

CHRISTMAS JOY - A DEVOTIONAL

MEL LAWRENZ



THE
BROOK
NETWORK

**SHARING IDEAS,
PURSUING WISDOM.**

This e-book is free to any subscriber to The Brook Letter. To sign up for The Brook Letter visit The Brook Network at www.thebrooknetwork.org and use the sign up box at the top right.

No part of this e-book may be reproduced for sale.

The Brook Network is an exchange of ideas and growing set of relationships aimed at helping Christian leaders improve their leadership. Sponsored by [Elmbrook Church](#), the Brook Network offers events and group experiences, learning opportunities, audio and print resources, and a blog where you can engage with the issues of the day.

Mel Lawrenz serves as minister at large for Elmbrook Church and is the creative director of The Brook Network. Having been in pastoral ministry for thirty years, the last decade as senior pastor of Elmbrook, Mel seeks to help Christian leaders engage with each other. Mel is the author of eleven books, the most recent for church leaders, [Whole Church: Leading from Fragmentation to Engagement](#).

To get the weekly digest of offerings through The Brook Network, make sure you sign up for [The Brook Letter](#).

copyright 2010 Mel Lawrenz

www.thebrooknetwork.org

Joy

"But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.'" (Luke 2:10-11)

A bit of joy will do. But "great joy"? Is it almost too much to hope for?

Where did all the Christmas joy go? How did things get so complicated? So rushed? So squeezed and cluttered? It doesn't have to be that way. We can choose to step aside, step into a quieter moment, and read angel's words that came on that night that changed the world.

Just another night of work in the field for shepherds. A chill in the air, with serenity, and boredom. Another night of work like a thousand nights before, and just like a thousand years before when David was just a boy and stood watch in the same fields. Life hadn't changed in a millennium. And then everything would change in a single night.

When the angel appeared, beaming with a glorious light that could only be the glory of God himself, those men and boys who were used to fending off wild beasts to protect their sheep were reduced to terror. Were they convinced by the simple words: "I bring you great news of great joy"? Probably not. Joy would have to come later. They would have to see the proof itself.

That's the way it works with joy. Real joy is never something that originates from within, it has to come to us from without. Trying to find joy by getting it out of yourself is like believing a river can flow uphill. Maybe that's one of the reasons why so many have a hard time finding joy at Christmas. Bite into a Christmas cookie, and you might enjoy it. Open a shiny package and you might enjoy what you find inside. But joy itself--in its true and pure form--is so much more than enjoyment. Joy is the startling realization that God really has claimed territory in this world. He's taken back what belongs to him. And then joy is a thirst that doesn't want to be quenched; a hunger that knows it will go on and on. It's a good thing, to never get enough of God.

And best of all, this joy about a royal entry into the world is "great" because it is everywhere. A joy "that will be for all the people." Right here, right now--that means me and it means you.

Prayer for today: Dear God, turn my fear into great joy.

Peace

"Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.'" (Luke 2:13-14)

Peace is a noble aspiration at any time. When the world is at war, or when wars seem to have settled down. When you find yourself in battle with someone else, or when you are feeling pretty good about your relationships. When you are confident that you are on the same side as God, and when you're not so sure. There is no time when it is not good to pursue peace.

But peace is so much more than the absence of conflict. Maybe you can lay your head on your pillow tonight and thank God that nobody beat you up today, but that is not the same thing as experiencing peace. If a husband and wife get tired of shouting at each other and slip into a mutually agreed-upon icy indifference, that's not peace. In Hebrew the word for peace is "shalom," a kind of well-wishing that says it all: may you be healthy, whole, complete. May you know where you fit in the universe, and may you have tranquility in that. Augustine said that peace is "the tranquility of order." When you know where you fit into God's world--that you are more than a beast, but less than God--that is the sense of order that brings tranquility.

And so we wish for peace at Christmas, which includes the hope that somehow fewer people will be killed by bullets or hunger or AIDS. But it goes beyond that. Christmas shalom is the confidence that when God's favor, his undeserved grace, rests on us, we will know a peace that goes beyond understanding. The peace that comes because Christ came into the world and put things in order, beginning with his birth, completed in his sacrificial death and triumphant resurrection.

Prayer for today: Dear God, let your favor rest on me, and let me stand in the peace that Christ has made possible.

Angel

"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)

Dictionary:

angel: 1. A typically benevolent celestial being that acts as an intermediary between heaven and earth.

What really was Gabriel to Mary? What kind of being came with foreknowledge of a supernatural conception and with words that would change her identity forever? "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you" How would the shepherds have described the angel with the glory of the Lord shining about, and then "a great company of the heavenly host" whose voices poured out a chorus like a tidal wave: "glory to God in the highest"? What would Joseph say about his encounter with an angel, or what would Zechariah, John the Baptist's father say? In the days leading up to the birth of Jesus supernatural appearances and utterances were occurring like they never had before. Heaven's communication was electric.

The real meaning of "angel" is simply "messenger." And that reminds us that Christmas is about a message. It is gospel--good news. The best news. Powerful spiritual messengers whose very presence struck fear and awe in people (no pudgy winged cherubs here) were paving the way. Their mission and their message transformed human beings. They never left people the way they had been.

Now any of us this year can probably think of a dozen ways we would like to hear a word from a messenger from God--sent just to us. And we do have that message. It is a message best suited to each of us because it was sent to all of us. Jesus will save people from their sins.

Prayer for today: Lord, help me to listen to you. May the announcements of angels be like fresh news to my ears.

Virgin

"God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, 'Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.' Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus.'" (Luke 1:26-31)

Is there anyone in the history of the world who was asked to have more faith than Mary? She was young. She was a virgin. She was probably expecting her days to continue to follow the course of a normal life in a no-name Galilean town in an era that didn't even know it was an era.

And then came the message from heaven.

To be visited by an angel, that would be enough. But the words! Those troubling, confusing, ineffable words. "The Lord is with you." Yes, certainly that's true of all of us, generally speaking. But in this case the emphasis was, "The Lord is with YOU." The God who chooses had made another choice. As with Abraham, and Moses, and Isaiah, and Ruth, and David, God chose his instrument to do his work in the world. High favor indeed.

"You will be with child" in a way that no woman before or since has been with child. A virgin, and yet, with child. Is that too hard to believe? Is it too much to ask 21st century people to believe that there was one day when God did something--not too hard for him to do, not too complicated to understand--but utterly unique? Is it too hard for the Creator of the universe to cause a woman to have, by an act of creation, a complete zygote which would become an embryo which would become a fetus which would become a newborn baby? No, the virginal conception is only too hard to believe if you think that the Creator can never do anything just once. But who can make up such a rule for God?

Mary must not be worshipped, but she must not be ignored. She stands at the crossroads between the prophets of the Old Testament and the apostles of the New. She was asked to believe something that none of us could even imagine. And in her whole life, from stable to cross, she pointed to Jesus.

Stop and ask yourself this question: if Mary were here today, how would she celebrate Christmas?

Prayer for today: Lord, help me to believe that when you choose to show your favor in your unique choices, you are doing what is right and normal for you. Help me to have even a measure of the faith of Mary that would say: Lord, do whatever you choose to do in my life.

Shepherd

"And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby keeping watch over their flocks at night." (Luke 2:8)

It may seem like a stretch of a question, but try it anyway. If you were God, and could announce the arrival of the savior of humanity on the very night, would you send your messengers to some shepherds out in the fields whiling away their nighttime watch? Doesn't it seem like a waste? Why not send angels to an assembly of the religious council in Jerusalem? Why not to the megalomaniac King Herod to put him in his place in an instant? How about Caesar? Wouldn't that be a night of work--to blow open the doorways of society, to march right in and change everything.

But instead, it was shepherds. Rough characters at that time, those laborers did the tedious things a lot of other people would have been unwilling to do. They smelled of the flocks, and were used to sleeping on the hard ground.

There was a link, of course. A golden thread that connected the town of Bethlehem and two shepherds who lived a millennium apart. When David was at his best as king of Israel (and he had many less-than-good chapters in his life), he acted as the shepherd-king. He cared for the people just like he cared for sheep when he was a boy watching sheep in the fields outside Bethlehem. David could write the incredible words of Psalm 23 because he knew what it meant to be a good shepherd, and he knew that God was his good shepherd. "The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters." And that isn't all. He guides. He protects with his rod and staff.

Jesus, the Son of David, came to be the good shepherd. When Jesus spoke about it (John 10) he said that he knows us as his sheep, and we are to know him. He promised that he would defend us from wolves, and not run away. But most important, he said that the good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.

So consider this: on the night when Jesus' life began in this world an inexorable process was set in motion, leading to the day he would lay down his life for the world. That's what a true shepherd does. So an angelic vision to Bethlehem shepherds--men who understand feeding and guiding and saving--seems like the best way for chapter one to begin.

Prayer for today: The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever. (Psalm 23)

Joseph

"This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly." (Matthew 1:18-19)

We know so little about him, the father of Jesus. Joseph probably died long before Jesus' adult ministry, because he is only mentioned in the birth and childhood stories of Jesus. Named after the ancient patriarch who used his success in Egypt to save his family and a future nation, this Joseph was a carpenter who lived in the town of Nazareth. It may have been that some great great grandfather had moved from Bethlehem in Judea up to the north where Jews at that time were establishing their presence among the pagans of Galilee. So when a Roman ruler called Caesar Augustus wanted a census, Joseph had to go back to Bethlehem, though his wife was well along in her pregnancy.

The most important thing we know about Joseph is that at the right moment in his life, he was full of faith and grace. He found out that the woman he was engaged to be married to was pregnant, and though Mary had the benefit of the message of an angel who explained her unique conception, Joseph hadn't been visited yet. All he had was Mary's word. So what was that conversation like? No, she hadn't slept with another man. Yes, she was pregnant. And yes, a spiritual being had told her that she would conceive by a unique act of God--and as if that wasn't enough--the child in her womb would be the Savior of the people.

Why did Joseph believe her? Why did he change his first plans to quietly divorce her so as not to expose her to public shame (engagements were so serious then, to break one off amounted to a divorce), and instead take her as his wife--and then abstain from sexual relations with her until the birth of the child? I ask myself, if I were in his shoes, would I have believed Mary?

Here is something for all of us to think about at Christmas. Think of Joseph. Think of him looking into Mary's eyes, hearing her account, knowing in his heart of hearts it was true, and having the courage to act on that faith knowledge even though he may have had doubts. As nonsensical as it seemed, he believed it. As much as the idea of a virginal conception violates every norm of what we know about real life, he knew it was possible with God. As risky as it was to stay with Mary and be branded by others as the hapless dupe of an immoral woman, Joseph decided to put everything on the line.

That is true faith. And it is true grace. It wasn't just that he believed Mary; he believed God. That God could; that God might; that God would.

Prayer for today: God, give me an iron-strong faith that at the birth of Jesus you really did enter this world--my world--and you are still working powerfully in it.

Kingdom

"He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end." (Luke 1:32-33)

Christmas represents a beginning that only makes sense if we comprehend the end. The beginning was a baby. The beginning was quiet humility in an earthy stable. But the end... The end is the explosion of divine glory bright enough for the whole world to see--like a hydrogen bomb without the destruction. The end is a kingdom. Jesus came not just for the moment of purity that his birth brought about, but to move toward the kingdom of God, introducing people to it, and bringing it as the central reality of their lives. "His kingdom will never end." What Herod didn't understand was that by killing all the baby boys in Bethlehem, he was not protecting his kingdom, but showing how weak and pitiful it was. All human power will slip from human hands like water dribbling out of cupped hands though they try to hold it.

But the kingdom of Christ is different. It will never end. There is no rival to his authority, though people will continue to disbelieve in it. There is no one sitting at the right hand of God this very moment except him. No other authority was there when the earth was created and will be there when the final judgment comes.

Don't ever think that Christmas is a way for us to wrap God up in a package, put a bow on it, and keep the whole thing under our control. A way for us to avoid God except for those extra-special religious seasons.

The first Christmas was the arrival of a king. Rulers from the east knew it, so they came to present gifts. King Herod knew it, so he tried murder. It is the Battle of Bethlehem, the beginning of a war in which the King of Kings is intent to take back territory that belonged to him all along, and to liberate captives like you and me.

Prayer for today: Dear God, help me to live these days with a conscious knowledge that you are reigning in this broken world as king. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Manger

"She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn." (Luke 2:7)

Where is the first place you place a baby after it emerges from the mother's womb and after a few moments of lying against it's mother's chest? Today we use super-sterile blankets and sanitized cribs. A plexiglass dome, if necessary. All precautions go toward minimizing the germs the child may come into contact with. Emerging into the world means being isolated from the world.

But Mary laid Jesus in the feeding trough for an animal. The Good Shepherd took refuge that night in the sheep's manger, and when the shepherds came to see what was announced to them, how stunned they must have been.

Of course, this would not have been Mary's and Joseph's first choice. They would have preferred a modest room at a local inn, but the No Vacancy sign was put out for the night. If it all took place today maybe a red neon light would have flashed a big "NO" that made a ghastly pool of light on the asphalt of the parking lot. There are times when "no" is the hardest thing we have to hear. Yet Jesus has seen and continues to see the "NO" sign from the human race which he had a hand in creating. Many don't even want to consider him. Even in the life of a faithful believer, there is so much in us that wants to say to him: stay out of that part of my life; keep that door closed; no, you may not spend the night.

So instead, he stays where he can. A feeding trough will do. Not protected from the world, but lying in it.

Prayer for today: Lord, make way in my heart and mind for you today. Unlock every door. Open the most valued places. Don't let me try to exclude you from any part of my life.

Jesus

"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." (Luke 2:7)

Sometimes a name is just a name, and sometimes it is a perfect description of reality. The ancients were much more inclined than we are to choose names carefully so as to make a lifelong statement about a person's identity. "Jesus" is a name so familiar to us it could easily escape our notice that it was an ordinary name with extraordinary significance that an angel announced should be the name of Mary and Joseph's new child. And what a name! "Jesus" is the Greek form of the Hebrew "Joshua" which means "the LORD saves."

He does indeed.

Call him Jesus, because he will save people from their sins. You can't say that about any little Joshua. None of us can save ourselves anymore than a person sinking in a rowboat can save himself by pulling up on the side of the boat.

We don't need to wait until Good Friday and Easter to celebrate the savior. The saving started at the birth of Jesus.

Prayer for today: Lord, make me more aware today of my sins, and help me know that they shrink before the powerful person of Jesus.

Christ

"Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord." (Luke 2:11)

Some people think that "Christ" is Jesus' last name. Jesus Christ, like Joe Johnson or Audrey Smith. If you have thought that, don't feel bad. It is just evidence that over the centuries our understanding of Jesus as the Christ has become so solid in our thinking that we don't think of "Jesus" without "Christ."

Jesus is his name; Christ his title. Among all the titles he bears, Son of God, Son of Man, Good Shepherd, Alpha and Omega, it all begins in the gospel story with this one incredible announcement: the baby born on an ordinary day in Bethlehem was the Messiah, the Anointed One. "He is Christ the Lord." "Christos" in Greek, "Messiah" in Hebrew, "Anointed One" in English, the name means one with the divine designation to split all of history between this age and the age to come. The One and Only. The Beginning of all and the Conclusion of all.

But what is the meaning of "Anointed One"?

In the Old Testament kings were anointed, as were priests, and prophets. And so when we hear "Christ" our minds should spin around like a compass seeking its orientation, landing on Jesus the King who rules over a different kind of kingdom, ruling in people's lives not just because they are in his realm but because he is in their hearts. Priest: one who stands between God and humanity. One who sacrifices; one who intercedes. The mediator, the bridge. And he is Prophet too. Prophets had brought the words of God to the people, but the Messiah is the Word of God to the people.

In those days when the heavy hand of Caesar Augustus gripped the land of Promise, people were looking for the Anointed One to come. They were hoping for a large army, not a multitude of the heavenly host. They assumed a bigger and better David, not an obscure rabbi wrapped in rumor of magic and charisma who always seemed like an outsider when he visited Jerusalem. They probably expected an orator, but the speeches of this Messiah left people speechless.

The very best things God does in our lives usually come as a surprise to us. So wouldn't it be surprising if we who think we know so much about Jesus, and who presume to be on a last-name basis, would be startled to see him in a whole new way. Not stuck in a nativity set or merely documented in hymns, but the real, live manifestation of God on earth. This, the angel said, was "good news of great joy." What could be better than God landing in the midst of our lives?

Prayer for Today: Christ, you are the King above all other kings, the high priest who has made the ultimate sacrifice, the prophet who has had the last word. Let me be astonished this Christmas by knowing more fully than ever before, that you really have come and have changed this world.

Bethlehem

"So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David." (Luke 2:4)

It could have been called Anytown, because Bethlehem was like any town in the hills of Judea, except that the greatest king of Israel, David, was born there. And then, a thousand years later, the Messiah.

How does such honor come to the ordinary? Were the people of this town particularly worthy? Was there some great strategic advantage of where it lay? Were the people of Bethlehem politically savvy, having a long history of producing great leaders? Not at all. The little town of Bethlehem was in the shadow of great Jerusalem just six miles to the north. Even the meaning of Bethlehem, "house of bread," is unremarkable. What we know is that hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus the prophet Micah predicted the destiny of Anytown. "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."

The townspeople of Bethlehem were surely proud to be the "town of David" and the home of his famous grandmother, Ruth. They must have been glad, too, that the tomb of Rachel, Jacob's beloved wife, was there. And they must have wondered what Micah's prophesy really meant. When would another prophet like Samuel come to town and anoint a new king just like he had done with the boy David?

But it didn't happen that way. On an ordinary day when men plied their trades and women baked bread and children played in the streets a traveling couple from Nazareth arrived looking for a room. They got no special treatment. No one offered their own room. Ordinary people were having an ordinary response to an ordinary looking couple.

Honor comes to the ordinary because of God's choice, whether it is God's choice to use a town, or a nation, or even a single man or woman, boy or girl. So if this is shaping up to be an ordinary day for you--be prepared. That's the stage on which the acts of God are played.

Prayer for Today: Dear God, it so easy for us to assume that nothing exciting will happen with the ordinary. Help us this Christmas to see the amazing things you do when you choose to use the ordinary.

Immanuel

"All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel'--which means, 'God with us.'" (Matthew 1:22-23)

My wife and I lost one of our kids seriously only one time. We were walking through a crowded tourist town where the streets were lined with shops. It was evening, the crowds were dense. Suddenly I noticed that neither my wife nor I had our eight-year-old daughter by the hand. A quick scan didn't reveal her. Then I remembered she had skipped along into a toy store, but we also had just passed a side street which was also lined with shops and throngs of people. She could be anywhere. A few minutes of running around, and somehow I spotted her, way down the side street. The look on her face was unforgettable: "Where were you?" were the words, but the eyes said, "Thank God, you are with me now. I am never going to leave your side again."

"With us." There is hardly a more central promise that God has ever made to human beings. The alternatives are just too horrifying to imagine. If God has abandoned us, and that is why so many bad things happen in life, then what does that say about God, and what does it say about our destiny? If God vacillates, willing to be "with us" only as long as we don't get too obnoxious, coming and going like a father who keeps giving up on being a father, where does that leave us? If God is incapable of being with us, then we have to conclude that we will never reap the benefits of divine presence, and words like grace, mercy, love, and truth have no meaning.

Isaiah was the prophet who was given the message. In a time when Israel's enemies were bearing down on them, he gave this startling oracle about the Lord giving a sign, a virgin would conceive and give birth, and the promise in the child: Immanuel; God will be with us.

Jesus was born, but he was sent, and Immanuel was one of his names. God with us. That was why so many people didn't understand him. His voice came from a different place. He turned life upside down with the truths he presented. But he also left people with the sense that they had never been closer to God than when they were with him. We don't need to stay lost. God is not indifferent to our condition. And he came to us in the most radical way, by taking our flesh, our humanity, on himself.

Prayer for Today: Dear Lord, I need to know you are with us. Help me this Christmas to know more than I have ever known before that you have come and that we can always live in the conscious enjoyment of your presence.

Magnify

"My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." (Luke 2:46-47)

We live in an age of shrinking souls. Which is the perfect reason to take Christmas seriously as our best hope for our minds and hearts to be enlarged with God's greatness.

Mary's response to the message that she would bear the one who would be the savior was a remarkable song of praise, sometimes known as the Magnificat (Luke 2:46.55). It begins with "my soul magnifies the Lord," which means that because God's announcement opened her heart to God in a way that she couldn't have imagined, now her soul was beginning to grasp the bigness of God.

I remember as a kid the first time I looked through a telescope at the open sky on a cold winter evening. When I pointed it at the half-lit moon and focussed, I was stunned, almost rocked back on my heels, to see mountains and plains--not like looking at picture books of the moon--but at the real thing in real time. It was the reality of it that struck me. A familiar bright dime hanging in the sky was now a real place to me. The telescope magnified it's reality. The moon didn't become bigger, but my comprehension of it did.

Sometimes human beings look at God as if he were a distant point of light. But then his word comes along, a sober statement of his intent to do something in our history, and--if we accept it by faith--our lives become larger. We see that we are living in a greater reality, with a greater God than we had imagined, and with greater possibilities in our future.

Mary knew her life would never be the same. Not just her life, but the lives of countless others, because of what God was going to do. And it stretched her soul.

Prayer for today: Lord, this Christmas give me a larger vision of who you are. May you be magnified in my soul, and may others see that you are the focus of my celebration.

Counselor

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

"What is the baby's name?" Many people in Bethlehem who heard of a baby born in a stable must have stopped by to talk to Mary or Joseph, who might have had a shudder every time they voiced the name they themselves had not chosen: Jesus. But hundreds of years earlier other names had already been announced for the Anointed one. Isaiah spoke of one who would be called Wonderful Counselor.

One of the roles of a king or other highly-placed official in ancient times was that of counselor. The most difficult questions, the most complicated negotiations, the most intractable problems were presented to someone who was supposed to be wise and judicious because of his high position. The counsel of the king was supreme. But then, we know there is good counsel and there is poor counsel.

The one born of a virgin would be called Wonderful Counselor. Now that is something different. The Hebrew word for "wonderful" means something out of the ordinary, clearly different, beyond human explanation. It is the kind of knowledge spoken of in Psalm 136:

O LORD, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD. You hem me in--behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain.

When we think of the nativity of Jesus there is one overwhelming sense that we should have about it all: wonder. God coming right to us in that way. Wonderful. Jesus giving us an unclouded vision of what our lives are supposed to be--good counsel. Wonderful!

Prayer for Today: Lord I need your counsel in every area of my life. As I think about my family, friends, work, decisions--I know I need to be smart beyond what is humanly possible to be smart. So please help me listen to you this Christmas as the only one who is the Wonderful Counselor.

Government

"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders... and of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever." (Isaiah 9:6-7)

Government. Does that word strike a positive note in you, or negative? Of course, we're used to complaints about "government" because governing almost always falls into the hands of imperfect people who build their own kingdoms and bureaucracies, and then they become ends unto themselves, and "government" becomes a massive monster needing to be fed to stay alive. And the food is sometimes people's lives. Worse yet, some forms of governing are tyranny in which a despot imposes rules designed only to build up his power, control, and treasure.

It's a shame government has gotten such a bad name--because we all need it. The ungoverned life is chaos, anarchy, and injustice. With no governing, people would not volunteer to pitch in for the common good, and they would be unwilling to enact laws that impinge on their prerogatives. And so government is a necessary constraint on our impulses and independence, a way for a person to say "I need to have standards in my life, and I know I and my neighbors need to live under those standards for them to be meaningful."

God knows we need governing. That's why he calls himself King, Shepherd, Master, Lord, Father. And when Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the world gained the greatest governor the world had ever known.

Have you ever looked at someone with the responsibility of governing and wondered how he or she can bear up under the sheer weight of the responsibility? Good news here. "The government will be on his shoulders." Governing--real, life-shaping authority--ultimately rests on Christ's shoulders. Now there is a future time when he will reign as undisputed ruler, but in the meantime he is exercising considerable governing power. Since Bethlehem the world has changed. It is not that evil has disappeared, but its counter--the power of Christ--has been triumphant in one life after another.

We can thank God this Christmas that he did not leave us to our chaotic, ungoverned state. A shepherd-king came to stand in the Davidic line, not to be like other kings, but to govern our lives from the inside out.

Prayer for Today: Lord, I confess that there is much in me that does not want to be governed. Help me to see joy in the fact that your governing will never end, and because of that, peace will increase.

Mighty God

"And he will be called... Mighty God." (Isaiah 9:6)

Some of the prophecies about Christ in the Old Testament are mysterious statements that are so bold, so large, that they were held as treasures across the generations until they were fulfilled and then understood. Isaiah's oracle about a son who would be born--Wonderful Counselor, Prince of Peace, and all the rest--was one of those landmark promises. And in that moment of inspiration, Isaiah revealed he would be "Mighty God."

Now in the Jewish tradition nothing was more important than belief in the oneness of God. Not two gods, not a thousand gods, but one and only one God. So what could happen when, in Bethlehem itself, Magi from the east came bearing gifts fit for a king, but who also worshipped him? Why did Jesus allow fishermen in a boat worship him after he calmed a storm? Or Mary falling at Jesus' feet in worship in the garden after his resurrection? Or the disciple Thomas falling at Jesus' feet, saying "My Lord and my God"?

Nobody at the start of Jesus' life, nor during his adult ministry even hinted at anything suggesting there is more than one God. But because of who God is, and because God is higher than human comprehension, and because God said "us" from the very beginning ("let us make man in our image"), and because the coming one would be called Immanuel, "God with us," we can believe that Christmas represents the true entry of God into human affairs. The same God who created humanity, took humanity on himself when it suited his purposes--to save that same humanity.

Not any kind of god would do that. Only the one, the true, the "Mighty God."

Prayer for Today: Lord I believe you are mighty. I believe you can do whatever you wish. I believe you came in the flesh in Jesus.

Everlasting Father

"And he will be called... Everlasting Father" (Isaiah 9:6)

What a remarkable string of names in this one verse, Isaiah 9:6! This child who was born, this son who was given is known by what he was called. Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, and then, Everlasting Father. Now this was a radical statement indeed. A coming ruler might--if he were an ordinary ruler--simply assert his authority and prerogatives as potentate. And everybody knows that the king is the one who has the power because he has an army, and who has wealth because he controls the resources of his realm. That is the way of earthly rulers.

But Jesus would be no mere earthly ruler. His reign would be "everlasting." That means enduring, unstoppable, without challenge, and it also means having the qualities of heaven. An Everlasting King would have to be a Divine King.

It is a different kind of king who reigns as father. Kings (or, for that matter, prime ministers or presidents) don't have to be fathers. They can wield power simply because they have it. But a ruler who cares for those in his realm, who truly wants to protect, and provide for his subjects out of a familial kind of love, is as much a father as king.

We don't need to be confused about Jesus being called "Everlasting Father" here as if this confuses the doctrine of the Trinity. Hundred of years before his birth Jesus was called "Everlasting Father" simply because his reign would be about protecting and providing--a king, yes, but a fatherly one. And we should not forget that Jesus' relationship with God the Father was so close that Jesus could say: "if you have seen me, you have seen the Father."

In some parts of the world the legend of Santa Claus, derived from St. Nicholas, is called "Father Christmas." And at its best, the legend expresses the hope that someone bigger than life out there is full of benevolence and magical charm. But nothing can compare with the reality that Jesus Christ has become for the world the Powerful Protector and Perfect Provider, a king whose authority is so right and so good, that it will never end.

Born a child, destined to bring fatherly care. Always and forever.

Prayer for today: Lord, help me to fully submit to your authority as king in my life, and then let me know your protection and provision which goes beyond what any early father can provide.

Prince

"And he will be called... Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6)

Princes, whether they desire it or not, usually end up as warriors. Rulers of nations may talk about peace, but nothing is more elusive than peace. And so when Isaiah talked about a child who would be born, a son who would be given, who would be called "Prince of Peace," it sounded like high rhetoric, wishful thinking. But could it ever possibly happen?

When you look at the life of Jesus, it hardly looks like a life of peace. He was in constant conflict with people who had invented their own ideas about God and with people who really didn't want God to meddle in their affairs at all. Jesus had enemies. And in the end he died a most violent death preceded by humiliating abuse. His followers were harassed and persecuted. Fishermen ended up as martyrs.

Yet it is in the very sacrifice of Jesus that he became Prince of Peace. Only when the chief enemies of humanity were defeated would it be possible for people to live at peace with God, with themselves, and with the world.

And so, yes, he was the Prince of Peace. The angel was right in saying "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace..." The apostle Paul could pass on a sincere wish for peace in saying "now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way" (2 Thess. 3:16).

This is the kind of prince--a ruler brand new to the world--that the prophecy pointed to. So when we think of Bethlehem, we must remember that it was not the stable that made this baby unique, nor the virtues of Mary or Joseph, nor the angelic presence, nor any other feature of those extraordinary days. Jesus is prince because of who he is. Even as a baby, his presence was a new force for peace in the world.

Where do you need to find peace in your life at this time?

Prayer for today: Lord, I know there will be battles in my life, and I know that some fights between what is right and what is wrong are necessary. But help me to live in the calm and confidence that you have made it possible for me to live at peace with you.

Magi

"After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, 'Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.'" (Matthew 2:1-2)

Mary and Joseph apparently stayed in Bethlehem many months after the birth of Jesus, yet we know nothing about that time. How was Mary treating her baby, knowing she would have to submit to him as her Lord? How much attention were they getting from the townspeople? What were they telling people, if anything? We just don't know.

But we do know that one day some travelers from the east--maybe Persia or Mesopotamia (the regions of modern day Iran or Iraq)--suddenly showed up in Bethlehem, claiming to have been guided to a new king by a star. The word Magi refers to people who belonged to some kind of a priestly caste who specialized in special knowledge, interpretation of dreams, and astrology. Despite popular traditions, they were not kings, we don't know their names, and we don't know that there were three of them (that is a tradition inferred from the fact that they bore three gifts: gold, incense, and myrrh). There may have been two; there may have been twelve.

But what we do know of them is startling. They saw a sign. They were motivated. They travelled. No wonder they are sometimes called "wise men." They were not merely astrologers. They were worshippers. Jerusalem was their first stop, where they inquired about a new king (which is a sure way to set off the alarm with the existing king); but then they found Bethlehem. They delivered their valuable gifts, and they bowed in worship. If people in Bethlehem weren't paying much attention, before, they surely were now.

They were as foreign as could be, but Jesus was of keen interest to them. These are the stories that remind us that familiarity can breed contempt--that if we are not careful we who are "insiders" can consider Christ and Christmas so familiar that we pass them with a simple nod of the head. No, if men from far away in the east went out of their way to find him and to set treasures before him, then maybe one of the best things we can do at retail-obsessed Christmas season is to think: what gifts will I bring to him?

Prayer for today: Lord, I know that what you want me to give you is my life. Help me with my motivation. With my willingness to go the distance. Show me what gifts I can bring you.

Star

"They went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed." (Matthew 2:9-10)

It says in Psalm 19 that stars above have voices. "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world."

If you have ever stood outside in the black night and looked up at the canopy of stars, away from the city, away from noise, it may have seemed to you like the stars have a message. In silence they speak, and their voice is thunderous.

The star of Bethlehem, a sign in the sky noted by the Magi, may have been a miraculous event matching the miraculous entry of the Savior into the world, or it may have been a natural astronomical phenomenon used by God as a sign. In either case, the point is that the heavens were speaking when Christ was born, in a unique way about a unique world-changing event. Should that come as any surprise?

But note that only the observant recognized the sign. God drew outsiders toward Bethlehem with a word that he had placed in the sky. Don't ever doubt that God is speaking to the "outsider," and that those who seek will find.

Prayer for today: Lord, thank you for putting your clear markers into this world and into our lives so we can know that you are real, and what you intend to do. May this Christmas be a new marker for me.

Flesh

"The word became flesh, and made his dwelling among us." (John 1:14)

The point is not so much that the Son of God became a baby, but that he became flesh. And in this humbling of the eternal Son of God, the Word who was with God from the beginning and was God, he chose to begin in the way all flesh does--as a newborn.

But what does "flesh" really mean? Doesn't it sound a bit crass? Maybe even sinful?

In the Bible "flesh" is a word that points to a number of different realities. Literally, it means the body, the tissues and bones and fluids that are common to any human being living anywhere in the world at any time. The body is the jar of clay in which God has placed treasures. Consequently, "flesh" can mean "humanity" or "human nature." To speak of "flesh and blood" refers to the humanness that you share with your family, friends, and people you've never met. And then "flesh" can mean "fallen, flawed humanity." "The flesh" is shorthand in Paul's epistles for humanity as it always is--broken and fallible--with one exception, and that is Christ.

"The word became flesh." It means that the Son of God became human--really, truly human, with the exception that he had no sin. Christmas is a time of awe because the best news the human race ever got was that its Creator had so much love, that he joined the human race to save it.

Prayer for today: Lord, help me to hear "the Word" this Christmas. Help me to see you for who you are in all your glory. Thank you for humbling yourself.

Light

"For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." (Luke 2:30-32)

There was less light yesterday than any other day of the year. The winter solstice on December 21 means for many of us who live halfway between the equator and the north pole that we have breakfast when it is still dark outside, and by supper the sun has long set. That slide toward the shortest day of the year seems like sinking into a black hole. No wonder people in ancient cultures thought that the day when the sun started coming back was reason to celebrate. The prophet Malachi spoke of the healing power of light: "the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings" (Malachi 4:2).

Eight days after Jesus' birth, when Mary and Joseph had taken him to the temple as the law required, a man named Simeon saw him, and his eyes were opened to the reality of Jesus' identity. His eyes saw God's salvation. There in human form. At the right place at the right time. Brought in not by royalty, but by an ordinary couple. Yet Simeon knew this was it. And he saw in Jesus a brilliant light that would show the way not just for Israel, but for all the nations.

Days were dark then. It was hard to know when deliverance might come from the heavy grip of the Romans. War was always just a rumor away. It was difficult to settle into a normal pattern of living, when on a whim an emperor in a faraway land could demand a census that sent you packing your bags.

Days are dark now. Not just because it is late December, but because the black hole of evil has been drawing people in. But darkness will never be able to deny light. It will never be able to say "I am the real thing and light is an illusion," because, as everybody knows, darkness is only the absence of light.

We need to see salvation--here and now. We need to use this Christmas as much as ever before to look at the One who has been "prepared in the sight of all people." The public Savior; the beacon for the world; the light for revelation.

Prayer for today: Lord, open my eyes as Simeon's eyes were opened to the Lord Jesus.

Beginning

"That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched--this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us." (1 John 1:1-2)

Beginning. The Beginning. How much we all want to know about the beginning of all things so that we can understand the now of all things, and pursue the way things are supposed to be in the now. We assume that the right way to live is defined by the divine origins and designs for life. And we are right in this. The Bible's opening words: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" mark the line between a time when there was only God, and the beginning of the existence of his magnificent creation, including mankind. And the opening words of the Gospel of John place the Son of God right there--at the beginning. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

Unlike every other human birth that has ever happened, the birth of Jesus was not the beginning of a new life. Rather, someone who was there at The Beginning "appeared," as it says in 1 John 1:1-2. And this appearance was not a dream or vision or apparition. The appearance was an extended visitation, a flood of revelation, all lived in a real life. "The life appeared." It was heard; it was seen; it was touched. Bethlehem was not the beginning of the life of Christ, and that's why his life can change our lives. Jesus said: "Before Abraham was born, I AM."

What was new at Bethlehem was the way God reached out to the human race. Whereas in the past God spoke through the words of prophets, a new God-speech began at Bethlehem. God "has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word" (Heb. 1:2-3).

So Christmas is about the good beginning, and it is about the rescue of the now. A new contact with the human race by one who has been there all along.

Prayer for today: Lord, I acknowledge that you are the only one who can begin something new in my life. Thank you for the appearance of "the life." Help me to stay focussed on his appearance.

Eve

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

On the night before Jesus was born the shepherds would have seen the night sky the way they had seen it thousands of times before, without a hint that they would witness an angelic company.

On the night before Christmas in the year 1968 three men looked into the night sky also, but from an entirely different perspective. Frank Borman, Jim Lovell, and William Anders, the crew of Apollo 8, were further away from the earth than any human beings had been. It was the first time a spacecraft had broken earth's orbit and ventured out across a quarter million miles to orbit, for the first time ever, the moon. On a historic broadcast on that Christmas Eve the astronauts beamed back to earth a video picture of a small blue disk which was the earth, and spoke of the "vast loneliness" of space. And then their voices crackled over the radio: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was formless and void; and darkness was over the face of the deep."

There on that small blue circle is where the whole drama of human history had unfolded: the creation, the fall, wars, explorations, feast and famine, marriages and divorces, births and deaths. And to that blue circle God came, at just the right time, for all the right reasons.

Wherever you are, whatever you are doing, Christmas Eve is a time when we approach that dividing line in human history, the doorway from BC to AD, that revolution that happened when the Son of God made his entry into the world. Sometimes you know when you're on the eve of something big (your wedding, moving to a new home, adopting a child), and sometimes you don't. Every Christmas Eve we know we are about to mark the moment when Immanuel came. So on the night before Christmas, find a quiet moment when you can think about what was about to happen in Bethlehem so many years ago.

Prayer for today: God, thank you that, with millions of other people around the world, I can anticipate and celebrate the moment when you joined yourself to the human race to offer us our only hope for salvation.

Christmas

"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)

In Christmas everything lines up just the way it is meant to be. The shepherds heard, they saw, and it was all just as they had been told. In a perfect conjunction of heaven and earth, God connected the two for his eternal purposes. Years later Jesus would tell us, in so many different ways, "this is why I came." "I have come as a light." "I have come that they may have life and have it to the full." "For this reason I was born and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth."

The birth of Jesus was as intentional a divine act as anything we have seen in the history of the world.

And so, we can pray:

Thank you Lord Christ for humbling yourself and taking the form of man. Thank you for pushing back the darkness of this world and of my life. Thank you for fully living before us so that we can see just how much life we can have. Let me live for the next 52 weeks in the light of your ongoing presence and power in this world. And then let me celebrate Christmas again--with joy.