

We've spent the last month waiting for Christmas to come, marking the days and weeks with our Advent calendars at home and our Advent Candles at church. From one perspective, it seemed like Christmas would never get here. The Christmas decorations were filling the store aisles as early as October this year, and the retailers were filling our mailboxes with sales catalogs well before our first snow fall, so if it feels like we've been waiting for months, maybe that's why. Apple and Amazon have been planning for this year's Christmas since last year.

From another perspective, the days leading up to Christmas really flew by quickly. Maybe it's because so many of us have things we need to get done before the cold weather sets in, like taking in the hoses and insulating our windows. Maybe procrastination set in and we didn't start our Christmas gift shopping or Christmas baking early enough. But most likely, it's because each day of living tends to be filled with as much if not more than we can handle, and so thinking about anything in the future can be overwhelming. And then suddenly we're here, on the eve of Christmas, and our waiting is almost over.

This year I've been challenging you to interrupt the routines of your days by remembering to wait for Christmas with hope, peace, joy, and love, the very things we associate with the birth of Jesus on Christmas Day. If you're anything like me, you found that some days were easier to do that than others. Life can be full of crazy, unforeseen circumstances that turn us upside down and backwards. Regardless of how your Advent season has been, or even if you haven't really thought about Christmas until tonight, it's not too late to prepare your heart for Christmas. Tonight, we finish our waiting together, having remembered the events leading up to the birth of Jesus, and now allowing ourselves to be amazed that God loves us so much that he sent his son to live among us.

What's so amazing about Christmas? Well, how about that star blazing above

Bethlehem? Astronomers will tell you that stars are nothing more than enormous balls of burning gas. But what if one of those stars told a story, fulfilled a promise, and invited you to be a part of something that would turn the word on its head? That's exactly what happened to the Magi, who set out on a journey to follow the star. They could have ignored it, dismissed it, studied it from afar, or explained the star away as just another one of many in the sky. But they didn't. They waited for Jesus with faithful hope, then set out on a journey, believing that the star would lead them to Jesus.

I don't know about you, but there are times in my life that I allow myself to get derailed in the complications, anxieties, and fears of life. There are times when I've got my eyes turned so far inward toward my own problems that I fail to notice the stars that God has placed in the sky to lead me. That's not the way I want to live. Do you? Whenever I get sidetracked by the worries of living, I need to stop and look for a star that God may be providing. I need to follow that star until I find Jesus.

Christmas is a time to notice God's stars, to set out in search of Jesus, and to be overcome with joy that the sovereign Lord of all creation is still showing us signs and wonders in creation all around us. God continues to offer us signs of hope, but first we have to open our eyes, break out of our routines, and go on a journey to find Jesus.

Another amazing thing about Christmas is the name, Jesus. The Bible refers to Jesus by many different names. At Christmas, we especially remember the names given to Jesus by the prophet Isaiah: Wonderful counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. Those names are important, they reflect to us a part of who God is, but the name given by the angel Gabriel, "Jesus," cuts to the very center of our faith. Jesus means "God saves!" Think about that for a second. His very name is a resounding affirmation of God's goodness, love, and mercy. Christmas is a time of anticipating and celebrating that "God Saves" is making a personal appearance on earth to save us all. There's a breathtaking scope of mercy, compassion, kindness, and forgiveness wrapped

up in that one simple name, Jesus. There's an endless and overwhelming flood of love in that name. There are rivers of living water springing forth from that name. Jesus, God Saves!

Have you ever seen the lyrics for a song for the first time and discovered you'd been singing the wrong words all your life? Or maybe you've been singing the right word and never realized what it means? When I was a kid, I had the lyrics to Jingle Bells wrong. Instead of "one-horse open sleigh," I sang, "one-horse soap and sleigh." In a similar way, sometimes we get confused about the word "manger." The manger isn't a barn or a structure with a roof, it's actually the little box Jesus was laid in, what the dictionary describes as "a trough or open box in a stable designed to hold feed or fodder for livestock." A manger isn't a cute scene to sing about and adore, it's a dirty animal feed box. It would have been quite a bit dirtier than the one in this picture. That's right, Mary set the son of God down in a wooden box that sheep had been licking and drooling in. Can you imagine that? We should be shocked by the manger!

The real manger scene looked nothing at all like the crèche we set up in my family's living room in my childhood home, with each clean porcelain Hummel figure carefully painted and placed and Jesus neatly laid in a pile of pristine straw. That the Son of God was born to an unwed teenager in a barn should astonish us! Not only did the holy appear to us in the flesh, but God came as a helpless child, crying and squirming as all children do, born under difficult circumstances, and was revealed first to the most ordinary and downtrodden people possible- shepherds from the fields. In one bold stroke, God met all of us exactly where we need God to be, the perfect intersection of the divine and the human, the holy and the ordinary. Christmas is almost upon us, a time when heaven and earth come together in the most unexpected of places, a manger.

And then there are all those angels. We sing about them and we hang them on our Christmas trees, but why? It's not really the angels that should inspire wonder in us, but

the promise they delivered. “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.”¹ Immanuel means “God with us.” Do you believe that God is really “with us?” How do you see God? Is God so high above you and so holy that God can’t be bothered to give you the time of day? Is God so angry with you for your failings that God has nothing but judgement and punishment for you? The miracle of the Christmas promise that the angels heralded is that while God was high *above* us, Jesus bridged that great divide. God is now *with* us, Immanuel. The most amazing thing about Christmas is that God kept the greatest promise of them all and God is *with* us, for now and forever!

When you get up in the morning, do you expect God to show up, to really be with you, to be a part of your day? Do you expect that God will be there when you don’t feel like getting out of bed? When the grief you’re carrying around in your heart feels bigger than you are? When the loneliness or fear you’re facing are too much for you to handle on your own? The Christmas promise is that God is *with* us, Immanuel.

Christmas is a time to remember the wonder of God’s relentless and miraculous love, to embrace the real and powerful presence of God in our lives, and to offer that same relentless love to others. Jesus is the perfect fulfilment of that love. Tomorrow morning is the end of our waiting for Christmas. Don’t let tomorrow come without allowing your heart to beat just a little bit faster at the thought of what that first Christmas really means. Enjoy singing the Christmas carols but remember Jesus as you sing. Enjoy sharing gifts, but don’t forget to share the Good News of the most important Christmas gift of all, Jesus.

¹ Isaiah 7:14(b), NIV



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