

Introduction to *Anticipate Christmas* Daily Readings

One of the highlights for our church each year is Christmas, the annual celebration of Jesus' birth. For many Christians around the world the season is called *Advent*. It is a Christ-centred time of patient waiting, hopeful expectation, soul-searching, and calendar watching marked by many churches, Christian families, and individual followers of Jesus. There's no biblical mandate to observe Advent. It is an optional tradition that developed over the course of church history as a time of preparation for Christmas Day, the anticipation of Jesus' coming.

The term Advent emphasises the *events* of Christ's coming. Christmas was the first advent; Christians await his second advent. The Old Testament people of God awaited Messiah's coming. New Testament believers await his return for this church. At Mountain View the emphasis is on the *enthusiasm* of those who wait, so we refer to this season as *Anticipation*.

At Mountain View/Somerset West we'll observe this season starting on 1 December culminating in our candlelight service on 24 December. Each Sunday we will look at the anticipation of Jesus' first and second comings through these four words and themes: *Rejoice, Praise, Adore and Worship*. Each Sunday we will light a candle and hear the readings composed for each theme word.

The daily readings were written by the pastoral staff at Mountain View to complement and correspond with the four weekly topics. We encourage you to use this time of reading, individually or as a family devotional time, to help prepare your hearts and minds to come and adore him this season. Together, we will "Anticipate Christmas" and also look toward Jesus' second coming.

Our prayer is that our daily reading times together might help the forever family at Mountain view keep the focus on Jesus, that we'll keep him preeminent even in all the rush and busyness that surrounds the season. Let's together anticipate the birth and coming of Jesus -- "O Come, Let Us Adore him."

[All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version]

Anticipate Christmas - 1 December

Rejoicing in God

After listening to the king, [the wise men] went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. [Matthew 2:9,10]

To rejoice is to celebrate God's goodness and grace. It is fitting that the spirit of rejoicing is often cited as a response to the birth of a child. The angel's prophecy to Zechariah was that many would rejoice at the birth of the promised son, John. When he was born, Elizabeth's neighbours and relatives rejoiced that God had shown mercy and blessed her with a baby. But it's doubtful their joy could have come close to the rejoicing in the hearts of the elderly parents who had waited so long.

Mary rejoiced when Gabriel revealed to her she was to be the birth mother of the God-man, Jesus. When he was born, shepherds left the stable and his presence "glorifying and praising God." In other words they were rejoicing they were privileged to see the newborn child, exactly as the angels had told them: "wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in the manger." Later, the wise men rejoiced when they saw the star that would lead them to the Christ-child. When they found him, they knelt before him and offered him their gifts.

The narrative does not suggest the child rejoiced at the gifts presented to him. Rather the rejoicing was from the hearts of those who had traveled so far to find him.

We're not surprised the both term *rejoice* and the gladness it represents permeate the birth narratives of Jesus Christ. Like the magi, when we come into the presence of the Saviour, our hearts swell with exceeding great joy.

What prompts joy in your heart at Christmas?

Anticipate Christmas - 2 December

Rejoice, he has come!

“Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord” [Luke 2:10-11]

There’s a lot to be joyful about during Christmas time: time off from work, time with family, festive food, and long summer days outdoors! All these good things bring us joy, but do we rejoice in them? Is there a difference between joy and rejoicing?

In the account of the nativity, we see several people rejoicing: Mary rejoices after hearing that she’ll conceive the Christ, Elizabeth and baby, John the Baptist, rejoice when Mary comes to visit and the shepherds rejoice after seeing baby Jesus in the stable. In each of these cases, the nativity characters are more than just glad, they outwardly express their joy through praise or even leaping for joy!

Christmas day is a day of joy for many people around the world as they scramble to unwrap presents, eat way more than they should, and exchange gifts with family and friends. But believers should rejoice as they remember God’s perfect gift. He sent his Son to die for the sins of the world, giving the gift of eternal life to all who place their faith in him. That was the most valuable gift anyone could give not just for a select few, but one that is sufficient for the entire world. Paul writes, “Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!” Now that’s a Christmas gift about which we can all rejoice!

Is my joy deeper than the world’s around me this Christmas? How can I take time to reflect and rejoice on God’s perfect gift this Christmas season?

Anticipate Christmas - 3 December

Rejoice always!

“Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say rejoice!” [Philippians 4:4]

As Paul wrote his letter to the Philippians, he was in chains in a prison in Rome, unsure of what the future held. Would he be released? Would he die in prison? None of these prospects seemed to bother Paul. Why?

Well, Paul’s joy certainly wasn’t in his circumstances, but rather *in the Lord*. Paul’s salvation gave him a joy that exceeded all situations, one that characterised his life and caused him to exude joy to those around him despite his terrible situation. As Christians, we have a joy that the world doesn’t. We’ve put our faith in Christ who came to die for our sins and who has given us eternal life. This truth should fill us with a joy that cannot be suppressed under the weight of our situations, but one that should burst forth and pervade our everyday life. Christians should be known as people who rejoice!

The implication of this truth is that Christians have the God-given ability to rejoice *always*. Even in times of suffering like Paul did. Even though Christmas is a time of celebration and joy, there may be times when it is filled with difficulties. It’s during these times that we have an opportunity to express the joy that lives in us to the watching world around us, testifying to God’s grace and goodness in sending his Son to forgive the sins of the world.

Am I able to rejoice in the Lord this Christmas season, even amidst the inevitable busyness, disappointments, and hardships?

Anticipate Christmas - 4 December

Rejoice Together

And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favour with all the people. [Acts 2:46. 47]

Imagine waking up on Christmas day, opening cards and gifts, and sitting down to a meal all alone. Unfortunately, this is a reality for many people in the church every year. Whatever the cause, it's very difficult to rejoice in isolation this season. And why should those in the body have to? It's not normal.

In Acts 2:42, Luke reflects on the early body of believers saying: "*And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved*". The early church's lives were characterised by joy and intimate community providing for each other's needs.

Christmas can often be such a mad rush as everyone prepares gifts, shops, and organises family meals that we can easily overlook those in the church who may be spending this season of rejoicing alone. So, let's come alongside neighbours, singles, widows, and widowers this season to include them in our rejoicing as we remember Christ's birth together and anticipate his imminent return. Because, our rejoicing is better together this season.

Who do I know that may be spending this season alone? How can I come alongside them to rejoice together this Christmas?

Anticipate Christmas - 5 December

Rejoice in God's blessings

And Mary said, *“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.”* [Luke 1:46-49]

One of the greatest pieces of advice I've received from someone was believers ought to wake up every day with an attitude of gratitude. That sounds easy, and most of us are grateful for our safety, our health, and the food we eat. But as Christians, this attitude of gratitude should go deeper than this. Are we truly grateful every day for everything God has given us? Does our attitude of gratitude lead to rejoicing?

When the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary with the news that she was the one through whom God had chosen to conceive Christ, Mary rejoiced! Imagine the thrill of discovering that you are the one whom God has chosen to birth and raise the Saviour of the world! This realization dwarfs any fears she may have had of being stoned for seemingly being unfaithful, or what Joseph would think or say about her. Her gratitude and joy led her to outburst of praise!

Regardless of the trials and challenges some will inevitably face this season, believers can rejoice in God's providence and continued blessing. But, most importantly, we rejoice in the knowledge that God has sent his Son to die for us, forgiving our sins, reconciling us with God so that one day we'll enjoy eternity in his glorious presence. As a bygone song writer puts it, “When we all get to heaven, what a day of rejoicing that will be; when we all see Jesus, we'll sing and shout the victory.”

What are you grateful for this Christmas season? Does it compel you to rejoice in all that God has done for you?

Anticipate Christmas - 6 December

Rejoice at Christ's nearness

“In those days, Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb.”

[Luke 1:39-40a]

Mary, in the early days of her pregnancy with Jesus, went to visit her cousin Elizabeth who was pregnant with John the Baptist. When Mary approached Elizabeth's house, baby John leapt for joy inside Elizabeth. Both Elizabeth and her unborn baby rejoiced at the privilege of being so near their Saviour.

Throughout Jesus's ministry, people clambered to get near him. Some climbed trees just to catch a glimpse of him, others strained to reach out and touch his clothes. Thousands rejoiced at being in his presence. Then he died, and everyone thought that was the end. But three days later he returned to life and after forty days he ascended to heaven. He sent the Holy Spirit as had promised to live inside all who'd put their faith in Jesus. For the first time since the fall people could once again enjoy an intimate relationship with God. And today, over 2000 years later, God's Spirit resides in those who put their faith in him.

So, amidst all the hustle and bustle of this season, be reminded that Christ is near. In fact, if you're a believer, he's nearer to us than he was to Elizabeth all those years ago, because we have his Spirit living in us.

Does God's Spirit live in me? If so, how can I take time to appreciate this fact and enjoy his nearness during this season?

Anticipate Christmas - 7 December

Rejoice forever

“Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God almighty who was and is and is to come” [Rev. 4:8]

Believers rejoice in the present because of all that Christ has done for us. And that’s good. However, our rejoicing now is only a shadow of the rejoicing we will all participate in for eternity.

Picture this: You’re standing with millions of people surrounded by a brilliant presence. You look around and see people you recognise, and many you don’t. There are people from every ethnicity and culture you can think of, all standing stunned in God’s glorious presence. A group of heavenly creatures singing their holiness anthem. And everyone joins in praising God. You’re standing in the presence of the Heavenly Father, filled with inexpressible joy prompting you to join in the celebration.

This isn’t some lofty idea of what heaven will be like. In many such scenes, those in God’s presence are so filled with awe and joy they burst into reverent praise. So, while we have glimpses of rejoicing in this life, it’s only in the next life when we’ll truly know the meaning of perfect rejoicing. Standing in God’s presence forever, singing songs of praise, fellowshiping with the saints and experiencing the perfections of eternal life.

So, let’s make time to rejoice in this season, but also intentionally look forward to his return in glorious splendour to take us home where we will rejoice in the Father’s presence forever.

Do I look forward to Christ’s return? How can I rejoice in the knowledge that He will return to take us home?

Anticipate Christmas - 8 December

Praise Him, Praise Him

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. [Galatians 4:4, 5]

The writer of Hebrews makes a distinction between praise and thanksgiving. He defines praise as the *objective* exercise of saying the same thing about God that he says about himself.

Christ's incarnation was the ultimate statement of who God is. The writer of Hebrews says in the past God spoke through his prophets but in the last day he spoke *i.e.* revealed himself through his son. John states that incarnate revelation disclosed God as one who is full of grace and truth.

The angel told Mary to name her son, Jesus, the New Testament equivalent of the Old Testament term, **Yeshuah** (God Saves). As she celebrated her privilege she extolled God, her *Saviour*. The message to Joseph in his dream emphasised Mary's son would "save his people from their sins." The angelic appearance to the shepherds was to announce, not the birth of a prince, but rather a Saviour.

To praise God is to acknowledge he is holy, he is righteous, he is all powerful. But the humbling reality is God is also gracious, merciful and committed to our redemption. Christ's birth, his life and his death revealed God to be a gracious God eager to save those alienated from him because of sin. Such truth should produce a fountain of praise from the lips of his children.

Do you celebrate God as you imagine him to be or as he has revealed himself to be?

Anticipate Christmas - 9 December

PRAISE - An Echo and a Contagion

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

[Luke 2:13, 14]

The apostle John was privileged to catch a sneak peek of the greatest worship service man has ever seen. Recording his vision in Revelation 4 and 5, he describes four magnificent creatures who never rest, praising God for who He is and what He has done. Soon the twenty-four elders catch on and join the worship too. Next, myriads and myriads of angels all join in the worship. God's holiness and power being sung and celebrated along with His worthiness due to His creation and His conquering of death. And the worship and praise to the Eternal One culminates with every creature in heaven and earth giving praise, honor and glory to the Lamb who is worthy. (Take a moment to step into that worship and join the praise!)

Compare the choruses in these two chapters of Revelation with those of the heavenly army mentioned in Luke 2. It sounds as if the heavens erupt with praise the night of Jesus' birth. It cannot be contained. It began with a single angel of the Lord speaking to the shepherds until abruptly, or suddenly, there is a multitude! A vast, heavenly army! An explosion of praise!

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among people with whom he is pleased!"

Praise seems to be contagious. Those closest to the Lord give Him the most praise, which inspires (or reminds) others of the praise the Lord is due. What does your praise habit say about your proximity to the Lord? Does your praise to the Savior compel anyone to join you? What do you need to stop and praise Him for today?

Are you "spreading the germs" of praise?"

Anticipate Christmas - 10 December

PRAISE - An Attitude or Mood

I will bless the Lord at all times his praise shall continually be in my mouth. My soul makes its boast in the Lord; let the humble hear and be glad. Oh, magnify the Lord with me and let us exalt his name together! [Psalm 34:1-3]

What do you think of when you hear the word, “praise”? Maybe you reflect on a recent Sunday worship service where you sang praises to the Almighty. Or perhaps you think of heaping compliments on someone for a great athletic effort or job well done. In most cases, my mind drifts to a *response*. On Sunday, churches around the world sing praise to God in response to who he is and what he has done. Sports fans may praise athletes and teams for remarkable achievements. Both of these examples are responses.

While it is good to respond in praise, our reading evidence praise is an attitude or mood. In Psalm 34, David writes of praising the Lord “at all times” and praising Him “continually.” Job is another excellent example of having an attitude of praise, modeling what this looks like “at all times.” Job had every reason to respond to the Lord’s blessing in praise. Yet in a matter of moments, Job loses everything. It would seem that Job has thousands of reasons to withhold praise. Yet verse 21 he speaks; **Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; *blessed* be the name of the Lord.** Job helps us understand what a praise attitude “at all times” looks like.

Do you only find yourself praising the Lord in response to what He has done for you? What could you do today to work towards a habit and attitude of praise? When was the last time you reflected and praised the Lord for who he is and all that he has done for you?

What can you do to cultivate an attitude of praise “at all times?”

Anticipate Christmas - 11 December

PRAISE - An Offering or Sacrifice

Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. 16 Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. [Hebrews 13:15, 16]

Fortunately for us, God inspired the writing of 150 “praises,” or psalms as we more commonly refer to them. The Psalms served as a songbook for God’s worship, and a vehicle for the prayers and praises of God’s people. Being written over the course of 1,000+ years, the range of life’s experiences and emotions are captured and help to shape our response and give them to the Lord. We must thank God for these psalms for if we are honest with ourselves, in many situations, praising God may not feel natural to us. Yet, we are instructed to do so, regardless of how we feel. It seems as though God works through this process.

Twice in Psalm 50 there is instruction to offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving or praise to the Most High (14, 23). It appears in contrast to the sacrifices of bulls and goats. The Lord tells us this praise honors Him, and one may even be delivered through obedience of His commands (23). Hallelujah!

The author of Hebrews continues in similar thought the verses noted above, yet another reminder of the sacrifice that honors and pleases the Lord - the sacrifice of praise. Note also the quote from Hebrews emphasises this is to be done “continually.” When our lips are engaged in praise there is no time left for gossip, lying or empty speech.

When you begin to think about praising God what emotions rise to the surface? What compels you to praise him? Why do you praise him? Is it out of duty, or desire?

Does the “fruit of your lips” accurately reflect the truth in your heart?

Anticipate Christmas - 12 December

Praise - A Mark and a Characteristic

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. [1 Peter 2:9]

Scripture provides us with a number of ways the world will be able to identify the followers of Christ. One of those marks of a believer is *praise*. Paul, in the opening verses of Ephesians, overwhelms us with the blessings we have through Christ. From every spiritual blessing to being chosen for holiness and adopted as His children, is all for the praise of his glory and grace. From redemption and forgiveness to the revelation of Jesus Christ, all for the praise of his glory. We see it in expressed in verse 6, 12 and 14. The promised Holy Spirit is the mark of that seal, when we believe the gospel of salvation in Christ, and this too, “for the praise of his glory.” Certainly, the believer is to be characterized by this praise, back to the Lord and for His glory.

Peter also reminds us of all these blessings, writing, “that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who call you out of darkness. There is a connection between the reception of all these blessings and the expected behavior of the recipient. And it extends beyond a response to the blessings to the Giver of good gifts Himself.

David writes in Psalm 22:1 about a troubling, stressful and dangerous situation. (Our Savior quotes this very psalm while hanging on the horrible cross. Yet, even in this difficult situation, David recalls the character and acts of the holy and mighty God he serves. In verse 25, he states, “You are the reason I offer praise...” He does not provide reasons, plural, but his purpose for praise is YAHWEH, the great I AM.

And so, the followers of Jesus Christ the Lord, should also be marked by praise of His glory. We do not need reasons to praise Him. He is the reason!

Jesus is the reason for the season. Is he the reason for your praise?

Anticipate Christmas - 13 December

PRAISE - A Response and an Outburst

And Jesus said to [the blind beggar at Jericho], "Recover your sight; your faith has made you well." And immediately he recovered his sight and followed him, glorifying God. And all the people, when they saw it, gave praise to God. [Luke 18:42, 43]

It has been said, to whomever or whatever or wherever you go when you are in trouble, hurting or in need, there is your god (God). If that is a person you run to in crisis, or a substance/addiction you seek to numb the pain of life; whatever it is, if it is not the Lord Almighty, then it is an idol taking His rightful place. However, I think there is truth here. I also wonder if an alternative has truth in it too. Is it possible that whomever or whatever or wherever you go in times of joy and celebration, may also be your god (or God)?

Luke records two of Jesus' many healings in chapters 17 and 18. Chapter 17 recounts ten lepers who called out to Jesus for mercy and receive healing as they follow Jesus' instructions. Only one turns back to praise God; the other nine are missing. These lepers were so eager to meet Jesus and have a need met, yet just the one came back to praise and give him thanks.

Similarly, a blind beggar (chapter 18), who hears Jesus the Nazarene is passing by, calls out in faith, believing this man can heal him. Jesus has mercy and heals him. Rather than running off to celebrate with whomever else, like perhaps was the case with the lepers, this man praises God and follows Jesus! And it doesn't stop there, the contagious praise spreads to all the people who saw it and God receives all their glory!

Are your times of prayer and intimacy with the Father more consumed in celebrating and praising Him, or in more supplication, pleading God to meet additional needs? And when you are blessed, do you return to praise and give thanks to the Father?

In this season of giving are you generous with your thanks?

Anticipate Christmas - 14 December

PRAISE - A Joy and a Consummation

Deliver me from blood guiltiness, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness. O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. [Psalm 51:14, 15]

Praise, blessing, rejoice, and thanksgiving are all very similar terms. Many times, our English Bibles translates the same Hebrew and Greek words with these different English terms. It is fascinating that a fitting antonym for all those terms might be *forgetfulness* or *depreciation*. While praise acknowledges, thanks, and happily celebrates, the opposite of this would be ignorance and ingratitude. It seems mankind has a way of forgetting God. Paul, in Romans 1 observes man's sinfulness includes an unwillingness to give thanks. Even God's people require frequent reminders. While our God is full of grace, he longs for the thanksgiving and praise of his people. Psalm 50 captures this: "The one who offers thanksgiving as his sacrifice glorifies me...." Is there a secret to such readiness to praise and give thanks?

David's great confession in Psalm 51 reflects a deep sorrow for sin and a longing for God's forgiveness. He explicitly requests the joy of forgiveness and deliverance and expresses a desire to obey God and experience the joy of his salvation saying, "then my tongue will shout for joy because of your deliverance. O Lord, give me the words! Then my mouth will praise you (14b-15/NIV). David's words make clear the source of praise and thanks is a heart free from sin and aware of God's forgiveness and grace.

In *Reflections on the Psalms*, CS Lewis wrote, "Therefore praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation.... In commanding us to glorify Him, God is inviting us to enjoy Him." And He even has the abundant grace to supply us the desire and power to praise Him! What a wonderful God we serve!

Is sin preventing you from expressing your praise and thanks?

Anticipate Christmas - 15 December

O Come Let Us Adore Him

But the hour is coming , and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit an truth, for the Father is seeing such people to worship him. [John 4:23]

The term adoration does not appear in most English translations of Scripture, however, the spirit and implications are communicated in a New Testament term translated *devout* or *worship*. The usual term for worship describes the posture of the body but this synonym emphasises the posture or condition of the heart.

Worship can be external. The Old Testament is full of examples of the emptiness of Israelites who went through the motions of worship, however, their “hearts” were not in it. Their wilful disobedience to the Law and their fascination with idols betrayed the emptiness of their external posture. They openly exhibit how one may kneel or bow down but may not have an attitude of worship in the heart. Jesus similar condemned the Pharisees for their hypocrisy. Though why would be horrified to even be suspected of worshipping an idol, Jesus described their emptiness as being “whitewashed tombs...filled with dead people’s bones and all uncleanness” because their external appearances and practices were a cover-up for reality of what they were on the inside.

Jesus said acceptable worship the Father seeks is from those who worship in Spirit and in truth. It seems clear the Father is more interested in the devotion and adoration from the heart than the posture of the body.

Well did the song writer issue his invitation: “O come let us adore him; O come let us adore him; O come let us adore him, Christ the Lord.”

How authentic is your adoration?

Anticipate Christmas - 16 December

Angels in Adoration

And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, "Let all God's angels worship him." [Hebrews 1:6]

A friend recently gave me a book entitled, *The Unseen Realm*. In it the author seeks to help readers understand the unseen world of the spiritual and/or supernatural that often escapes us as we are preoccupied with the physical world in which we live.

The writer of Hebrews pulls back the curtain on that world when he speaks of heaven's side of things at the advent of the God-man. He writes: "And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, 'Let all God's angels worship him.'" As the Son of God prepared to step over the threshold of heaven into our broken world, angels were ordered to worship him. They were commanded to celebrate this momentous occasion. He himself declared he was coming into the world to do the Father's will (Hebrews 10:7), willing to give up the privileges of heaven as God to take the form of a servant and was obedient even to his own death. No wonder angels adored him.

They would show their adoration as they ministered to him after his wilderness experience with Satan. They adored him in the Garden as he sweat, as it were, great drops of blood in anticipation of his crucifixion. They adored him as the risen Christ announcing to the women, "He is not here." They adored him as they welcomed him home at his ascension. These who owed their very existence to Christ the creator, adored him for the lengths to which he went to accomplish our redemption. They do not sing redemption's song, but they adore the Redeemer for all that he was willing to do to add humans to the population of heaven.

Let the redeemed of the Lord say so. Will you say/sing you adore Christ the Lord?

Anticipate Christmas - 17 December

Adoring Shepherds

And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger....And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. [Luke 2:16, 20]

Shepherding is a lonely business. Isolated from the community to spend time in the fields with the sheep is humbling. Shepherding is also a lowly business. When the Israelites went to Egypt they were informed the Egyptians wanted nothing to do with shepherds or help. Being a social outcast is humiliating. But God has a soft spot for shepherds, referring to the leaders of his people in both testaments as such.

And it was to the lonely, lowly shepherds God's messengers announced the birth of Messiah. They hastened to Bethlehem and found the child. The term suggests they searched for him until they found him. We're not told what happened when they found him. We can only surmise they reacted as most people do when staring at the beauty and preciousness of a newborn. One may wonder whether they asked permission to hold him. Perhaps they stroked his brow or cheeks and cooed. But one doesn't have to speculate far to conclude they adored him.

The context itself suggests such a response. These shepherds who were stricken with fear became fearless; the message of the angels echoed in their own determination to glorify God and rejoice as a result of what they both *heard* and *saw*.

The simplicity of the nativity—a stable not a home; shepherds not a midwife; perhaps animals but certainly no medical professionals—suggests an atmosphere of adoration at the wonder of a Saviour's birth. The magi saw a star; the shepherds heard a song. Heaven and earth reverberated with the anthem of adoration.

Does the anthem of Jesus birth move you to adoration?

Anticipate Christmas - 18 December

The Magi Meet His Majesty

“Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? for we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”

[Matthew 2:2]

The wise men who visited Jesus’ family caused no small stir in the capital city as they inquired the whereabouts of the one who had been born king of the Jews. Their retinue was evidently of sufficient size to gain the attention of those living in the city; their questions certainly gained the attention of Herod and his advisors. Adding to the mystique was their relating their visit from “the East” was prompted by the appearance and leading of a star.

Being led by the star, they finally found the child with his family. If their visit caused a stir in Jerusalem, imagine how electrified the neighbors of this humble family were. The men entered the house, fell down worshipped. Such was the posture their bodies. But what about their hearts? By faith they saw and followed the star. Their journey evidently took months if not years, and would have been expensive, tiring, fraught with danger from highwaymen and robbers and, perhaps, they were tempted more than once to turn back. What compelled them to “press on?” I’m convinced it was because their hearts were already filled with adoration for the child king. In addition to the investment of time and energy, their gifts were exceedingly expensive. But those gifts were not given as a sense of duty, rather a sense of devotion. They were not cheap trinkets but treasures. These were not Jews bringing tithes to the Temple; these were Gentiles bringing treasures to The Messiah.

The aroma of adoration fills the narrative as it must have filled both the hearts and home in accompaniment to their worship. Similarly, those who adore the Saviour will themselves be a sweet smelling aroma permeating the context of their spheres of influence.
(2 Corinthians 3:15)

Adoration is an aroma of the heart. Do those around you smell it?

Anticipation - 19 December

Marginalised and Misfits

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich. [Corinthians 8:9]

Tracing Jesus' ministry through the gospel accounts makes two things evident: the Pharisees and religious elite *abhorred* him; the marginalised and social misfits *adored* him. Luke gives an account of Jesus dining at the home of a Pharisee. The host ignored the social custom of providing water for washing the feet of the guests; a woman of ill repute washed Jesus feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. Mary Magdalene was one out of whom Jesus had cast seven demons. She evidences her adoration as she wept at the site of the empty tomb until Jesus comforted her and dispatched her to tell the other disciples. Tax collectors sought his presence; the sick sought his healing touch; the lepers and blind begged to be delivered from their respective maladies; the invalid at the pool of Bethesda carried his bed instead of being confined to it following the intervention of the healer. The woman of Samaria was so taken with his winsomeness and teaching she hurried to the village to declare she had met Messiah.

Paul affirmed God's gospel would not be primarily directed at the wise, strong and noble. Rather, the message of the cross (considered foolishness by the elite) would resonate in the hearts of the weak, the ignoble and the unlearned. Their lives on earth and eternal destinies would be forever changed by an encounter with him who left heaven's glory to partake of the misery of a broken world.

Born and reared in poverty, Jesus connected with the masses throughout his earthly ministry. As we carry out our part of the Great Commission we proclaim the gospel to the "up and outers" as well as the "down and outers." True wealth is our treasure in heaven an inheritance for those who adore him.

Do you adore the comforts of life or the Christ of Christmas?

Anticipate Christmas - 20 December

The Little Children Love Jesus

Let the little children come to me, do not hinder them.... And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them.

[Mark 10:10-13]

A song sung in many Sunday Schools, even in my day, was “Jesus Loves the Little Children.” According to the Scriptures, the little children loved Jesus as well. He welcomed them to come to him; they evidently responded and did so. While the parents encouraged them and the disciples discouraged them, Jesus broke through the confusion to embrace them, bless them and pray for them. Mark’s account notes that Jesus took them up in his arms. In Matthew’s account Jesus issued a stern warning against those who would cause one of the little ones to sin. God’s concern for children is evident throughout the Old Testament; Jesus would put a face on it as well as putting his arms around the precious little ones. The children were not intimidated by his appearance or put off by his popularity and the crowds. With patience and compassion Jesus reached to them; with childlike grace and affection they responded to him.

They were in the crowds of thousands who ate the bread and fish Jesus provided. They were present at his triumphal entry even “crying out in the Temple, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David,’” much to the chagrin of the Pharisees. We are told of two, Alexander and Rufus (Mk. 15:21) whose father was compelled to carry the cross. We are not certain of their ages, however, the custom to carry out crucifixions in public places, usually along well traveled roads, suggests children would have witnessed the grotesqueness of Jesus final hours.

All things considered, Jesus did indeed love the little children. But it is also clear the little children loved Jesus. Jesus would honour them by using their affection and trust to describe the childlikeness as commendable virtues of Jesus-followers.

Is your faith childlike or childish? There is a difference.

Anticipate Christmas - 21 December

Adoring Disciples

Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him. [John 14:21]

I love to work crossword puzzles, usually working three to five per day. A frequent term is *adore*. The clues vary: *to love extensively, to cherish, to be infatuated with, to be crazy about*. You get the idea.

To adore someone is to assign the ownership of one's heart to that someone. We sometimes hear or read, "He/she stole my heart." Or, "I have you in my heart." Or, "I give you my heart."

Such can be said about Jesus' followers as well. To adore him is more than just a surge of emotion. It is to love him as God accompanied by a willingness to sacrifice one self or one's resources to fully express that adoration. Peter learned that in the three-fold inquiry as to whether or not he loved Jesus. Did he love him enough to sacrifice his fishing business? Did he love him enough to lay down his life. Peter answered the best he could, but it was his life from Pentecost to his martyr's death that proved the point.

Peter was not the only one given opportunity to give visibility to the adoration of his heart. On the day Jesus gave the Great Commission, Matthew says they "worshipped him." Those who had forsaken him and fled the night of his arrest, were gathered to the one they loved. He ordered (commanded) them to carry out his mission. Their worship was more than a physical posture. All but John died martyr's deaths, faithful to the Saviour who indeed had "stolen their hearts." Even James, Jesus' brother, was transformed from a skeptic and scoffer to a passionate follower of Jesus. Sibling rivalry turned into a fraternal love, ultimately leading to his being viciously slain for his faith. Indeed he *adored* his elder brother.

Adoration is not unrestrained sentiment; it is unconditional sacrifice.

Anticipate Christmas - 22 December

Worship is the *spirit* of Christmas

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him. [Matthew 2:1, 2]

All the persons referenced in the Christmas narratives are referred to or described as worshipers. Mary worshiped God in her song of praise, exhibiting humility; Joseph was a worshiper of God, demonstrating it by his obedience. The writer of Hebrews says the angels were commanded to worship Jesus when he came into the world. Luke describes the scene as they glorified God in the presence of the shepherds. The shepherds worshiped at the manger, Simeon and Anna in the Temple, the magi in the house where the child resided with Mary and Joseph.

Their status in life nor the place of worship made any difference. The object of their worship was the infant Christ—the incarnate God—born into poverty, a lifestyle and station in which he would remain until his ascension back to heaven's glory. Such was and continues to be true of all whose lives he touches.

Though he never sought it, this poor rabbi's popularity brought him as much worship as criticism. Women washed his feet, men sought his wisdom, children sought his blessing, the sick his healing, the blind their sight and the deaf their hearing, the grieving his company, the disciples places of honor in the kingdom. The latter may have been ambitious, but they wanted to be close to him. One of those is known as the disciple Jesus loved!

People exhibited devotion and adoration in the heart as well as assuming a bodily posture of humility, reverence and awe. At the end of Jesus' time on earth his disciples worshiped him; the church in heaven will worship him. From the cradle to the cross, from the tomb to the ascension, from earth to heaven, he is worthy of our worship.

What's your "worship temperature?"

Anticipate Christmas - 23 December

GIFTS

And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.
[Matthew 2:11]

FYI, the fact that there were three gifts is the reason for the assumption that there were three wise men. But that's enough about that debate for now.

Past: This gift-giving ceremony was part of their worship service. Worship involves an outward expression of what happens in the heart of the worshipper. In other words, worship first starts in the heart and then is expressed in action. They met the King of the Jews, the Saviour of the world, their hearts filled with adoration, and they worshipped Him through giving Him gifts.

Present: Jesus is revealed to us in many ways today - through the created world, through the Word of God, through people who are being conformed to His image, etc. There are many ways that we can respond to this that are worshipful - singing songs of worship, using our gifts and talents to serve other people, being generous to others, etc.

Future: As people anticipated His coming 2,000 years ago and worshipped Him at His arrival, so we will also worship Him when He is revealed as the Lamb of God in heaven. The worshipers represent every "from every tribe and language and people and nation, Then all of heaven will worship Him as worthy. This worship will be expressed as words about His worth spoken by all present.

If you pay attention, you will see many opportunities to worship Christ this season. The question is, "Are you paying attention?" How will you respond? Will you worship Him?

Anticipate Christmas - 24 December

REVEALED

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."... And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. [Matthew 2:1.2, 9-11]

Sing it with me... "We three kings of Orient are, bearing gifts we traverse afar..." The song bears out the traditional idea there were three kings or three wise men. Previous devotionals reminded us the number is based on the number of gifts presented. Now we can debate how many wise men there were, but that would be a distraction from the significant of the text. What they did with their gifts is the point. All around the world this year, songs will be sung in worship of Jesus. And worship was the purpose of the wise men's trip.

Worship is an expression of reverence and adoration. When the star revealed to these men the long awaited King of the Jews had been born, they made the journey from their homeland in the East to the place where the child was. They were eager to show reverence for a child they knew was special, one who was born a king. After questioning the elders in Jerusalem the star finally led them to where he was. The only royalty was that acknowledged by the wise men with their worship and their gifts. All other references reveal him to be more. He was born Saviour of the world, and so we worship Him this Christmas. Not as king but as Lord. Not as a sovereign but the Saviour. Jesus' gift of forgiveness for our sins outshines the treasures of the magi presented to him that holy night.

Worship is the natural response to the revelation of Christ. As He is revealed this Christmas through His word and the love shared between each other, how will you choose to worship Him?

Anticipate Christmas - 25 December

LIGHT, LIFE, HOPE

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.... In him was life, and the life was the light of men.... 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, 4 14]

Jesus' birth was the fulfilment of prophecies made over the course of thousands of years prior to his coming. From God's promise the seed of the woman would crush the head of the serpent—to the promise of a son for Abraham—to the promise of a progeny for David—to Isaiah's prophecies of a virgin born Saviour, Christ's birth was the culmination of faith, hope, anticipation, yes even desperation.

The Messianic hope, however, was not for a suffering Saviour but a sovereign—victorious like David, as wise as Solomon and as King to surpass and defeat all the kings of the earth. He would restore the nation, inhabit Jerusalem, bring about the promised kingdom, make the land fruitful, etc. Sadly, Jesus' own people were blinded by their own expectations and disregarded him. They failed to see the light!

But he was also prophesied to be the light of the Gentiles. The hope of Israel is, in reality, the hope of the human race. Not a conquering sovereign but a perfect sacrifice to accomplish our redemption and reconciliation gifting us with eternal life.

Don't miss this: the Son of God became the Son of Man that the sons and daughters of men might become the sons and daughter of God. A king rules his subjects; Jesus loves his brothers and sisters and promises we will one day rule with him...when the fulness of time is come.

Are you awaiting him as eagerly as the ancients? Are you ready for his coming?