



# ADVENT

*A SEASON OF EXPECTATION*



2021 ADVENT READER  
WEEK 4: LOVE



# LOVE

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 19

SEE, I AM DOING A NEW THING!

BY: GREG THIESSEN



**READING:** Isaiah 43:15-21

I am struck by the words in v. 18, “Forget [*Remember not*] the former things; do not dwell on the past.” (NIV) As a historian, this seems to go against my vocation and my very nature. It also seems to go against the Torah, where repeatedly, especially in Deuteronomy, God calls his people to “Remember” and especially “Remember that you were slaves in Egypt...” (Dt. 5:15; cf. 7:18; 8:2, 18; 9:7, 27; 15:15; 16:3, 12; 24:18, 22; 32:7). So what’s going on? In today’s passage from Isaiah God is using hyperbolic language to emphasize the point to His exiled people in Babylon that it is not just in the past (i.e. with the Exodus out of Egypt) that He has brought redemption to His people with a mighty hand for all to see; He is doing it anew in their very midst – “See, I am doing a new thing!” (Isa. 43:19a). In other words: *Don’t lose heart thinking that the glory days are over for good, and that God only worked wonders in the past. No, take heart! Pay attention because God is working here-and-now, and it’s going to be amazing!*

Despite this passage, I will adamantly affirm the importance of the past and remembering the past. When we are in a desert and in the darkness (as I’m sure many of us are experiencing right now) it is incredibly important to remember those moments in our own story, in the stories of others heard through testimony, in the stories of the Cloud of Witnesses through Church history, and in the stories of the Bible, where God has displayed His faithfulness and brought redemption with His mighty hand. But let us not be so fixated on the past that we start to believe the lie that those momentous days are over, that God only worked like that in the past, and the new indefinite reality is desert and darkness. To that, this passage jumps out and says, “See, I am doing a new thing!” It may not look the same as it did in the past, but God is on the move; are our eyes open to see it? *Don’t lose heart thinking that the glory days are over for good, and that God only worked wonders in the past. No, take heart! Pay attention because God is working here-and-now, and it’s going to be amazing!*

**PRAYER:** Lord, open our eyes, that we may see your glory; Lord, open our hearts, that we may trust in you even as we wait in darkness.

# LOVE

MONDAY, DECEMBER 20

JESUS'S FAMILY

BY: ANDREW HAAK



**READING:** Matthew 1:1-17

Genealogies aren't usually where you go to find devotional material, but nearly every name in Jesus' family tree tells a story. And for what it's worth, this family line is more interested in telling a theological tale, rather than a biological one.

For starters, it's worth pointing out that some names are intentionally omitted (the list takes a bit of a shortcut from Rahab to David, among others). It's clear that a bunch of names are assumed or deemed not worth mentioning based on Matthew's bigger intention of having an orderly arrangement of names (as implied by verse 17). This isn't uncommon in the Bible, and while the number fourteen is obviously important to the author, we are only left to speculate: is it because it's perfection twice over? (seven is number of completeness in Jewish thought); is it because fourteen is the numerical value of David? (each letter in the Hebrew alphabet has a numerical value); or is there something else going on?

I'm more interested what we can know, and this goes back to the theological implications of Jesus' genealogy that Matthew has arranged. In addition to some names being purposefully omitted, we see some names are intentionally included. What makes this genealogy unique and powerful is that it includes five women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Uriah's wife (Bathsheba) and of course Mary. This is highly unusual. One would only have to skim through the ancestry lists of Genesis, 1 Chronicles or even Jesus' other family tree in Luke 3 to see that the inclusion of women is extremely rare.

Additionally, three of these women are Gentiles (Tamar, Rahab and Ruth) and Bathsheba, while probably a Jew, she was married to a Hittite (2 Samuel 11:3). If the gospel author was intending to account for Jesus' Jewish heritage, he would have excluded such "anomalies." Furthermore, these women all had experiences that would have led to widespread societal shame, exclusion, and pain in their day: Rahab was a prostitute (Joshua 2; 6:25); Ruth was a poor childless widower living among foreigners (Ruth 1); Bathsheba was forced into adultery by king David (2 Samuel 11-12); Mary of course was unexpectedly pregnant; and Tamar's story is just too complicated to explain it briefly so you'll have to read it for yourself (Genesis 38).

The point being, Matthew seems to indicate right off the get-go that the good news of Jesus wasn't limited to a certain gender, a certain ethnicity, or even to those of a certain moral standard. Before Jesus is even born, we see how those who the world would consider as outsiders are intricately and lovingly woven into Jesus' story.

Like the women listed in this family line, maybe your life story feels messy, painful, and confusing; maybe you too have felt like society or family has pushed you to the margins. Maybe you wonder if this excludes you from Jesus or disqualifies you from being a recipient of the good news. The answer is unequivocally no! In Jesus there is no gate-keeping or policing who's in and who's out: all are invited and welcome to see their story redeemed and find its place in God's epic story of love at Christmastime.

Who is someone in your life who may feel like an outsider at Christmastime? How can you invite them and include them in what God is doing?

**PRAYER:** Emmanuel, we remember at Christmas that for you to be God-With-Us you gather all to be with you. Open our eyes and hearts to receive you and all those who you are drawing to yourself.

# LOVE

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 21  
A FATHER'S RESPONSE  
BY: KEITH ST JEAN



**READING:** Matthew 1:18-25

The 6th century deacon and poet, Romanus the Melodus, put these words in Joseph's mouth:

“O luminous One, I see a flame, a fire which surrounds you and I am terrified of it. Mary, protect me and do not consume me. Your guiltless womb is suddenly become a furnace filled with fire; let it not melt me, spare me, I beg you. You wish that I as Moses of old should also take off my shoes, that I should approach you and listen to you and that, enlightened by you, I should say to you — Hail, unwedded bride!”

Christians have long debated what Joseph must have been thinking when he discovered that Mary was with child. An explanation that I particularly resonate with states that Mary came clean and told Joseph that she was conceived by the Holy Spirit. He believed her. But he didn't know how to deal with it. After all, it was unprecedented. He felt unworthy of the Mystery. He wanted to humbly bow out and get a nice one-man flat in Galilee. Hence, an angel had to reassure him. I can relate to a Joseph who hears of his wife's pregnancy and then discovers that the child she carries is the promised one who will save all of Israel and says, “I must step back. I am not worthy of this awesome Mystery. This is above me. Moses himself said he wasn't worthy and I am no Moses. I'll quietly bow out and let God do His work.” This is when the angel appears and reassures Joseph that he is the one to both be a father to Jesus and a husband to Mary. That, he would not be alone in this and he didn't need to be afraid or feel unworthy because God had chosen him. I remember when Jen told me she was pregnant. So many thoughts and emotions swirled around inside of me that I quickly felt overwhelmed and frightened. Was I actually prepared to be a father? Would I make good decisions? Would I be able to raise my children in a loving home that was free from the fear and loneliness that I consistently experienced as a child. For a very brief period my fight or flight instinct kicked in and I felt the onset of panic. Then I spoke to my dad and he was able to calm me down and remind me that I did not have to do this alone. I wonder if that is what Joseph experienced? I wonder if he was terrified of the prospect of being a father, particularly the father of the messiah

My question for us all is, how do we approach this sacred Mystery?

If Joseph, this “righteous man” trembled at the thought of what was to come then should we not approach the Christ-child with the same wonder and humility as he did. I believe there is a freedom in admitting that we are afraid and unsure, that we do not fully understand what happened here, and that we feel unworthy of it all. Then hearing the still small voice of God as He speaks words of love and reassurance to us, telling us that He loves us, that we don't need to be afraid, and that we are chosen.

# LOVE

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 22

ALL ARE WELCOME

BY: JOSH WILLMS



**READING:** Galatians 4:4-7

When I think of God as a Father and us as his children, I am always drawn to the story of the Prodigal son in Luke 15. If you are unfamiliar with the story, a son asks his dad for his share of the inheritance and then wastes it all on partying and frivolity all in a far off land. He is reduced to feeding slop to pigs and is so hungry he considers eating pig food. He finally comes to his senses and returns to his home. Along the entire journey back the son wonders what his dad will do when he shows up on his doorstep. Will he yell at him and turn him away? Will he refuse to even speak to him? The Jesus Storybook Bible tells the story like this:

*The son is still a long way off, but his dad sees him coming. What will the dad do? Fold his arms and frown? Shout, "That'll teach you!" And, "Just you wait, young man!" No. That's not how this story goes. The dad leaps off the porch, races down the hill, through the gap in the hedge, up the road. Before his son can even begin his I'm-Sorry-Speech, his dad runs to him, throws his arms around him, and can't stop kissing him. "Let's have a party!" His dad shouts. "My boy's home. He ran away, I lost him - but now I have him back!" (Pg.276)*

The father in this story values his child not because of what the child has done or hasn't done. The father values him because he is his child. That's what matters to the father. He loves him for who he is in this moment, because of their bond as father and son, even though he has been hurt by his son. What would it mean for us to see ourselves as having value not because of the things we have accomplished or what we can offer to others, but simply in the fact that we are God's children? Do you find it hard to see yourself that way? Do you find it hard to see yourself as having value, simply because you exist?

Paul also considers us as God's children in Galatians 4:4-7 where he says;

<sup>4</sup> But when the right time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman, subject to the law. <sup>5</sup> God sent him to buy freedom for us who were slaves to the law, so that he could adopt us as his very own children. <sup>6</sup> And because we are his children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, prompting us to call out, "Abba, Father." <sup>7</sup> Now you are no longer a slave but God's own child. And since you are his child, God has made you his heir.

We have been freed from slavery and adopted as God's own children, included in his family. No longer are we slaves, no longer are we victim's of the life you have lived thus far. Your choices do not define you, how God sees you is what defines you... You are God's child and not only that, God has made you an heir. You will inherit all of God's promises of joy, peace, happiness and restoration.

And this is not because of anything that we have done, good or bad. We belong to God's family only because of what he did for us, not by any of our own action. This is the main point that Paul is trying to get across to the Galatian church.

# LOVE

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 22  
**ALL ARE WELCOME (CONTINUED)**  
BY: JOSH WILLMS



God is creating a new diverse multi-ethnic family that will trust in the promises that God has made. It is by our faith in Jesus, trusting and following him in our daily lives, that we become more and more like him. This knowledge that we have value as God's children is the foundation for us to be able to cultivate the fruit of the spirit in Galatians 5.

Without the knowledge that we are loved, how can we love others? To stick with the fruit metaphor, how can we hope to prune off old habits, or harmful ways of living, if we do not first know deep down in the bottom of our souls that we are loved by God and have value as his children? As we follow Jesus his spirit helps us to cultivate new ways of being human. As we follow him we will find ways to thrive and help others to thrive even in the midst of the pain and brokenness in this world. This is the hope that we have in Jesus.

**For me, this is the Gospel... All are welcome, and we are transformed as we follow Jesus into the dark places of this world and our lives and allow him to heal us with his love.**

**PRAYER:** Jesus, thank you that you came as a baby into this world, to experience what it means to be human. You came as a servant, to show us the great love you have for all of us. Thank you that we can trust you, that we can call you 'Abba, Father.' Help us, Jesus, to become a part of your great plan to remake the world into a place of justice, peace, beauty and love. Help us to have the courage to follow you into the dark places within us and in our world as you reshape and remake us into more and more of who we were always meant to be.

# LOVE

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 23

LOVE AND LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

BY: ANDREW HAAK



**READING:** John 3:16

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son ...”

This familiar verse can take on special meaning at Christmastime. Originally spoken by Jesus about himself, these words were a part of a very Advent-like conversation he was having with a religious leader named Nicodemus (John 3:1-21).

The Bible tells us that Nicodemus met with Jesus privately in the dark, perhaps in part to conceal this stealthy conversation. And yet as the conversation unfolds, it's clear to the readers that there is darkness within Nicodemus as well; not an evil darkness, but a darkness of not understanding. Patient and articulate, and try as he might, Jesus just cannot quite get Nicodemus to comprehend just who he is and how this can all possibly be true. For his whole life Nicodemus had grand hopes and long waiting for the Messiah, and Jesus just didn't quite fit his original expectations.

Sometimes we too can feel like we are left in the dark about what God is doing. Sometimes we too cannot make sense of what he is revealing to us. Sometimes we too can find our expectations of Jesus get in the way of understanding him. But like Nicodemus before us, Jesus doesn't give us up on us or leave us alone in the dark.

It's not lost on me that the week before Christmas are literally the darkest days of the year. Every year at this time we crave light as we wait in shadow and persevere through the longest nights. This darkness parallels the long eventide that enveloped the world until one day love came down and was born at Christmastime.

Sometimes God's love appears in our darkness like a flickering flame; other times it arrives like the blazing sun after a long night. At Christmas we remember that God's love changed everything, the gift of love incarnate; a love from heaven that gives light and chases away our darkness, his son Jesus Christ.

What darkness have you waited through this year at Advent? How has God's love lit up this darkness?

**PRAYER:** God of love, thank you for sending your gift of love to us, your son Jesus.

# LOVE

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 24  
CHRISTMAS HOSPITALITY  
BY: KRISTINA TOEWS



**READING:** Luke 2:1-7

At Advent I love to put up nativity scenes I have from different places around the world. Some of my favourites are an indigenous one from Colombia, one made out of salt from Bolivia and one from Kenya of Joseph, Mary and baby Jesus on a donkey when they were fleeing to Egypt. They remind me of how people celebrate the birth of Christ all around the world.

In all these different nativity scenes, the most important figurines are Joseph, Mary and baby Jesus. And when the Nativity scene has a background it's a stable, because Jesus was laid in a manger, so that means he was in a stable... right?

That's what I grew up hearing, and what I always believed. I didn't think about it much, until I was about to give birth to Mariana in December 2019. I was thinking about Mary a lot, and the thought of giving birth alone with only my husband, didn't sound appealing. I wanted to know that I would have more support, people who had helped with other births before mine. Why would God let Mary go through her first childbirth alone, without any other women there to help her?

Last year, I was able to do some reading\* and I learned something that totally changed the way I understand this passage and the Christmas story. Understanding this passage in the culture of the time, shows that Mary and Joseph were not alone!

In Bethlehem, Joseph wouldn't have gone to an inn for a room, he went to family! He asked at his relatives' house for a place to stay. The idea of them going to a stable is misunderstanding the way that Middle Eastern homes were built. The homes in Bethlehem would have had two rooms, one for the animals and the family, and a guest room. Luke 2:7 (NIV) says "there was no guest room available for them." The second room, the nice one for guests, was full. But they weren't turned away, Joseph and Mary were welcomed into the main family room, where the family sleeps on one side, and their animals on the other.

Instead of Mary and Joseph being alone, left in the back behind the house with no one around, they were in the centre of the home of relatives. They were shown all the hospitality that their extended family could give them! They were with family and the manger, all in one room!

This fills me with new hope when I think of Christmas and Christ coming to be with us. God wants to be here with us, in the midst of our family life, messiness, animals and all. Where we're not alone, but surrounded by others who care for us, who welcome us, who love us. God is here with us in the midst of our life as Level Ground. I pray that we can keep learning new ways to show this welcoming hospitality to each other and everyone we meet.

\*A blog from Sarah Bessey about this:

<https://sarahbessey.substack.com/p/why-everything-you-know-about-the>

# LOVE

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 25

**GOD'S GOOD NEWS**

BY: ANDREW HAAK



**READING:** Luke 2:8-20

“But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.’”

I haven't thought of it this way before, but I suppose the shepherds had to go door to door through the town of Bethlehem in the middle of the night to find their infant Savior. Can you imagine a sleepy quiet town, bursting at the seams with weary travellers, slowly been woken one by one by boisterous shepherds who were asking the oddest question: “sorry to disturb you, but is there a newborn sleeping in your animal trough?”

**God's good news can make one do extraordinary things.**

I do find it interesting that the angel gave the shepherds instructions that were simultaneously specific yet vague; specific enough that they would know in an instance when they found who they were looking for, but vague enough that the baby's location was only narrowed down to a certain village. There is no way that the shepherds would find the baby Jesus on the first try. It's almost like having the shepherds wake up the town to hear the good news was a part of God's plan all along ...

**God's good news isn't supposed to be kept to ourselves.**

And then we have Mary who held on tightly to all the details of this supernatural event, so that long after the shepherds were gone she still had them stored deeply in her heart. There would be days and seasons ahead where she need to recall moments like this to have the strength to carry on. Her response in contrast to the shepherd is certainly more subdued, yet just as willful and marked by glad wonder and deep faith.

**God's good news is a treasure to cling onto.**

How will you respond to God's good news this Christmas? Will it wake you up with a jolt and inspire you to do something out of the ordinary? Will you spread the word and live the good news among those who need to hear it the most? Will you believe it again anew and let it seep into every corner of your heart?

This Christmas we are all in desperate need of some good news on multiple fronts and for many valid reasons. Like the carol acknowledges, we bring our “hopes and fears of all the years” into moments like this. And yet in the waiting, hoping and praying, there is still reason to celebrate and take heart when we remind ourselves once again of the greatest news we could ever hear: that Christ has come, and with him he brings, joy, peace, and salvation for all mankind.

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

In what way are you being led to respond to God's good news this Christmas?

**PRAYER:** God of highest heaven, thank you for the gift of Jesus. We pray to receive your peace and favour today. May the good news of Christmas once again bring joy into our weary world.