christmas in **unprecedented** times something new?

The Bethlehem birth prediction came during the **unprecedented** prosperity of the northern kingdom of Israel. The mighty Assyrians were **unprecedentedly** weak for a time, leading to **unprecedented** wealth and expansion in Israel.

But God still spoke to the wayward nation. His **unprecedented** message promised deliverance by a baby, of all things! Yet he would not come to the prosperous urban north, but rather the impoverished rural south:

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, are only a small village among all the people of Judah. Yet a ruler of Israel will come from you, one whose origins are from the distant past. —Micah 5:2 NLT

Not long afterward, Assyria brought affluent Israel to its knees in Assyria's **unprecedented** resurgence. Israel had had problems before, but they had never seen the destruction of their nation and its capital, Samaria.

Isaiah watched with bated breath from the south, wondering who could save them from the mighty Assyrians who destroyed 46 cities of Judah. God's **unprecedented** answer? Again, a baby!

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

Fast forward 700 years. Rome, the new master of Israel, motivated Israel to long for God's Messiah deliverer. But God's unique solution again was this **unprecedented** Baby, born to a virgin (Matthew 1:23).

"But babies grow up," you say? Indeed. This One later gave **unprecedented** liberation from an occupying power— **unprecedented** freedom from the occupying power of sin itself.

God always thrives in the **unprecedented**. A simple Christmas baby amidst a complex, **unprecedented** world is the norm.

Dr. Rick Griffith serves in Singapore training Asian leaders at Singapore Bible College and Crossroads International Church. More of his Bible studies are available free at biblestudydownloads.org



Cultivating a Joyful Heart

DAY 2

Breathe

Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for God has already approved what you do. —Ecclesiastes 9:7 NIV

When I was in elementary school, my family was living in the suburbs of Chicago. It was a year of the polar vortex, and around Christmastime there came a flurry of heavy snowstorms. My best friend lived only one house away from us, and my days had a very simple routine: wake up; get dressed; eat breakfast; put on my coat, jacket and boots; run across to my friend's house; take off my coat, jacket, and boots; and go down to their basement to play Legos.

I am no longer in elementary school, and my days are not that simple. I often find myself worrying:

- Am I spending my time wisely or foolishly?
- Am I doing everything I'm supposed to do, or is there something else?
- Have I sacrificed enough, or does God want more?

God is preparing for us a feast in Heaven, and He is not against our feasting on Earth. There is, to be sure, a time to weep and a time to mourn, a time for nails and crosses and death. But there is also a time to laugh and a time to dance, a time for angelic choirs and the gifts of the magi and a miracle in a manger. The birth of Christ is a time of celebration, a time to put the daunting troubles of this world in their proper perspective, a time to dash across snow-cloaked lawns and play Legos in a well-heated basement. God has already approved what we do.

Philip Kendall serves in West Africa. Learn more at worldventure.com/nbkendall

DAY 3

And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. —Luke 2:12 ESV

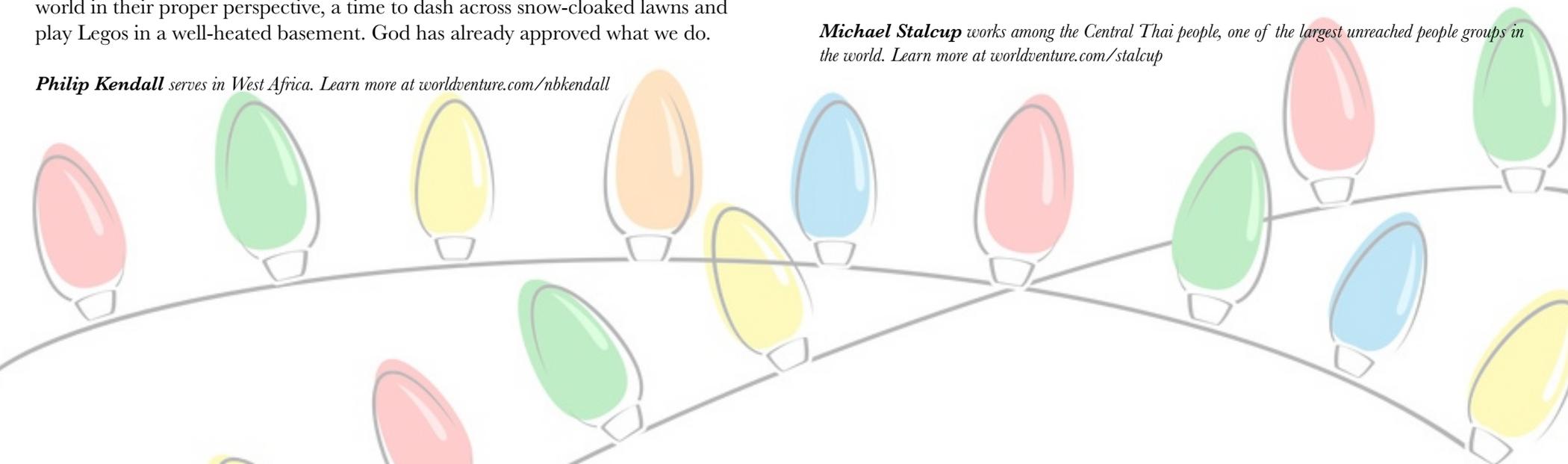
***This Christmas Eve
My infant son
Lies wrapped in swaddling cloths
And oxygen tubes.***

***Vulnerable.
Our hearts have held their breath
Too many times
For love of his little life.***

***Tonight I marvel
That an eternal God
Would make himself
A breathing baby boy***

***And, vulnerable,
Sleep in our sin-sick world—
That, having died,
We might breathe again.***

Michael Stalcup works among the Central Thai people, one of the largest unreached people groups in the world. Learn more at worldventure.com/stalcup



How Can This Be?

DAY 4

“How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?” The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail.”

—**Luke 1:34-37 NIV**

The barren brings forth, brilliantly, barely comprehensible to the virgin mind: the inconceivable has come. Not by will of man nor blood that he, born of God, born of light, immutable, is borne of woman. The ever-speaking and spoken Word muted in flesh. There is a glorious fittingness to the illogic, this second invasion, where again comes breath from ashes, life from dust.

Great Father of imperatives, who silences “How?” with “Let it be!” and Spirit, who hovers over our void and overshadows darkness of watery deep and empty womb, cover us with the ineffable light that enters chaos and, against all reason, is God with us.

Jeremy D. Otten works in Belgium in theological education and counseling.
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Let Our Light Shine

DAY 5

There is a sense of unfolding each year as the months count down to the coming of the Christmas season. Christmas music begins to fill the air, decorations appear, and then there is the wonder of the lights. One cannot venture anywhere without seeing the glow, and oftentimes they appear in elaborate fashion. They come in an array of colors and shapes. Some are large, some small, some twinkle and some just shine their light steadily.

Then there is my house with its simple one bulb candles sitting in each of my front windows. They look miniscule in comparison to all the other ornate displays. Yet, they, too, shine brightly even in all their simplicity, and do so without intimidation or shame.

Seeing the merriment of all the lights during this season is a reminder of the star that shone at the time of Jesus’ birth. As we are told in Matthew 2:9 (ESV):

And behold the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was.

The star fulfilled its purpose, shining boldly and brightly for all the world to see, and served as a precursor to what Jesus would later proclaim of Himself:

I am the Light of the World. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. —John 8:12 ESV

We, too, are to let our light shine before others. Sometimes our light becomes dim and doesn’t glorify God very well. It may even feel like just a flicker. But when our light stays plugged into the main power source of light, we can shine brighter and be used to shine the path to Jesus who is the ultimate hope for all in the world.

Linda Gawthrop is the Director of Personnel Ministries at WorldVenture.

Liminal Space

DAY 6

I was recently introduced to the term *liminal space*. It refers to the in-between transition place when you have started to leave the old but are not yet fully in the new. Your feet straddle the threshold (limen in Latin) with your heart in one room and your gaze in the other.

Liminal space describes my world well, a boarding school for TCKs (*Third Culture Kids*) whose heart homes are across international borders and passport countries even farther away. We have learned to inhabit the tension of feeling ourselves a part of multiple worlds.

Jesus likely knew something about that, too. The Son of God and simultaneous Son of Man, creator of the universe without a place to lay his head, spent his life here living in liminal space. He, who was fully God, became fully human by spending nine months in the womb of a Jewish girl. He grew up obeying the laws of Moses and yet had come precisely to introduce a new covenant, a better one. At the culmination of his ministry, he hung suspended between heaven and earth, life and death, justice and grace. His choice to live in the in-between saved us.

2020 has felt akin to a liminal space. Somewhere between multiple quarantines, face masks, and remote everything, it is good to remember this is temporary living. Because Jesus left heaven to wear human skin and eventually die for us, our true home has shifted to being with him. May this Advent season invite you to become comfortable living in the juxtaposition of already/not yet, whatever your liminal space looks like.

“Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.”
—1 John 3:2 ESV

Katrina Custer is serving through education in Germany—K-12 students coming from 50 different countries. Learn more at worldventure.com/kcuster

Unexpected Advent

DAY 7

*Unexpected. In reverse.
God descends to end the curse
of sin: a world that’s turned its back to Him,
humanity fallen, broken, dead.*

*Unexpected. In the night
shepherds see the shining light
and hear: Glory to God! On earth peace to men!
Divinity sleeps in a manger bed.*

*What? No cheering public? No eager press?
What about image? A world to impress?
But there were no reporters voicing their views;
just shepherds rejoicing, telling the news.*

*Unexpected, this Son of Man,
Savior, Shepherd, bears the lambs
in His arms—then bears their sin.
The Lamb of God dies in their stead.*

*Unexpected! We’re at a loss—
God the Son nailed to a cross,
bleeding, torn, head crowned with thorns,
Author of life, crucified, dead.*

*Before a jeering public, without an eager press
to describe His visage—God-forsakenness!
Nor see His body, wrapped in linen, laid in a tomb.
Nor on the third day hear: He’s risen! Life has pierced the gloom.*

*Unexpected? This long night,
this advent of heartache—when hopes once bright
are dim—your world turned upside down.
You fear the morn will never come.*

*Do not fear! The Morning Star has shone.
He is here—Christ, your King, God the Son
has wept your tears and now holds you tight.
So all is well and all will be right.
The Lord is near—expect Him.*

“... the people living in darkness have seen a great light...” —from Matthew 4:16 NIV

Patty Davis ministers through publishing, music and church development in Slovenia. Learn more at worldventure.com/mpdavis

Waiting for Christmas

DAY 8

What was it like waiting for Christmas as a child? Was there a special gift you were hoping to open? Remember that feeling of hopeful expectation?

Since the exile to Babylon, the people of God waited expectantly almost 600 years for the promised Messiah to reestablish His kingdom. Then, the angel Gabriel visited Mary with a message:

“And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

—**Luke 1:31-33 ESV**

Here was finally the fulfillment of the promise. The Messiah was coming. But Mary was unmarried. She was a virgin. How could she give birth to the Son of the Most High? Gabriel explained that the child would be conceived by the power of God, and therefore called the Son of God. Even Mary’s barren relative, Elizabeth had become pregnant, “for nothing will be impossible with God” (vs. 37). When Mary later visited her, Elizabeth prophesied over the young woman, saying, “And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord” (vs. 45).

The Jews believed in the coming Messiah, and Mary believed in the message of Gabriel. They waited for the fulfillment of God’s promises. Too often we give up on waiting. We don’t expect God to surprise us, let alone to do what he promised. Jesus taught his disciples that only those who receive the kingdom of God like a child will enter (Mark 10:15). Let’s remember what it was like to have the simple faith of a child believing that good things were to come. Hold on to it and wait expectantly for God to show up.

Emily Roth serves in Spain. Learn more at worldventure.com/eroth

Winter Stillness

DAY 9

*Take a trip up north in the country
Step from almost overheated house into the dark night
Hat, scarf, gloves, boots, and thick winter coat
Round as a snowman with the same amount of limited mobility*

*Sharply inhale as the cold, crisp air shocks your lungs
Slowly exhale and the vapors lilt softly across your exposed face*

*Step further into the dark leaving the soft glow of the security lights
The crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch of snow under your boots
Stop and crane your neck up
With a clear sky the stars twinkle, asking to be perused*

*Lungs become accustomed to the cold air
Breathing is easier*

*Hear the wind lightly whispering through the evergreens
Your own inhales and exhales
Cold seeps into your body
It is quiet but not silent.*

A blanket of stillness covers creation, and for this moment of time you are enveloped too. It is as if the world takes a deep breath awaiting the start of a new beginning. It is the calm before the storm, a storm of glad tidings and joy. The senses are elevated in anticipation, and the soul is beckoned to come alive. Then, there is the faintest of whispers. Ears strain to catch the tiny waves of sound. What is it? What is being said?

*“Listen to me, Jacob,
Israel, whom I have called:
I am he; I am the first and I am the last.”*
—**Isaiah 48:12 NIV**

Beth Horn serves in Austria. Learn more at worldventure.com/bhorn2020



Come Let Us Adore Him

DAY 10

I've always loved the whimsical melodies of Christmas songs. Over the years music has drawn me into the season as I played holiday concerts for mall shoppers, carefully held candles with family as we stood shoulder to shoulder on Christmas Eve, or while sitting quietly in my living room as I gazed at the glow of the Christmas tree with sleeping children around it.

Mary was also drawn into the beauty of celebrating our Savior's awaited birth by song. In Luke, she adored our Heavenly Father with truth about who He was as she carried the savior of our world. She adored the God who sent an angel to meet her and assure her she was seen and never alone.

And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." —Luke 1:46-47 NIV

Our Father asks us to come, as Mary did, exactly where we are and adore. Speak the truth of who He is back to Him. Speak His truth over your life, even if you don't feel it sink in today. Our God is Emmanuel, "God with us."

Oh come all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant

What is your heart feeling as you sit in this Advent season? Where is God calling you into adoration?

Oh come ye, oh come ye to Bethlehem

Where are you resting or resisting the truth of the gospel?

Come and behold him, born the king of angels

Let us sit where we are, be with our Father, and behold who he is in our lives today.

Oh come let us adore him, Christ the Lord

Brianna Brown serves in Taiwan making disciples and partnering with the local church for Kingdom growth. Learn more at worldventure.com/thebrowns

A Simple Christmas Explored

DAY 11

Dietrich Bonhoeffer preached and served before and during World War II. The darkness that began engulfing Germany and the German church did not overwhelm the Bonhoeffer home. His family created a bulwark against the culture, continuing to have birthdays, family time, and Christmases with music and laughter up even to the time when Dietrich Bonhoeffer was arrested by the Nazis.

Like Dietrich Bonhoeffer's family, we can create an atmosphere of joy in our homes and among our friends; a place of warmth by simplifying Christmas.

What can a Simple Christmas look like?

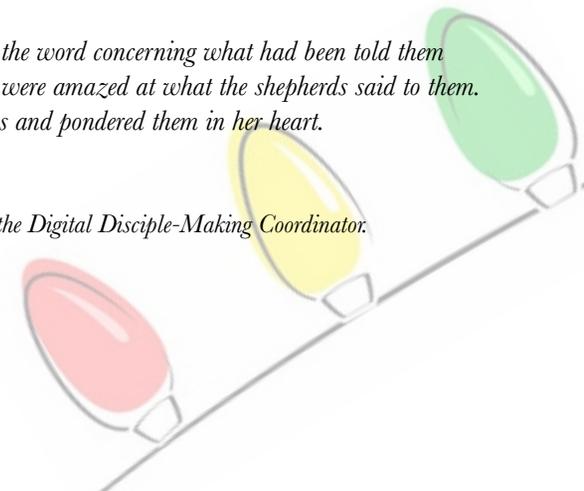
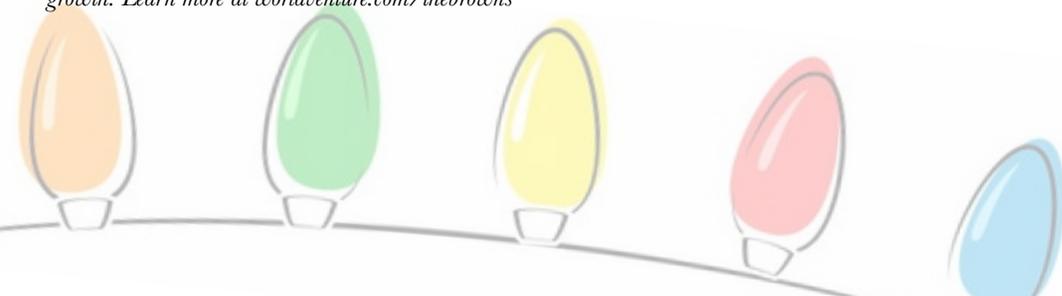
- Adopt a family to shower gifts on.
- Buy gifts for other people. Look at their social media posts and learn about their needs and wants.
- Make memories together and go on road trips.
- Share gratitude stories at the dinner table.
- Find opportunities to serve on Christmas Day.
- Send encouraging cards to the missionaries your church supports.
- If you live alone, invite others who might also live alone to join you in celebration of Christmas.

In our family, a Simple Christmas in 2019 was an opportunity to connect with others and spiritually and emotionally help us keep Jesus at the top of our focus. Instead of a tree, we bought a miniature tree from a craft store and took it on trips around Arizona, taking photos of it for social media. This created opportunities for conversations online and in-person "around the tree."

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.

—Luke 2:17-19 NIV

Nikole Hahn serves with WorldVenture as the Digital Disciple-Making Coordinator. Learn more at worldventure.com/nhahn



Preparing Our Bronya-Apata

DAY 12

“[...] for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.”

—**Luke 2: 30-32 ESV**

I remember a particular Christmas from my youth. The aroma of goat meat boiling and chicken frying almost masked the smell of the standing water from the open gutters that surrounded our homes. That was the year my friend Kweku and I made our Bronya-Apata—our “Christmas house.”

Kweku was a short, left-handed boy who carried a machete. We used his machete to go to the bush and cut broad fanning leaves from the palm trees for our spectacular structure. Our precious leaves were stored at the site we wanted to build on, which was virtually any area we could find space around our mud houses. Sticks were staked for the structure, and then we spent hours meticulously weaving the palm leaves together to create our beloved Christmas house.

Just as Kweku and I meticulously prepared our Bronya-Apata growing up in the slums of Accra, we also must prepare our hearts for the return of Jesus Christ. God came down in human flesh, fully God and fully man. He died, and He was resurrected in order to bring us into right relationship with Him; for His glory.

Simeon was eagerly awaiting the Messiah; he was one of the people to whom the Lord had prepared to reveal himself. Luke 2:25 says that Simeon was a man who was “righteous” and “devout,” and that “the Holy Spirit was upon him.” We can prepare our hearts—our Bronya-Apatas—as Simeon prepared his heart. We do this by accepting the righteousness of Christ; devoting ourselves to the daily disciplines of prayer, studying and reading of the Word of God; and nurturing our relationship with the Father to create an inviting environment for the residence of God’s Holy Spirit.

So...how are you preparing your Bronya-Apata—your heart?

Evans and Jeanette Walton serve in Northern Ghana facilitating church leadership development, small group discipleship and mentoring, and coordinating various mercy ministries within the Navrongo communities. Learn more at worldventure.com/evanswalton

The Wise Still Seek Him

DAY 13

For about 400 years, the Israelites had heard nothing from the Lord. They knew there was to come a Messiah. After all those years of waiting, many seemed to have forgotten the promise, but some were looking for the Messiah coming as a king and conqueror. Few, if any, were looking for a baby in the manger.

The Jewish people longed for their Messiah but were distracted and did not know what to look for in the coming of the Messiah.

It was the Wise Men who were alert to His coming. As astrologers, they were watching the stars and considering the prophecies in the Old Testament. Scripture tells us their story in the second chapter of Matthew, especially in the first two verses:

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” —**Matthew 2:1-2 ESV**

They didn’t simply know what to look for—they also went looking for Him.

Each Christmas, we celebrate His coming as a baby. We know what to look for because we are looking back.

We also know that He is coming again. Are there things that are distracting you from watching and being ready for His return? And do you know for Whom you are looking?

We are living in interesting times as the Jewish people were in their time. During this Advent season, consider ways to celebrate both the fact that He came and the promise He will return.

Ginny Jensen serves as part of WorldVenture’s Paraclete Team providing missionary care. Learn more at worldventure.com/gjensen2020



Remembering Mary

DAY 14

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 NIV

*Mary, some think too much of you
But I, I fear, too little.*

*I do not venerate or pray to you
For that would God belittle.*

*Yet God chose you to be the one
To bear the Savior right.
And you replied obediently, fruit fulfilling.
What was the manger like that night?*

*You lived to greet and meet God's will
And died your birth pangs vindicated,
Pierced heart mended. Treasured thoughts ended.
Raising Him who would be Resurrected.*

*So if the star should guide me
I would not kneel to you but thee would thank
For what you did, O maiden true,
for obeying; heart and soul, mind and strength.*

*If e'er God chooses me to do
His will on earth for women and men
May I like you say yes to Him
And bless the world yet again.*

*Charley Campbell serves in Senegal training Christian leaders.
Learn more at worldventure.com/cscampbell*

Our Ultimate Fulfillment

DAY 15

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.” —Matthew 5:17, ESV

That's a bold statement from Jesus at the beginning of His earthly ministry.

God's Word had been passed down through oral tradition, extensive memorization and ultimately into written word. The Jews, God's chosen people, knew God's Word – commonly referred to as “the Law and the prophets” – in all of those forms. What would it mean to fulfill the Law and the prophets?

Jesus, God's Son, the Messiah, came – born of a virgin, in an unkempt manger, in modest Bethlehem, absent of notoriety. God's promise of old was kept! God's perfect world, broken by sin, had finally welcomed Jesus Christ – the Savior promised throughout “the Law and the prophets.” And, at the forefront of His public ministry, Jesus says He came to fulfill God's Law. The Jews, under the oppressive rule of Rome at the time, certainly anticipated a Savior – a political Savior. Jesus didn't come for that purpose. He came to provide salvation for man's sin through the sacrifice of Himself, ultimately fulfilling the Law and the prophets.

So, what was Jesus saying? Jesus was born to be everything we could never be because of sin—the perfect Man, King, Prophet and Sacrifice. In Jesus, we have our ultimate fulfillment.

Introducing the concept of Old Testament animal sacrifice to our Japanese neighbor, she was quite surprised at such a process. Yet, she understood something critical.

We asked, “Why do we not offer animal sacrifice for sin?”

She yelled, “I know!” She proudly declared, “We don't have to – Jesus was the Perfect Sacrifice.” And thereby fulfilling the requirements of the Law.

Our neighbor is getting to know Jesus – the One who can provide her with spiritual restoration, unshakeable peace – our ultimate fulfillment. And that makes for a very merry Christmas.

Justin Mitchell serves in Yokohama, Japan. Learn more at GodsGloryinJapan.com

Again. Unprecedented

DAY 16

The word, “**unprecedented**” has become a buzz word in 2020. **Unprecedented** pandemic, lockdowns, closures, face masks, protests, floods, locusts...hmmm. It is hard to even think about Christmas. So, what was it like that first Christmas?

For Mary, being visited by an angel was **unprecedented** enough after centuries of what seemed like silence from the heavens. Then, the announcement Gabriel gave left her stunned. She was to give birth to the Messiah, though not even married. Oh, that would be **unprecedented** news to her parents, her betrothed, Joseph, and her neighbors in Nazareth! Just imagine what they would think! Yet Mary submitted herself to the **unprecedented** will of her heavenly Father to accomplish... the **unprecedented**. God assured Joseph that, though **unprecedented**, he should still marry Mary which no doubt was a very quiet, parents only, wedding ceremony. Indeed, no one else would understand.

As Mary neared delivery, the unimaginable happened. Caesar Augustus required the entire Roman Empire to return home to be counted and taxed. Really? Nine months pregnant and a 90-mile trip? The crowds in Bethlehem were **unprecedented!** Not one room left. The innkeeper offered the stable, and amid musty hay, the King of kings was born. **Unprecedented!**

The **unprecedented** suddenly filled the night sky! The glory of the Lord shone around unsuspecting shepherds. An angel announced the Savior, Christ the Lord was born! When they saw Him, they spread this **unprecedented** news that Christ, our Savior was born.

We are living in **unprecedented** days—perhaps signs we are closer to our Savior’s second coming. Do we respond with fear and anxiety?

In 2021 can we, like Mary, be submissive to the will of the Father, even facing the **unprecedented**?

“I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said.” —**Luke 1:38 NIV**

Susan Griffith serves in Singapore, training student wives. Learn more at worldventure.com/rsgriffith

Where. O Death. is Your Sting

DAY 17

My favorite Christmas book was written in the early 300s.

No holly, ivy or mistletoe but this Christian author traced out the incarnation of the Son of God from eternity past to our own future. Christmas means the defeat of death, including the defeat of cancer, heart disease, and every deadly virus:

“You know how it is when some great king enters a large city and dwells in one of its houses; because he dwells in that single house, the whole city is honored, and enemies and robbers cease to trouble it...

[Since the death and resurrection of the incarnate Son], death has become like a tyrant who has been completely conquered by the legitimate monarch; tied hand and foot the passers-by sneer at Death, hitting him and abusing him, no longer afraid of his cruelty and rage, because of the King who has conquered him.”

—**Athanasius, On the Incarnation 9.3-4, 27.4**

Athanasius summed up Christ’s victory by quoting **1 Corinthians 15:55 NIV**:

“Where, O Death, is your victory? Where O Death, is your sting?”

The “sting” here in the original language is not a mere bee-sting, but the deadly pang of a scorpion! But in Christ’s kingdom, even COVID-19 is tied up hand and foot; and although the virus plays at being king, we need not fear his rage! For we serve the legitimate monarch, the true King, who conquered death itself.

Gary Shogren serves in Latin America. Learn more at worldventure.com/shogren

Encouragement

DAY 18

*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: 4-7 NIV***

As we celebrated the new year's arrival on January 1, 2020, no one could have envisioned the chaos, restrictions, suffering, uncertainties, and social outcry against racism and injustice the year would bring. The majority of us will remember this year for the rest of our lives. 2020 was not what many of us expected or hoped it would be. It certainly isn't something any of us could have anticipated.

Jesus' birth was not what Mary and Joseph anticipated, either. A first-time mother, attended by a new father, delivering in a stable, with a cleaned out animal trough for a cradle...it was not what they expected or hoped for.

Yet, in the midst of a dark and chill night, God was there. In the midst of pain and fear, God was there. Despite the uncertainty, God was there. Not only was He there, but He was at work.

He has also been at work throughout 2020. And we should expect nothing less in the time to come. I pray that I will see where He is at work today, so I might join Him!

Grace Sandeno serves as WorldVenture's Director of Public Health Initiatives.
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Winter Stillness

DAY 19

The year 2020 will be recorded in history as the beginning (hopefully, also the end) of the Coronavirus pandemic. It has certainly cast a dark shadow across our world. This not the first time humans have experienced such despair.

The historical period known as the "Dark Ages" included the appropriately named "Black Plague" which killed over one third of Europe's population.

Biblical scholars often refer to the 400 years between the last Old Testament prophet Malachi and the time of Christ as a period of spiritual darkness. Malachi wrote of many dark things. However, he ended the book with great hope.

*But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings.... —**Malachi 4:2 ESV***

Isaiah prophesied of this light four verses before he mentions that "a child will be born unto us."

*The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. —**Isaiah 9:2 NIV***

The night Jesus was born, the shepherds experienced it.

*Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them... —**from Luke 2:9 NLT***

God's promise to Simeon was fulfilled.

*I have seen your salvation, which you have prepared for all people. He is a light to reveal God to the nations, and he is the glory of your people Israel! —**Luke 2:30-32 NLT***

Jesus referred to Himself as "The Light of the World." —**John 8:12 NIV**

Life around us may become very dark, but Christmas is a celebration of the Light of Jesus which entered to brighten our world.

Bruce Thomas serves in Poland, teaching English as a second language.
Learn more at worldventure.com/blthomas

The Gift Inside

DAY 20

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.. —Isaiah 7:14 NIV

When I work with wood, I want it to look nice so I spend a lot of time sanding—rough sandpaper moving to the finer paper with a goal to make the wood smooth. Then, varnish brings out patterns in the wood and protects it.

But no beautiful, smooth, stained wood welcomed the King of kings. Mary and Joseph took their newborn, wrapped him in baby cloths (not cute baby clothes from Walmart) and laid him in a manger (not a crib they purchased from Ikea). A manger was a long open box or trough for horses or cattle to eat from, made of rough wood because animals would not appreciate the extra work to make the wood smooth.

When I prepare for the Christmas season, I want things to be very special. The decorations need to be in the proper place, the lights spaced just right, the perfect tree with a uniformed shape, and presents wrapped with paper, ribbon and bows.

It makes you wonder, what is most important: the beauty of the wrapping or the value of the gift inside? A gift represents the thoughts, love, concern and preparation of the giver to come up with a gift that is of value to the one who receives it. The greatest joy is when the person receiving the gift opens it and shows delight in the gift. You know you chose well and that person is pleased.

It reminds me of another rough piece of wood that Jesus was laid on at the end of his life. Isaiah writes that he “had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.” That was the outer wrappings, not the gift beyond value inside.

*Simply a manger, a place for animals' food
No beautiful wrappings for the world's greatest treasure
Symbolic of another piece of rough wood
On which this treasure would one day be laid
Once as a baby for rest now as a Savior for humanity's salvation.*

Jim Thorp is the Global Director to the Americas. Learn more at worldventure.com/thorp

Dangerous Worship

DAY 21

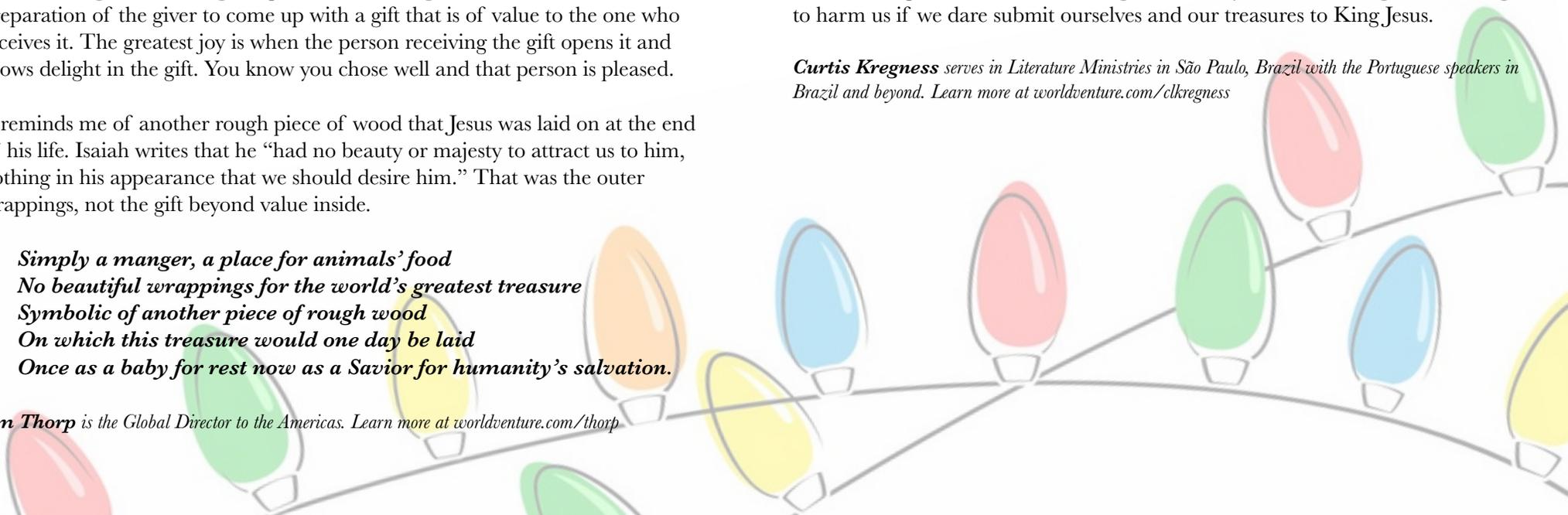
After Jesus was born in Bethlehem village, Judah territory—this was during Herod's kingship—a band of scholars arrived in Jerusalem from the East. They asked around, “Where can we find and pay homage to the newborn King of the Jews? We observed a star in the eastern sky that signaled his birth. We're on pilgrimage to worship him.” When word of their inquiry got to Herod, he was terrified—and not Herod alone, but most of Jerusalem as well. —Matthew 2:1-3 MSG

This segment of the nativity story could be entitled “A Tale of Two Kings.” The old king, Herod, is terrified when he hears of the Magi's “pilgrimage to worship” the new king, Jesus. After his initial reaction of fear, Herod becomes devious, then deadly. The wise scholars from the East discover that worship of King Jesus can be dangerous.

Although these first recorded visitors of Jesus rejoice when they find him, we also see very tangible costs attached to their bold worship: (a) the Magi must return to their country by a different—probably more circuitous—route; (b) Mary, Joseph and Jesus become fugitives and refugees in Egypt; (c) children are murdered in Bethlehem, victims of Herod's paranoia.

Come to think of it, authentic body-and-soul worship of Jesus always brings real world consequences, while other kings continually vie for our allegiance, itching to harm us if we dare submit ourselves and our treasures to King Jesus.

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Providence in Perplexity

DAY 22

But as [Joseph] considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.” —Matthew 1:20 ESV

Joseph faced a perplexing dilemma. One can only imagine the range of emotions he experienced upon learning that his beloved betrothed, Mary, was pregnant: Heartbreak, anger, sorrow, a sense of loss and betrayal. Joseph was compelled to proceed with the only recourse that seemed open to him: to formally break off his betrothal, which at that time was a covenant of such gravity that the only way it could be undone was through divorce.

A less noble man might have been inclined to publicly shame Mary for her apparent affair with another man. Yet Matthew tells us that Joseph was “a just man” (*v. 19*) giving no place to any vengeful response, but rather resolving “to divorce her quietly” to shield Mary from any wanton shame. That Joseph was a just man would seem to imply that he was a man of faith, for:

“The just shall live by faith.” —Galatians 3:11 KJV

Joseph still trusted in God even amid the heart-wrenching situation he faced.

We know from Scripture and from experience that often, when God’s people face a dilemma or a crisis, the Lord intervenes precisely when we have our backs to the wall, when we are boxed in and there seems to be no way out. This is what happened to Joseph. God sent his angel to reassure Joseph that the child conceived in Mary was of the Holy Spirit and would fulfill God’s redemptive plan of salvation.

Are you facing a perplexity in your life? Keep your hope in God (*Psalms 42:5*). For while his response and timing may not necessarily accord with our expectations, when we “draw near to the throne of grace,” we can be assured that God will in his perfect timing providentially intervene such “that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” —*Hebrews 4:16 ESV*

Greg Swenson serves in Japan as a church planter. Learn more at worldventure.com/gaswenson

Waiting

DAY 23

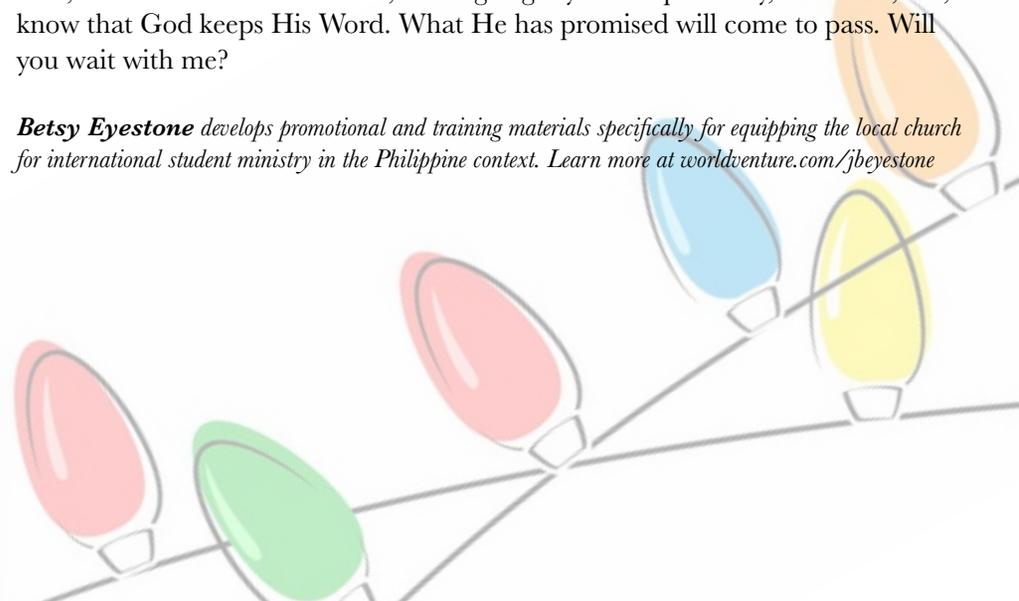
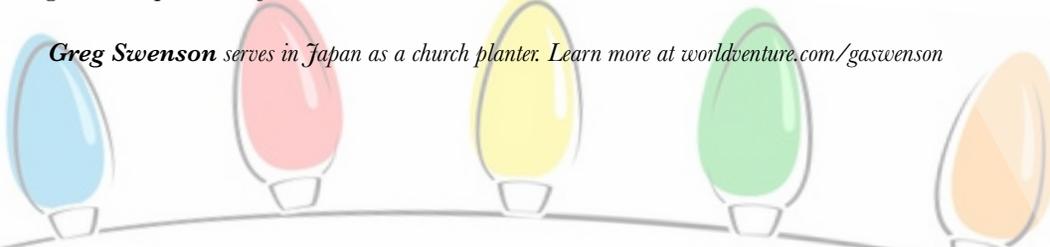
[T]here was a man in Jerusalem named Simeon. He was righteous and devout and was eagerly waiting for the Messiah to come and rescue Israel. The Holy Spirit was upon him and had revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. That day the Spirit led him to the Temple. So when Mary and Joseph came to present the baby Jesus to the Lord as the law required, Simeon was there. He took the child in his arms and praised God... —Luke 2:25-26 NLT

Simeon had been waiting. How long he had been waiting, we don’t know. But God had assured him he would live to see the One promised through the prophets who would bring deliverance and restoration to Israel. Simeon knew God well enough to know that He keeps His Word. Simeon had no doubt that what the Spirit had revealed would come to pass. So, during a dark period in Israel’s history, he waited patiently, expectantly, eagerly! And he was not disappointed.

Like me, you have undoubtedly found yourself waiting a lot this year. But what have we been waiting for? The pandemic to be over so we can get on with life? The political and social turmoil to pass so we can establish a new normal? Or have we been watching with anticipation how God is going to accomplish His Kingdom purposes through these unusual circumstances? Has it piqued your interest in the promise of Christ’s return?

While God has given me no assurances that I will live until Christ’s Second Advent, I choose to be like Simeon, waiting eagerly and expectantly, because I, too, know that God keeps His Word. What He has promised will come to pass. Will you wait with me?

Betsy Eyestone develops promotional and training materials specifically for equipping the local church for international student ministry in the Philippine context. Learn more at worldventure.com/jbeyestone



Silent Night?

DAY 24

Silent Night, Holy Night. All is calm. All is bright. (Right...?)

Franz Gruber and Joseph Mohr hurriedly wrote the music and lyrics in time for their Christmas Eve service at church in Oberndorf, Austria, in the year 1818. It quickly became a national treasure. In most of Europe, tradition demands that **Silent Night** can only be sung on December 24th.

In European culture there is no busier, more stressful, more complicated day than December 24th. It borders on insanity all that they try to cram into that day! Still, tradition demands attendance at the candlelight service which always concludes with the slow, soulful singing of all the verses of **Silent Night**. Even after singing of such history-changing truths, people rush back into the complexity of the celebration.

With all due respect to the famed Christmas carol, the biblical account of the night Jesus was born seems to describe more chaos than quiet! After an arduous trip, Joseph and Mary couldn't find any place to lodge. They finally ended up in some sort of an animal shelter. Exhausted and needing sleep, labor pains began. Meanwhile the night sky exploded with a loud choir of angels proclaiming the greatest news any Israelite could ever hope to hear. The Messiah was born! And those same angels sent simple shepherds to go find Jesus.

Mary, who had just given birth, was now entertaining guests. And they couldn't stop talking or staring into the manger. Would they ever leave? When they did, they ran all over town sharing loudly with everyone about the angelic singers and the barely-hours-old Messiah they had seen with their own eyes, making these sheep-watchers the very first to point others to Jesus Christ. The people marveled and came to see for themselves. Bethlehem buzzed with the bizarre news.

Was it a silent night? Absolutely not. It was noisy and crazy and busy and, yes, complicated. Was it a holy night? Absolutely, yes! The best way to celebrate Christmas, no matter how complicated things get, is to be like our simple, awe-struck shepherds – just keep pointing everyone to Jesus. Simple enough.

Silent night, holy night! Shepherds quake at the sight! Glories stream from heaven afar; Heavenly hosts sing Al-le-lu-ia! Christ the Savior is born! Christ the Savior is born!

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Do Not Be Afraid

DAY 25

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.

—**Luke 2:8-10 NIV**

Have you noticed in Scripture that often the first thing an angel says when they appear to people is, "Don't be afraid?" I am sure the shock of seeing a heavenly being caused immediate trauma. It was common to believe that if you saw an angel of God you would die (Hagar in Genesis 21:17; Gideon in Judges 6:22-23; Samson's parents in Judges 13:21-22).

Sometimes God does shocking things in our lives to get our attention. It is natural to respond in fear. But God tells us, "Don't be afraid!" He is bigger than our circumstances. He is stronger than our enemies. He is greater than our fears. He came to us with GOOD NEWS: The Messiah has come!

This same Jesus gives His followers peace in the middle of hard times.

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid. —**John 14:27 NIV**

And the Apostle Paul wrote this to the church at Philippi:

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

—**Philippians 4:6-7 NIV**

"Do not be afraid," God reminds us. The Prince of Peace is here. His peace is a gift and it is beyond understanding. It will guard our hearts and minds. And it is a gift unlike anything the world could ever give us.

Enjoy God's gift to you this Christmas!

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The Light

DAY 26

When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, “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 NIV**

Try this. Turn off all the lights in your home for a few moments. Then turn on your Christmas lights—only your Christmas lights. Then stop and consider how beautifully the lights glow and how the darkness cannot overcome the light.

Jesus called Himself the Light of the world in John 8:12. Jesus calls us, His followers, the light of the world in Matthew 5:14. Light. The darkness cannot overcome the light.

While we celebrate Jesus’ life on earth and remind ourselves that He is coming again, we also look around and see the darkness of those living without Him. There are people sitting in shadows of despair, clouded by hopelessness, and overcome by the losses of the pandemic. Darkness everywhere.

But Jesus is the Light. And we are invited to be light with Him.

When the light shines, darkness doesn’t win. Sickness, loss, despair, and death don’t win. There is always hope because Jesus lives. He was there in the beginning, He is with us now, and He always will be. God is constant no matter what things look like around us or in the lives of those to whom we have been sent. And we have the opportunity to reflect His light into the darkness around us.

So... shine bright!

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.
—**John 1:1-15 NIV**

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I See You

DAY 27

Mary’s exultant psalm as recorded in **Luke 1:47-48 ESV** rings true then and now “... and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for He has looked on the humble estate of his servant.”

What an assertion to make—that God has been mindful! But this was not Mary’s first reaction to the angel’s message. At first, she was troubled!

Then, this side-sweeping message from the angel - “you shall have a child.” **What?** An incarnation story with her in the starring role?

Mary would have been understandably confused, what with the potential for humiliation and rejection, even an execution by stoning a real possibility if Joseph did not believe her! But, instead of a meltdown, Mary quieted herself, allowing the earlier refrain to flow through her heart and mind – the words of the angel – *nothing is impossible with God!* (1:37)

How do we celebrate **the most wonderful time of the year?** For earlier this year, we learned, “**We are having... a pandemic!**” The announcement literally turned our world upside down. How can we be merry?

- Take a deep breath.
- Realize that God has seen the dilemma from way back.
- Believe that God is mindful of you. God sees you!

With that affirmation we can be like Mary bursting out with song. Affirming in the midst of the isolation and the social distancing God’s constant refrain: “**I am with you in this moment. I am mindful of your humble estate.**”

This **problem** has come to **save**. In the truest sense of the word. After all, isn’t Christmas all about our sure recovery? Our redemption and that of others! This Christmas is indeed like no other.

And since God has got us covered, the New Year, you’ll see, will be just fine!

Rene Chanco prepares people for ministry across Asia. Learn more at worldventure.com/rcchanco

When They Departed

DAY 28



Thanks

Now when [the wise men] had departed, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt...for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." And he took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod...

Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under... Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation..."

—**from Matthew 2:13-18 ESV**

Horrible. No wonder we never include this story in our Christmas pageants. Can you imagine the scene on a Christmas card? Me neither. The injustice! The suffering! It seems like the antithesis to Christmas.

But Jesus came back.

This helpless child, who departed for Egypt, grew up and confronted evil, abuse of power, and sin head on. He triumphed over all of it on the cross and rose again. And He departed from the earth with a promise of His Return, His Advent.

That's what that word means—Advent. He came once. He is coming back again. Jesus is King and He will return to establish justice and mercy in God's Kingdom. On earth. As it is in Heaven. Forever.

In the meantime, we live in a world where people around the globe and in the USA suffer from various "herods" on earth. But Jesus is building His Church and the gates of hell will not prevail.

As we depart 2020, let us affirm our role as the Church. Let us pray and work to see God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Let us begin in our own hearts. Let us look forward to the next Advent, when Jesus returns!

Bruce Swanson is the Director of 360 Innovation for WorldVenture.

Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift! —2 Corinthians 9:15 NIV

At WorldVenture, we believe in the importance of partnership. God has called us to embark on His mission to save the world together! And though we depend on your faithful support, we also wanted to support you in some simple way this season.

So I hope this resource was a blessing to you and that it helped you focus on Jesus during these unprecedented times. Because you aren't just our partner in ministry... we're your partners, too.

Engaging the world for gospel impact,

Jeff Denlinger

President, WorldVenture

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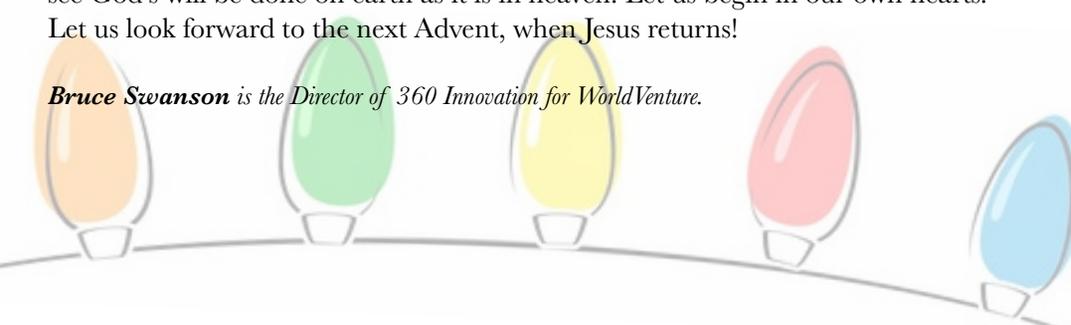
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