

THE *Newborn* KING

AN ADVENT DEVOTIONAL OF GLOBAL
VOICES CELEBRATING JESUS'S BIRTH



WITH AN
INTRODUCTION FROM
**CHRISTOPHER
J. H. WRIGHT**

GLOBAL AMBASSADOR
FOR LANGHAM PARTNERSHIP



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The Newborn King: An Advent Devotional of Global Voices Celebrating Jesus's Birth

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Our vision is to see churches in the Majority World equipped for mission and growing in maturity through the ministry of pastors and leaders who believe, teach, and live by the Word of God.

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- Nurturing national movements for biblical preaching (Langham Preaching)
- Fostering the creation and distribution of evangelical literature (Langham Literature)
- Strengthening the theological training of pastors and leaders by qualified evangelical teachers (Langham Scholars)

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INTRODUCTION

"Mummy's coming!" That was the shout that stopped the game right there. Our children (now adults with children of their own) told us some years ago (when they deemed it safe to do so) about the game they used to play. They'd go into the lounge in our home and do all the things they were told not to do, like jumping from armchairs to sofas and throwing the cushions around until one of them would shout, "Mummy's coming!"—at which moment, they had to stop and sit totally still, and the last one down was "out."

It was all make-believe, of course, but if Mummy really *was* coming, it would mean judgment or joy, depending on what she found when the door was opened. Mummy's advent was a critical event: in make-believe, it was the end of the game (for that round); in reality, it could be the end of the world (for that day at least). A childhood game, but a parable of the Bible's story.

For one day, the shout will go up, *"God is coming!"* And that will be the end of the game, with judgment or joy for all the players in all of history. Some of the parables of Jesus make the same point—not with childhood games but with wedding arrangements or the return of a long absent master. The bridegroom is coming! The master is coming! Are you ready?

Actually, though, the announcement that *"God is coming"* weaves its way through the whole Bible. Adam and Eve heard it in the cool of the day when they had chosen the path of disobedience and hid themselves in shame and fear. The Hebrew slaves heard it in the midst of their cruel oppression as an exploited ethnic immigrant minority in Egypt when Moses told them their Redeemer God was on his way to deliver them. The Israelites heard it again at Mount Sinai when God came down to make his gracious covenant with them and dwell among them in spite of their rebellion and sin. Generations of Israelites, in their unfaithfulness and injustice, heard it from the mouths of the prophets as a warning of God's judgment to come: "Prepare to meet your God!" (Amos 4:12). That judgment fell in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile. But then the exiles themselves heard it again as a word of hope: "Be strong, do not fear; your God will come . . . He will come to save you"; ". . . prepare the way for the LORD!" (Isaiah 35:4; 40:3).

Well, God did indeed come, and He brought His people back from exile. But those words of the prophets resonated forward in hope and longing for an even greater coming, when God Himself would come and walk among His people in living flesh and, in that divine humanity, bear the sin of the world on the cross for our redemption. The readings that follow let us hear the voices of those in the Bible itself who anticipated, witnessed, and explained that first coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, and hear them through the voices of Langham friends from around the globe today.

But the readings, like the Advent season, also call us to prepare for the day when, at Christ's second coming, all of creation will rejoice to exclaim,

"God is coming!"—coming to put things right forever.

*Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad;
let the sea resound, and all that is in it.
Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them;
let all the trees of the forest sing for joy.
Let all creation rejoice before the Lord, for he comes,
he comes to judge the earth.
He will judge the world in righteousness
and the peoples in his faithfulness. (Psalm 96:11–13)*

"God is coming!"

May this work prepare you to share the joy of all creation and all the redeemed when He does.

Chris Wright

Global Ambassador and Ministry Director

Langham Partnership

DAY 1: THE GLORY OF THE LORD ACCORDING TO JACOB

Kemuliaan Tuhan menurut Yakub

Indonesian | Genesis 49:8–12

The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he to whom it belongs shall come and the obedience of the nations shall be his.

– Genesis 49:10

Genesis 49:8–12 recounts Jacob's blessing on Judah. According to Jacob, Judah was a man of great strength, like a lion, who would confront his enemies and to whom his brothers would give praise and bow down (49:8–9). In that great strength, he would be a great ruler from whom the scepter and staff would not depart (49:10).

Looking at what happened later in Israel's history, David, of the tribe of Judah, seemed to fulfil some of Jacob's blessing on Judah. Israel's enemies were defeated through David (1 Samuel 18:7; 2 Samuel 22:41). Later, however, the kingdom of David came to an end when the people of Judah were taken into exile to Babylon (2 Kings 25:1–21).

This necessitates a rereading of Jacob's blessing on Judah regarding the steadfastness of his kingdom. We do not find fulfilment when our reading considers only the kingdom of Judah in the Old Testament era. What kingdom is spoken of in Jacob's blessing on Judah? Who is he to whom the nations will submit and whose person and work is described in Genesis 49:11–12?

Traditionally, the Christian reading of the passage has shifted from looking at the physical kingdom of Judah to looking to the reign of the Messiah. Both the Old and New Testaments provide descriptions of the Messiah that recall Genesis 49:8–12. For example, Zechariah announces the coming of a king who is "riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey" (Zechariah 9:9; cf. Genesis 49:11). Matthew, Mark, and John all record that Jesus commanded His disciples to go and bring a donkey for Him. Matthew specifically asserts that Jesus's action is a fulfilment of Zechariah's prophecy (Matthew 21:4–5). This resonates with what was expressed in Jacob's blessing on Judah: "Binding his foal to the vine and his donkey's colt to the choice vine" (Genesis 49:11). Other passages remind us of the last part of Jacob's blessing on Judah (Genesis 49:12). Isaiah describes one who comes in a red garment (Isaiah 63:1–3). The Apostle John saw and described the Messiah as "dressed in a robe dipped in blood" (Revelation 19:13).

We see a common thread between Jacob's blessing on Judah and Jesus Christ, the Messiah. Through Judah, the person and work of the Messiah had been announced long in advance, though still vaguely. As time went on, the prophets made the picture clearer until finally the Messiah, namely Jesus Christ, came as promised, His genealogical record confirming that He is the fulfilment of the blessing on the line of Judah (Matthew 1:2–3). He is the strong one who defeats all His (and our) enemies, who will reign forever, to whom shall be the obedience of the peoples, ourselves included. He is the one who rode a donkey into Jerusalem to atone for our sins, who washed our garments clean in the wine of His blood, and whose beauty we will enjoy forever.

What do we think of when we read Jacob's blessing on Judah? One thing that is very moving to me, and that also provides an important lesson, is that Judah himself did not have an idea about how this blessing would manifest itself in the future, just as we do not know exactly what the future will look like. In Indonesia, where I'm from, people are dealing with many difficulties due to inequities in the economy and in access to information and opportunity. This creates uncertainty that leads to despair, crime, and loss of hope.

However, we can see today that the blessing on Judah has indeed been fulfilled and will continue to be realized in history through and in Jesus Christ. With that awareness, we can trust God's work in the difficulties and uncertainties we face as we set our feet to the future. It will lead us to humbly depend on God, through prayer and obedience to Him, come what may. Jesus, the Messiah who has come to us, will welcome us when we bring the burdens of our lives to Him, as He has invited us to do: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).



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DAY 2: THE GLORY OF THE LORD ACCORDING TO GOD THE FATHER

အဖေမည်းတစ်၏အဆိုအရ သခင်ဘုရား၏ ဘုန်းတန်ခိုးတော်

Myanmar | 2 Samuel 7 and Psalm 2

Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

– Psalm 2:12b

In some countries, such as the UK, Saudi Arabia, Thailand, and Brunei, people are able to understand what it means to be ruled by a king or queen, but people from most countries today find it challenging to appreciate the blessing of royalty and their rule. Despite its theological importance in Scripture, the kingship theme does not attract many preachers in Myanmar. Perhaps our memories are marred by unpopular colonial rule or our current despotic rulers. Another issue could be that most Christians come from ethnic minorities who once were ruled by local chiefs without the absolute power of a king. A concentration of power in one person sounds terrifying, so it is difficult to visualise a benevolent and just king. Yet, whatever our history or political system, we all long for someone with the power and the goodness to rule justly and set things to right.

The King Promised

Psalm 2 and 2 Samuel 7 both elicit longing for an ideal king. Most biblical scholars understand Psalms 2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 89, 101, 110, 132 and 144 as royal psalms, depicting different aspects of the promised and longed-for Davidic king in ancient Israel and demonstrating the theological importance of the kingship theme. Psalm 2, specifically, is a poem for the awaited king's coronation and a proclamation of his absolute authority. Because of its high hopes, it may have been used to enthrone the kings in ancient Israel, and it is one of the most quoted passages in the New Testament.

The events portrayed in 2 Samuel 7 are understood by most scholars as the “theological summit” not only of the Samuel corpus but also of the Old Testament. David wanted to upgrade the portable tent shrine of the Lord to a permanent “house” of cedar, an impressive temple. In response to his modest proposal, Yahweh announces that he will build a dynastic “house” for David instead. King David appears to be sincerely uncomfortable living in a cedared palace while the Lord's dwelling remains a skin tent. And David might have had another concern: temple building for their gods was typical for kings of his time. However, the message of God through the prophet Nathan makes it clear that Yahweh was more interested in his presence dwelling in a human being's faithful rule than in a magnificent

building. Nathan, making a pun, declares that the “house” would be the dynasty of kings from David to his descendants “forever.”

The King Yet Awaited

Yet Scripture also shows us that no king or ruler lives up to the ideal. The Bible does not draw a veil over the wickedness of humans, even over God’s chosen kings. In a strict sense, the Davidic kingdom ceased to exist after the death of Solomon (cf. 1 Kings 11:31–38). No Judahite monarch satisfied the hope of that ideal seed of David on the eternal throne. All earthly kings have failed. Therefore, along with the psalmists, we must keep looking for the true Davidic King who will demonstrate the ideals presented in these texts.

The King Arrived

Who, then, is that ideal King? Who installs him? It is Yahweh who is enthroned in the heavens (Psalm 2:4) who has crowned his anointed (Mashiach in Hebrew or, in Greek, His christos) on Zion (Psalm 2:2, 6). This cosmic King, the Father, makes the nations His son’s inheritance and the end of the earth His possession (Psalm 2:7–8) and invites all kings and rulers of the earth to be wise by submitting (Psalm 2:10–11) because no rebellion or plot against Yahweh’s anointed will succeed (Psalm 2:1–3). This worldwide dominion stems from the cosmic King, not from the King’s earthly military victories. God, the Father, gives His Davidic son the right to rule forever (2 Samuel 7:13), promising the anointed that He will not withdraw His steadfast love (*hesed*) from him (2 Samuel 7:15). Nathan, the court chaplain, hails the new monarch not just as the son of David but actually as the son of God (2 Samuel 2:14).

The New Testament writers do not mince words but understand that all aspects of the messianic expectations are fulfilled in Jesus the Christ. Ultimately, the righteous and just ruler has arrived. Remember that God the Father glorifies His Son and demands complete allegiance to Him as the true King (Psalm 2:11; Luke 9:35). It will be wise and better for us all to be quick in taking refuge in Him.



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DAY 3: THE GLORY OF THE LORD ACCORDING TO KING DAVID

Yòn khi Lông wu yôn ndhi lông Dauda sat

Mhiship | Psalm 110

*The LORD says to my lord: "Sit at my right hand until I make
your enemies a footstool for your feet."*

– Psalm 110:1

Psalm 110 is triumphant! It has the aura of royalty, and in it, King David speaks poetically about the authority of royalty to ably rule a dynasty and about the wielded power of royalty to conquer the enemies of the kingdom. But Matthew makes clear (Matthew 22:41–46) that in Psalm 110, David speaks not primarily of himself but rather heralds the coming of Jesus the Christ, one accredited by God, to the sinful world of humanity to redeem it in victory (cf. Acts 2:22–24). Luke, too, confirms Jesus's royalty. He reported the angel as affirming that Jesus would be great, that God would give Him the throne of His father David, that He would rule over the house of Jacob forever, and that His kingdom would never end (Luke 1:32–33).

So what can we learn from David's royal psalm about the Jesus who came and will come again? Let's answer that question by considering the scepter imagery that David employs in Psalm 110:2.

A scepter is an ornamental staff or rod that represents royalty, kingly power, and authority. It is usually carried by kings or queens at ceremonies. In Africa, the scepter is carried by the *lông*: the traditional ruler, chief, king, or the emir. It invests the person who carries it with sovereignty and royal authority. Such a symbol of authority demands veneration of the throne and the person seated on it by subjects as a mark of respect and honour. In Psalm 110, the Lord's scepter sent forth from Zion represents two great benefits to those under its rule—and therefore under the rule of Jesus.

The Scepter is Adorned with Power as Victor in Battle

The act of sitting David's Lord at the "right hand" of the Lord places Him in the position of authority, power, dominion, and victory over His enemies. That's what the "right hand" in the Scriptures symbolizes. Indeed, verses 5–6 of Psalm 110 describe the complete victory that will be won from that place at the right hand. This prefigures Christ's victory on the cross to defeat sin (John 10:17–18). During Advent, Christians reflect on how God graciously forgave their sins and adorns them, according to Apostle Paul, as His bride through the death and resurrection of

Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:1–19; 1 Timothy 3:15). Jesus had said prior to His passion, death, resurrection, and ascension, in response to Peter’s confession, that He would build His church and no power, physical or spiritual, will prevail against it (Matthew 16:13–19). Christ will always lead His people in a triumphal procession as conquerors in Him, through Him, and with Him (Isaiah 60:11; 2 Corinthians 2:14).

Christians should call to mind during Advent, and always as they live, that in Christ, God has given to them the spiritual power to become victorious in their spiritual battles against all kinds of enemies, just as He granted to David power to fight and defeat his physical enemies. God will always fight on behalf of His people, as He did for the Jews in Susa (Esther 4:1–17; 8:1–17), one day bringing justice and righteousness to all of His reign. This is especially reassuring for Christians who live amidst corruption, a bad economy, and the activities of terrorists and kidnappers, as is the case in Nigeria.

The Scepter is a Blessed Presence in the Midst of His People

Psalms 110 also depicts the reign of this one who goes out with Yahweh’s scepter (verse 2) as a reign and rule in which the people delight! They willingly offer their services to this ruler (verse 3), grateful for His benevolent power in their midst.

The period of Advent reminds all Christians around the world about God’s presence and protective power over them as their Father and Shepherd. Jesus assured His church concerning His continuous abiding presence when He promised to be with them always to the close of the age (Matthew 28:20b). Although we all live in a troubling world, our hope in the incomparable power and abiding presence of our God is never failing. Therefore, we can confidently say, “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Romans 8:31).



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DAY 4: THE GLORY OF THE LORD ACCORDING TO ISAIAH

Ang kaluwalhatian ng Panginoon ayon kay Isaias

Filipino | Isaiah 7 and 9

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

Rooted in the misery of poverty and corruption, Filipinos resiliently long for the reversal of this kind of discourse, something we could claim and recognize as a glorious path. We may dub it as a signpost of God's reign on earth as in heaven, the formation of a new kind of *polis* that ushers in renewal and transformation. The Advent of the Messiah graciously presents such a splendid story, ever told and experienced by people who hope in God. One place we encounter this amazing vision of renewal through His dominion—from “gloom” to “glory”—is in Isaiah, especially in 7:14 and 9:6–7.

Because the “glory of God” is interwoven into the fabric of the biblical story, Scripture speaks of the glory in different senses (adjective, noun, verb), referring variably to God's honour, dignity, exaltation, or reverence. The expression is related in many respects to the concept of God's *name* in the Old Testament. Morgan and Peterson summarized it well:

God, who is intrinsically glorious (glory possessed), graciously and joyfully displays his glory (glory displayed) largely through his creation, image-bearers, providence, and redemptive acts. God's people respond by glorifying him (glory ascribed). God receives glory (glory received) and, through uniting his people to the glorious Christ, shares his glory with them (glory shared)—all to his glory (glory purposed, displayed, ascribed, received and graciously shared throughout eternity).¹

Isaiah 42:8 declares, “I am the LORD; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols.” And Isaiah's chapters 7 and 9 stand in continuity with the Scripture's emphasis, prophesying about the glory to be revealed in the coming Messiah. In Isaiah 7 and 9, God's glory is revealed in *power*. Immanuel means “God with us.” Immanuel is foretold in Isaiah as one who *embodies* God's justice and righteousness. The angel, addressing Mary in Matthew's gospel, specifically identifies Immanuel with Jesus. Through Isaiah, God *announces* the coming birth to a “young woman” of a child named “Immanuel” as a sign to King Ahaz, a Judean king in Isaiah's time who engaged

in pagan worship and mollified the Assyrians, that God will come in Ahaz's own day, by the time "the child" knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, with mighty acts of *judgment* and *mercy*. Isaiah not only continues to apply the name Immanuel to the one doing God's work (8:8) but also announces that God will be *with* Israel as helper and saviour (Isaiah 41:10; 43:2, 5). The later Greek translation of the Old Testament will render "young woman" in Isaiah 7 as "virgin," and the New Testament will pick up this translation to *announce* the birth of Jesus, who will also be called "Emmanuel" (Matthew 1:23). Matthew builds on Isaiah's reiteration of God's covenant promises to Israel regarding the *coming* of God, which is the display of his *glory*.

Other New Testament writers also reflect the vision of a glorious, sovereign being painted in Isaiah 7 and 9 as a signpost of His glory. Jesus was rich and secure in the glory of eternity. Yet He willingly became poor and entered the world of suffering and death in the flow of time on earth (Galatians 4:4). He did this in order to die for the sins of humanity so that all who put their allegiance in Him can be forgiven of their sin and one day experience the wealth and security of living in glory with God. Indeed, the glory of the Lord is revealed in what He does. God will destroy the powers that oppress the people, and a holy child will be born (Isaiah 9). This child will grow into an authority, hence, the "Prince of Peace," who will rule over a world where war and violence have vanished, one that will be perfectly righteous (Isaiah 9:6–7). Believe it or not, God will accomplish all this (Isaiah 9:7: "The zeal of the Lord ...")! His words will come to pass.

To Filipinos, and to all who belong to the *samahan ng mga kinatawan ni Kristo* (community of God's people), the message of Isaiah 7 and 9 does not only come as a word of reassurance but a message of hope. God governs through His beloved Son, Jesus the Messiah, for His beloved community! Ultimately, God's glory will be displayed and His light will shine (John 3:19, 8:12) for and through His people.

¹ Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A Peterson, *The Glory of God and Paul: Texts, Themes, and Theology*. NSBT 58 (Downers Grove: IVP, 2022).



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DAY 5: THE GLORY OF THE LORD ACCORDING TO MICAH

Слава Господня згідно з пророком Міхеєм

Ukrainian | Micah 5

*And he will be our peace when the Assyrians invade our land
and march through our fortresses.*

– Micah 5:5

To read this text at a peaceful time is one thing because you read it as a story or as yet another messianic prophecy in the Bible. However, reading it while living in a country with an ongoing war is a different experience because you seek peace for your broken soul or for deeply traumatized people you work with daily. Micah wrote his prophecy about the Messiah when the Assyrians invaded the land of Israel. It was a time of fear, despair, death, and God's discipline for many people. However, it is precisely at this time of hopelessness that the people of God heard a promise about the hope to come: "He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God" (Micah 5:4a). Then Micah continues: "And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth. And he will be our peace when the Assyrians invade our land ..." (Micah 5:4b–5a).

During war and times of despair, we mostly look for peace as an action to stop the fighting and establish a state of non-war or, at the very least, a temporary cease-fire. Secondly, we look for peace as a state of our souls and minds. We want to experience peace internally. When the Assyrians invaded, however, the prophet described peace as God being present among frightened and suffering people and being the source of their shalom. "I am Emmanuel. I am with you. I am your peace. Trust me. Follow me, not other gods."

As followers of Christ in a country with an ongoing war, we often challenge Him in the depths of our souls and minds. Probably as a result of our profound internal and unresolved pain which tears us apart at our core, we are afraid to entrust ourselves and confess to Him because we think of Him as someone who is far away from us now. We think He is away because the war hit our lives, so we are afraid and experience a lot of pain. But He is present with us whether we feel it or not.

The story of Jacob struggling with God encourages me to live and serve the Lord in a context where many things seem to tear our souls apart. Jacob did not know what

awaited him the next day on the other side of the stream: war with his brother or a life of peace. And I find myself shouting with Jacob, wrestling with the Lord: “I will not let you go unless you bless me!” I am crying to Him, overcoming poignant pain in my hip: “I will not let you go unless you give me peace!” Perhaps we cannot appreciate the discipline and blessing of the Father, even during a war, without Him striking us and humbling us in the dark depths of our souls where we often do not allow access even by those we love immensely. This darkness can only be dispersed by the presence of God, even if we try to struggle with Him like Jacob. I ask only one thing in the darkness of the night when I lose peace and am overwhelmed with fears or panic regarding tomorrow: “Father, I prefer to struggle with you like Jacob rather than serve you like Annas and Caiaphas in the temple. You hurt my thigh, struck, and humbled me. But you bless me and give me yourself as the peace. And I firmly confess that the dawn will come inevitably.”

We, in Ukraine, meet this Advent season having the war in our country. We learn not only to pray for peace but also to acknowledge that peace is not just about war or battles. It is about God's presence in our souls and minds as the source of His shalom over the hopelessness and His light over the darkness, regardless of the pain we experience. Therefore, Jesus, let us never forget amidst any invasion—whether by sin, pain, suffering, or war—that our peace is you, Emmanuel, God among us.

Peace be with you.



TARAS DYATLIK

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DAY 6: THE GLORY OF THE LORD ACCORDING TO JESUS'S GENEALOGY

የጌታ ክብር፣ በኢየሱስ የትውልድ ሐረግ እንደተገለጸው

Amharic | Matthew 1:1–17

So, all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations, and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ fourteen generations.

– Matthew 1:17

One day, as always, I had a chat with my grandmother. As we were talking, she started to give us some advice on marriage. It's not the kind of advice that you are thinking right now. Rather, it had to do with the background of a potential husband. She was firm in insisting that he had to be from a well-known family and that we should ask him about his ancestry and lineage. In the culture of the northern part of my country, it's kind of an unwritten rule that you research back five to seven generations before you get married in order to be sure the partner is acceptable. Part of it is to check that there is no mix of families, but the other part is to make sure that the lineage is familiar and known. Genealogies and family lineage do really matter in most of the societies in my country, and I assume the same is true with that of my fellow Africans and beyond. It gives an assurance of relatability for the families and also for future generations!

Jesus needs to have a lineage one can associate with. Matthew (1:1–17) presents Jesus as the consummation of Israel's history by listing the genealogy starting from Abraham, who is the bearer of the promise of God to make him a blessing to all the people on earth.

The contents of the genealogy give us a new definition of the glory of God. As we study the details of the generations, we see different kinds of people with different kinds of character as well. Such a genealogy gives us an assurance that Jesus has a reliable background and a lineage that we all can relate to. Let us see how it is the redefinition of the glory of the Lord.

As Matthew has written it, we can see it in three categories. The first category is from Abraham to David. This includes all the patriarchs, the fathers known for their strong faith, the ones who called God their Lord. Their stories and actions were very well known. Surprisingly, we also see three women mentioned, which is not the usual case

in a genealogy in the history of Israel. On top of that, these women did not even have widely accepted character and lineage—two of them were Gentiles!

In the second category, we see kings, starting with the mention of David as king. In this category, we see fourteen kings, of which only two were found to be righteous—Hezekiah and Josiah. Again, we also see a woman, Bathsheba, though her name was not mentioned. Rather, she is presented as the wife of Uriah. Nevertheless, she is listed as the mother of Solomon, the second king. In the third category, I tried to look for the names in Scripture but could only find three of them! The others are unknown—i.e., not patriarchs or kings or prophets, but regular people, I assume. Again, we see one woman, called Mary, who is presented and featured when Joseph is introduced as “the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born.”

The glory of God was made known before, in the Old Testament, in some specific ways, but in ways that seem distant and unrelatable for everyday people. But the glory of God finally manifested through Jesus Christ is redefined. He is the manifested glory of God (John 1:18 and Colossians 1:19), a son of David, and the son of Abraham. But when we see His lineage, it has all kinds of people in it—Jews and Gentiles, patriarchs and kings, harlots and faithful women, unknown people and regular people. The lineage of Jesus is indeed an assurance that any one can associate themselves to it—and to Him—whether we are famous, sinful, righteous, messy, low-class, high-class, commoner, or king.

The full and final manifestation of the Lord’s glory is all about inclusion not exclusion in Jesus! Our background, our reputation, mistakes, gender, languages don’t matter. Jesus’s lineage is telling us that He belongs to the whole world, and we all can relate to Him. The coming of Jesus, the birth of Jesus, is about inclusion, assurance, and relatability.



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DAY 7: THE GLORY OF THE LORD ACCORDING TO THE ANGEL OF THE LORD

Dyegyong thyi Nga Khyee n Fa Maleka Nga Khyee

Gyong | Matthew 1:18–25; 2:13–15, 19–23

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet ...

– Matthew 1:22

The good news brought by the angel of the Lord in Matthew 1 and 2 is what my people in Southern Kaduna, Nigeria, greatly needed. As African traditional worshippers, their life was guided by the ancestors, spirit beings, and elders of the communities. By the sovereignty and providence of God, Christian missionaries came to our area in the early 1930s with the gospel of Jesus Christ. In Matthew 1–2, we read about significant advances in that gospel's unfolding and see a spirit being, the angel of the Lord, in its rightful place.

Through his ministry to Joseph, the angel of the Lord brings about the plans and purposes of God. The text tells us three times that the result of the angel's intervention fulfilled what God had revealed through the prophets (1:22; 2:15, 23). Before God created the heavens and the earth, in His foreknowledge, He made a salvation plan for humanity (Ephesians 1:4; Revelation 13:8). He first promised the seed of the woman, Jesus, who would crush the head of the serpent, Satan, when Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:15). God reiterated that promise in different times and ways to the patriarchs and through the prophets, and the birth of Jesus fulfilled God's promises and prophecies of the coming Saviour of the world. The ministry of the angel of the Lord in Matthew 1–2 glorifies God, the promise-keeper, who honours His Word and who is trustworthy, reliable, and dependable.

At the same time, these fulfilled prophecies teach us important things about God's saving work in Jesus. No matter our tribe, tongue, or nation, they bring comfort and encouragement as we prepare to celebrate His birth.

Jesus identifies with our experience and our struggles, so we can have peace.

"Out of Egypt I called my son" (Matthew 2:15) is a quote from Hosea 11:1 and references the historical fact that Israel sojourned in Egypt before God delivered them and brought them to the promised land. Jesus, too, sojourned in Egypt because He came to be and do what God's people were meant to be and do. Additionally, His being called a Nazarene (Matthew 2:23) likely refers to the fact that he would be despised and looked down on, not elevated and beloved, in His earthly ministry. Jesus identified with the lowly, the vulnerable, and the have-nots as He came to restore

peace to His world.

Jesus saves from sin, so we can rest in His sacrifice. The angel of the Lord delivered a message about naming Mary's child. "Jesus" means "God saves." He saves people from their sins. His conception by the Holy Spirit and the holy life He lived means that He was able to offer Himself as a perfect, sinless substitute for sinful humanity. In Adam, all human beings inherit sin and unrighteousness and therefore face God's wrath and death. But in Christ Jesus, the Second Adam, by grace through faith they inherit obedience and righteousness and therefore God's delight and eternal life. The salvation of Jesus is offered to human beings for them to believe and accept Jesus as Saviour and Lord.

Jesus is with us until the end, so we don't need to fear. The angel of the Lord's ministry brought about the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy about Immanuel, which means "God with us." God's abode is no longer apart from us. His presence is with us and within us. When we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God comes and lives in us by His Holy Spirit. Just as Jesus was born through the power of the Holy Spirit, so also a Christian receives a second birth through the power of the Holy Spirit when one believes. More than that, our Immanuel is always with us even to the end of the age. Some people look for protection and assurance not from God but from lesser beings and mundane things. God is our place of refuge and protection.

In Matthew 1–2, we can see and be encouraged by the sovereignty of God that protected Jesus, using His angel messenger to do so. The providence of God guides our lives through the contingencies and the unseen and unpredictable forces and powers in our lives. The hand of God is always with us in our history. We need not rely on tribal ancestors or modern gurus to offer protection or show us the way because the sovereign God covers us and His providence directs and guides us.



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DAY 8: THE GLORY OF THE LORD ACCORDING TO JOSEPH

La gloria del Señor según José

Spanish | Mathew 1:18–25

*When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord
had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.*

– Matthew 1:24

I want you to imagine this scenario. You are engaged to be married, and the long-awaited wedding day is fast approaching. You love each other and have avoided intimate relations waiting for the precious moment of being declared spouses. Suddenly you receive unexpected news. Your fiancée is pregnant. How would you feel? What would your reaction be?

Well, that happened to Joseph, Mary's fiancée, according to this Gospel account from Matthew 1:18–25.

By putting ourselves in Joseph's sandals, we can imagine how devastated he would feel. Being pledged to be married—or “betrothed”—was, at that time, something more serious than it is today. Usually, the commitment time was one year, and you couldn't just cancel it at any time. In a sense, the fiancés were already considered spouses, so to break off the engagement, they had to face a legal divorce.

Joseph had two options in this difficult situation. One was to report publicly that his fiancé was pregnant, and, according to the law (Deuteronomy 22:23–24), the community would have stoned Mary. The other option was to secretly divorce her to protect her from public embarrassment and punishment. The biblical account tells us that Joseph chose this second option. But what implications would Joseph's decision have had?

On the one hand, we can imagine the pain for Mary, who, being faithful to God's will, would be abandoned to face the birth and subsequent education of her child alone. She would have been a single mother. And what about the consequences for Jesus Himself? What would it have meant to grow up and live without a father figure?

It's a sensitive issue in my Latin American context. I know several people who have grown up only under the care of a mother. They grew up with a profound emotional emptiness and a strong desire to have a close relationship of love and healthy authority with a male figure. Currently, too many men, when they face the responsibility that pregnancy and the care of a baby implies, decide to run away,

to abandon their women. It's so true that I heard a dear colleague from the ministry of Langham Preaching say that, although the parable of the prodigal son has taught us great lessons, in our Latin American reality, we have to tell stories of prodigal fathers. These lost fathers decide to return home and take responsibility for their children's education and for their wives' emotional support.

What was the solution to the dilemma Joseph was facing? Matthew tells us that when Joseph was considering abandoning Mary, "an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins'" (Matthew 1:20–21).

Joseph was facing a complicated situation. But God intervened, and the angel reassured him and asked him to receive Mary as his wife. But that was not all. He also told him he had to take responsibility for the child that would be born. That's why he said to him: "You will give him the name Jesus." In other words, you will take full charge of the child, receive him as your own son, and give him a legal identity. And this is very significant because, as the angel said, Joseph was the son of David.

How timely was God's intervention! And what valuable information he transmitted to Joseph. Mary had not betrayed him. Her pregnancy was a true miracle, as confirmed by the quote from Isaiah 7:14. Joseph is also made aware of the unique nature of the son to be born: He will be the Saviour of the people.

The story ends by showing us a Joseph obedient to the message of the angel of the Lord. He did the two things the angel asked him to do: he received Mary as his wife and took care of the baby he named Jesus.

What a great story for us to reflect on! In its details, we see God working out His purposes to provide the world a Saviour through the often-difficult faithfulness of people. And you, how do you solve the great dilemmas of life? Do you seek the will of God and count on the help He provides? Are you willing to obey the Lord and pay the price this often requires?



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DAY 9: THE GLORY OF THE LORD ACCORDING TO GABRIEL

Kemuliaan Tuhan menurut Gabriel

Indonesian | Luke 1

But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favour with God."

– Luke 1:30

Fear.

Fear is a universal experience. Fear can be triggered by many factors. Some fear the dark; others fear the uncertainty of the future. Some fear losing their loved ones; others fear being rejected. Some fear failing; others fear for their safety. Some fear because of war; others fear the ever-present shadow of death. In Indonesia, many people fear the spirit world, malevolent spirit-beings, and dark magic. They fear that dark magic and evil spirits might inflict harm on them.

Fear always lurks near us, waiting for the right time to seize us. This is why the message of the angel Gabriel in Luke 1 is important. Twice the angel exclaimed, "Do not be afraid." When he appeared to Zechariah the priest, Zechariah was shocked and became very afraid. To calm him down, the angel Gabriel said, "Do not be afraid" (Luke 1:13). Later on, when Gabriel visited Mary, she too was startled. The angel Gabriel reiterated his message, "Do not be afraid" (1:30). In fact, Luke recorded that when Jesus was born, an angel of the Lord appeared to the shepherds who were tending their sheep. Guess what was the first thing that the angel said. "Do not be afraid" (2:10).

It is true that in the incidents mentioned above, the people needed to be calmed since they were startled by the appearance of the divine messenger. However, the exhortation goes beyond merely calming down the shocked recipients. The exhortation by Gabriel is strongly related to his main message: God is about to execute his plan of salvation through Jesus. To Zechariah, Gabriel stated that his son would be a forerunner to the coming Lord. John the baptizer, as he would be known later, would call the Israelites to repentance (1:13–17). To Mary, Gabriel declared that she would bear a child—a saviour, who is the promised Messiah and king from the line of David (1:30–33). Furthermore, he explained that it would be a miraculous birth through the power of the Holy Spirit (1:35).

When Zechariah voiced his doubt, Gabriel responded by explaining his identity. “I am Gabriel,” he said (1:19). For the Jews at that time, the name Gabriel recalled an angel with the same name who visited Daniel twice (Daniel 8:16; 9:21) and helped Daniel to understand God’s plan. Likewise, in his visit to Zechariah, Gabriel declared that he stood in the presence of God and had been sent to proclaim the good news of God’s plan of salvation (Luke 1:19). Gabriel’s message to Zechariah and Mary was not one of doom. Rather, it was a message of hope.

For Christians today, Gabriel’s message seems to be a thing of the past. Jesus has been born, has died, and has been resurrected. Yet Gabriel’s exhortation still stands: do not be afraid! God’s good news is not confined to the past. It also belongs to us who live in the present. God has carried out his plan of salvation in Jesus. We are now waiting for its completion. We do not wait in fear but in an assured hope.

Fear is a universal experience. Fear can rob us of our joy. The things that we fear might become reality. Nevertheless, for Christians, fear is not and will not be the last word. Gabriel, the divine messenger, has reminded us: do not be afraid! God will certainly accomplish his plan of salvation through Jesus. In this Advent season, may we learn to trust that, while fear might creep in, Jesus our Lord and Saviour will protect and see us through.

Fear not.



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DAY 10: THE GLORY OF THE LORD ACCORDING TO ELIZABETH

La gloria del Señor según Elizabet

Spanish | Luke 1:5–7, 24–25, 39–45, 57–66

Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

– Luke 1:6–7

In privacy

Luke's story begins by presenting a married couple who, although both were just before God and very careful to obey him, carried a shadow of frustration. Despite their fidelity to the Lord, they had not been able to have children: Elizabeth was barren, and they were already very old. The disappointment of previous years had possibly turned into resignation. It seemed like God did not hear their prayers. And it was already too late!

When her husband arrived home from Jerusalem after serving a week in the temple, Elizabeth was amazed to see him. He had lost the ability to speak. But his face reflected joy. After greeting her with renewed affection, he began to communicate by signs. The woman watched her husband's wrinkled hands pointing upwards, outlining a swollen belly, and rocking an imaginary baby.

Time passed, and while Elizabeth continued thinking about what her husband had tried to communicate to her, she began to notice that her body was experiencing some changes. Little by little, her clothes became tighter, and she felt discomfort in her belly until the expected motherhood became evident. Elizabeth stayed home, resting and meditating on how the glory of the Lord had been manifested in the privacy of her home and in the secrecy of her body when everything seemed impossible. She praised God, who had removed the social shame of being sterile.

In the meeting

Elizabeth was surprised when the young Mary came from Nazareth to visit her. Let us remember that the news did not arrive at the speed of our days. How would her young relative have known she was pregnant despite her advanced age? But that was not all. Listening to the visitor's voice, the old woman felt the child she carried inside her start moving like never before. It seemed that the baby was jumping for joy. And a sense of spiritual fulfilment communicated incredible news to her. She understood that this girl, Mary, would be the mother of the Messiah.

And the glory of the Lord filled the place where both women merged into a hug. Both shared a manifestation of God's grace that was incomprehensible. Both witnessed how God had made Himself evident in their lives, even though the conditions were unsuitable for things to happen that way.

In the community

The long-awaited day arrived, and Elizabeth gave birth to the son God had sent her. The neighbours and relatives were happy to see God manifest His glory in her life with great mercy.

When the time came to name the child, those present did not agree with the name suggested by his mother, so they consulted the father. When he affirmed the name his wife had said, he immediately began to speak and praise God.

The news captivated the neighbourhood. Everything that happened was too incredible! And discussion of the happenings spread through the hills of the region. God had manifested his Glory among them!

In us

Many people consider themselves Christians in Argentina. However, they are not convinced that God can manifest Himself in their daily lives amid the uncertainty generated by economic instability, corruption, and generalized violence, including church divisions and a membership with very little commitment.

But in this season of Advent, it is critical to remember that, although we often feel frustrated because it seems that God is absent from the harsh reality that we have to face, the Lord still wants to and can manifest his glory in the intimacy of our lives, in our home, our relationships, our community. He has no limits to doing so. There are no impediments to what He wants to do with us.

May the Lord give us the faith and the ability to recognize His incredible and merciful interventions in our daily lives, even if it seems that the conditions are not favourable and it's not humanly possible. What God does in private will bear fruit among those close to us and those far away. And then our story will never be the same again.



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DAY 11: THE GLORY OF THE LORD ACCORDING TO ZECHARIAH

जकरिया के अनुसार प्रभु की महिमा

Hindi | Luke 1:5–25, 57–79

But the angel said to him: “Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John.”

– Luke 1:13

Luke’s account of the life and ministry of Jesus is distinctive in that it does not begin with His birth or baptism. Rather, his intent seems to be to draw attention to the supernatural events that mark God’s intervention after four hundred years of prophetic silence. Thus, following a brief preamble, he begins his narrative by focusing on the supernatural circumstances of the birth of the forerunner of Christ, John the Baptist. The spotlight in these opening verses is on John’s parents, Elizabeth and Zechariah, chosen by God to be included in his plan for the arrival of the Messiah.

Luke tells us that Elizabeth and Zechariah were both of priestly ancestry, “righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commands and decrees blamelessly,” but tragically for that era, “childless” (Luke 1:6–7). In the Ancient Near Eastern world, as in traditional societies like India even today, childlessness was seen as a curse or even as a divine punishment for sin. Elizabeth herself viewed her shame and humiliation as a “disgrace” (Luke 1:25). Most believers have experienced times in our lives when our faith comes under stress like this. We believe God’s Word is true and that He answers prayer, and we are following the Way of Christ as best as we can, yet God does not seem to come through for us.

Zechariah and Elizabeth lived with their reproach and remained faithful despite no sign of divine favour. But then came the moment of a lifetime. Zechariah was one of twenty thousand priests who served at the temple for two one-week periods each year. A priest could offer the incense at the daily sacrifice only once in his lifetime, and on this day, the lot fell on Zechariah. The people were undoubtedly praying for the hope of Israel, the Messiah, to come and usher in the kingdom of God. What about Zechariah? What could he have been praying for?

The angel’s words—“your prayer has been heard”—suggest that Zechariah may have used this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to ask God to fulfil his lifelong, unfulfilled desire for a son. And the response came dramatically in the appearance of God’s personal messenger. The prayers of Zechariah and those of the people praying for

the Messiah to come are both answered in one stroke. Zechariah and Elizabeth would have a son like no other! They would be the privileged parents of the forerunner of the Messiah. Like Zechariah and Elizabeth, Israel's hopes of seeing divine intervention in their circumstances might have died after God's long silence. But faithfulness has its reward. In Zechariah's marvelous divine encounter in the temple, he saw God as the God who gives life to dead hopes.

India, a nation of 1.3 billion people, has many millions whose lives are marked by dead hopes: over two million women and children who are victims of sex trafficking, one-fourth of the world's malnourished people, and one-third of the population living below the poverty line.

Jasmine and Samir's story offers us a window into the "dead hopes" of India's untold millions. After AIDS had snatched away her mother, four-year-old Jasmine's father and elder brother abandoned her and her six-month-old baby brother, Samir, to fend for themselves on the streets of Mumbai. Some servants of Christ heard this little girl calling out to God as she rocked her little brother to sleep, having found temporary shelter in the corner of a hospital ward. They took these two abandoned children to a "Village of Hope" run by a Christian ministry that offers refuge to such children. Eighteen years later, Jasmine and Samir have grown into radiant young followers of Christ. Jasmine's story recently made headlines in newspapers and local TV after she appeared for a competitive exam and obtained a highly-coveted medical college seat.

This Advent season, Zechariah's vision of God's glory reminds us that there is a living God, a God who gives life to dead hopes! Why did God wait so long to hear Zechariah and Elizabeth's prayer? Why did He wait for thousands of years to send Jesus to save the world? God's timetable may be different from ours, but don't stop praying. Keep your hope anchored in the faithfulness of God!



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DAY 12: THE GLORY OF THE LORD ACCORDING TO JOHN THE BAPTIST

Ang Kadakilaan ng Diyos Ayon Kay Juan Bautista

Filipino | Luke 1:13–19, 44, 57–79

He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, "His name is John."

– Luke 1:63

Names can say a lot. The Spanish influence on the Philippines is noticeable in names: Juan dela Cruz is the representation of a common Filipino. However, John, which is the English counterpart of Juan, is also popular, revealing the presence of Americans in the Philippines and the American impact on the Filipino way of life. For Filipinos, names are used not only for identity but also for fad and fashion. The naming of John the Baptist, though, has deep implications tied not to fad and fashion but to his story and his kingdom role.

The Name of John, His Father's Doubt, and God's Grace

When Zechariah doubted the words of the angel of the Lord about his wife's conception at her old age, he was chastised and could not speak until the fulfillment of the angel's message (Luke 1:18–22, 64). On the eighth day after Elizabeth gave birth, Zechariah wrote the name of his baby after the angel's instruction: "His name is John." This surprised those around because Zechariah and Elizabeth didn't have any relative with that name (Luke 1:57–63). True, John's name didn't conform to tradition, but it had more important communicative work to do.

"John" (Greek: *Ioannes*) is an adaptation of the Hebrew *Yôhānān*, meaning "Yahweh is gracious/merciful." John's mother testified about such grace when she got pregnant even though old and barren: The Lord "has shown his favour and taken away my disgrace" (Luke 1:25). Her neighbours and relatives shared her joy upon hearing "that the Lord had shown her great mercy" (Luke 1:58). Zechariah also declared that God raised up a "horn of salvation ... to show mercy to our forefathers" and that his son would prepare the coming of the Lord "to give his people the knowledge of salvation ... because of the tender mercy of our God" (Luke 1:69–78). John's name displays the glory of the Lord in terms of his grace and mercy for John's family and nation—grace and mercy we all need, John included.

From Conviction to Question or Doubt

As John grew up, his parents would have talked about his extraordinary birth and the prophecy that he would be great in God's sight, "filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth," and would prepare the way of the Lord in the "power of Elijah ... to make

-- a people prepared for the Lord" (Luke 1:15–17). Also, the neighbours' and relatives' expectations for an extraordinary career might not have mellowed down (Luke 1:66). When John felt God's call, he decided to get proper training with the Qumran Community (cf. Luke 1:80). That community would have introduced John to a more intense study of Old Testament scripture.

After his desert training, John came out preaching with courage and conviction. He was not only preaching the message of repentance and forgiveness (Luke 3:3) but also a message of judgment: "You brood of vipers ..." (Luke 3:7–9). He knew his vocation and his message. But later on, when imprisoned, he questioned the messiahship of Jesus, asking, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" (Luke 7:18–20). While in prison, John would have been expecting the judgment of the wicked because that was the theology he learned from his training in the desert (cf. Luke 3:17). Instead, he was left wondering: "If He is really the one, why is He not doing something to free me?"

John's story is relatable. How many Christians are there, faithful and zealous servants of God, who become discouraged and frustrated by life's circumstances? There are many confused Juan dela Cruzes in the Philippines reeling from the results of the recent election, the rising social ills of the society, and the lingering effects of COVID-19.

No Other Way, But to Jesus

Though confused, there was no other way for John to go but to Jesus, and, in response to his question, John was reminded of the meaning of his name (Luke 7:21–23). Jesus didn't scold John. Rather, He demonstrated His power to bring grace and mercy to lives in need of them and sent back testimony to bolster John's faith.

Such is the glory of God's grace and mercy upon John and the witness to His glory through the one named "Yahweh is gracious." This Advent season, may hope in the Lord be bolstered by John's witness to the Lord's glory.



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DAY 13: THE GLORY OF THE LORD ACCORDING TO THE HOLY SPIRIT

從聖靈看上主之榮光

Traditional Chinese | Matthew 1:18–20; Luke 1

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit.

– Matthew 1:18

Matthew's story of Jesus's birth begins on a discordant note: Mary, an engaged virgin, is pregnant. In traditional Chinese society, it was shameful for a woman to carry a child not conceived with her husband. But in Mary's case, the scandal was worse. In first-century Palestine, a woman found to be pregnant before marriage could be stoned to death. Joseph vows to break off the engagement. How frightening that prospect must have been for Mary!

Fear and confusion are also what Mary feels when, in Luke's Gospel, an angel informs her that she, though unmarried, will bear a son (Luke 1:29–30). "How will this be since I am a virgin?" Mary wonders (Luke 1:34). The angel explains: "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you" (1:35). What seems to be a scandalous birth is really cause for great joy. Fittingly, His name will be Jesus ("God saves" – Matthew 1:21). Mary's Spirit-conceived child will be the Saviour of the world.

The Holy Spirit will also be at work in another surprise child. Before we meet Mary, Luke introduces us to Mary's relative, Elizabeth, the barren wife of the elderly priest Zechariah. An angel appears to Zechariah bearing the amazing news that Elizabeth, in her old age, will bear a son. Even before he is born, that son, to be named John, "will be filled with the Holy Spirit" (Luke 1:15). Later, as Elizabeth and Mary share their marvellous pregnancy stories with each other, Mary comes to accept, understand, and praise God for his astounding intervention in her life: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant" (Luke 1:47–48). She testifies to the truth of the angel's assurance that nothing will be impossible with God (Luke 1:37).

And the work of this same Holy Spirit redirects the life of Joseph. In a dream, an angel appears, urging Joseph to cancel his plan to abandon Mary and informing him that God, the Holy Spirit, is present and at work in her child: “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 1:20).

Woven through the scenes of the familiar stories of Jesus’s birth as told by Matthew and Luke we find the creative, life-changing Holy Spirit. That same Spirit was at work long before Mary in God’s creation of the world (Genesis 1:2, 2:7). He was present in the formation of Adam from dust (Genesis 2:7) and is the source of human life (Genesis 6:3; Job 27:3, 33:4; Psalm 33:6). Thus, it is hardly surprising that God the Holy Spirit can create the life of the Son in the womb of the virgin, Mary. The miraculous conception of Jesus testifies to the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit.

What does the working of the Holy Spirit through the lives of our Gospel Christmas characters mean for Chinese society today? The Holy Spirit can work in many ways through our daily life if we ally with Him. Nowadays, Chinese people face many difficulties, including persecution. In Hong Kong, Christians and pastors are emigrating to other countries because of the possible pressures or constraints that churches will experience. The story of Jesus’s birth, especially the role played by the Holy Spirit, reminds us that this same Spirit guides, instructs, enlivens, and sustains people today in troubled situations and in unexpected ways. The Spirit enables us to face confusion, persecution, and loss. As Mary wondrously learned, when God acts through the Holy Spirit, nothing is impossible.

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DAY 14: THE GLORY OF THE LORD ACCORDING TO MARY'S SONG

Inkazimulo kaNkulunkulu ivezwa ngu Maria

IsiNdebele | Luke 1:46–55

And Mary said: “My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour ...”

– Luke 1:46–47

In the traditional Bakiga society of Uganda, unmarried girls who got pregnant were seen as not only bringing shame to the family but robbing it of much-needed wealth in the form of the bride price. Families used to rid themselves of the “shame” by dumping these girls on some remote island, leaving them to die.

In the gospel of Luke, we meet Mary, an unmarried, virgin, teenage girl who faced the same challenge. According to the culture of her day, finding herself unmarried and pregnant, she could have faced a painful, shameful, and humiliating death by stoning. However, because of the extraordinary, world-changing circumstances around her pregnancy—that she was pregnant by the power of the Holy Spirit and the baby she was carrying in her womb was Jesus, the Son of God—she embraced the challenge of her role in God’s salvation plan. Mary did not understand fully what God was asking her to do, yet she trusted His plan with humble acceptance: “I am the Lord’s servant. May your word to me be fulfilled” (Luke 1:38). Instead of asking many questions and demanding understanding, like most of us do, she responded with a song of praise, testifying to God’s greatness and glory. In so doing, Mary gives us insight into how we should respond to God in seasons of difficulty, adversity, and confusion.

Mary Magnifies God’s Personal Care (Luke 1:46–49)

Mary’s praise is a reaction to the truth of who God is as it touches her life. He is mighty and holy, and He has allowed His power and holiness to both touch and abide in her. He has allowed one of low estate, one undeserving of blessing in human cultural economies, to fill a kingdom role that will forever be blessed. Mary magnifies and rejoices in this mercy of God that is at work in her circumstances, challenging as they may be.

Mary Magnifies God’s Historical Action (Luke 1:50–53).

Mary perceives God’s actions in her life as consistent with His actions in history. Her song praises God for His treatment of her but then extends to God’s mercy to those who fear Him throughout the ages (1:50). She praises God because she knows that this baby in her womb will be the channel through which God continues to

extend His mercy, just as He has done in the past. Those who look and turn to God in whatever circumstances they find themselves are the objects of His blessing. Often, those in need are the most spiritually sensitive to God and the most gifted with faith by Him. God promises them that they will experience great future rewards despite their deprivation.

I live in South Africa, the most unequal country in the world according to the World Bank. Here, ten percent of the population owns more than eighty percent of the wealth. One of the themes in Mary's song is God's desire to minister to the poor. Throughout his gospel, Luke stresses a ministry of social concern for those in need and warns those who are wealthy not to hoard what God has given to them (Luke 6:20–26, 7:22–23, 12:13–21, 14:12–14, 16:14–29).

Mary Magnifies God's Covenantal Fidelity (Luke 1:54–55)

Mary also praises God for keeping and fulfilling his covenant promise. For her, the tremendous significance of Christ's birth is that it pointed to a God who always keeps His promises, even against impossible odds. Mary understood the theological importance of this—Jesus the Messiah will be the fulfilment of all that has been promised going back to Abraham. Mary not only acknowledges that God has remembered, but she also remembers and praises God for it.

This Advent season, may we be like Mary in our response to the truth of God revealed in the Scriptures. Let us praise Him in every circumstance. Let us learn to honour Him in the calm and through the storm because, as we praise Him, we remember what He has done in our lives, what He is doing in the world, and how He will keep and fulfil His covenant promises to us.

May we be encouraged by the simplicity of Mary's response, especially her attitude of total trust and reliance on the Lord. May the Lord help us see what Mary saw, see what allowed her to make the response she did, to step out in faith and take the risk she took. May the Lord grant us the humility to say, "May it be to me as you have said, Lord."



REV. DR VICTOR NAKAH

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DAY 15: THE GLORY OF THE LORD ACCORDING TO MARY

La gloria de Dios de acuerdo a María

Spanish | Luke 1–2

“I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled.”

– Luke 1:38

Mary, the mother of Jesus, is the most important person besides Jesus in Latin America. In fact, María is still the most popular name given to baby girls both in Latin America and Spain. Among Catholics, Mary is at the center of theology and practice. For example, she is the central figure in the *posadas*, a Christmas celebration of Joseph and Mary’s arrival in Bethlehem that takes place during the nine nights leading up to Christmas. Among Protestants, Mary’s role is minor. She appears in Christmas celebrations but is almost nonexistent during the rest of the year. Nonetheless, during the Christmas season, both groups highlight her example of hope and obedience.

Luke’s account of the Nativity sheds light on Mary’s deep faith in God. The narrative has two scenes. In the first scene, the angel Gabriel announces God’s message to Mary (Luke 1:26–38), and in the second scene, Mary visits her relative, Elizabeth, and expresses her thoughts and feelings in a poem known as the Magnificat (Luke 1:39–56). In the narrative, Luke presents Mary as a teenage girl with a clear understanding of who the God of Israel is.

In scene one, when the angel Gabriel speaks to Mary, he announces the coming of the Messiah, David’s son. After this announcement, Mary responds with total obedience to God by saying, “I am the Lord’s servant. May your word to me be fulfilled” (Luke 1:38). Even though she did not understand the process fully or how she would conceive the child, Mary was ready to obey God’s will with all that that entails. In light of the poem that follows in scene two, it is clear that her remarkable obedience is not just because an angel appears to her. Her deep knowledge of God and His plan of liberation helped her to say “Yes” to God in that critical moment.

In this Advent season, Mary gives us an example of how a deep conviction, rooted in God, can lead us to obey Him even when we do not fully understand how God will fulfill His will through us. God’s glory is still being made manifest among us. God wants to advance His history of salvation through us by expanding His

kingdom on the earth. Let's follow Mary's example of costly obedience, which rests upon a deep knowledge of the God who sent His beloved Son to save us.

In scene two, Mary's beautiful poem of praise, the Magnificat, reflects her hope in God's promises of liberation. She calls God her Saviour (1:47). She knows God is the God who reverses fortunes—who brings down the mighty and sends the rich away empty, who exalts the humble and fills the hungry with good things (1:52–53). She was waiting for God's mercy, which was once spoken to her ancestors (1:54–55). Mary connects this hope with the angel's message. It is evident that, while the angel was speaking, she realized that this hope for liberation and great reversal of fortunes was becoming a reality right before her eyes. God's glory was concretely manifested in her time. The Magnificat reveals Mary's heart. The deep hope that she had cultivated as a faithful Israelite enabled her to recognize and rest in God's purposes being fulfilled.

Like Mary, we await God's full salvation. In the midst of struggles and uncertainties after the pandemic and the effects of a faraway war on our Guatemala, we are waiting for God's reversal of fortunes. As we celebrate that our Saviour has been born and will come again, we can say with Mary, "the Mighty One has done great things for me ... His mercy extends to those who fear Him, from generation to generation." In that confidence, we can also follow the example of Mary and rest in the sure hope of God's redemption, persevering through challenging times in the light of that hope.



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DAY 16: THE GLORY OF THE LORD ACCORDING TO THE SHEPHERDS

A Glória do Senhor de acordo com os pastores

Português | Luke 2:8–20

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

– Luke 2:20

Brazil, my home country, is usually immersed in a hot and humid summer when the Advent season arrives. I always feel sorry for all the “Santa Clauses,” ringing their bells at the door of street shops dressed in as many red garments as their counterparts in the Northern Hemisphere would be and sweating under the sun. Their colleagues in air-conditioned shopping malls suffer considerably less!

Not as certain as the presence of the “Santa Clauses” in the streets and in the malls during the Advent season, but also very likely, is the fact that Evangelical churches throughout the country will have a display, a picture, or even a staging of the nativity scene described by Luke in this passage (Luke 2:8–20): the holy family by the manger that night, surrounded by animals and by kneeling shepherds celebrating the birth of “the Saviour, the Messiah, the Lord” (2:11).

I have had the opportunity to play two of the characters in this scene in such plays. No, I have never played baby Jesus, but I was one of the shepherds once, in a small church in my hometown. My costume was based on our ideas of the garments they wore at the time, and that resulted in a lot of sweating. A couple years later, in a larger, fresher, and less crowded church in another town, my Joseph was better able to maintain his composure!

“There were shepherds living out in the fields nearby”

My insistence on juxtaposing uncomfortable and air-conditioned environments in this season is not random. On the one hand, none is qualitatively or morally superior to the other just because of its circumstances. On the other hand, one type is much easier to bear than the other. And even though the event we are celebrating by retelling the story of Jesus’s birth is the same, this juxtaposition does represent the persistence of sharp differences among the contexts, experiences, and living conditions of the people that retell the story of Christmas.

Furthermore, reading Luke 2:8–20 attentively, we notice that the very same contrasting elements are somehow present. After all, Mary was giving birth to Jesus in a precarious environment because the all-powerful Caesar Augustus, from the comfort of his

distant palace, demanded a census. And as for the shepherds we see in this passage, Luke makes it clear that they were not even small farmers who own at least a small piece of land and a pen to shelter their sheep at night, but rather they were the ones “living out in the fields,” working the late-night shift. Yet to them appeared magnificent, awe- and fear-inspiring messengers from heaven itself, and the angels and the lowly shepherds alike celebrated the night’s good news (2:13–14, 20).

The meticulous character of Luke’s work both in his Gospel and in Acts assures us that these details are not accidental. In fact, Luke’s account is heavily marked by an emphasis on what the Africa Bible Commentary calls “a prophetic concern for the poor.”¹ The Latin American Bible Commentary goes in the same direction, saying that “Luke’s theological proposal is based on the universality of God’s love and on his preference for the poor.”²

“All who heard it were amazed”

It is in the light of this context, therefore, that the manifestation of the glory of the Lord to the shepherds presents us with some direct challenges.

We are invited to acknowledge that the socio-economic dimension of the good news is so important to the Lord that it is even woven into the account of this most joyful moment of celebration, and we are asked to fulfill our role in His mission taking this into account. We are invited to celebrate the fact that peace has finally come to those on whom God’s favour rests and to listen actively and attentively to those who testify to it, whether they be heaven’s angels or the fields’ shepherds. And, finally, we are invited to be permanently amazed and transformed by these accounts.

¹ Tokunboh Adeyemo et al., “Luke,” in *Africa Bible Commentary* (Nairobi, Kenya: WordAlive Publishers, 2010), p. 1229.

² C. René Padilla et al., “Lucas” in *Comentário Bíblico Latino-Americano* (São Paulo, Brazil: Mundo Cristão, 2019), p. 1287.



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DAY 17: THE GLORY OF THE LORD ACCORDING TO THE ANGEL OF THE LORD AND A MULTITUDE OF THE HEAVENLY HOST

Chwała Pana według anioła Pańskiego i mnóstwo wojsk niebieskich.

Polish | Luke 2:8–15

Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.

– Luke 2:14

The triumphalism of the proclamation, first by the angel and then by the multitude of the heavenly host, would be nothing but an ironic cackle if it were to be understood in political or military terms or even in terms of personal health and wealth. Any novice reader of the New Testament will quickly realize that the long-awaited Jewish Messiah did not bring political liberation from Roman occupation, repentance by corrupt Jewish clergy, or prosperity for Christ-followers. Instead, it brought poverty, persecution, and often death. John the Baptist gets beheaded by the ungodly traitor king at the capricious wish of a wicked girl, Jesus is crucified after an unjust mock trial, and, later, the apostles and early Christians are harshly persecuted and martyred.

Yet the angels announce joy and peace. What joy? What peace? Many of us continue to ask these questions because we confuse political, military, and even cultural triumphalism with the message of joy and peace proclaimed to the shepherds. A great lesson the disciples had to learn was that Jesus had no aspirations to become a political leader who would liberate Jews from Rome and reinstate the old Davidic glory of a mighty, powerful Israel. Jesus could have cashed in on his popularity, starting a military revolt to overthrow the corrupt Herod, but He didn't.

Instead ...

Any of us today who demand peaceful lives in "Christian countries" fail to recognize what it means to be true Christians living between Christ's first and second advent. We fail to understand what the angels proclaimed and what Christ so explicitly taught in the Sermon on the Mount. We are like the mother of the sons of Zebedee who wanted her boys to take prominent political positions once Jesus entered Jerusalem, took down Herod, and assumed the Davidic throne. Yet nothing could have been farther from Jesus's purpose. The whole point of His birth in a stable to a poor, provincial Jewish family and the angelic announcement before the shepherds was a loud, symbolic shout to the contrary.

For Luke's Hellenistic readers, the angelic proclamation of peace could sound reminiscent of the *pax augusta*, for which Caesar Augustus was celebrated as a saviour who ended all war. But the fact that the angels made their announcement to simple shepherds, instead of to the Roman army or Jewish insurrectionists, was a clear signal that this Messiah's mission would be far greater than challenging the political status quo.

His greater mission was to initiate the messianic age by reconciling mankind with God, removing God's wrath and man's guilt, and ultimately conquering death. Through Christ's atoning work, humans could cease to be at war with God. Thus, Jesus's ministry was aimed at directing peoples' hearts vertically towards heaven, not horizontally towards Rome.

The angelic heavenly army understood this well. For thousands of years, they had been assisting man's struggle with sin and Satan, through the rise and fall of countless leaders and kingdoms. They knew that God's intervention in Jesus was so grand that there could be no other option but victory. It's as if they couldn't help themselves as they burst from the sky announcing the full implications of the arriving messianic age in a non-threatening way, one consistent with the non-military nature of the first advent.

The messianic mission also brings joy and peace due to its inclusive character. The salvation plan will apply not only to the Jews but will extend beyond the narrow boundaries of the chosen nation. Messiah comes to those whom God first chose, but His coming extends His blessing through Abraham's offspring far beyond what the shepherds might have imagined, to every tribe and tongue—to any and all who will follow the Messiah alone in all His teachings.

So, yes, joy and peace. We are reconciled to God through Christ. Glory to God in the highest! God does not count our sin against us, and we are no longer enslaved to guilt and awaiting God's wrath. We have peace with God. May we today do the "ministry of reconciliation" and be true "ambassadors for Christ," making His appeal (2 Corinthians 5:19–21) and patiently awaiting Christ's second Advent, which will be horizontal, political, and even military, bringing the physical peace which we continue to long for in these turbulent times.



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DAY 18: THE GLORY OF THE LORD ACCORDING TO THE PRESENTATION AT THE TEMPLE

Ogo Oluwa geḡe bi igbejade ni ẓẹmpili

Yoruba | Luke 2:21–24, 39

Most African contexts have significant cultural practices for the circumcision, presentation, naming, and dedication of newborn babies. For example, in Yoruba contexts of Nigeria, a newborn male child is circumcised on the seventh day and named in a public ceremony on the ninth day. Every name is important, with meanings related to either moral values or what the baby is believed to be destined for in life. For example, my full name, as given to me by my great-grandmother, is Oluwafemi, which means “God loves me.” In Ghana, the term “outdooring” is used by the Akan and other ethnic groups for the ceremony that takes place when parents bring their newborn outdoors for the first time and bestow names in elaborate ceremonies. Most African rites of passage have deep moral values which, in response to the rapid expansion of Christianity in Africa through the grace of God, have become increasingly biblical and intentionally glorifying to God.

Luke’s account of the arrival of Jesus is a celebration of the glory of God on display as He fulfills His salvation plan. Mary and Zechariah wrote songs to celebrate. Elizabeth marveled in private then exulted with Mary. Angels proclaimed God’s glory to shepherds in the field, and the shepherds echoed the angels’ praise and glory because of all they saw and heard that night. In Luke 2:21–24, Joseph and Mary continue to glorify God through rites of passage, obeying and fulfilling the Word of the Lord to them personally, through the angel, as well as what God had spoken in the past through the laws of Moses.

The Circumcision and Naming of Jesus

Jesus was born into a Jewish family, and He was circumcised on the eighth day as required by Jewish law for all male children. Circumcision was a sign of new life, instituted with God’s covenant with Abraham (Genesis 17:1–14). Mary and Joseph fulfilled this to glorify God, the giver of life! Likewise, Joseph and Mary followed the Word of the Lord to them by naming their baby Jesus, “the name the angel had given him before he was conceived” (Luke 2:21). When the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, he told her, “You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus” (Luke 1:31). An angel of the Lord had said similar things to Joseph (see Matthew 1:21). The name Jesus, which means “the Lord saves,” reflects His life’s purpose and mission, for “he will save his people from their sins.” Mary and Joseph fulfilled this to glorify God, the one who saves!

Presentation of the Baby in the Temple and Purification Offering

Joseph and Mary obeyed another Jewish law by fulfilling the requirement for purification. A Jewish woman was considered unclean after childbirth and had to remain indoors for thirty-three days before going to present the baby at the temple on the fortieth day (Leviticus 12:1–8). As required, Mary and Joseph presented Jesus, for “it is written in the Law of the Lord, ‘Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord’” (Luke 2:23). This consecration of the firstborn son points back to God’s deliverance of His people from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 13:1–16). Mary and Joseph fulfilled this to glorify God, the one who liberates from slavery! Likewise, at the presentation of Jesus in the temple, Joseph and Mary fulfilled another requirement of Jewish law by offering “a pair of doves or two young pigeons.” Doves or pigeons were the offering for people of modest means (Leviticus 12:8), so their offerings revealed how Jesus, at His coming, identified with the poor in God’s world. At the same time, these required offerings—a burnt offering and a sin offering—are provisions for God’s people to have sin atoned for and to be in relationship with God. Mary and Joseph fulfilled these to glorify God, the one who, in the Jesus they presented, is God with us and the atonement for our sin!

All to the Glory of God

This Advent season, we can delight in the glory of God as revealed through the obedience of Mary and Joseph. At the same time, we, too, shall do well to glorify God through obedience to His Word with all the saints in response to the Advent of Christ. Our faithfulness, like that of Mary and Joseph, honours Him and reveals His character, bearing witness to His glory before a watching world.



DR FEMI B. ADELEYE

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DAY 19: THE GLORY OF THE LORD ACCORDING TO SIMEON

La gloria del Señor según Simeón

Spanish | Luke 2:25–35

*Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout.
He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him.*

– Luke 2:25

A feature of Facebook displays memories from previous years. This is especially meaningful during Christmas. Quite frankly, I cannot help but feel a lump in my throat when a picture of deceased, beloved relatives pops up. In my family, we mourn their absence and grieve over their thwarted plans. They might have died without seeing what they longed to see, worked to see, or expected to see. Unfulfilled expectations produce pain. And Simeon's narrative almost leaves this taste in our mouths, too.

Simeon is a faithful old man who longs to see the consolation of Israel before he dies. To a first-century Jew, the consolation of Israel speaks of a king (or saviour) who would re-establish the Davidic dynasty by exercising military power—what Israel longed to see! To Roman occupiers, the consolation of Israel might hint at threats to their rule, if not outright rebellion—what Rome did not want to see!

Enabled by the Spirit, Simeon sees what both Jews and Gentiles should see. The kingdom starts with Israel—indeed, God's long-awaited promise is fulfilled through Israel—but it extends to the Gentiles (including Roman citizens!). In Jesus, God has fulfilled His promise in a way that the naked eye cannot recognise: the kind of king, the nature of the kingdom, and the scope of the people are all surprising.

Likewise, the nature of the problem is almost impossible to spot without the Spirit's help. Jews and Gentiles share the same captivity: not to Rome, but to sin. What led Israel to captivity in the first place was their sin, i.e., their unfaithfulness to God. Both groups need to experience salvation; they need to be rescued from the power of sin.

But the solution is even more remarkable. When Simeon encounters Jesus, God's Messiah is a baby, not a warrior. Jesus hadn't done anything yet (He was just a helpless little child), but Simeon shouts that he has already seen God's salvation (past tense)! Simeon recognizes this baby's arrival as the inbreaking of God's kingdom; he sees God's unexpected and gigantic move from heaven to earth, from invisibility to visibility. In Simeon's eyes, this first foothold guarantees God's final victory. Jesus's presence guarantees God's salvation so securely that Simeon can

see it as accomplished. In Jesus's birth, the consolation of Israel has taken place (even if there is more to see).

Simeon meets the king wrapped in diapers, and this encounter transforms the weary old man. Although Simeon's outward circumstances didn't change and this salvation didn't protect him from harm or death, Simeon gets to see things God's way. Seeing God's salvation rescues us from a purely human perception, utterly unaware of God's presence in the world. Jesus's salvation changes how we see death, and it keeps us from seeing our thwarted plans from an earthly and simply materialistic perspective. By the Spirit, Simeon can walk confidently into what others would consider darkness. Although he is nearing the end of his life, death is not a frightening abyss because of his encounter with the infant Saviour. God's people now face their circumstances with hope since the Saviour has arrived.

The same Spirit that enabled Simeon to see God's rescuing plan in its inception enables us to enter this reality ourselves this Christmas. Seeing God's salvation is seeing what God is up to in the world. God's ways run counter to our values and cultural priorities. We need help to see that God reveals His glory through weakness.

I pray that God's consolation—Jesus, the King, manifested to Simeon (and us) in weakness—will become visible to our atheist friends, colleagues with terminal illnesses, parents mourning a child's death, and siblings going through financial bankruptcy. And for Christians, may it be a reminder that we have already seen God's salvation (not only in the crib but on the cross and at the empty tomb). God's salvation is so secured that we can see what is yet to come as accomplished. May the Spirit allow us to see how rich and blessed we already are by being united to Christ, the Saviour.



DR OSCAR JIMÉNEZ

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DAY 20: THE GLORY OF THE LORD ACCORDING TO ANNA

Ana ajanga Kibuba sentsuwangshi

Ao Naga | Luke 2:36–38

Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

– Luke 2:38

Advent is here, the season of waiting with expectancy. As we turn to the gospels, the Israelites appear as a nation waiting for deliverance and the fulfilment of their deepest longings, for the Messiah who would vindicate them all! In Luke 2:25–38, we find two persons in particular, Simeon and Anna, known simply just for waiting—“waiting for the consolation of Israel” (Luke 2:25).

It is to Anna that we turn our attention here. Luke calls her a prophetess, one in the tradition of female prophets in the Old Testament, such as Miriam (Exodus 15:20) and Deborah (Judges 4:4), and also a forerunner of the role of female prophets in the early church (Acts 21:9). She was a descendant of a family from the Northern Kingdom, a daughter of Phanuel of the tribe of Asher. Bible commentators point out that she is the only one of note from the tribe of Asher mentioned in the Bible.

Anna became a widow after just seven years of marriage. Luke says she was eighty-four, though this may be read as the number of years she lived as a widow, and, therefore, she could have been older. Luke describes Anna’s lifetime work in just a few words: “She never left the temple but worshipped night and day, fasting and praying” (Luke 2:37). This is baffling to us! More than eight decades of this same routine, day in and day out? However, this brief episode provides insight into Anna’s long life and ministry.

The outcome of living such a devoted, pious life culminated for Anna on the day baby Jesus was brought to Jerusalem to be consecrated to the Lord by His parents, Joseph and Mary. Like watching a well-synchronized video clip, the account of Simeon and Anna seeing baby Jesus is awesome! Notice Simeon first: “Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts” (Luke 2:27). As Simeon took baby Jesus in his arms, he knew this was the promised one he had been waiting for. As he broke out in spontaneous praise, Anna appeared: “Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all ...” (Luke 2:38). Like Simeon, Anna confirmed the awe, recognition, and significance of that encounter. With perfect timing, perfect understanding, they knew the

Messiah had come! Waiting was not in vain. The years of preparation in anticipation had been rewarded. Indeed, isn't this what Amos the Old Testament prophet said about how God reveals his secret plans in history to His humble servants who continually live in conscious awareness of His presence (Amos 3:7)?

So, like the shepherds that first Christmas night, Anna was filled with wonder and joy at Christ's first coming. Indeed, the glory of the Lord was upon Anna as she broke out in thanksgiving! Then she went about speaking of Him to all who, like her, looked for the redemption of Jerusalem. The "pious remnant," as they are called, were few but faithful, waiting for the Messiah. It would not be surprising if Anna knew them all through those many decades of ministry in the temple.

Anna symbolizes a bright beacon of hope for the "voiceless" women from my context. Gender issues, patriarchy's strongholds, and women's struggle to be heard are constant challenges in my part of the world. Anna, a woman—a widow at that—is seen, heard, recognized, and given equal standing alongside Simeon as the all-important links to verify and announce the good news of the arrival of the Saviour of the world! For both Simeon and Anna, their guiding motivation was to be constantly in tune with God's Spirit all of their lives to fulfil God's purposes.

Oh that we, too, will remain faithful and walk consistently in step with the Spirit to discern and recognize God's ways as we eagerly wait in anticipation for Christ's second coming! Amen.



ALONGLA AIER

Dimapur, India

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DAY 21: THE GLORY OF THE LORD ACCORDING TO THE MAGI

Ang kaluwalhatian ng Panginoon ayon sa mga dalubhasa sa butiin at panahon

Filipino | Matthew 2:1–12

On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

– Matthew 2:11

Just as ambassadors and diplomats greet a newly elected president of an allied country, the Magi, or political counselors, made a courtesy call in Jerusalem to pay homage to the newborn “king of the Jews,” an unmistakably political title. No wonder that, “When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him” (Matthew 2:3)!

Who were these Magi? Why should their presence and pronouncement cause distress to political entities? In ancient times, kings and rulers valued the counsel of wise men, especially those who claimed to know the future and interpret divine matters. Magi were trained in diplomacy, legislation, religion, astrology, and the mystical arts. They held such a prestigious political and social status that they were known to tip the political scale with their support for one ruler over another. Some were even appointed as vassal kings, like Tiridates of Armenia, a Zoroastrian priest who was made king by the emperor Nero.

The Prophet Daniel is a biblical example of a magus (Daniel 5). Given Daniel’s long political influence over the Magi and beyond, it is not improbable to think that the Magi who visited Jesus had access to divine prophecies about the Messiah. Ancient historians like Josephus, Suetonius, and Tacitus all testify that the ancient world expected a political figure to rise from Judea and rule the world.

This political motif is often lost and overlooked in the Advent narrative, leaving just a story of a “mystical” or “spiritual” Messiah. But the political theme needs to be recalled at such a time as this. The implication of a political Messiah means that one day the world will have to submit to a political king whose kingdom is not a democracy. The world today is opposed to the idea of monarchy. On the one hand, this is understandable, given the historical realities of power misused. But on the other hand, it is foolishness, driven by the thought that everyone doing what is right in his or her own eyes is best. The individual—and individual rights related to speech, family, sexuality, wealth, health, etc.—is king. How then will the world respond when the Lord Jesus Christ finally appears in bodily form in all his glory to establish his physical and political kingdom on earth?

When the Magi finally arrived at the place where the child, Jesus, was staying, "... they were overjoyed" (Matthew 2:10). Imagine, a company of wise men in all their pompous attire jumping and celebrating as they come before the presence of a child. Why the premature rejoicing? At this point, the child has yet to grow up and establish His kingdom. What was the celebration about? It is about hope and a promise. After witnessing all the evil rulers in their lifetime, the Magi have finally found the righteous one they have been looking for.

As the world grapples with the COVID pandemic, the Russia–Ukraine war, climate change, economic instability, famine, and the like, every person in every country is looking to their political leaders for answers, and none has any to give. Imagine coming before the presence of a king who can address all that is wrong in this world. It is a cause for celebration indeed! And it is the reason for hope looking forward.

The recent presidential election in the Philippines was the most divisive in our nation's history. Many believers prefer to be silent amidst the rampage of disinformation destroying not only the nation but also the soul of the Church. It is easy to regress from political conflict and just accept the philosophy of separation of Church and State. Yet in God's economy, there is no such thing as separation of Church and State. There is only one King and one kingdom. As citizens of God's kingdom, Christians bring the values of His kingdom to political engagement, speaking truth to power and working toward a just and equitable society. Since Jesus is a political Messiah, we know that no election and no ascension of a new king is our final hope, so we don't over celebrate or over despair but keep pressing on in faithfulness to the true King until He comes.

When the Lord Jesus Christ finally appears in all His glory to establish His kingdom on earth, He will contend against every form of oppressive, authoritarian, and libertine political structure that goes against His kingdom's values of true righteousness, justice, and love. He will shine His glory into all spheres of life.

Balang araw, ang kaluwalhatian ng Panginoon ay hihigitan at pagliliwanagin kahit ang pinakamadilim na yugto ng pulitika.

(One day, the glory of God will surpass and illuminate even the darkest period of our political history.)

This is our hope and our promise.



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DAY 22: THE GLORY OF THE LORD ACCORDING TO HEROD

हेरोदेस के अनुसार प्रभु की महिमा

Hindi | Matthew 2:3–20

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.

– Matthew 2:3

As December brought in the mild winter chill, the figurines, disfigured and chipped from years of use, made their way into our living room. Setting up the nativity scene was a common Christmas tradition in our home. The familiar faces of baby Jesus, His parents, the shepherds, the angels, the three wise men and the well-behaved yet disproportionately-sized farm animals would surface out of the old shoebox. Unwrapped out of last year's newspaper, they were gently wiped down and placed in and around a cardboard shed. Sometimes, we would add a little cotton on the shed's roof. Even though snow was alien to us, it was an attempt to mirror the white landscapes from the greeting cards our relatives from the western side of the world sent us each year. Every year, the objective was simple: to set up a scene that best represented "all is calm, all is bright" so that baby Jesus would "sleep in heavenly peace." However, as much as we try to set up this idyllic yet unrealistic scene, our version of the nativity is starkly different from Matthew's version. It is missing a very important character: Herod.

Why is Herod missing? That "Christmas feeling" we attempt to recreate each year helps us escape the painful reality of life in this world. As one living in a country where Christianity is a minority religion, Christmas is a time to freely celebrate and proclaim the good news of Christ. It is an escape from the hostility, the violence, the uncertainty that surrounds us each day, a time to enjoy some hot chocolate around the Christmas tree. Why spoil the "Christmas feeling" by bringing in Herod? Wouldn't he just disturb the peace?

In fact, the Gospel of Mathew reports that he did just that. On hearing the news of the coming of the true king of the Jews, the anti-king, Herod, was disturbed, and with him all of Jerusalem (Matthew 2:3). Why so? History recognizes the good side of Herod: a capable and competent leader, a military genius, and a master builder. Under his rule, Israel enjoyed prosperity, lower taxes, and a glorious, newly-renovated temple. Yet he also made the rich richer and the poor poorer and bribed his way through court for his numerous wrongdoings. Worse still, he had an ugly side that stemmed from his insecurity around the throne. Any threat to him being king usually led to someone being exiled or executed. It didn't matter if the victim was his wife, his children, or other innocent children from his kingdom. So, when the Magi came seeking the true king of the Jews, the people expected the worse.

Herod represents almost everything that is wrong and frighteningly true about our world: immoral and power-hungry leadership, economic disparity, unjust social structures, corrupt legal systems, religious extremism and apathy, all leading to the oppression of the weak and vulnerable. We squirm at the thought of Herod killing all those male children, yet according to a report from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), in 2020, female infanticide and sex-selective abortions led to the death of over 140 million girls below the age of five, 40 million of those in India alone.¹ Our world is not any different from the world in which Herod ruled.

This is the world into which Jesus was born. His first cries for life soon merged with the eerie atmosphere of threats of His death. Despite this, on the first Christmas, God took on real flesh and blood. God didn't try to escape a world where Herod ruled, but He chose to engage it in order to conquer it. This gives us hope. In a world where Herod was real, God also is real.

As tempted as we are to recreate a Christmas that is devoid of Herod, sooner or later we must acknowledge his domain. Like the Magi who appeared in the courts of the anti-king Herod, we, too, are presented with a choice between two competing realities. Despite an awareness of the real darkness that surrounded them, they chose to pursue the true light. For, as John wrote, "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 1:4–5).

We have been given the light. Though we have reason to fear, we also have reason to trust in God. Our fears are real, but the object of our faith is real, too. In a world where Herod and those like him disturb, divide, and destroy, we can live in the assurance that our God continues His work to bring the peace we long for.

¹ <https://www.unfpa.org/gender-biased-sex-selection>

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DAY 23: THE GLORY OF THE LORD ACCORDING TO BETHLEHEM

Yesu en Rwoth

Amharic | Matthew 2:5–12, 16–18

But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.

– Matthew 2:6

In Bethlehem, the Saviour of All Arrived

Matthew heralds the good news that Jesus is the promised ruler from Bethlehem in Judah, the one who shepherds God's people (Matthew 2:6). He affirms to his readers the continuity between the Old Testament and Jesus, that Jesus is the fulfillment of the law and the prophets!

At the same time, the coming of the Magi to Bethlehem to worship Jesus is an affirmation that God is the God not just of Israel but of all. God's salvation in Christ was revealed to those outside of Israel. God met the Magi in their own place and practices, using the astrology they were skilled at to lead them to the one and only Saviour of the world.

In a pluralistic setting such as Ethiopia, one challenge Christians face is drawing boundaries. We tend to speak with certainty as to who is in and who is out of God's kingdom. Maintaining a meaningful relationship with those we consider to be outsiders becomes increasingly difficult, and our vocabulary shrinks to a point that we find it challenging to hold a conversation with people who do not profess our faith. We, at times, preside as judges and fail to live as witnesses to Jesus Christ.

I remember a true story of a well-known African scholar who came to understand Jesus as Lord through reading other scriptures. Christians were not prepared to welcome him into their fellowship because they were suspicious of the means of God's revelation he claimed to have received. The story of God finding the astrologers where they were is a great reminder. God's ways of calling people to the knowledge of Christ are not limited to the ones we are used to.

This message also comes as a huge encouragement and affirmation to those who are despised for turning to Christ, accused of abandoning their tradition for a foreign one. Jesus is from Israel but for the world! Wherever we grew up, we are all part of God's story of salvation in Jesus.

In Bethlehem, the Reality of Evil Hit Home

The same good news that caused the Magi to be overwhelmed with joy led Herod to act with great evil. Hoping to eliminate the threat from the baby king, Herod ordered the massacre of all boys under two. What a mixed story! The dawn of a new era, the coming of the Saviour, was accompanied by the death of innocent children.

This story resonates with what is happening in Ethiopia now—and with what happens over and over in the history of the world. Many children are killed because of conflict stirred by people frightened for their own power and position. We have fresh tears in our eyes, like mothers in Bethlehem, “... weeping for (our) children ... refusing to be consoled, because they are no more.” The inclusion of this heartbreak in the account of our Saviour’s birth tells us we must not look away or pretend that it is fine. Until the Lord comes a second time, the kingdom advances with good news and hard realities intermixed.

I remember hearing the story of a mother who lost her child. Her pastor, trying to comfort her, got up to preach and read Romans 8:28: “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those ...” As he was reading, the bereaved mother wrapped her head in her black shawl, covered her ears with her palms, and sobbed, “What good can come out of this? Why did God let my baby die?” These are the same questions we in Ethiopia grapple with today. Looking for some higher meaning behind the death of innocent people has worn us down. Instead, we cry out! In the words of Vinoth Ramachandra, we complain to God directly instead of complaining about God.¹ We are not to deny our helplessness and anger in the face of death. Rather, as we cry, we keep our eyes on Jesus, whose parents experienced the terror of losing their son and who, Himself, went through death to ultimately put an end to it. We trust God who intervened. We pray that He would intervene and put an end to the conflict and war in our nation.

God’s good plan unfolds amid tears, pain, and loss. It involves great sacrifice, and God knows it. In Bethlehem, the birth of Jesus came as a fulfillment of God’s promises, and the most painful experience for the city’s mothers fulfilled Old Testament expectations. His glory unfolds through unexpected occurrences (the leading of the Magi) and painful experiences (the massacre of the children in Bethlehem). But the story did not end there. God is faithful to His promise of salvation, so we long for His second advent when there will be no more death, mourning, crying, or pain.

¹ Vinoth Ramachandra, *Sarah’s Laughter: Doubt, Tears, and Christian Hope* (Carlisle, UK: Langham Publishing, 2020), 1–22.



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DAY 24: THE GLORY OF THE LORD ACCORDING TO NAZARETH

Ang Kaluwalhatian ng Panginoon Ayon sa Nazaret

Filipino | Matthew 2:19–23

... and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets, that he would be called a Nazarene.

– Matthew 2:23

I lost count as to how many times I rehearsed what I was going to do and say when my Lolo (grandfather) came out from the departure area towards the parking lot where the rest of the family—my Lola (grandmother), parents, siblings, cousins, aunts, and uncles—waited beside the parked rental vehicle. After being in another country to work as a carpenter for three years, his work contract finally ended, and we were seeing him again for the first time. What was more exciting was that, unlike other relatives who came home for a vacation, my Lolo returned for good. This is one of my happiest childhood memories—a family reunion at the airport.

Arrival in Nazareth

I can imagine the excitement Joseph and Mary must have felt when, after fleeing to Egypt, the angel of the Lord instructed Joseph in a dream to go back to his own country with his wife and child. Because Joseph was afraid to go to Judea where Archelaus, Herod's son, was reigning and because he was warned by the angel of the Lord, he and his family withdrew to Galilee, to the city of Nazareth. The family's settlement in Nazareth fulfilled what the prophets said, that Jesus would be called a Nazarene (Matthew 2:19–23). What a joy to both Joseph's and Mary's families when they were finally reunited!

The Gospels are silent about much of what happened after their return, but we know from accounts in the Gospels and Acts that Jesus became known as "Jesus of Nazareth" (Matthew 26:71; Mark 1:24, 10:47; Luke 4:34, 18:37, 24:19; John 1:45, 18:5, 18:7, 19:19; Acts 2:22, 3:6, 4:10, 6:14, 10:38, 22:8, 26:9). He grew from his infancy to manhood in Nazareth (Luke 4:16). The people of Nazareth witnessed how Jesus "became strong," "was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him," and "grew in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man" (Luke 2:39–40; 51–52). In Nazareth, Jesus quietly did a very relatable human thing: He grew up among family and neighbours. Nazareth teaches us that Jesus truly is one of us.

Departure from Nazareth

Later, Jesus returned to Nazareth and taught in her synagogue, and the people there were amazed at His wisdom and miraculous powers (Matthew 13:54). But Nazareth

was not the final destination for Jesus. Despite their amazement, its people expelled Him. They took offense at Him and His teaching, and He did not do many miracles there “because of their lack of faith” (Luke 4:16–29; Matthew 13:54–58). When Jesus departed from Nazareth, He travelled to other towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness. Nazareth also teaches us that Jesus is not merely one of us. He is God with us, as one of us, and therefore one to whom we must submit, even when His teachings are difficult.

“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

The Jews believed that the great “good” was to come from Bethlehem (Micah 5:2), not from anywhere else—and certainly not from obscure Nazareth! So, when Philip told Nathanael that he had found the one about whom Moses and the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, Nathanael challenged that assertion geographically (John 1:45–46)! The fact that Jesus grew up in and was identified with an “unimportant” place like Nazareth teaches us that He came to dignify and bring redemption to all of His creation.

Our Nazareth and Beyond

It is common that a Filipino family will have a family member (a parent, a sibling, an aunt, uncle, or cousin) who works abroad and sends financial help to those who are left behind. In fact, Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) make up eleven percent of the total Filipino population. In the communities and churches that my organization works with, we encourage the OFWs and those who are preparing to go abroad to be witnesses wherever they go—not just to make dollars but also to make disciples, to go and live for a higher purpose. The OFW believers can consider the Philippines as their Nazareth—a place where they can serve and grow until such time that they leave their Nazareth and become Overseas Filipino Witnesses.

That’s a perspective we all can benefit from. Wherever God has placed you, He is at work. He may be preparing you in your Nazareth or have moved you to be His witness. In all places, our faithfulness matters because God works His perfect purposes in and through us.



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DAY 25: THE GLORY OF THE LORD ACCORDING TO THE APOSTLE JOHN

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Arabic | Revelation 12

She gave birth to a son, a male child, who “will rule all the nations with an iron scepter.” And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne.

– Revelation 12:5

My Palestinian kids gathered around our Christmas tree in Nazareth. I was insisting that we could not open the gifts until we had heard the Christmas story. They complained, saying, “We know all the stories in the Bible!” I then asked, “But have you heard the story of the dragon?” The night became silent, and the Spirit lit the lights of their eyes. I continued ...

The Kings of the earth made an alliance with an evil dragon, the ancient serpent. It lived for thousands of years and recruited powerful, hellish armies. It manipulated economies and spread lies to destroy goodness, joy, peace, and justice. Mighty countries and powerful religious communities were under its spell. Who can oppose such power?

Believe it or not, there was a Bethlehemite child who was a threat to this dragon. The murderous dragon wanted to find this child and finish Him, so the dragon mobilized its underlings: “Find the mother and you shall find the child!” Evil kings looked for the baby throughout the world’s kingdoms and attacked God’s temples mercilessly. Many people thought that God forsook them. They lamented, “O God! We are like a worm. Can a worm fight a dragon? Lord, Bethlehem is under siege; Gaza is dying. Our refugees cannot come back, governments are destroying our lands, and the dragon is blowing flames of fear into our hearts. Our young are jobless, without dignity or hope! Hell is opening its evil doors and is spreading discrimination, occupation, and hatred. Our Jerusalem is becoming the capital of oppressive segregation. Our leaders are paralyzed.”

Yet the evil of the dragon grew stronger, and it was able to find the baby’s mother. She was a beautiful lady, shining with the light of the sun and the moon and crowned with glory. When the seven-headed dragon with ten horns found her, she was pregnant—with Jesus—and about to give birth. It was Christmas, but the dragon was attacking the mother at her weakest point and in the most unexpected place. Her only hope was not in a holy and safe place but in her first born. Could a baby defeat a vicious dragon?

The dragon tried to destroy the baby, but the power of the baby was beyond imagination. Love conquers hatred, light expels darkness, and hope defuses despair. The baby defeated the dragon and saved his mother from destruction. The birth of the baby was the beginning of the ultimate end of the dragon. The dragon is no longer indestructible.

However, the war continues. The mother brings forth many babies who are committed to following the path of the first baby, and the dragon seeks to distract and destroy them while it can. These children of light, of truth, of love, and of hope defeat the evil dragon again and again by their loyalty to their older brother. They are the children of the celestial community, not the children of Babylon who embrace the dragon and its underlings. They are the living stones that shall construct the heavenly Jerusalem here on earth. They die heroes instead of living as cowards. Their faithfulness paves the way for the birth of the civilization of love, of hope, of equality, and of mercy. In the power of the baby born at Christmas, they strive toward the fulfillment of the dream of peace.

In light of the story of the Christmas dragon, I encourage my children to do the following: (1) believe that killing the dragon is possible, (2) fight the dragon and don't give up, (3) stand against political and religious ideologies that embody and encourage systemic evil, (4) remember that we conquer the dragon not with his weapons but with the blood of the Lamb, (5) and whenever you are locked in Patmos like the Apostle John, lift up your eyes to heaven. You don't need to leave Patmos in order to get to Jerusalem. You just need to believe in Christ and follow Him where you are. Jerusalem shall arrive through your faith, love, and hope as well as godly tears. Last, we need to fight the dragon together, so remember Palestinians and Israelis in your prayers during this Christmas season.

Merry Christmas!



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John Stott, Langham Founder

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9:41



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53:35

- 11:26



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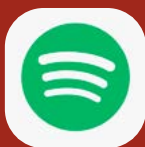


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–Chris Wright

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