

Advent-ures With God

Join us on an ADVENT-ure at Toowong Uniting Church. Starting December 1, would you commit to doing five things:

ONE: Pray Daily – set yourself the challenge of spending a consistent length of time in prayer. Whether 10 minutes or two hours, the length matters less than your resolve to devoting some uninterrupted time to just being with God.

TWO: Daily Nourish Your Soul from God's Word – take some time each day to read the bible and ponder its word, As part of these adventures with God we will suggest a passage and provide a short reflection on it for each day but reading our notes is much less important than thinking carefully about the scripture passage looking for ways to put what you read into practice and seeing how it might inform your prayers

THREE: One Act of Fasting per Week – Advent was once, like lent a time of fasting. Fasting normally involves abstaining from food for spiritual purposes. It is not so much that we deny ourselves in order to earn spiritual credit and favours from God. Rather the act of abstinence expresses our love for and devotion to God, expecting nothing in return. Advent-ures with God challenges us to one act of fasting per week. Depending on your past experience, this might be fasting for one day each week, or one meal per week, or like lent doing without a different luxury each week (chocolate, soft drinks etc).

FOUR: A Weekly Act of Worship – Commit yourself to joining with God's people once each week for corporate worship. This is important because when we commit ourselves to personal devotions it is easy to assume this is all we need. But it is not. We must also worship in the company of one another. Of course there are times when we simply cannot get to church.

FIVE: A Daily Act of Service – find an opportunity each day to intentionally serve someone else through word or action. It might be as simple as offering a compliment where you would have kept silent, sending a card of encouragement, inviting someone for a meal, lending a helping hand, picking up a piece of rubbish.

The ADVENT-ure: I will commit to

1. Pray every day
2. Nourish my soul daily from God's Word
3. One act of fasting per week
4. A weekly time of worship
5. A daily act of service

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Toowong Uniting Church
Advent 2010—Week 2



More than anyone else in the Christmas story, Mary demonstrates the true spirit of Christmas. The true spirit of Christmas is not the spirit of family bonding, nor the spirit of giving, nor even the spirit of rejoicing. All of those things are well and good, but Mary teaches us that the true spirit of Christmas is a spirit of humility.

Adapted from Bible Study Material by Mark Mitchell and JoHanna Reardon

Week 2 Day 1

Core Reading

Luke 1:26-56

In one *Peanuts* comic strip, Lucy says that Christmas is a time for kindness and to forgive one another. Charlie Brown says, “Why do that just at Christmas? Why can’t we have the Christmas spirit the rest of the year?” Lucy looks at Charlie and says, “What are you—some kind of religious fanatic?”

In last week’s devotions, we looked at the beginning of Luke’s Gospel. The angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah in the temple and promised that his wife would bear a child who would prepare the way for the coming of Christ. Zechariah had a hard time believing that, because he and his wife were well beyond the years of child-bearing. He asked for a sign, and the angel gave him more than he bargained for—he was unable to speak until the promise was fulfilled.

At this point in Luke’s Gospel, Zechariah exits the stage. He’ll be back, but now we have a change of scene. Luke leads us from the great and holy temple in Jerusalem to an obscure village in a remote region not known for its piety. He leads us away from this well-known priest to an unknown peasant, from an old man to a young woman. He leads us from Zechariah to Mary.

More than anyone else in the Christmas story, Mary demonstrates the true spirit of Christmas—a spirit of humility.

Discussion Questions:

[Q] How would you define *humility*?

[Q] What about Mary sticks out most to you in the Christmas story?

[Q] Who else in the Christmas story demonstrates humility?

Today I will pray for:

Today I will pray for:

Today’s intentional act of service:

situation—he has sent his Son to be your Savior, to reverse your fortune. And if you let it, that will bring you real joy.

[Q] Explain why thanksgiving is an act of humility.

How does it annihilate self-pity?

Today I will pray for:

Today's intentional act of service:

Week 1 Day 5

Bringing things together Reread Luke 1:26-56

The spirit of Christmas is the spirit of humility. It's a humility that is expressed in being willing to say, "I'm a bond slave. Be it done to me according to your word." It's a humility that's expressed in being willing to accept your place in God's plan. It's a humility that's expressed in grateful worship for a salvation you did not merit.

A well-known Christian writer and speaker was asked if it was difficult for her to remain humble. She replied, "When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday on the back of a donkey, and everyone was waving palm branches and throwing garments on the road and singing praises, do you think for one moment it ever entered the head of that donkey that any of that was for him? If I can be a donkey on which Jesus Christ rides in his glory, I give him all the praise and all the honor."

That's the spirit of Christmas—the spirit of humility.

Action Point: Yesterday we named one reversal Christ has made in our lives. Now name another one you would like him to make. Pray for God to be at work in this regard.

Today's intentional act of service will be:

Week 2 Day 2

Core Reading
Secondary Reading

Luke 1:26–38
Mark 8:34-38

There are some striking similarities between what happened to Zechariah and to Mary. Both are visited by the angel Gabriel. Both are given what seemed like an impossible promise involving a child. One of them would be filled with the Holy Spirit while still in his mother's womb. The other would be conceived by the Spirit. Both are given a sign.

But the similarities end there. Mary is a young teenager from a non-descript town called Nazareth, in the region of Galilee. She was betrothed to a carpenter named Joseph. That meant more than engagement does today. It was a binding contract; any breach of it was considered adultery. To get out of it, you had to initiate divorce proceedings. Betrothed couples had many of the responsibilities of marriage, without the privileges.

We don't know what Mary was doing. Perhaps she was in the midst of her morning chores, daydreaming about her future with Joseph. What kind of husband would he be? When would their first child come along? And then the unthinkable happened: the angel Gabriel appeared, front and center. If that weren't strange enough, he gave Mary an even stranger greeting. He called her "favored," and said, "The Lord is with you." She's baffled! Gabriel senses her confusion and explains more: she would conceive and give birth to a child—the long awaited Messiah.

Like every Jewish kid, she had grown up hearing all about the coming Son of David. It might have even crossed her mind that Joseph was from the line of David. *But me, the mother of the Messiah?* It wasn't an expression of doubt, as with Zechariah, but of confusion. And then came the shocker: *Who did he say the father would be? Something*

about the Holy Spirit making me pregnant? Imagine the swirl of emotions. On the one hand, she was stunned by the honor. On the other hand, she dreaded how this might play out. Jewish law said that a man or woman who committed adultery was to be stoned.

And how would Joseph react? Could he possibly believe her story? She would be disgraced. All her dreams were dying. A part of Mary wanted to fall down in grateful praise; another part wanted to protest at such an unfair intrusion into her life. But somehow, in that battlefield of her own heart, she chose to surrender: “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said.” In simple faith, Mary said yes to God.

That’s the spirit of Christmas—humility. Mary said yes to God’s intrusion because she saw herself as the Lord’s servant. Humility is one of those Christian buzz words we love to talk about, but when it comes right down to it, everything within us protests against it. Humility expresses itself in surrender. Some translations have used the word *bond slave* instead of *servant*. A bond slave is one who has basically given up his right to call the shots. He realizes he doesn’t own himself. He’s not autonomous. He belongs to someone else. Think of how different your life would be if you saw yourself as a bond slave of the Lord. What would you stop worrying about? What would you stop wrestling with God over? What would you stop doing to secure your own place?

Corrie Ten Boom tells the story of when she was speaking in a church and recognized a man who was a guard at the concentration camp she and her sister were in during World War II. Memories of the concentration camp came back with a rush: the huge room with its harsh overhead lights, the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the floor, the shame of walking naked past the man. Now this former guard was in front of her with his hand thrust out: “A fine message, fraulein. How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!”

It was the first time since her release that she had been face to face with one of her captors. She froze. “You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk,” he said. “I was a guard there. But since that time, I’ve become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I’d like to hear it from your lips as well.” Again the hand came out—“Will you forgive me?” She stood there—and couldn’t do it. Her sister had died in that place. Hours seemed to pass as the man stood there with his hand held out, and Corrie wrestled with the most difficult thing she ever had to do.

[Q] Once again, do you see the reversals? Name as many as you see in this section.

Some have taken this as a political manifesto of liberation for the poor and oppressed of the Earth. It was never meant to be only that. The liberation she describes is not just political or economic, but also spiritual. Mary will be called blessed not because she’ll get a new Mercedes, but because her Son will save her and others from sin. The liberation is not for the poor, period—but for the poor who fear God, trust God, and look to God for salvation.

[Q] The reality is that it’s easier for the poor and oppressed to do this than for the rich and powerful. Why is that so?

The spirit of Christmas is the spirit of humility. Like Mary, each one of us is born into a humble state. Spiritually, we’re bent toward sin, separated from God. But God sent his Son so that our fortune might be reversed.

[Q] Name one thing God has reversed in your life since you have come to know him.

The angel told Mary, “You shall name him Jesus.” That name means *salvation*. Mary sings of “God, my Savior.” What was Mary being saved from? Her sin, of course. Later, Zechariah will praise God for raising up a “horn of salvation” for us. And it’s as we begin to claim that salvation that joy and gratitude come into our lives. But salvation only comes to the poor in spirit—the humble of heart.

The Masai tribe in West Africa has an unusual way of saying thank you. They bow, put their foreheads on the ground, and say, “My head is in the dirt.” Why do they do that? Because at its core, thanksgiving is an act of humility. Humility isn’t just, “Woe is me.” It begins with “Woe is me,” and ends with “Look what God has done for me.” Every one of us has a choice: will we humble ourselves before God and live gratefully, or will we continue to lick our wounds and wallow in self-pity?

The Christmas season can bring that question to the fore. It’s a hard time for many people. But no matter how hard it is, the message of Mary’s song is that God has done something to change your

[Q] In what areas are you most tempted to compare yourself to others? What kind of things are you most jealous of in others?

[Q] Name practical ways we can know and accept our place in God's plans.

[Q] Why is it often so hard to rejoice with those who rejoice? What does that say about us?

Today I will pray for:

Today's intentional act of service will be;

Week 1 Day 4

Core Reading

Luke 1:46-55

As you might imagine, all of this was pretty overwhelming for Mary—so much so that she broke out in praise.

This song has at least 15 quotations from the Old Testament. Mary knew her Bible. The spirit of the song is one of praise and thanksgiving. If this song had a name, it might be "The Great Reversal." Its theme is God's great reversal of fortune for the poor in spirit. It has two parts to it. The first part focuses on what God did for her. Read again verses 46–49.

[Q] Do you see the reversal? Name as many reversals as you see in this section.

Mary sees the same principle at work in others. Read verses 50–55.

She knew she didn't really have a choice. Jesus commanded it. So she prayed: "Jesus, help me! I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling." And so, mechanically, she thrust her hand into his. As she did, she said a current started in her shoulder, raced down her arm, and sprang into their joined hands. And then a healing warmth seemed to flood her whole being, bringing tears to her eyes. "I forgive you, brother!" she cried. "With all my heart!"

For a long moment, they grasped each other's hands—the former guard and the former prisoner. Corrie made the same choice Mary did. Those are hard choices to make, but could it be that, as with Mary, our greatest gifts come disguised as intrusions demanding our surrender? Philip Yancey writes, "Every work of God comes with two edges—great joy and great pain."

That doesn't mean we won't wrestle over this. There will be a battle within. Self never gives up easily, and right when you think you've got it where you want it, it rises up somewhere else. Jesus called us to take up our cross daily. It's the daily part that's so hard. Every day, we have to make that choice. But, as with Mary, there is blessing on the other side of surrender.

[Q] Have you ever had to surrender something to God and found it difficult? If so, tell us about it: What was the hardest thing about it? What was the outcome?

[Q] Have you ever refused to surrender something to God? If so, what was the outcome of that?

[Q] What do you think it means to "take up our cross daily"? What does that look like in everyday life?

[Q] Why does God bless us when we surrender? What does he want most from us?

Today I will pray for:

Today's intentional act of service will be:

Week 1 Day 3

Core Reading

Secondary Reading

Luke 1:39-45

Romans 8:28-39

This brings us to the second scene. The angel said that Mary's cousin Elizabeth was also experiencing a miracle: she was pregnant in her old age. Mary might have thought that Elizabeth would understand. So she packed her bags and headed south for the hill country of Judea, where Zechariah and Elizabeth lived. It would have been about a four-day trek to Elizabeth's house. She had plenty of time to think about how she would present this to her older cousin. She may have even prepared a little speech. But she didn't need it.

This must have been one of those moments when Mary felt a massive load lift off her. This was confirmation: *No, I'm not crazy. Yes, I did hear the angel right. God is in control.* Mary didn't even have to say a word. Before she could speak, Elizabeth broke out in a Holy Spirit-inspired blessing on Mary and her child.

In this blessing, we see another example of the spirit of Christmas. Elizabeth's humility is seen in the fact that she recognizes Mary as the most blessed among women. She's humbled by the fact that Mary would come visit her; she doesn't feel deserving. She says Mary believed that the Lord would deliver on his word. Not only that, but she recognized that the child in Mary's womb is greater than the child in her own womb. She called Mary, "the mother of my Lord." John, who did a prenatal somersault, pointed to Jesus even from the womb. Years later, John would confess, "He must increase; I must decrease."

Perhaps in the back of Luke's mind was another story from Scripture. When the twins, Jacob and Esau, were still in their mother's womb, they struggled for preeminence. When their mother prayed about it, the Lord said, "The older will serve the younger." That's not the way it was supposed to work. In that culture, the younger was supposed to serve the older. Now, years later, we have the same message: the older (John) is going to serve the younger (Jesus). The difference is that no one is struggling. Both Elizabeth and John are filled with joy.

Knowing and accepting your place in God's plan expresses humility. We all have a place, but your place is different than mine. When we finally get that and stop comparing ourselves with others, and when we start doing what we were called to do, the result is just what we see here—joy. You can't have joy if you're always chafing under the fact that God's plan for you doesn't seem as important as God's plan for someone else.

An illustration from the world of American basketball: In the 1998–99 NBA season, David Robinson, a frequent all-star and veteran center for the San Antonio Spurs, learned to share the limelight with the new dominant player of the league: his teammate, Tim Duncan. San Antonio won the NBA playoffs in 1999, and Duncan was the star.

In *Sports Illustrated*, Robinson reflected on what this was like for him:

I can't overstate how important my faith has been to me as an athlete and as a person. It's helped me deal with so many things, including matters of ego and pride. For instance, I can't deny that it felt weird to see Tim standing on the podium with the finals MVP trophy. I was thinking, *Man, never have I come to the end of a tournament and not been the one holding up that trophy.* It was hard.

But I thought about the Bible story of David and Goliath. David helped King Saul win a battle, but the king wasn't happy because he had killed thousands of men while David had killed tens of thousands. So King Saul couldn't enjoy the victory because he was thinking about David's getting more credit than he was.

I'm blessed that God has given me the ability to just enjoy the victory. So Tim killed the tens of thousands. That's great. I'm for him.

That's the spirit of Christmas—knowing you're accepting your role in God's plan. Thomas Merton once said, "Give me humility, in which alone is rest, and deliver me from pride, which is the heaviest of burdens."