



# THE WAY to Bethlehem

An Advent Devotional

*A companion to Christ Memorial Productions' Advent presentation THE WAY to Bethlehem*

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*Inspired by original art by Mark Amen*

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## Introduction

Dear Fellow Travelers,

The Christ Memorial Productions presentation *THE WAY to Bethlehem* began with Christ Memorial and CMP member Mark Amen pondering the incredible role that Mary, Jesus's mother, was asked to play. If we apply our knowledge of the social and cultural practices of her time and place, Mary was most likely a young teenager when she received the angel's message that she would be the mother of the Messiah. What would she have been thinking and feeling as she approached Bethlehem and the birth of this miracle child?

The journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, depending on the route, was between 70 to 90 miles. On foot or a donkey, this trip perhaps could be done in a few days. But one can assume that a young woman in her third trimester of pregnancy would need to go significantly slower. So perhaps this journey took Mary and Joseph a week or more. Long days on dirt roads, long nights listening for the sounds of dangerous animals and dangerous men. If Mary was anything like me as I approached the birth of my first child, she was also probably worrying about what her labor and delivery would be like, especially since she would be far from home. When we hear the familiar Christmas story, we know the journey ends in joy, so it's easy to overlook its difficulty.

When I began to work on the script for *THE WAY to Bethlehem*, what captured my imagination is that Mary and Joseph's journey started long before they received their heavenly news. The way to Bethlehem began with the first mother, with Eve in the Garden of Eden as she took her first bite of forbidden fruit and compelled the need for a Savior.

I've always loved stories and am fascinated by the intricacies of their construction. This story, the greatest story, captivates me. When you look closely, you can find traces of brave Mary, of gentle Joseph, and of this miraculous child throughout the Old Testament. These patterns shape how we are to understand our relationship with a God who walks with us steadfastly through all of life's twists and turns.

This Advent devotional explores how four stories from the Old Testament foreshadow Mary and Joseph's journey and bring us closer to Jesus—in the stories of Eve, Sarah, Boaz, and David, we can see the the longing for a promised son, the failure of earthly power, the mercy of redemption, and the way our loving God is always working for us, even in the most unexpected ways.

Advent means arrival. The season of Advent in the church year is associated with waiting. Humanity waited for millennia for the First Coming of Jesus in that stable in Bethlehem; now, we wait for his Second Coming. But I also think that we can connect Advent with journeying. This world outside the perfection of the Garden is not our home. David says in Psalm 119:9, "I am a sojourner on the earth," and hundreds of years later, after Jesus's death and resurrection, Peter refers to Christians as "sojourners and exiles" (1 Peter 2:11).

In many ways, we are all on the way to Bethlehem, traveling ever closer to our Savior. The way can be hard, it can feel perilous. We don't always know what is around the next turn. It can ask more than we think we have to give, but gives more than we could ever imagine.

And, oh, it ends in joy!

Blessings to you this Advent season,

Megan Roegner

## Week 1: Eve and the Vanquishing Son

Reading: Genesis 3-4:7

### Genesis 3

[1] Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made.

He said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?"

[2] And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, [3] but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'" [4] But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. [5] For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." [6] So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. [7] Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.

[8] And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. [9] But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?" [10] And he said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself." [11] He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" [12] The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate." [13] Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate."

[14] The LORD God said to the serpent,

"Because you have done this,  
cursed are you above all livestock  
and above all beasts of the field;  
on your belly you shall go,  
and dust you shall eat  
all the days of your life.

[15] I will put enmity between you and the woman,

and between your offspring and her offspring;  
 he shall bruise your head,  
 and you shall bruise his heel.”

[16] To the woman he said,

“I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing;  
 in pain you shall bring forth children.  
 Your desire shall be for your husband,  
 and he shall rule over you.”

[17] And to Adam he said,

“Because you have listened to the voice of your wife  
 and have eaten of the tree  
 of which I commanded you,  
 ‘You shall not eat of it,’  
 cursed is the ground because of you;  
 in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life;  
 [18] thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;  
 and you shall eat the plants of the field.

[19] By the sweat of your face  
 you shall eat bread,  
 till you return to the ground,  
 for out of it you were taken;  
 for you are dust,  
 and to dust you shall return.”

[20] The man called his wife’s name Eve, because she was the mother of all living. [21] And the LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them.

[22] Then the LORD God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever—” [23] therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. [24] He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life. (ESV)

## Genesis 4:1–7

[1] Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, “I have gotten a man with the help of the LORD.” [2] And again, she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground. [3] In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, [4] and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, [5] but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell. [6] The LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? [7] If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, and you must rule over it.” (ESV)

## Reflection

When we think about Christmas, we naturally think of the baby born in a stable in Bethlehem. In the darkness light gleams from the bright star in the sky and from the activity of the bustling little town as well as the visitors who come to greet the child. But the story begins much earlier than that; it starts with the first baby, the one born somewhere lonely in the wilderness outside the guarded gates of the Garden of Eden.

This season of waiting we call Advent starts in Genesis 3. The humans God has shaped by hand are tempted by the serpent to break his one rule: They eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Why do they do this? Genesis tells us that Eve “saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise” (3:6). It’s easy to judge her, but haven’t we all been tempted to taste more than we should, to look at what we shouldn’t see, to be something different than who God made us to be? Don’t we all desire to have, to know, to be *more*?

The perfection of the Garden is broken. The man and woman who have been so lovingly made are suddenly ashamed not just of their betrayal but of their bodies. This is what a knowledge of good and evil does for them—all they had known before was *good*. The revelation of another option is devastating.

Adam and Eve are cursed to a life of hard work and pain in childbirth. In the face of their desire to be something greater, he reminds them of their earthen origins, “for you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (3:19). But this serpent (and, yes, we have a lot of questions about him, too) is cursed as well, and with the curse there is a promise:

I will put enmity between you and the woman,  
 and between your offspring and her offspring;  
 he shall bruise your head,  
 and you shall bruise his heel. (3:15)

Her offspring! A promised child to exact retribution on the creature who lured them into a separation between them and the Lord.

When Eve gives birth to this very first baby, Cain, don't you think she probably thought that *this* was the child? "I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord." (The ESV translation has a period here, so I've kept it, but it feels like an exclamation point situation to me.) However, we know what happens with little Cain. His jealousy leads to the murder of his brother Abel, the first murder in this once perfect world that God created.

Oh, the irony of human failings. How often we are disappointed by the people and things we trust to save us.

I can't remember a time in my life when I didn't know the Cain and Abel story. But it wasn't until I was an adult that I noticed what God tells this first child born of woman when he observes Cain's anger: "If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, and you must rule over it" (4:7). The English teacher in me appreciates God's use of figurative language here. Sin is brought to life, beastly and brutal. It crouches like an animal, ready to pounce, but it *desires* like a human. Sin is lurking and hungry, but not irresistible: As God says, we are especially vulnerable when we do not feel "accepted," but we still have the ability to "rule over it."

And yet, like Cain, like Eve, like Adam, how frequently we give in to temptation.

Cain's failure to rule over crouching, ravenous sin is a failure to crush the head of the serpent. And throughout the Old Testament we see more and more of Eve's offspring fail to resist the monster waiting at the door, even the "heroes...": Abraham, Moses, David...they all fall prey to sin.

The son that Eve is promised comes millenia later. After centuries of threatening darkness, a child (who is not just a child) is born to a young but courageous woman. This story is filled with paradox: virgin and mother; God and man; ancient and infant; Alpha and Omega.

The Gospel of John begins with a parallel to Genesis:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. ...

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:1-5; 14)

A revelation! This longed-for child is the God who has been walking with us all along, from the first golden days of the Garden into the wilderness outside its gates. He is the light who kept the darkness at bay, who is keeping it at bay, who has defeated it.

I'm a daughter of Eve. I still want to know more. Why did we have to wait so long for the Savior? Why are we still waiting for him to return? And if he conquered sin and death, why does it feel like we are still surrounded by evil every day? But if I am the daughter of Eve, I am also the sister of Mary. I can wonder, "How will this be?" (Luke 1:34) and still trust that it *will be*, that it *is*. God is big enough for my questions.

## Prayer

Father, you made us in your image. You made us good. I am sorry for turning away from who you made me to be. Jesus, thank you for being the light in the darkness and for defeating sin and death. Thank you for bringing me back to you. Holy Spirit, when we feel temptation or overwhelmed by darkness, help us remember that you've already won. Help us be a light in the world, too. Amen.

## Week 2: Sarah and the Promised Son

Reading: Genesis 18:1-16; 21:1-7

### Genesis 18:1-15

[1] And the LORD appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day. [2] He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing in front of him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth [3] and said, "O Lord, if I have found favor in your sight, do not pass by your servant. [4] Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree, [5] while I bring a morsel of bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said." [6] And Abraham went quickly into the tent to Sarah and said, "Quick! Three seahs of fine flour! Knead it, and make cakes." [7] And Abraham ran to the herd and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to a young man, who prepared it quickly. [8] Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them. And he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

[9] They said to him, "Where is Sarah your wife?" And he said, "She is in the tent." [10] The LORD said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him. [11] Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah. [12] So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?" [13] The LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' [14] Is anything too hard for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son." [15] But Sarah denied it, saying, "I did not laugh," for she was afraid. He said, "No, but you did laugh."

### Genesis 21:1-7

[1] The LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did to Sarah as he had promised. [2] And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him. [3] Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore him, Isaac. [4] And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. [5] Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. [6] And Sarah said, "God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me." [7] And she said, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age."

## Reflection

There are times when I wish God would speak to me directly. To tell me what I'm supposed to do, tell me what it is he has planned. But when I really think about it, I'm terrified at the idea of knowing precisely, without a doubt, what God has in store for me... *because what if I don't like it?* If God comes to talk to me, and I disagree, it's not like I can talk back or challenge him, right?

Sarah might disagree. After years of promises from God that Abraham would be the father of a lineage as numerous as the stars, she had given up hope that this great line would come from her. In a series of fairly disastrous decisions, Sarah convinced Abraham to have a child with her servant, Hagar, so he could have a son even though her body was not providing one. But it seems that Sarah wasn't prepared for the pain of watching another woman raise her husband's son, and she frequently dealt "harshly" with Hagar and the boy, Ishmael.

How often do we decide we must do God's work for him, try to spur the action on when God is telling us to wait? How often do we tell ourselves to take things into our own hands only to use those hands to hurt ourselves and others?

God had plans for Hagar and Ishmael, but they were not the plans he had for Sarah and the son he had promised her. God spoke to Abraham, once again, and told him that Sarah, "advanced in years" as she was, would give birth to a son in a year's time. Of course, Sarah was listening at the tent door (wouldn't you?), and she laughed at the thought. Of course, God knew she was listening and knew she laughed, no matter how much she tried to deny it.

What was the nature of this laughter, do you think? Amused? Incredulous? Bitter? Angry? Probably a bit of all of these emotions: *"After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?"* (18:12). (By the way, I believe this will be the theme of my retirement party in about 10 years.)

Laughter can be a weapon we inflict on ourselves and others although we often deploy it as a means of self-preservation. Mocking, scornful, cynical. It wounds us as much as it defends. Yet, despite Sarah's laughter, God kept his promise. Genesis 21:1 says "the Lord visited Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did to Sarah as he had promised." Just as with Mary and her cousin Elizabeth in Luke 1, it is clear that the conception of these long-awaited sons was due to his divine plan, not human biology.

But why does God work this way? Why do his plans come too late for our comfort (as in the case of elderly Sarah and Elizabeth) or too soon (as in the case of the unmarried Mary)? I don't know, and I don't want to provide a trite suggestion. Sarah's pain as she lived into old age without a child was real, as was Elizabeth's. Mary's acquiescence to the angel—"let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38)—took courage; the risks of scorn and violence toward an unwed mother were real. The longing of generations as they waited through danger and captivity for the promised Savior was real. The distress we experience today as we grieve our losses, as we watch conflict tear us apart is real. This is Advent: *Come, Lord Jesus*. We wait and wait again.

There have been times in my life that I have prayed for things and the wait for an answer seemed interminable. And yet, when the answer came, I realized that God's plans for me were much better than the plans I had for myself. Perhaps this is one reason for the waiting, to confront our tremulous, temporal hearts with the timelessness of God's perfection. We need to see that these blessings do not come from our own machinations.

In the anxiety of waiting, we often prepare ourselves for disappointment. Yet, how often are these grim expectations reversed? In Genesis 18 Sarah laughed with disbelief; in Genesis 21 she laughed with joy. Isaac, the name God planned for this miraculous child, means laughter. Sarah proclaimed, "God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me" (21:6). This is the good laughter, not the laughter that shields and attacks but the laughter that rejoices, the laughter of a singing heart.

Grappling with the revelation that she, a virgin, will bear the Messiah, Mary, too, found joy in this reversal of expectations. As she celebrated with her cousin Elizabeth,

[46] [Mary] said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord,

[47] and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

[48] for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.

For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

[49] for he who is mighty has done great things for me,

and holy is his name.

[50] And his mercy is for those who fear him

from generation to generation.

[51] He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;

[52] he has brought down the mighty from their thrones

and exalted those of humble estate;

[53] he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and the rich he has sent away empty.  
[54] He has helped his servant Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy,  
[55] as he spoke to our fathers,  
to Abraham and to his offspring forever." (Luke 1:46-55)

Two pregnant women in a patriarchal society, one a virgin, the other post-menopausal, were the first to know the Messiah was coming. Expectations reversed! We are filled with fears of our own weakness and frailty, yet the mighty fall, the humble are uplifted. Expectations reversed! Despite the corrupt and exploitative hunger for power that plagues human authority, God's strength is mercy. Expectations reversed!

His plan was better than ours all along. And all we can do is laugh.

## Prayer

Dear Lord, teach us patience. Help us keep our hope in you. Let us trust in the goodness of your plans for us, even when they require us to wait. And open our eyes to how you are working in our lives today in the most unexpected ways. Let us rest secure in your love for us. Amen.

## Week 3: Boaz and the Redeeming Son

Reading: Ruth 4:1-22

### Ruth 4

[1] Now Boaz had gone up to the gate and sat down there. And behold, the redeemer, of whom Boaz had spoken, came by. So Boaz said, "Turn aside, friend; sit down here." And he turned aside and sat down. [2] And he took ten men of the elders of the city and said, "Sit down here." So they sat down. [3] Then he said to the redeemer, "Naomi, who has come back from the country of Moab, is selling the parcel of land that belonged to our relative Elimelech. [4] So I thought I would tell you of it and say, 'Buy it in the presence of those sitting here and in the presence of the elders of my people.' If you will redeem it, redeem it. But if you will not, tell me, that I may know, for there is no one besides you to redeem it, and I come after you." And he said, "I will redeem it." [5] Then Boaz said, "The day you buy the field from the hand of Naomi, you also acquire Ruth the Moabite, the widow of the dead, in order to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance." [6] Then the redeemer said, "I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I impair my own inheritance. Take my right of redemption yourself, for I cannot redeem it."

[7] Now this was the custom in former times in Israel concerning redeeming and exchanging: to confirm a transaction, the one drew off his sandal and gave it to the other, and this was the manner of attesting in Israel. [8] So when the redeemer said to Boaz, "Buy it for yourself," he drew off his sandal. [9] Then Boaz said to the elders and all the people, "You are witnesses this day that I have bought from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and to Mahlon. [10] Also Ruth the Moabite, the widow of Mahlon, I have bought to be my wife, to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance, that the name of the dead may not be cut off from among his brothers and from the gate of his native place. You are witnesses this day." [11] Then all the people who were at the gate and the elders said, "We are witnesses. May the LORD make the woman, who is coming into your house, like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you act worthily in Ephrathah and be renowned in Bethlehem, [12] and may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah, because of the offspring that the LORD will give you by this young woman."

[13] So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife. And he went in to her, and the LORD gave her conception, and she bore a son. [14] Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without a redeemer, and may his name be renowned in Israel! [15] He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age, for your

daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has given birth to him.” [16] Then Naomi took the child and laid him on her lap and became his nurse. [17] And the women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, “A son has been born to Naomi.” They named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.

[18] Now these are the generations of Perez: Perez fathered Hezron, [19] Hezron fathered Ram, Ram fathered Amminadab, [20] Amminadab fathered Nahshon, Nahshon fathered Salmon, [21] Salmon fathered Boaz, Boaz fathered Obed, [22] Obed fathered Jesse, and Jesse fathered David. (ESV)

## Reflection

I can still remember a Christmas homily given by my pastor when I was a child. He dressed up in robes and a beard and spoke in Joseph’s voice. I think that until then I had never really thought about Joseph. The incredible thing Mary had been asked to do was obviously daunting—as a young girl, it was shocking to imagine someone just a little older than me being asked to give birth to the Messiah. Mary’s submission to what the angel asked her to do was a tremendous show of courage. I think it takes some maturity to understand the strength that underlay Joseph’s acceptance of the angel’s message.

My pastor was an adoptive father, which is perhaps why Joseph’s story resonated so much with him. He knew firsthand that a father’s love and sacrifice are not simple matters of biology, that there is something greater, something deeper.

Before Joseph was a father, he was a prospective husband, a betrothed man in a culture and time that had harsh punishments for women who did not follow the rules for sexual behavior. A woman who had a child outside of marriage was at risk of public shaming and even death. Yet Joseph, even before he knew the truth about Mary’s child, acted with compassion: “being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, [he] resolved to divorce her quietly” (Matt. 1:19). The word “just” is compelling. The law in Deuteronomy allowed for death by stoning in such cases, but Joseph’s decision to spare Mary from the law’s humiliation and death, even though he believed her to be guilty, is considered to be the superior righteous behavior. What better earthly father could our Savior have than a man who knows the law and chooses mercy over punishment?

An angel spoke to Joseph in a dream and told him that Mary’s child was conceived by the Holy Spirit, and the gospel writer refers to the prophecy from Isaiah 7, “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel’ (which means God with us)” (Matt. 1:23). Joseph followed through with his marriage to Mary and committed

to raising this incredible child as his own. We learn so much about our Father in heaven by examining who he chose as an earthly father for his son: the man who embraced gentleness and kindness even when the world allowed him to be harsh, the man who accepted the miracle unfolding.

Just like we find glimpses of Mary in Eve's and Sarah's stories, we can see Joseph in one of his forefathers, Boaz, the husband of Ruth, one of the four women Matthew 1 includes in Jesus's genealogy. A Moabitess who married an Israelite, Ruth immigrated to Bethlehem, faithfully following her mother in law, Naomi, after both of their husbands died. Ruth and Naomi were destitute and vulnerable when they arrived, and Boaz was the owner of the land where Ruth gleaned grain.

As a relative of Naomi's husband, he had the distinction of being a "kinsman redeemer," a family member who had a moral obligation to rescue endangered kin or their property. In the Book of Ruth, the role of kinsman redeemer is intertwined with the act of levirate marriage, a practice in which a man married a deceased relative's childless wife in order to continue the dead man's lineage. At Naomi's urging, Ruth asked for Boaz to be their redeemer—to purchase the land that had belonged to their husbands and *also* to marry Ruth, thus saving them from poverty and, hopefully, providing a son who would be the dead men's heir. Not every man was ready to provide such a redemption—the cost was steep: the expense of a wife and children, who, according to custom, were seen, in a way, as another man's. Another of Naomi's relatives viewed this act as "impair[ing] my own inheritance" (Ruth 4:6) and declined to do the job. Redeeming is not for the faint of heart.

Kinsman-redeeming, levirate marriages, sealing deals with sandals...these are obscure, almost incomprehensible customs now. They may even have been obscure to Joseph in the first century. But he would have recognized this underlying theme of the Book of Ruth: a woman responds to incomprehensible circumstances with tremendous courage, and a kind man quietly does everything he can to support her. Both bravery and gentleness are acts of faith. The reward for the sacrifice, love, and faith demonstrated by Ruth and Boaz, by Mary and Joseph, was the gift of bringing up the child who belonged, not just to them, but to their community, to the world.

When Ruth gave birth to her son, Obed, the women of Bethlehem rejoiced with Naomi because he was a reminder that even in the bleakest times, God is acting for our good: "Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without a redeemer, and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life..." (Ruth 4:14-15). These words echo through the generations and are even more true for the son of Mary, and the Book of Ruth ends exactly how the Book of Matthew begins, with a genealogy: This child of Ruth (and all of Bethlehem, it seems) was the father of Jesse, who was the father of the great King

David. And as the generations continue to Joseph, son of Jacob, the the descendents of David know that the Lord has declared that “the days are coming...when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall executive justice and righteousness in the land” (Jeremiah 23:5).

In Jesus the strands of adoption and redemption are woven together even closer. In Jesus, who was once adopted by Joseph, we, in turn, are adopted as God’s children, and this adoption is our salvation. Paul writes in Galatians, “[4] But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, [5] to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. [6] And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” [7] So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God” (4:4-7).

## Prayer

Redeemer, you are the only one who saves. When you act through us, give us strength for all that is required, whether it is the courage of Ruth and Mary or the kindness of Boaz and Joseph. Let your love for us guide our actions and our relationships with others. Help us show them your love. Amen.

## Week 4: David and the Sacrificial Son

### 2 Samuel 12:1-23

#### 2 Samuel 12

[1] And the LORD sent Nathan to David. He came to him and said to him, "There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. [2] The rich man had very many flocks and herds, [3] but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. And he brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children. It used to eat of his morsel and drink from his cup and lie in his arms, and it was like a daughter to him. [4] Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was unwilling to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the guest who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him." [5] Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man, and he said to Nathan, "As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die, [6] and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity."

[7] Nathan said to David, "You are the man! Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you out of the hand of Saul. [8] And I gave you your master's house and your master's wives into your arms and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah. And if this were too little, I would add to you as much more. [9] Why have you despised the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and have taken his wife to be your wife and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. [10] Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.' [11] Thus says the LORD, 'Behold, I will raise up evil against you out of your own house. And I will take your wives before your eyes and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun. [12] For you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel and before the sun.'" [13] David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD." And Nathan said to David, "The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die. [14] Nevertheless, because by this deed you have utterly scorned the LORD, the child who is born to you shall die." [15] Then Nathan went to his house.

And the LORD afflicted the child that Uriah's wife bore to David, and he became sick. [16] David therefore sought God on behalf of the child. And David fasted and went in and lay all night on the ground. [17] And the elders of his house stood beside him, to raise him from the ground, but he would not, nor did he eat food with them. [18] On the seventh day the

child died. And the servants of David were afraid to tell him that the child was dead, for they said, “Behold, while the child was yet alive, we spoke to him, and he did not listen to us. How then can we say to him the child is dead? He may do himself some harm.” [19] But when David saw that his servants were whispering together, David understood that the child was dead. And David said to his servants, “Is the child dead?” They said, “He is dead.” [20] Then David arose from the earth and washed and anointed himself and changed his clothes. And he went into the house of the LORD and worshiped. He then went to his own house. And when he asked, they set food before him, and he ate. [21] Then his servants said to him, “What is this thing that you have done? You fasted and wept for the child while he was alive; but when the child died, you arose and ate food.” [22] He said, “While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept, for I said, ‘Who knows whether the LORD will be gracious to me, that the child may live?’ [23] But now he is dead. Why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me.” (ESV)

## Reflection

I am a high school English teacher, and this often influences the way that I read the Bible. I am interested in stories and how they are told—just because a text is the inspired word of God doesn’t mean that it’s not a story. When I consider the story of David, I see many aspects of the tragic hero archetype, the great man who experiences a great fall, often as a result of his own failings.

David was destined for greatness. When the Lord rejects Saul, the first king of Israel, he sends his prophet Samuel to the house of Jesse in Bethlehem to anoint the next king. Jesse is the grandson of Ruth and Boaz and the father of many fine sons, one of whom, David (the youngest, like a fairy tale), was “ruddy and had beautiful eyes and was handsome” (1 Samuel 16:12). Even though he’s just a boy and a humble shepherd, he is anointed. David famously defeats the giant Goliath with his slingshot. He joins Saul’s household and becomes the best friend of Saul’s son Jonathan. He marries Saul’s daughter, Michal. He defeats foe after foe, and all the while Saul seethes with jealousy, knowing that this young man outshines him in every way.

David eventually does become king. He defeats his enemies, he amasses wealth, he honors God. Everything is going so well...until he is blinded by his own power.

The genealogy of Jesus in Matthew identifies four women. One was David’s great-grandmother, Ruth. The final woman is simply called “Uriah’s wife.” The irony is that the child mentioned in the lineage, Solomon, is not Uriah’s child—he is David’s. This woman is Bathsheba, whom David spots bathing on a rooftop and contrives to have an affair with,

then contrives to cover it up when he learns that Bathsheba is pregnant with his child. David's determination to keep his offense a secret ultimately leads him to orchestrate the faithful Uriah's death by intentionally placing him on the front line of battle. After Uriah dies, David brings Bathsheba into his home as one of his numerous wives, believing he has gotten away with it all.

But, as Adam and Eve discovered when they attempted to cover up humanity's very first shame, there is no hiding from God. The prophet Nathan comes to David and tells him a compelling story about a rich man who takes and slaughters the beloved lamb of a poor man. When David responds with outrage at this injustice, Nathan admonishes him, "You are the man!" (2 Samuel 12:7).

The outcomes of David's repugnant behavior are tragic and far-reaching. In the immediate aftermath, David and Bathsheba's innocent son dies. In the long-term, as Nathan warns, "Thus says the Lord, 'Behold, I will raise up evil against you out of your own house'" (12:11). David will never have an easy relationship with his children. He lives to see two more of his sons die—Ammon, who assaults his sister, Tamar, is killed in revenge by their brother Absalom. Absalom then revolts against David, and in fleeing from David's army, gets his hair tangled in a tree. David's right-hand man, Joab, finds him and kills him, much to David's grief. The story feels Shakespearean, and an intrepid reader can find more than one allusion to David in *Hamlet*.

Yet despite David's flaws, he is still upheld as an ideal throughout the rest of the Bible. David's reign was a golden era for Israel and Judah. The united kingdom was powerful, and the king, although imperfect, loved and trusted God fervently. But the strength of the House of David didn't last long. After the death of Solomon, the second child of David and Bathsheba, the kingdom was split into two. Many of the kings who followed abandoned God, and then both kingdoms were destroyed by the Assyrian and Babylonian empires, leaving the Jews in exile.

The longing for the House of David was a longing for a better time, a longing that many of us can empathize with. We so frequently yearn for the good old days. But did those good old days ever truly exist? David's story is so intriguing because *even he*, this man of tremendous faith, stumbled. *Even he*, the golden king, failed in his leadership. The tension between David's triumphs and failures reveal how an earthly leader can never be enough to save us. The unfinished glimpses of a savior in David's story—the shepherd king, the blameless son who died for another's crime—lead us to cling even more strongly to the hope of our perfect king, Jesus. He is the Shepherd *and* the Lamb. He is the Son *and* the King. We cannot find this perfect unity of goodness and greatness among our fellow man, a truth even David understood although he did not know how the story would unfold. He wrote in Psalm 24:

- [1] The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof,  
the world and those who dwell therein,  
[2] for he has founded it upon the seas  
and established it upon the rivers.
- [3] Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?  
And who shall stand in his holy place?  
[4] He who has clean hands and a pure heart,  
who does not lift up his soul to what is false  
and does not swear deceitfully.  
[5] He will receive blessing from the LORD  
and righteousness from the God of his salvation.  
[6] Such is the generation of those who seek him,  
who seek the face of the God of Jacob. *Selah*
- [7] Lift up your heads, O gates!  
And be lifted up, O ancient doors,  
that the King of glory may come in.  
[8] Who is this King of glory?  
The LORD, strong and mighty,  
the LORD, mighty in battle!  
[9] Lift up your heads, O gates!  
And lift them up, O ancient doors,  
that the King of glory may come in.  
[10] Who is this King of glory?  
The LORD of hosts,  
he is the King of glory! *Selah* (ESV)

Born in the same little town of Bethlehem that David was born in, Jesus, the King of glory, modeled a very different kind of authority. He was no soldier, he amassed no wealth. The only crown he wore was a crown of thorns. The people in Jesus's time who wanted a warlord king like David to overthrow their Roman oppressors were disappointed. Jesus wasn't concerned with earthly kingdoms and human power—his eyes were fixed on the kingdom of heaven, where the blessed are the poor in spirit, the mournful, the meek, the merciful, the peacekeepers, and persecuted (Matt. 5:1-10).

Considering the kind of people who are drawn to power in this early kingdom makes me long for the kingdom of heaven. This time of year, I am drawn to the words of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day." Reeling from the trauma of the American Civil War and tragedy in his own life, he wrote in a tremendous demonstration of faith,

And in despair I bowed my head;  
 "There is no peace on earth," I said;  
 "For hate is strong,  
 And mocks the song  
 Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:  
 "God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;  
 The Wrong shall fail,  
 The Right prevail,  
 With peace on earth, good-will to men."

Advent means "arrival." It is a brief season of the church year, but it is also our perpetual state, a twilight time between Jesus's first coming and his second. As we wait, we must hold fast to the belief that, no matter what happens in the present moment, the story already has its conclusion. Ultimately and eternally, wrong has failed, and right has prevailed. Our eyes lift upwards as we wait for our perfect King to return.

*[2] But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,  
 who are too little to be among the clans of Judah,  
 from you shall come forth for me  
 one who is to be ruler in Israel,  
 whose coming forth is from of old,  
 from ancient days.*

*[3] Therefore he shall give them up until the time  
 when she who is in labor has given birth;  
 then the rest of his brothers shall return  
 to the people of Israel.*

*[4] And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD,  
 in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.  
 And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great  
 to the ends of the earth.*

*[5] And he shall be their peace. (Micah 5:2-5, ESV)*

## Prayer

Good Shepherd, when our leaders and our heroes fail, help us remember to keep our eyes and our hopes focused on you. When *we* fail, help us to remember that your sacrifice covers all of our sins. Let our confidence in your salvation help us to strive to live and to lead as you did, with love. Give us patience and strength as we wait for you to return. Amen.

## Worship Opportunities this Advent and Christmas Season

We would love to have you join us for our Advent and Christmas services at Christ Memorial Lutheran Church!

### Weekend Services

We have services every Saturday evening at 5:00 pm, and every Sunday at 8:30 am and 10:45 am. You can find livestreamed services at <https://www.youtube.com/c/lovedsent>.

### Midweek Advent Services

Advent services will be held at noon and 6:30 pm on December 3, 10, and 17. A meal will be provided before the 6:30 services.

### Christmas Eve and Christmas

We will have Christmas Eve services at noon, 3:00 pm, 5:00 pm, and 10:00 pm. A Christmas Day service will be held at 10:00 am.