



The Scarlet Thread

Advent Devotionals

By Michal Crum,
Anne Wegener
and Jake Mentzel

The Scarlet Thread
Advent Devotionals

Written for BloomingMoms, a ministry of Clearnote Church
By Michal Crum, Anne Wegener and Jake Mentzel
December, 2013

These devotionals were written to be read aloud to your family. There is one for each day of advent, with 24 devotionals leading up to Christmas day. We hope they will help you guide your children through Old Testament stories, Messianic prophecies, and the stories surrounding Christ's birth. They are written to help young children understand the common thread connecting all of these stories. We want our children to understand God's perfect plan for history, and why Christmas is a wonderful reason to celebrate!

Day 1: The Greatest Story

Symbol: Chi Rho

Passage: Genesis 1, John 1

Once upon a time, before there were any trees or oceans or bugs or people, before there was any world at all, there was God. This God was the same God we know now, and he was three Persons then, just as He is now. He created the world and everything in it, and said, "Let us make man in our image." Jesus Christ was with God in the beginning (John 1:2), and so was the Holy Spirit (Genesis 1:2). Then God created man. God knew that Man would sin against Him and need to be saved from sin and death. But even before He created us, He always had a plan to save us. And that is the beginning of our story.

Every story has a beginning, a middle, and an ending. The beginning introduces us to the people in our story. The middle is called the climax, and is usually exciting and a little bit scary. And the ending is always happy--at least it is in all our favorite stories. Every great story also has a hero, and the hero has to fight a villain to save something special. Christmastime is all about the climax of our very favorite story. God wrote the biggest, greatest and most beautiful story ever made, and that is the story of how He saves the people He has chosen to be His children. Those people are called the Church. And the hero? Maybe you can guess who the hero is...

Because God loved us and wanted us to understand our story, He began to show us little hints and pictures of His plan all the way back at the very beginning. He wanted us to know that He had a hero to save us. These stories are woven all the way through the Old Testament, the part of the Bible written before Christ was born. He sprinkled promises all through these stories so that when He sent His Son to earth, we would recognize the parts of the story He had already told us about. And we know God sticks to His plan and keeps His promises, because the Bible says "God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should

change His mind.”

The middle, really exciting part of our story is the part that we begin to celebrate at Christmastime. That’s when we have parties and songs and special food and drinks and gifts to celebrate the greatest gift that anyone ever gave. That’s when God gave us His Son--the hero of our story. He sent Jesus Christ to come to earth as a baby, grow into a man, and save us from our sin.

What about the ending of the story? Well, we haven’t reached the ending yet. But God has told us a lot about it, just like He told us a lot about the middle part, the climax.

Whenever we talk about time and dates and history, we measure everything by whether it happened before or after the climax where God sent His Son. Because of this, we talk about all dates by saying whether they happened before Christ’s birth, B.C., or after Christ’s birth, A.D.

When God’s Son came to earth and was born as a baby, He was named Jesus. We often call Him Jesus Christ, because Christ means Messiah. Every time we call our hero Jesus Christ, we’re saying that Jesus was the Messiah that all those messages in the Old Testament were talking about.

As we go through this advent calendar, we’ll be reading lots of stories that happened before Christ. It’s just the beginning of the big story, but you can’t understand the climax, Christmas, until you’ve heard the beginning. We’ll learn stories of God’s chosen people before Christ’s birth, stories that foreshadow Christ’s birth before it even happened, and then Christmas stories that show how those messages came true. This will help us understand better on Christmas morning how God had a beautiful plan for all of time, and how the Bible tells the greatest story ever told.

Day 2: The Villain Snake

Symbol: Serpent

Text: Genesis 2-3

After creating the world, God created the very first man and called him Adam. He gave Adam life in a perfect garden for his home. It was never too cold or too hot. There was no poison ivy and no blood-sucking mosquitoes. He had delicious food to eat. God gave the fruit of all the trees to Adam as food--all the trees except one. There was one tree that God told Adam not to eat from. God said, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." (Gen. 2:16-17)

Then God gave Adam a wife named Eve, and now Adam had everything he needed. Adam and Eve lived and worked in this garden. They were never sick, they never argued with each other, they were never selfish. They had one another to love, and they even took walks with God and talked with Him. Because God created them, He knew them and loved them perfectly.

Now, the devil hates God and wants to break everything that is true and perfect and beautiful. God is the King of Truth, but the devil is the Prince of Lies. He wanted to ruin God's perfect story. So one day in the garden, the devil disguised himself as a snake and went to Eve to ask her a question. "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?'" he asked. Now, of course, that is not what God said to Adam! The devil was asking a slippery, slimy, tricky question to make Eve wonder if God is really good, and if He had really given them all they needed. Eve answered the snake, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden lest you die.'"

Then Satan, that slimy, lying snake told the biggest lie that has ever been told. He said, "You will not surely die. For God knows

that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” Eve already knew that God had given them every good thing, and that it is wicked to doubt God’s goodness and disobey Him. But the devil’s trick worked on Eve, and she reached out and took the beautiful fruit and ate it. Then Eve gave the fruit to Adam. Adam took the beautiful fruit from his beautiful wife, and he decided to eat it too. And now the devil thought his evil plan had worked. But do you think God’s story was ruined? No way.

When God came that day to walk and talk with Adam and Eve, they were ashamed and hid from God, which never ever works. They knew they had made a big mistake, but it was too late. They couldn’t take back what they had done. God found Adam and asked if he had eaten from that one forbidden tree. Then Adam’s sin got bigger, because he told God it was all Eve’s fault, and even blamed God for giving Eve to him. When God asked Eve what she had done, she blamed the snake. Everyone wanted to blame someone else.

Then God said to the snake, “Because you have done this, cursed are you... 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.” (Gen. 3:14-15)

Then God went on to tell Adam and Eve the curses that would be upon them and their children forever because Adam had disobeyed. He told them how difficult their lives would be now—about pain and loneliness and death. God sent Adam and Eve out of the garden so they could never return.

Adam and Eve were so scared and sad. Because of their sin and God’s curse, their lives would be very difficult. But God did not leave them without hope. That curse God placed on the snake was not only a curse. It was also the first promise God gave to His people. God had said to the snake,

“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between

your offspring and her offspring;”

The children of the snake and the children of the woman would always hate each other. The children of the snake are not just baby snakes. They are the children of the Prince of Lies, all those who fight against God and love evil instead of good. There will always be war between good and evil, between the devil’s children and the children of God. But God wasn’t finished. Then he said,

“he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.”

This was certainly a curse to the snake, but to Adam and Eve, it was a promise. God gave us a glimpse of His great big plan for sending a hero to save his children. One day through Eve would come a Promised One, One who would strike back at the devil. Though the snake would bite the heel of this Promised One, He would strike the head of the snake-devil.

Day 3: Another Curse, Another Promise

Symbol: Noah and the Ark

Text: Genesis 6

Adam and Eve had many children, and those children had many children. Adam’s descendants spread across the land, and the people turned away from God and did not want to be His children. God saw that they loved wickedness and only wickedness, all the time. The earth was dirty from their wickedness.

When you are filthy dirty, you take a bath, right? The water gets everywhere--between your toes, all through your hair, under your fingernails. And it washes you clean. God decided to wash the world clean using water. He would wash away all the men who loved to hurt and kill. But there was one man who pleased

God, and his name was Noah.

Imagine if you were the only person in the WHOLE world who loved God. Imagine if there were no churches, no Bibles, no Christian friends... That would be a very lonely world to live in, wouldn't it? That was what the world was like for Noah and his family.

God told Noah that he was going to kill all the bad men who loved violence. But God would not wash Noah away with all the wicked men, because God had made a promise to Adam and Eve. God told Noah to build a big boat called an ark, so that they would be safe inside when God washed everyone else away. He told Noah just how long and wide and tall to build it, and how to make sure it wouldn't leak. He told him to bring two of each kind of animal--a mom and dad. Then he said to pack up food for all the animals, and food for himself and his family, and store it on the ark. They needed a lot of food, because they would be on the ark for a long, long time.

Noah obeyed everything that God commanded him to do. He built a boat and he gathered up the animals until it was like one big zoo. He preached righteousness and warned the other people. And even though the wickedness on the earth was like a hungry fire that needed to be put out, God waited patiently for Noah to finish preparing everything. Then when the ark was ready, God sent the biggest rainstorm there has ever been. Water came down out of the sky and up out of the earth. There was so much rain that everything in the world--all the houses, all the trees and even all the mountains were covered over with water. But it wasn't just the places and things, it was the people too. These people were like spots of dirt on the earth, and God washed them away. Everyone on earth was dead now, except Noah and his family and all the animals safe on the ark, floating on the water.

For five months the water covered the earth, and Noah and his family stayed in the ark. Do you remember last Christmas? Where did you go? Imagine if you had climbed onto a boat last

Christmas and stayed there until today. That's a long time, isn't it? Noah and his family were all alone, waiting on the ark for a long, long time. But God had not forgotten about Noah. The flood waters began to grow smaller, until the ark came to rest on top of a mountain. The Flood was over.

"Then God told Noah and his family to go out from the ark. So they went out, and Noah burnt offerings to the Lord. And God told Noah he would never again curse the earth because of man's sin. He promised, "While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease." He told Noah and his family to fill the earth with people again. And God made a beautiful sign for Noah, to mark His promise. Noah and his family looked up and saw a brilliant rainbow stretching from one side of the sky to the other. God told Noah that every time He saw that rainbow, He would remember His promise to Noah and his children.

God washed the earth clean, but He knew that everything men did would still be dirty with sin. Even Noah was sinful, but God set him apart as righteous because he acted by faith and went on the ark when God told him to. Noah believed God's warning, and he believed God's promise. (Hebrews 11:7) And God remembered the promise He made when He cursed the snake. Through Noah would come the Hero who would save his children from their sins.

Day 4: As Many as the Stars

Symbol: Star
Text: Genesis 12-21

When's the last time you heard a really good joke--the kind of joke where the punch line took you by surprise and made you laugh until your belly hurt? Good stories have a hero, but they

also have some funny parts. And you'll see that God knows how to tell a good joke.

After the Flood, Noah's descendants began to fill the earth again. But just as they had before the Flood, men hardened their hearts against God. There was nothing funny about that. But God had not forgotten His plan. Just as He had with Noah, so now He chose one man to bless the entire world. This man was named Abram.

God called Abram to leave his home and travel to a new country that God would show him. God said, "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Gen. 12:3)

Now when God called Abram, he was already a very old man, but that did not stop Abram from obeying. He and his wife Sarai packed up everything they owned and got going. They traveled north and came to a place called Canaan, where they called on the name of the Lord.

God said to Abram, "Lift up your eyes and look... all the land that you see I will give to you and your children and your children's children forever." (Gen. 13:14) But Abram wondered, What children? He and his wife Sarai had none, and they were far too old to have a baby now. But God said to Abram, "Your very own son will be your heir." (Gen. 15:4)

Did you ever lay on your back on a clear summer night and look at all the stars? That night, God brought Abram outside and told him to look up in the sky and count every single star. How many stars do you think there are in the sky? The harder you look, the more you see! Then God told Abram that's how many kids and grandkids he would have. That's outrageous, right? What a crazy promise.

Then Abram and Sarai did something very sad--something that

brought tears instead of laughter. Instead of waiting on the Lord and trusting Him to carry out His perfect plan, they decided to fix the problem themselves. Sarai wanted a son so badly, she decided it didn't really matter where that son came from. She gave another woman named Hagar to Abram, so that Hagar could have a baby to be their son. But this was not the son that God had promised to Abram and Sarai. So God came to talk to Abram again.

Remember Robin Hood's best friend Little John? Little John was anything but little. His name was a big joke. Now, God gave Abram a new name as a sign of this covenant. But at first, the new name might have seemed like a joke. God changed Abram's name to Abraham, which means "father of many." And God changed Sarai's name to Sarah. Imagine Sarah calling Abraham: "Father of Many, time for supper!" It's a funny name for a man with no children, isn't it? They laughed about God's promise because they were so, so old. But God kept reminding him, "No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him." (Gen. 17:19) God told Abraham that when one year had passed, they would have a son.

So Abraham obeyed God. And guess what--God kept His promise! Pretty soon, Sarah's tummy began to grow round, and one year after God's message, God gave Abraham and Sarah a son. They named him Isaac, which means "laughter." There are lots of different kinds of laughter, right? Sometimes we laugh at a story because we don't believe it. And sometimes we laugh because a story is outrageously funny but true! And sometimes we laugh because we hear good news, news so wonderful that all we can do is laugh (and maybe cry a bit at the same time). This little baby was all three kinds of laughter wrapped into one. Abram was now Father Abraham, father of many.

And Sarah said, "God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me." 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." (Gen. 21:7)

God made a promise to Abraham and Sarah, and He kept that promise. God gave them a baby boy in their old age because through Isaac, another baby boy would one day be born--the Promised One--through whom "all the families in the world would be blessed."

Day 5: Jacob's Ladder

Symbol: Ladder

Text: Genesis 28

Now, Isaac grew up to be a wise and godly man, just like Father Abraham. And in due time, God gave Isaac a beautiful and radiant bride who loved Him. Her name was Rebekah. And, in due time, God gave Isaac and Rebekah children of their own. Twin boys, in fact.

While those twin boys were growing inside of Rebekah's belly, God told Isaac something very difficult. He told them that His promise would only pass to one of those twin boys, but not the other. In fact, it would pass to the younger boy, not the older, which was not how anyone would've planned it. But God, being God, gets to decide those sorts of things.

The name of the older son was Esau. The name of the younger son, the one that God had chosen as His very own, was Jacob. It was Jacob's children that God would make into a great nation as numerous as the stars, just as He had promised to Abraham. It was Jacob's children who would be marked as belonging to God. And it was through Jacob's children that the Promised One would be born.

But when Jacob was a young man, he did not act very much like the kind of person that should be so highly favored by God. In fact, it's easy to wonder if he knew God at all. His very name

meant “supplanter” or “deceiver,” and he did a good job living up to his name. He was always trying to outdo his brother Esau and always get the best of everything for himself, even if it meant lying, cheating, or stealing. Even when he was born, he was holding onto Esau’s ankle, trying to get ahead of him.

In other words, Jacob was sneaky and tricky and downright mean. But people get to be God’s children not when they act like his children, but when God shows Himself to them. And that’s when God starts changing their hearts.

When Jacob grew up, Isaac sent him away from his home to find a wife who was beautiful and radiant and loved God. As Jacob was traveling, night came, and Jacob lay down outside with a rock under his head to sleep. It must’ve been a pretty big rock, too, as we’ll find out in a minute. You might not think a rock would make a very good pillow, especially if it was a very big rock. But Jacob must’ve thought it was better than the ground.

That night, while Jacob slept under the stars, God sent him a dream. In that dream there was a ladder. But this was no ordinary ladder. How high is the highest ladder you’ve ever seen?

You may have seen a high ladder on a building somewhere. You may have seen an even higher ladder on a fire truck. But this ladder climbed up into the sky, and when it got there it kept going right on past the clouds and all the way up to Heaven. Do you think you could climb a ladder that high?

And then Jacob saw something even more amazing. God’s angels were climbing up and down the ladder.

And then Jacob saw something even more wonderful. Way up at the top of the ladder, was God Himself. That ladder went all the way from all of us down here on earth, all the way up to God in highest Heaven.

And God said to Jacob in a voice that must’ve sounded like

thunder, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac." Then He said, "The land on which you lie I will give to your children and grandchildren...You shall spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your children shall all the families of the earth be blessed. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." (Gen. 28:15)

This is the same promise that God had made to Father Abraham, and then again to Jacob's father Isaac. And now God Himself was making the same promise to Jacob! What had Jacob done to deserve this blessing?

When Jacob woke up, he knew that the dream was from God. He knew that Almighty God had been there and had spoken to him. How do you think that made Jacob feel?

It made him afraid. Because God is holy, and Jacob was not. So Jacob said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.' (Gen. 28:17)

Jacob wanted to do something special to mark out the place where God had met with him. So he tipped up the rock that he had used as a pillow, poured oil over it, and he gave it a name. He called it Bethel, which, in English, means "house of God." Jacob left the rock there as a reminder of the promise that God had made to him. Like I said, it must've been a pretty big pillow.

Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me and will keep me and take care of me so that one day I can go back to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God." (Gen. 28:21)

Now this was a pretty incredible dream that God gave Jacob, but he knew that it wasn't just a dream. It was a promise. God gave Jacob a promise to bless all the families of the earth through him. And He gave Jacob a small picture of how His perfect plan would

be carried out.

How would God bless all the families of the world? That ladder is a picture for Jacob and for us of the Promised One that God would send. The ladder represents the one who would come all the way down to all of us on earth from God in highest Heaven. He would come to cover the distance separating God and man, the distance created by Adam's sin in the Garden. He would come to make a way back to God.

Jesus, although He was God, took the form of man and came to earth. Through His life, death, and resurrection, He became a ladder between us and God. And here's the best part. God didn't give us a ladder for us to climb up to Him. God gave us the ladder so that He could climb down to us. "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights" by way of Jesus Christ the ladder. (James 1:17)

Day 6: The Prophet and the Snake King

Symbol: Egyptian chariot

Text: Exodus 1-12

In the days of Joseph, Israel and all his sons moved down to Egypt where they were treated very well, for Joseph's sake. And just as God had promised, Israel's twelve sons became the twelve tribes of a great nation. But one day there arose a king that did not know Joseph, and, just as God had told Abraham, he made all the people of Israel his slaves.

Now, Egypt was ruled by a great and wicked Snake King called Pharaoh. He wore a great big headdress that made him look like a cobra. And can you guess what his crown had on it? That's right, a big snake.

Well, of course, that should remind you of the villain snake of the

Garden of Eden. Do you remember what God said to Satan, that snake? He said that there would be war between the snake and the children of God, and that one day a child would rise up and crush that serpent's head.

God's people were slaves under the Snake King for 400 years. They had to work hard, and they groaned and cried to God for help. And do you know what the Bible says?

“Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel—and God knew.”

God heard the cries of His children. He always does. So God raised up a man to save the children of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. That man's name was Moses.

Moses and his brother Aaron went to Pharaoh, the Snake King of Egypt, and said, “This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says, ‘Let my people go, that they may hold a feast to me in the wilderness.’” But Pharaoh said he did not know this God of Israel, and he would not let the people go. Instead of letting them go, he made them work even harder.

Do you think God was pleased with Pharaoh? NO! So God judged Pharaoh and the whole land of Egypt. He sent punishments called plagues on them. Their rivers turned into blood, their cows and sheep died in the fields, big bugs called locusts came and ate all their vegetables and fruits, frogs and flies and fire from heaven came on the people of Egypt in waves. And all this time God protected his own people so that they did not suffer from these plagues.

But do you think that Pharaoh listened to God and let His people go? No, God hardened Pharaoh's heart so that he would not listen. So God told Moses he was going to send one last plague on the people of Egypt. He was going to send an angel to kill the oldest son of every family in Egypt.

The next morning was awful. Every household in all of Egypt had someone dead in it. Mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters were crying. Even the great Snake King was crushed. He called Moses and told him to take the people of Israel away. So they took their things and finally left Egypt. They weren't slaves anymore! They were free!

But even though Pharaoh lost and God showed Himself to be the very strongest, the Snake King decided to make one last effort to fight God. He gathered all his chariots with their horses and their riders and followed God's people out into the wilderness.

The people of Israel were afraid. But God wasn't afraid. God planned this all along. He led his people right up to the edge of a great big sea. That sea was called the Red Sea, and that was a good name for it, because there was going to be one last judgment on the Snake King.

God told His prophet Moses to look at the sea and raise his arms. And when Moses obeyed God, God sent a big wind to part the sea. God made a big, wide path of dry land for the Israelites to walk on. They were going to pass right through the waters!

Pharaoh and his army of horses and riders and chariots chased the people of Israel through the sea. But do you know what happened? When the last Israelite had passed through the water, the waters of judgment closed in on the Snake King and all of his horses and all of his men. They all drowned. The Snake King would not trouble God's people any more.

Now, God wrote this story into history to teach us about something else. About something much, much bigger. You see, each of us was born into a kind of slavery. We're not slaves in Egypt, but we are slaves to the Snake King—the same Snake King that tempted Adam and Eve in the Garden. But can you guess the good news?

God sent a prophet to deliver us from the Snake King. You know His Name. It's Jesus. Just like Moses, Jesus came and crushed the Snake King under His feet. And just like the people of Israel, God has rescued us. The Snake King may chase us with his chariots, but he will never win. God will throw the horse and his rider into the sea.

Day 7: A Great High Priest

Symbol: Heart

Text: Exodus 19-20

After God drowned the Snake King and his army in the Red Sea, He led His people through the wilderness. Wildernesses are always bad places. There's never any food or water there.

Gardens are much better. God had a plan to take His people through the wilderness to the place He promised Abraham—a land called Canaan. Canaan was like a big garden—it was so wonderful that it practically flowed with milk and honey!

All the way through the wilderness God cared for His people and showed them His love. He fed them with bread from heaven. He quenched their thirst by making water come out of rocks.

But there was something God needed to do before He brought His people to Canaan. He needed to give them His Law, so they would know how to submit to His rule as their new King and receive His blessing.

So God brought them to a high mountain called Sinai. They camped at the bottom of the mountain while Moses went up to God. Then God told Moses to give the people of Israel this message:

“You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians,

and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples.”

The people of Israel promised to obey God's voice. Then God told all of Israel to clean themselves for God, because on the third day—yes, the third day, remember—God would come down to the mountain.

When God came down from heaven to speak to His people, it was terrifying.

The whole mountain shook and burned with smoke. Thick clouds and darkness surrounded it. Lightning thundered all around. And when God began to speak to the people, they couldn't bear to listen. It was too much. God was too big. Too holy. Too powerful. And the people were still sinners. Even though they cleaned themselves on the outside, their hearts were still unclean and unworthy on the inside.

The people of Israel needed someone to stand between them and God or else they would die. They needed a mediator. So God called Moses up onto the mountain. Moses was going to have to be God's mediator.

When Moses got to the top of the mountain, God gave him His Law to give to all the people. Moses' job was to tell that Law to God's people and to teach them to obey it.

God's Law had three parts. We call the first part the Ten Commandments. They're written on our hearts and they teach us how to love God and how to love people. Everyone in all times and all places must obey them.

The second part of God's Law was for the people of Israel when they got into the Promised Land. It had to do with questions like, what was their government going to be like? How should crimes

be punished? And who should do the punishing?

And then there was a third part of God's Law. In that part, God made a whole set of rules about how His people were to worship Him. There were lots and lots of sacrifices with lots and lots of blood. There were rules for washing and rules for the clothes you should wear. And almost all of it involved blood or water.

But maybe the most important feature of this part of God's Law was that every act of worship had to be done with a special group of people called priests. Priests are mediators. They stand between God and God's people. They pray for God's people. And they offer sacrifices to God for His people. Which mostly means they made things holy by sprinkling them with water and blood.

And the people really did need someone to stand between them and God. After all, if God's Law taught them anything, it taught them that they were sinners. They were unclean, inside and out. They needed to be washed.

So God set apart Moses' brother Aaron to be his first high priest. As high priest, Aaron's job was to make sacrifices for all the people, so that their sins would be atoned for. His job was to stand between God and the people.

And can you guess what had to happen when Aaron became the priest? He had to be sprinkled with blood.

But what about the sin in Aaron's heart? Who was going to mediate between Aaron and God? Who was going to sprinkle his heart? And how was Aaron going to sprinkle the hearts of the people? You see, all the people were sinners. Even the priests.

When God made Aaron and his sons priests, He was teaching His people that they needed a mediator. A much better mediator than Aaron could ever be. A mediator who could stand between God and His people. A mediator who could sprinkle the hearts of God's people with cleansing blood.

One day God would send that mediator from heaven. He would come and He would stand between us and God. He would be our great High Priest. And He would offer Himself as a sacrifice for our sins. He would make a way for us to come to God.

Day 8: The Snake on the Rod

Symbol: Snake on the Rod
Text: Numbers 21:4-9

When God brought His people out of slavery in the land of Egypt, a long journey was still before them, with many more dangers and battles for them to face. Some of the dangers were physical--that is, dangers that could hurt their bodies--battles that had to be fought against enemies they could see, like the Snake-King. But many of the dangers were spiritual battles to fight against the invisible enemy of their own sin. God did not leave them to fight their battles alone. He led them every step of the way, and He proved Himself faithful.

When the Egyptians changed their minds and decided to chase after the Israelites in chariots, God opened the Red Sea for the Israelites to cross it on dry land.

When the people of Israel had no food to eat, God provided for them by making bread called manna rain down out of the sky.

When the people hardened their hearts against God and decided they didn't want to go to the Promised Land, He did not reject the children of Abraham but instead decided to wait and give the Promised Land to the next generation--the children of the men who hardened their hearts against God.

He is a God who keeps His promises. He had a story to tell and a plan to make true.

Even after God had been so good to the Israelites, they complained against God. Over and over they rebelled against Moses, or rejected the food God provided, or even said they wanted to go back to Egypt to be slaves!

One day on their journey the Israelites did it again. It all started when their tummies started to rumble, and they whined and complained against God and against Moses. They even accused God of trying to kill them, when He had been saving them all along. They said:

“Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.”

Now I know you would never say something so ridiculous--”There’s no food and I hate this nasty food!” You would never open the refrigerator and say “There’s nothing to eat!” Right? I wish that was true, but it isn’t, is it? We find silly things to be discontent about all the time. Those Israelites did too. It was sin when they did it and it is sin when we do it.

And just as they were in the middle of raising up their voices in sin against God, they looked down to find fiery serpents among them--slithering along the ground and through their legs, wrapping around their feet and striking at their ankles. They had escaped one deadly Snake-King only to be surrounded with hundreds of deadly snakes--servants of the same Serpent-Devil who had deceived Eve in the garden. And the people began to drop to the ground--first one, and then another and another. Now there were snakes on the ground, but also bodies--dead bodies of people who had dared to raise their voices against the Lord. Sin always leads to death, and who could save them from their sin? And now the people could see the truth, and they began to cry out for something other than food. Now they needed a Hero. They said to Moses,

'We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us.' So Moses prayed for the people.

Then God told Moses to do something very strange. He didn't just take away all the serpents, like the Israelites wanted him to. Instead, he told Moses:

“Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.’ So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole.” (Num. 21:5b-9)

Then when a person was bitten by one of the fiery serpents, he would look up at the bronze serpent on the pole, and he would live. Were these people saving themselves by looking at the pole? No, it was God who was saving them. But they could only be saved through obedience--by looking up to the snake on the pole and believing as God had told them to do.

Once again, God was saving the people of Israel so that through them would come the Promised One. And when this Promised One came to crush the head of the Snake-Devil and all the smaller snakes of our sin, here is what He said:

“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” (John 3:14-17)

Day 9: A Kingly Crown

Symbol: Crown

Text: 2 Samuel 7

When the people of Israel finally reached the Promised Land, God continued to lead His people through prophets like Moses-men who listened to God and then spoke His words to the people. But after many years, the people of Israel began to ask for a king. They were not content to have God as their King.

“Everyone else has a king! Why can’t we have one too?” they whined.

God warned them that kings are often unfair and unwise. He warned them that a king would make them and their children into servants and take their homes and their things for himself. But the people of Israel would not listen. They wanted a king with a crown. They were stubborn and sinful, but even in this God was accomplishing His perfect plan.

The first king over Israel was named Saul. He looked like just the right kind of person to become a king. He was tall with big muscles and a handsome face. But he quickly became proud and disobedient, so God rejected him as king.

Then God chose one man to be king and to save Israel, just like he had chosen Noah, Abraham, and Moses. God chose David to be king over Israel when David was still just a boy living in a town called Bethlehem. And even though he was a sinner just like you and me, the Bible tells us that he was “a man after God’s own heart.” He had the Spirit of God within him, and he remembered that even though he was wearing a crown, the real King of Israel is God.

Now David was a great king and a great warrior. He led the people of Israel in many wars against the surrounding nations who hated God. But after many wars, God gave King David and

the people of Israel peace. When David saw that there was peace, David talked to God's prophet and said, "Look at this big palace I live in. But God's house is just a fancy tent. I want to build Him a house!" God's prophet told David that was a fantastic idea. But that night, the prophet received a different message from God. God said,

Would you build me a house to dwell in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day...the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you... He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son... And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever." (excerpts from 2 Samuel 7:5-16)

God said to King David, "You want to build me a house? No, but I will build you a house." God made a promise and showed David part of His perfect plan. He told David that through his son God would establish the throne of David forever, and God would give him peace.

But how could that be? David's son Solomon did build God a house, and he was a good king who obeyed God. But many of the kings who came after him--David's grandsons and great-grandsons--were very wicked men who oppressed the people of Israel. These men wearing the crown of Israel led their people into sin just as God had warned. And when the people of Israel sinned against God and worshipped idols, God allowed them to be made slaves, just as they had been in Egypt. For hundreds of years they had no king and were forced to live as strangers and exiles in other countries, far from the land God had promised they would live in forever.

So what happened? Had God forgotten His promises? Did he abandon His perfect plan? No, but God often makes His promises

come true in a very different way from how we expect.

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord... [My
word] shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall
succeed in the thing for which I sent it.” (Isaiah 55:8)

Even when everything seemed all wrong, God kept sending His prophets to call the people of Israel to repentance and obedience and to remind them of the promises He had made. It seemed like David’s house and crown were so broken they could never be fixed, and that there would never be a king like David again. But God said, “In that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins and rebuild it...” (Amos 9:11-15) God would still send His Promised One who would be a warrior, and then a king of peace, just like David had been. He would come through Eve, then through Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and this King David.

The promise still stood, but the people of Israel suffered under the load of their sin and slavery, and waited and waited, and mostly forgot God’s promise and stopped believing in His perfect plan.

Day 10: Introducing the Prophecies

Symbol: Bible

Text: Isaiah 42:6-9

King David became only a memory as his grandsons and great-great grandsons ruled in Israel. Sadly most of the kings who came after King David did not love and obey God. Often they would lead God’s people away from God rather than toward Him. But God did not abandon His people! God chose men and set them apart to speak His words to His people, to call them back to obedience, and to love and serve the only true God.

We call these men prophets, and throughout the times of the kings of Israel they stood and spoke God's words. When these men spoke God's word to His people, they were always speaking to the people of their day, yet because God is God, they were not just speaking to them, but to men who would live hundreds of years later – and that includes us, too!

Have you ever driven to the Rocky Mountains? As you come across the plains, you start to notice something on the horizon. As you get closer, you begin to see the massive mountains out in front of you. It looks like you are almost there. But you aren't! You still have a very long way to go, and even when you reach the front range, as you look through the mountain passes, you find there are more mountains behind the first ones, and what looked like one mass of mountains, is really layer after layer of mountains!

It was just like this when the prophets of old spoke. They spoke to the people of their time, which were like the first line of mountains. But they were also speaking to people whose grandparents had not yet been born, and that is like the mountains you can see through the passes. Some of the prophecies these men gave were fulfilled right at the time the men gave the messages. But others happened hundreds of years later. And still others are yet to come!

Now here's some really good news: scattered throughout the words of the prophets are promises of the Messiah, God's Promised One, the one who would save His people from their sins! God gave hints of exactly what He was going to do.

Isaiah was one of God's prophets. He lived in Judah while God was judging His people by taking some of them as slaves to another country. The people Isaiah spoke to were still living in the land God had given them, but many years later, they too (or really their great-grandchildren) would be carried to a faraway country as slaves because of their disobedience to God.

In the second half of his book of prophecy, Isaiah speaks comfort to these exiles in chapter 42: “I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I will also hold you by the hand and watch over you, And I will appoint you as a covenant to the people, As a light to the nations, To open blind eyes, To bring out prisoners from the dungeon, And those who dwell in darkness from the prison” (v. 6, 7).

And so God makes sure His people know that He will be with them, even in a foreign land. He also says that while they are there, surrounded by people who don't know God, they will be examples of what God is like to those people. This is what is means when Isaiah says they will be a light to the nations. But these verses also foretell of a time when God will reveal Himself in a more full way by sending His Son to preach to us to show and tell us what God is like. Jesus is the one who would open blind eyes, bring prisoners out of prison, and bring light to all of us who were prisoners because of sin.

Isaiah goes on to say: “I am the LORD, that is My name; I will not give My glory to another, Nor My praise to graven images” (v. 8). One of the main reasons God's people were slaves in a foreign land was that they had worshiped idols.

Then Isaiah says, “Behold, the former things have come to pass.” So just as God had promised, when His people worshiped idols, they were sent to foreign lands. But God, speaking through Isaiah, doesn't stop there. He goes on to say, “Now I declare new things; Before they spring forth I proclaim [them] to you.” God is saying that He will be telling them of new things to come – things that will give them hope! And the hope is through the coming of His Son!

In fact, God gave so many specific details about the promised Messiah He was going to send, it can be hard to count them all. God's people who lived before Jesus came to earth read these promises and looked forward with faith to the coming Savior. We, the church today, believe in the Messiah that God sent 2000 years

ago – Jesus Christ! And one of the things that helps us know He is the very one that God promised so long ago are the many, many prophecies we can read in the

Old Testament which Jesus fulfilled exactly! In the next few days we'll be looking at just a few.

Day 11: The Light Will Shine on Them

Symbol: Candle

Text: Isaiah 9:1-2

Have you ever had your electricity go out during a thunderstorm? It can be scary walking around your house with no lights! Candles and lanterns help some, but isn't it nice when the power comes back on, and we can turn lights on with a switch?

In the Bible light and darkness are used by God as pictures. Light paints a picture of God's presence and holiness. God is holy, which means pure, set apart, without any sin at all. Darkness describes sin – the sins we do every day and the sin that is all around us.

All through the Bible we see light and darkness. Before God created the world, everything was in darkness, but the very first thing the Bible tells us He said was, "Let there be light" - and there was! God said the light was good. Later when God rescued His people by bringing them out of Egypt, they wandered for many years in the desert. Sometimes God wanted them to go somewhere at night, but how would they know where to go? He guided them with a huge pillar of fire, which gave light for them to see and direction for them to follow. If you keep your eyes open as you read or listen to the Bible, you'll see many more places where light is used to show God's holiness and work, but let's take a look at one that told what the promised Messiah would be like.

Yesterday we talked about the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah lived a couple hundred years after King David. King David's kingdom had split into two parts: Israel in the north and Judah in the south. The northern kingdom always had bad kings, and the people followed false gods. In fact, during Isaiah's life, because there was so much sin in Israel, God sent invaders from another country called Assyria to conquer Israel and take the people away.

So in Isaiah's day God's people considered this northern part of the country a very dark place, full of men who did not know God. But through Isaiah, God proclaims to His people that in the future, that dark place will be filled with light, and that light will come from a child who was not yet born. Isaiah said, "But there will be no more gloom for her who was in anguish; in earlier times He treated the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali [places in that northern land] with contempt, but later on He shall make it glorious, by the way of the sea, on the other side of Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles. The people who walk in darkness will see a great light; those who live in a dark land, the light will shine on them" (Isaiah 9:1,2).

People who heard and believed Isaiah's words looked forward with great hope to the day when God's Light would shine on that dark land. They waited for God's promised Messiah. And they waited. And they waited some more. But God always keeps His promises, and He knew the perfect time to send His Son.

So about 700 years later, in the northern village of Nazareth a young girl became pregnant by the Holy Spirit with the Son of God, Jesus Christ! He was raised in "Galilee of the Gentiles," and He proclaimed in their synagogues that He had come to bring light to their darkness.

How do we know for sure that Isaiah was talking about Jesus? In the New Testament, Matthew tells us right at the start of Jesus' public ministry that "he withdrew into Galilee; and leaving

Nazareth, He came and settled in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali.” And then Matthew tells us that this was to fulfill the very words Isaiah had spoken so long ago, saying, “The people who were sitting in darkness saw a great light, and to those who were sitting in the land and shadow of death, upon them a light dawned.” Later Jesus said, “I am the light of the world; he who follows Me shall not walk in the darkness, but shall have the light of life” (John 8:12).

When you walk into a dark house and flip a light switch, all of a sudden the darkness flees away. Jesus came to bring His Light into the world, to drive away the darkness that comes from sin. Because we all sin, we all need God's light. At Christmas time we proclaim that Jesus is the only one who brings this light.

Day 12: O Little Town of Bethlehem

Symbol: Bethlehem

Text: Micah 5:2

Do you know where you were born? The place you were born is called your birthplace. Maybe everyone in your family comes from the same place, but maybe your mom was born one place and your dad another. You and your brothers and sisters may even not all have the same birthplace. Can you imagine being able to predict where your grandchildren will be born? How about your great-great-great-great... grandchildren? Seems pretty crazy, doesn't it? Amazingly, our prophecy today accurately predicted where the Messiah would be born. It was made by a man named Micah who lived about seven hundred years before Jesus would come to earth!

A rustic man, more at home in the fields and farms of Judah, the prophet Micah came to Jerusalem. There he spoke of God's concern for the poor and oppressed. He also proclaimed God's judgment on those who abuse their wealth and power to take

advantage of their countrymen. Micah prophesied at the same time as Isaiah, and he has some of the same kind of clear, straightforward prophecies as Isaiah.

And just like Isaiah, Micah also prophesied about the coming Messiah. Here's what he said about where the Messiah would be born: "But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity" (Micah 5:2).

Did you catch that? He said the Messiah, the One who would go forth from God "to be a ruler in Israel", would be born in Bethlehem Ephrathah. But where was that? Bethlehem Ephrathah was a little village in the hill country of Judea, not all that far from where the prophet Micah had grown up. Now because the Messiah was God's very own Son, you might think that God would want Him to be born in a palace or at least an important city. But that wasn't God's plan! And even though it was very small and not very important to most people, Bethlehem was exactly the right place for God's Son to be born.

Do you remember when we talked about how God promised King David his kingdom would be established forever? (Day 8) What God meant was that His Promised One, the Messiah, would be born many years later into King David's family. And guess what was David's birthplace? Yes! He came from little Bethlehem! I Samuel 17:12 says that "David was the son of the Ephrathite of Bethlehem in Judah." In the New Testament Jesus is often referred to as the "Son of David." So of course Jesus needed to be born in Bethlehem, which is sometimes called the City of David!

Here's one more reason why this little town was just right. Most of the time names have meanings. Maybe you know what your name means. Bethlehem also has a meaning in the Hebrew language. "Beth" means house and "lehem" means bread. So Bethlehem stands for "house of bread." After Jesus had fed 5000 men, he was explaining to them that He was the true bread that

came down out of heaven. He said, "I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me shall not hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst" (John 6:35). What better place for the Living Bread from God to be born than in a town called "house of bread"?

So Bethlehem was the perfect place for the Messiah to be born. But God had to do some amazing things to get Mary from where she lived to that little village in Judea. We'll be talking about that in a few days.

For now, let's stop and think just a bit about what we can learn from this surprising choice God made for His Son's birthplace. God didn't want His Son born in an important capital city. No! He chose instead a place that was "too little to be among the clans of Judah." And He gave this prophecy through a prophet who cared about poor people that others despised. Being rich or important isn't something that matters to God. Instead, He chooses people for His children who may not be wise, or mighty, or noble. In fact, "God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong" (I Cor. 1: 27). God does this so we won't brag about what we can do ourselves, but so that when we boast, we will "boast in the Lord!" (I Cor. 1: 31) Next time you think you are too small or unimportant for God, remember how God used little Bethlehem to be the perfect birthplace for His promised Messiah and give thanks to Him!

Day 13: To Proclaim Liberty to Captives

Symbol: Bell
Text: Isaiah 61

Long ago churches had bells which proclaimed messages for everyone in the town or village to hear. The bells would ring one way on Sundays when it was time to go to church. They would

chime to tell people what the time was. But the bells would also ring out messages at other times, and everyone understood what the bell message meant. One type of ringing might say that a new baby was born in town, and from the ring you would know if it was a boy or a girl! The bells made a good way to quickly proclaim news for everyone to hear at once.

But bells aren't the only thing that proclaim important messages. Today's prophecy tells us about what the promised Messiah would proclaim, and why He would proclaim it. Telling good news was going to be a very important part the Promised One's job!

God made men to work. Maybe your dad works in an office, or maybe he works at a hospital. Some dads build things and some teach math. Do you know what kind of work your dad does? But what kind of work did God want His Son, Jesus to do? Let's look at another prophecy given long before He came to earth that tells us something about it.

In chapter 61 of Isaiah, in giving comfort to the people, Isaiah speaks as if Christ were talking, telling what God had called Him to do. First He says, "The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the afflicted." God's Spirit was giving the Messiah the words to say as He spoke to the afflicted. He spoke to them Good News that God had remembered His people and was providing for them a way for their sins to be atoned or paid for, so they could be at peace with God.

The passage continues, "He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted." Sometimes when you hurt yourself, your parents or a doctor need to bind up your wound, to clean it and wrap it, to protect it and help it to heal. But it's not just our bodies that get broken. Our hearts also can be broken by sad things that happen to us. We can get so sad that sometimes we feel as if our heart is breaking inside us. Jesus comes to us and takes that broken heart and wraps it up tight in His love.

Then the Messiah says He will “proclaim liberty to captives and freedom to prisoners.” To proclaim something means to tell it publicly, maybe even loudly, so everyone knows, just like church bells do! And what was Jesus going to proclaim? Freedom to trapped people! People can be locked up in all kinds of different ways. They can be locked up in real prisons. Or they can be locked up in lands where there is no freedom to hear the Good News about Jesus. They can be locked up in sin that will not let them go. But Jesus breaks through all these types of prisons and gives real freedom.

When Jesus was just starting His time of teaching on earth, He entered a synagogue in His hometown of Nazareth. (Nazareth was the town He grew up in, not his birthplace. Do you remember what that was?) When He stood up to read, someone handed Him the scroll of Isaiah. Jesus Christ, God’s long awaited Messiah, turned to the place we’ve been talking about and read these words:

“THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME, BECAUSE HE ANOINTED ME TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO THE POOR. HE HAS SENT ME TO PROCLAIM RELEASE TO THE CAPTIVES, AND RECOVERY OF SIGHT TO THE BLIND, TO SET FREE THOSE WHO ARE DOWNTRODDEN, TO PROCLAIM THE FAVORABLE YEAR OF THE LORD”
(Luke 4: 18, 19)

Then Jesus “closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed upon Him. And He began to say to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing’ ” (Luke 4: 18-21).

From that time on, Jesus went about teaching people, bringing Good News to the afflicted, binding up broken hearts, and proclaiming freedom for all kinds of prisoners. He had Good News for all people who are sinners. (That’s all of us!) We, too,

as Jesus' followers, should care for people who hurt, for those who are brokenhearted, and for those who are prisoners to sin. And guess what we should do? Just like Jesus did, we ought to proclaim the Good News about Him to those who are hurting in the world.

Day 14: There Will Be No End to His Government

Symbol: Throne

Text: Isaiah 9:7

How would you know if a king arrived at your house one day? You'd probably expect him to appear in a limousine, have lots of servants, and wear beautiful clothes. And he ought to have a crown, right?

Well, Jesus is a King, but when He came to earth, He didn't do it that way!

So how do we know He is a king? Let's look at some more prophecies. Isaiah, who made so many predictions about God's Promised One, said this about Him: "There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from then on and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will accomplish this" (Isaiah 9:7).

Isaiah was telling the people the Messiah would be a king who would sit on the throne of David. That's why the Messiah needed to be from King David's family, and why he needed to be born in the same little town as King David, Bethlehem. (You'll see the fulfillment of this prophecy in a few days. Watch for an angel who mentions the "throne of David" to someone very important!)

But Jesus, the Messiah, was different from King David in some very important ways. When David ruled there were wars and

troubles, but the Messiah's kingdom is one of peace, justice, and righteousness. King David ruled for about 40 years. That's a pretty long time, but nowhere near as long as the Messiah will reign, because His kingdom will go on forever! Another prophecy in the Psalms repeats this idea by saying, "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever; a scepter of uprightness is the scepter of Your kingdom " (Psalm 45:6). You see, long before He came to earth, Jesus, God's Son, was already King. And He will go on being King forever and ever!

But amazingly, when it came time for Him to come to earth, He didn't do it as we might think a great King would come. Listen to how the apostle Paul wrote of His coming: "Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men" (Philippians 2: 5-7). When Christ came to earth, He set aside His kingly rights and became not just a man, but a little baby. Do you have a baby in your family? If you do, you know just how astounding it is to think of the King of Kings coming to earth not as a fully grown man, but as a helpless infant. The Creator of the Universe had to be held and fed and cleaned. He humbled Himself to be just like us.

And more, He became a servant in order to set us free from our bondage to sin. Paul goes on to say, "Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." Jesus, the Messiah, set aside His crown and kingly rights to give Himself as our payment for sin by dying on a cross. But more about that tomorrow.

Sometimes we start to think we are pretty important. We want things to be just right for us. We think that what we want is more important than what our brother or sister wants. And, oh dear, sometimes we demand our own way, just as if we were a little king or queen. Whenever you start to feel that way, stop and remember the Lord Jesus. He sat with His Father and ruled in

Heaven above. He had made the world and He owned it. And yet – and yet - He left His Father in heaven and came to earth, leaving behind His kingly glory, because He loved us so much. If the Lord Jesus loved us like that, don't you think He would want us to love our brothers and sisters the same way? The passage we looked at in Philippians says that we ought to have the same attitude as Christ Jesus. Paul tells us, "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests but also for the interest of others." Now that's a great way to show we love King Jesus this Christmas!

Day 15: Lamb of God, Born to Die

Symbol: Lamb of God

Text: Isaiah 53

When King Jesus came to earth, He didn't come to a palace. No, instead He was born in the backwater town of Bethlehem. Little Bethlehem might not have been important to the rest of the world, but something very significant took place nearby. According to Jewish tradition, on the hills outside of town, sheep were raised. These weren't ordinary sheep, though. These sheep had a very special purpose. They were going to be sacrificed at the temple in Jerusalem just a few miles away. But why would lambs be raised just to be killed?

Do you remember learning about the time God's people were slaves in the country of Egypt? God told His people to paint their doorposts with the blood from a perfect lamb, and then the oldest son in those houses would be protected when the angel of death passed over. Later when God had brought His people out into the wilderness to Mount Sinai, He gave them laws explaining how the sacrifices should be done and what they were for. Every year they would celebrate a feast called "Passover" to remember

the time God had passed over their homes. Also, they needed to make regular sacrifices of animals to pay for their sins. The book of Hebrews says, “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (Hebrews 9:22).

And so through the years and decades and centuries God’s people sacrificed lambs day in and day out, first at a special tent called the tabernacle, and later after David’s son Solomon built the temple, at that very special place of worship. If there was one thing the Jewish people knew and understood, it was about sacrificing lambs for sin.

And so when the prophet Isaiah stood before the people of Judah and spoke to them about a Lamb going to slaughter, they understood. But Isaiah wasn’t talking about a four-legged sheep who said, “Baaa.” No! He was giving the people a picture of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, who would act as a sacrificial lamb for us. Listen to how Isaiah described Jesus: “He was oppressed and He was afflicted, Yet He did not open His mouth; Like a lamb that is led to slaughter, And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers, So He did not open His mouth. By oppression and judgment He was taken away; and as for His generation, who considered that He was cut off out of the land of the living, for the transgression of my people to whom the stroke was due” (Isaiah 53:7,8).

Isaiah was telling the people that the Promised One, God’s great Saviour, was going to be like a lamb who would be killed. And like a lamb when it is getting sheared, He wouldn’t even open His mouth! But why would the Messiah need to be killed? A few verses earlier Isaiah had said that He was “pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities” (Isaiah 53:5). Transgressions and iniquities are big words for sin. We sin when we do bad things that displease God or when we don’t do good things that God does want us to do. And everyone of us does things that displease God every day. So everyone of us needs God to forgive us.

After Jesus was born and grew up, He was ready to start teaching and preaching to the people. One day John the Baptist, who was a prophet, was out at a river baptizing people when he noticed Jesus walking towards him. He didn't say, "Oh, look! Here comes Jesus!" He didn't even say, "Oh, look! Here comes the Messiah!" No. What John the Baptist called out to the people was, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" John the Baptist knew exactly why Jesus had come to earth. He had come not only to teach people about God and about how to live. He had come as a perfect lamb to be slaughtered as a sacrifice to pay for the sins of you and me and all His people.

Isaiah's Good News goes on to tell us that, "as a result of the anguish of His soul, He [GOD] will see it and be satisfied" (Isaiah 53:11a). God, when He saw the terrible but perfect sacrifice of His only Son, would be satisfied. "By His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, as He will bear their iniquities" (Isaiah 53:11b). No longer would men need to make daily sacrifices at the temple, because the one sacrifice of the perfect Lamb, Jesus Christ, would be all that was needed to forgive men forever. Later, after Jesus had died and gone back to heaven, Peter, one of Jesus' followers, wrote about this in a letter. He said, "For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit."

Jesus was born to be the perfect Lamb who would need only die one time. We don't need to offer lambs for sacrifice any more. Wasn't Bethlehem, a town that raised lambs for the temple, the perfect place for the Lamb of God to be born?

Day 16: On the Third Day...

Symbol: Sunrise

Text: Jonah

All throughout the Old Testament God told His people about the Coming One, the Savior of the World. God gave the first hint of this wonderful promise way back in the Garden of Eden after Adam and Eve had sinned. When God said to the serpent “he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel,” God was saying that one day the Messiah would come and defeat the serpent, Satan. Satan would wound the Messiah, but God’s Holy One would triumph. So right back in the garden, we see God’s promise start to unfold.

As time went on, God repeated His promise over and over to His people. We see this promise in the ways God acted and in the words He gave to His messengers. God spoke through His prophets, and they gave pictures and hints of what the Messiah would do. Micah said the Messiah would be born in King David’s hometown of Bethlehem. Isaiah told the people that the Messiah would bring light to a dark world, proclaim deliverance for people in bondage, be a king forever, and sacrifice His life as the great Lamb of God.

But there are many, many more messages about God’s Promised One! Hosea said the Messiah would spend a season in Egypt (Hos. 11:1). Zechariah predicted the Messiah would be betrayed for 30 coins and His body would be pierced (Zech.11:12,13; 12:10). And Jeremiah told the Jews that He would bring a new covenant with God’s people (Jeremiah 31:31ff). Some have counted more than 300 prophecies in the Old Testament that tell about Jesus!

Jonah was a prophet, too. He didn’t proclaim a message about the Messiah with his words. Instead, God used him to proclaim a message about the Messiah with his life! Jonah lived in Israel a little before Isaiah’s time. God had a job for Jonah, but it wasn’t a

job that Jonah wanted. Instead of preaching to God's own people, God told Jonah to go to the city of Nineveh, a very large and wicked city, and tell the people there to stop sinning. Nineveh was the capital city of Israel's fierce enemy, Assyria. So he didn't want to go there and tell the people to repent! He didn't want the Assyrians to know the good news about God's forgiveness. He wanted them to die in their sins. But God had compassion even on the Assyrians.

Instead of heading 550 miles north-east to Nineveh, Jonah went the opposite direction! He headed toward the sea and hopped aboard a ship sailing west towards Tarshish which might be all the way in Spain, 2500 miles away. Jonah tried as hard as he could to run away from God. (Can anyone do that?)

But God sent a great storm on the sea and the ship was about to be broken into pieces! Even the sailors who were used to storms became frightened. They threw cargo overboard, hoping to make the ship light enough to bob around the wild waves. Then they cast lots, something like tossing dice, trying to find out whose fault the storm was. They found out Jonah was to blame! And when the sailors learned that Jonah was running away from God, the God who made the sea, they were terrified! But the storm only increased in strength, and with prayers for pardon, they threw Jonah into the storming deep.

All was not lost for Jonah, for God had prepared a great sea creature to swallow Jonah alive, "and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights" (Jonah 1:17). After he called on the name of the Lord, the Lord commanded the sea creature to vomit him up on the beach. Then, finally, Jonah obeyed God and preached in Nineveh.

Many centuries later when scribes and Pharisees who did not believe in God confronted Jesus, they asked for a sign from God to prove the truth of what he was saying. Jesus said:

"An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no

sign shall be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet; for just as JONAH WAS THREE DAYS AND THREE NIGHTS IN THE BELLY OF THE SEA MONSTER, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. (Matthew 12: 39, 40).

Jesus Himself was predicting He would be three days and three nights in the earth, and that He would rise again as a sign that He was from God. And this is what happened! Jesus was put to death on a cross and buried in a grave, but then He came alive again on the third day!

The Good News about Christmas is not just that God sent His Son as a baby to live among us. The Good News about Christmas (and Easter, and every day) is that God's Son came in order to make the payment for our sins and bring deliverance to captives. He had to die to do this, but – hallelujah! - He didn't stay dead! God raised Him to life again! And because He lives, we also can live forever with Him. Now that's Good News!

Day 17: Jesus' Family Tree

Symbol: Tree
Text: Matthew 1

Have you ever studied your genealogy? Some people like to draw a sort of map showing where they came from--who their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents are, stretching back as far as they can learn. When they draw it all out on paper, it looks like a tree with branches, so we call it a family tree. They visit graveyards and libraries, read old books, and research on the internet. They learn about where their people came from, how and where they lived and died, and what was important to them. In some ways it's like a big treasure hunt to learn the stories of your family's past.

Four hundred years passed between the end of the Old Testament and the New Testament, but God's people still studied their genealogy. They did not forget God's promise to send a Messiah through their family tree. Some of them were paying close attention, and already knew who some of the Messiah's great-grandparents would be. Can you name some of them? (Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, Solomon...)

What was it that God promised Abraham? He promised that Abraham's descendants (his children's children) would be as many as the stars. And He promised that through Isaac and his children's children, all the families of the world would be blessed. God also made this same sort of promise to King David when He told him that He would establish the throne of his kingdom forever. So the people of Israel knew to look among the children of Abraham and the children of King David for this Promised One, the Savior. And some of them were so eagerly waiting--almost holding their breath, just looking for the Promised One's arrival.

When the time came for God to send His son to earth, He had already told us much about the circumstances that would surround Christ's birth. The Gospel of Matthew was written by one of Jesus' disciples to the nation of Israel to tell them about Christ our Savior. Matthew begins his book by giving evidence that Jesus Christ really was the Promised One that the Israelites had been waiting for.

Matthew knew that if he wanted to show Israel that this Jesus Christ was the Promised One, he would need to start all the way back at Abraham and show who Jesus came from. The Israelites would want to know who Jesus' grandparents and great-grandparents were, all the way back to Abraham, to know if he really was the one God had promised. So Matthew began his story of Jesus' life with Jesus' genealogy. Listen closely as we read the list of names in Jesus' family tree, and see if you recognize any of them from the stories we've been studying.

“The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers... and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David the king.

And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, and Solomon the father of Rehoboam...and Amos the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon. And after the deportation to Babylon...Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ.”

If we didn't know all the stories and all the promises being kept, this would just sound like a long list of names. Instead it is a beautiful and exciting way to begin the story of Christ's birth! It reminds us just how God kept His promise to save the children of Abraham from sin by sending us a Savior who would come from Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, Solomon, and Jesus' dad, Joseph.

Day 18: Jesus the God-Man

Symbol: Cross

Text: John 1

While Matthew thought it most important to begin his gospel by telling about Jesus' family tree, John started off his story by telling us that Jesus is God. He wanted to be sure that everyone knew that Jesus was not just a man. He was not the latest in a long line of great prophets. Nor was He God disguising himself as a man. Jesus was fully God and fully man.

In Him, all the prophecies of the Old Testament are fulfilled. Isaiah tells us that Jesus, this little baby born, is our Mighty God.

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given... and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” (Isaiah 6:9) And now John, wanting to show us that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the words God spoke through His prophets, calls Jesus by a new name, “the Word.”

On the first day of Advent, we talked about how Jesus Christ was with God the Father in the beginning, even when God created the earth. God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.” (Genesis 1:26) God spoke and through His Word He created the world and all things. Now John starts his story the same way, for now comes a new beginning. This beginning is the really exciting part of the story-- not of how God created the world, but of how he saved the world.

John tells us, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” He tells us that God created the world through Jesus, and “without Him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men.” (John 1:1-4) John goes on to say that Jesus is the light that came into the world, and even though the world was made through him, when He came we did not know it was Him. How is it, after all the signs God had given and so many were watching and waiting, that we did not recognize Him when he came?

When the Holy Spirit gave Mary a baby, Jesus became Man. Jesus who is God--the strongest, most powerful and perfect being--was willing, in order to save us, to become a tiny, helpless baby. And that is the greatest miracle of all--the incarnation.

As a man, Jesus had a body just like we have. He had to be born a baby, just like we were. He experienced all the same temptations and difficulties and pains that we do. We have to fight against our sin and sometimes we choose to obey. But often we are weak and choose sin and disobedience, just as the Israelites did. Jesus Christ was tested and tempted more intensely than any of us will ever be, but with one difference. Every step of the way, starting

with becoming a baby, He chose to obey His Father in Heaven.

It is difficult for us to imagine being a King, isn't it? It is even more difficult to imagine being a King, then deciding to live like a slave. And yet, that is only a small part of the sacrifice that Jesus Christ made for us. Jesus Christ "emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." (Philippians 2:7-8)

When Jesus Christ humbled Himself by becoming a baby, and then when He died on the cross, this was the greatest miracle. But it was also the greatest gift ever given. Jesus Christ, first in the manger and then on the cross, gave His life for us. He gave the first and greatest Christmas present. That's why we don't celebrate Christmas by sitting quietly thinking about how great God's love is for us. We celebrate Christmas the same way Christ did. We give gifts, we eat and drink and we are merry! It honors God to celebrate and have a party and sing loudly, just like the angels did. It is spiritual to celebrate in a physical, lavish way because God lavished on us the tangible gift of His Son.

"See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are." (1 John 3:1)

Day 18: Jesus the God-Man

Symbol: Cross

Text: John 1

Once upon a time there was a beautiful young woman named Mary. As they often are in stories about heroes, this young woman was very, very beautiful. She wasn't a princess, she was just a poor girl from a poor family. But she was descended from royalty. And this beautiful woman was chosen by the King,

chosen above all other women to do a very important job. Most storytellers would now tell you exactly what made this young woman beautiful. They might start by telling you the color of her hair, and then tell about her sparkling eyes. But Mary had a different kind of beauty. What made Mary beautiful to the King?

It wasn't Mary's face that caught the attention of the King. Unlike fairy tale kings and kings today, this King could see straight into the heart of any man or woman. When he looked at Mary, he saw a beautiful heart--a heart that believed all the old, sacred stories, and a heart that believed the most important part of the story was still to come. And just as this King had said hundreds of years earlier about her ancestor David, He didn't look on the outward appearance of Mary but he looked on her heart. Do you know who this King was and is? I hope you do.

When the King saw the heart of Mary and chose her for this very important job, he sent a messenger to tell her. This King of all Kings sent a warrior-angel named Gabriel to talk to Mary. Remember Daniel, the prophet who was so brave he wasn't afraid of lions? Gabriel once went to Daniel with a message from the King, and when Daniel saw Gabriel, he was so afraid he fell on his face.

When Gabriel came to Mary he said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" Mary was very troubled to hear how the angel greeted her. She must have been very surprised and frightened to see an angel. Even for a young woman who believes the old, sacred story with its talking snake villain and its miracle babies and its angels and its coming Hero, to suddenly see an angel right before your eyes would be terrifying. But Gabriel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God." What a wonderful message to hear from God. He told Mary that a baby would start to grow inside of her, and she should call him Jesus. Gabriel told Mary, "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no

end.” (Luke 1:26-33)

This message sounds very familiar, doesn't it? Gabriel's message to Mary reminds us of God's promise to David. God told David that the throne of his son would be established forever. And now Gabriel told Mary that her son, this descendant of King David, would reign forever and his kingdom would have no end.

Now Mary asked Gabriel a very important question: “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” It takes a man and a woman to make a baby. Mary was not married and she had never been with a man. How could she become pregnant with the Promised One? Gabriel answered that the baby would be planted in her by the Holy Spirit: “Therefore the child to be born will be called holy-- the Son of God.” (Luke 1:35)

Mary also had a cousin named Elizabeth, married to a man named Zecharias. For many years they had wanted to have a baby, but they never did, and now they were too old. Now Gabriel told Mary that her cousin Elizabeth was also pregnant and carrying a son. “For,” said Gabriel, “nothing will be impossible with God.” (Luke 1:37) This sounds a lot like God's message to Abraham and Sarah, doesn't it? We can see plainly that God loves to make miracle babies.

God told Mary about Elizabeth's pregnancy as a sign that everything He told her would come true. And just as Elizabeth's pregnancy was Mary's sign that God keeps His promises, so Mary's pregnancy was a sign to all of God's people. For this fulfilled the prophecy from Isaiah 7:14, “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.”

Mary knew that she had been given a very important job from God. It was a wonderful honor, but it was also a big, scary job. How could she be a mother to the Son of God? But Mary answered simply, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” (Luke 1:38) Mary trusted that if

God had given her this big job, He would be near her and make her able to do the job.

Often we think that in order to tackle a big job we need to be proud and brave, or trust enough in ourselves. But when God gives us a big job to do, we need to be just the opposite--humble and brave. Mary's answer was both humble and brave. It's not that she believed enough in herself. Instead, she believed in God and the promises He had made. And that is what made her strong and brave enough to accept the job that God was giving to her.

Day 20: Elizabeth and Zechariah

Symbol: Grasshopper

Text: Luke 1:39-79

Have you ever felt a baby kicking inside his mom's tummy? As a baby grows bigger in the womb, his mother can feel him kicking, stretching and rolling over. Sometimes other people can even feel or see the baby moving around in there.

Because Mary believed God's message, she quickly traveled to Judah to see her cousin Elizabeth. Remember, God's sign for Mary was Elizabeth's pregnancy. And sure enough, Elizabeth was pregnant! Not only that, but when Mary arrived and Elizabeth heard her voice, the baby in Elizabeth's womb jumped for joy. When Elizabeth felt his leap, she was filled with the Holy Spirit and cried out, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?...And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord." (Luke 1:45)

And Mary replied,
My soul magnifies the Lord,
And my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

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.
And his mercy is for those who fear him
From generation to generation.
.....
He has helped his servant Israel,
In remembrance of his mercy,
As he spoke to our fathers,
To Abraham and to his offspring forever.
(Luke 1:46-55)

So Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months, then returned home. It must have been a great joy for these two women--one very young, and one very old--to be together. For both of them were carrying miracle babies, foretold to them by an angel messenger. But who was this miracle baby in Elizabeth's womb?

God gave many signs and prophecies in the Old Testament to the people of Israel, so that when the Promised One came, they would recognize it was Him. In the final verses of the Old Testament, God gave another sign that the people of Israel should be watching for. Through his prophet Malachi, God told Israel:

“But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings... Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes.” (Micah 4:2-6)

So the people of Israel knew to be watching for one last, great prophet who would come before the Promised Redeemer. This prophet would make ready the hearts of God's people for His arrival. The baby that Elizabeth carried was this great prophet foretold by Malachi. Before the baby was born, an angel appeared to Zechariah and told him that his wife would bear a son. The

angel of the Lord said,

“You shall call his name John, and you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth...he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.”
(Luke 1:13-17)

When this baby was born, his parents did call him John. And his father Zechariah knew that God was fulfilling His promises. He said,

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has... raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old...and to remember ...the oath that he swore to our father Abraham...And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high....” (Luke 1:68-79)

From birth, John the Baptist was set apart by God for the enormous job of preparing the way for the Promised One. But God did not prepare John for this great job by sending him to a university or seminary. John lived in the wilderness and wore a camel skin and a leather belt. And his food was grasshoppers and wild honey!

And when his ministry began, all the people of Israel would come out to the wilderness to hear him preach. And he told them that the Promised One was coming very soon, and urged them to turn away from their sins. And the people did! They confessed their

sins and were baptized, as a sign of their change in heart.

And then, one day, John the Baptist saw Jesus coming. And now he didn't just tell them that a Promised One was coming. After all these hundreds of years, John was the great prophet who told Israel to look now--here is the Promised One. John said, "Behold, the Lamb of God!"

Day 21: Joseph the Carpenter

Symbol: Hammer
Text: Matthew 1:20-25

A couple days ago we learned that Mary was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph. Joseph was only a poor carpenter, but He was descended from a king--King David, in fact. In the eyes of the world, there was nothing important or special about him. But God knew Joseph. God saw his heart and chose him to be Jesus' dad here on earth. God chose a man who, like Mary, was humble and brave.

Mary's belly began to grow, and soon Joseph knew that Mary was expecting a child. Joseph thought that meant she had been unfaithful to him--that she had been with another man. Even though he thought she had done him wrong, he didn't want to tell anyone or put her to shame. So Joseph decided to break off their engagement quietly.

But as he was thinking about these things, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. The angel said, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." (Matthew 1:20-21)

God let Joseph know that Mary hadn't been unfaithful to him.

This was a miracle baby, planted in Mary by the Holy Spirit. Then God told Joseph what to name this baby boy, and who He would be. If He was going to save His people from their sins, then that could only mean one thing: this tiny baby in Mary's womb would be the Promised One!

Do you see how God was still making sure everything worked together to accomplish His perfect plan? "Joseph, son of David... you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." Joseph, Jesus' father on earth, was a son of David, so the kingdom that comes through Jesus is a fulfillment of God's promise to David.

Do you remember God's promise to Abraham? "In you, all the families of the earth will be blessed..." (Gen. 12:3) God told Abraham how hundreds of years later, his children would be enslaved in a foreign land, but God would set them free from their bondage. God commanded Joseph to name the baby Jesus, which means, "God is our salvation." Just like the Israelites in Egypt, we are slaves. But we aren't slaves to Pharaoh.

Our enemy, our captor is no pharaoh on the Nile
Our toil is neither mud nor brick nor sand
Our ankles bear no calluses from chains, yet Lord, we're bound
Imprisoned here, we dwell in our own land
.....
Our sins they are more numerous than all the lambs we slay
These shackles they were made with our own hands
Our toil is our atonement and our freedom yours to give
So Yahweh, break your silence if you can

--Andrew Peterson, "Deliver Us"

Joseph "did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus." (Matthew 1:24-25) Joseph's obedience

shows that he was humble and brave. He obeyed God.

Jesus' name points to the fact that God was keeping His promises by sending the One that Israel had been waiting and watching for, His only Son, to save us from our sins. Here, finally, was the Promised One who would crush the serpent's head under His heel. God is our salvation.

Day 22: The Long, Hard Road to Bethlehem

Symbol: Donkey

Text: Luke 2

After Joseph's message from the angel, he made a big change of plans. Instead of breaking off his engagement to Mary, as he intended, he took her as his wife. Instead of putting her away, Joseph took Mary to himself to protect her and care for her.

In those days the nation of Israel was not its own country. Like much of the rest of the world, Israel had been conquered by the Roman Empire. So they were subject to Rome. Around the time that Mary was ready to have her baby, the Caesar of Rome, kind of like the king or president, decided to count up all the people in the empire. All through the entire empire, which was made up of many countries, everyone had to go register their names and pay a tax.

For Joseph, that meant he had to go back to the place that his great-great-great-great grandfather was from. Who was this great grandfather? Well, you remember. It was King David. King David was from the town of Bethlehem, so Joseph had to travel back to Bethlehem to register his name and pay a tax.

Mary was very close to the time when she would give birth. And the closer a mom is to the end of her pregnancy, the more uncomfortable she is. Her body gets tired of carrying such

a heavy weight. And everything in her body is shifting and changing to get ready for the birth. Oftentimes her back aches, and her feet swell. She has trouble sleeping at night, and she gets tired easily. Have you ever had a new baby brother or sister in your family? In the weeks before the baby arrives, we usually buy diapers, set up the crib, and make sure everything is ready for the new baby. And most of all, we usually don't travel too far from home. Because, what if today is the day? We want to be ready!

But for Mary, as the days got closer to the time when she would give birth, she was traveling far, far away from her home. The journey from Nazareth (where Mary and Joseph lived) to Bethlehem, probably took about four days to travel. And Mary didn't have a minivan. Maybe Joseph had a donkey that Mary was able to ride. But probably Mary and Joseph just walked all the way to Bethlehem. What an exhausting journey! And what a terrible time to travel! But Mary and Joseph had to obey the Roman Caesar.

Even in this, though, God was keeping His perfect plan. God's prophet Micah had said many years earlier, "But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity." (Micah 5:2)

Bethlehem was not a big, important city. But in God's perfect plan, it was a very important place. It was the city of David, and it was the town that He had said the Promised One would come from to rule over Israel. So, even though it was difficult for Mary, God had everything planned from the beginning of time to make all His plans work out perfectly.

O little town of Bethlehem,
how still we see thee lie;
above thy deep and dreamless sleep
the silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth

the everlasting light;
the hopes and fears of all the years
are met in thee tonight.

2. For Christ is born of Mary,
and gathered all above,
while mortals sleep, the angels keep
their watch of wondering love.
O morning stars together,
proclaim the holy birth,
and praises sing to God the king,
and peace to men on earth!
3. How silently, how silently,
the wondrous gift is given;
so God imparts to human hearts
the blessings of his heaven.
No ear may hear his coming,
but in this world of sin,
where meek souls will receive him, still
the dear Christ enters in.
4. O holy Child of Bethlehem,
descend to us, we pray;
cast out our sin, and enter in,
be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels
the great glad tidings tell;
o come to us, abide with us,
our Lord Emmanuel!

Day 23: Waiting and Watching

Symbol: Angel

Text: Luke 2

While Mary and Joseph were in Bethlehem to be registered, the time came. Mary was about to have her baby. And that night, outside the town of Bethlehem, a group of shepherds were out in the fields keeping watch over their sheep. These shepherds were not important people. They were simple men who didn't make a lot of money. Just like Joseph, they didn't live in big cities or have important jobs. They just had the job of watching someone else's sheep.

And that night they were waiting for the night to be over, keeping watch over their sheep. Watching...and waiting. Who else was watching and waiting under someone else's command, for the long darkness to be over? The children of Abraham watched and waited in Egypt. They waited through the night to see if God would keep His promise to protect their firstborn children and save them from slavery to the Snake King. The people of Israel were now watching and waiting for the Promised One to come and fulfill God's plan to save them from their sin.

Suddenly an angel appeared. And the night around them shone with light, because the glory of the Lord was there with them. And they were completely terrified. But the angel told them not to be afraid because he had a wonderful message for them. He said unto them,

“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 Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.”
(Luke 2:10-12)

And suddenly, all around the shepherds there appeared hundreds

and thousands--maybe millions--more angels. And the angels were belting out their song and partying like nothing that the shepherds had ever seen. The angels were saying,

“Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with whom he is
pleased!” (Luke 2:14)

When the angels had finished delivering their message song, they returned back to Heaven. The shepherds looked at each other and said, “Let’s go to Bethlehem!” They weren’t going to waste any time--they wanted to see this spectacular child that God had told them about. Can you imagine what was going through their heads? All those promises--they’re about to come true! This very night!

Just like He had so many times before, God had given the shepherds a sign. He wanted to be sure that when the shepherds found baby Jesus, they would know it was Him--the One the angels told them about, “the Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” He wanted to be sure they would know that this baby was the Promised One that they had all been waiting and watching for. And the sign God gave to them was this: for starters, they would find the baby swaddled in cloth. That part is not hard to believe, is it? But here is the crazy part. This baby would be wrapped up and lying in a feeding trough. A feeding trough, or manger, is just a box that a farmer puts his animal’s food in. That was the sign from God for the shepherds. And the shepherds definitely wanted to see it with their own eyes. So they hurried off to Bethlehem.

Day 24: When the Fullness of Time Had Come

Symbol: Fruit Branch

Text: Luke 2, Galatians 4:4-5

Mary and Joseph weren't the only ones traveling that week. Remember, everyone in the Roman Empire had to be registered and pay their tax. When Mary and Joseph finally arrived in Bethlehem, the city was jam-packed with other travelers. Everyone needed a place to stay, so there was no room for them in the inn. All the rooms were already full, all the beds

were taken. Mary and Joseph ended up having to camp out in someone's animal shed, where the cows and goats were supposed to sleep.

Do you remember what God told King David when he wanted to build a house for God? God said, "No, but I will make you a house." (2 Samuel 7:11) But here, just when God had sent the true King from the line of David to establish this throne forever, there was not even a house for that baby to be born in. Could this be a mistake?

When a mom is getting ready to give birth, everything is kept as clean and quiet as possible. But Mary and Joseph were in noisy Bethlehem, staying in a shed with animals. It was dirty. It was loud. What does a barn with pigs, cows or chickens smell like? It's stinky, isn't it? This was exactly the opposite sort of place that any mom would want to have a baby in.

There wasn't anything Mary could do about that. When the time comes to give birth, no one can put it off longer. But it wasn't just Mary whose time had come. It was no mistake--God had arranged every detail in the world to be ready for Christ's coming as a baby then and there. The decree from Caesar meant that Mary and Joseph were in Bethlehem, right where they were supposed to be, and it showed that they were descendants of King David, just as God had promised.

Have you ever seen a tree that got chopped down, but then started growing all over again? Sometimes stems sprout out of the top or side of the stump, and even though someone meant to kill that tree, it goes on living. Just like a beautiful tree that has been chopped down, the kingdom of Israel had been chopped down. Instead of being ruled by a son of David, the children of Abraham were being ruled by the Romans. It looked like King David's royal family tree had been chopped off and nothing was left but a stump.

But Isaiah had told the Israelites, "There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit." (Isaiah 11:1) Perhaps you remember from Jesus' family tree that Jesse was King David's father. So this "stump of Jesse" was the throne of David. Just when it seemed like there was no hope for that stump, a little green shoot sprouted from the tree that everyone thought was dead. Jesus Christ, son of David and Son of God, came to earth and bore fruit.

"But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of 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) Here was the moment that all of Israel--all of history, in fact--had been waiting and watching for. So Mary had her baby right there in that dirty little barn in Bethlehem, and she wrapped baby Jesus up in strips of cloth. And it was just as God had always planned it to be.

Soon the shepherds came to see this baby that the angels had told them about. Just as they had been told, they found baby Jesus all swaddled up and lying in a feeding trough--a manger, that is. And they were so excited that when they went away, they told everyone they met about the Good News.

Remember back at the beginning of the month when we talked about the different parts of a story? At the beginning, we get to meet the people in the story, and we learn when and where it all

happened. We find out that there is some sort of problem for the main characters. That problem may be a sickness, or a dragon, or a battle. In this story, it's all three. Then comes the really exciting part called the climax, when we find out how the problem gets fixed. And in this story, just like all the best stories, it takes a hero to fight the battle.

In the Old Testament stories we learned about the sin of Adam. We learned about the Law and about how big our sin is. We learned that we can never fix the problem ourselves--even when God patiently corrects us and disciplines us over and over again, just like the Israelites we turn away and choose disobedience. But here at Christ's birth comes that exciting part of the story. Here at the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ we get to find out how God, through His perfect plan, will fight for us that battle with sin and death. And unlike Adam, unlike us, Jesus Christ will win.

That little green stem sprouting from the stump of Jesse will bear fruit. And when we believe in Christ and become His Sons, we are that fruit. (James 1:18) We know that sin is there in our hearts, but we become God's adopted sons and the fruit on his branches when we ask Jesus Christ to fight the battle for us.

“The tree of life my soul hath seen
Laden with fruit and always green
The trees of nature fruitless be
Compared with Christ the apple tree

This fruit does make my soul to thrive
It keeps my dying faith alive
Which makes my soul in haste to be
With Jesus Christ the apple tree.”

--excerpt from the 18th-century hymn
“Jesus Christ the Apple Tree”

SUPPLEMENT

Supplement–Day 4.2: God Will Provide (Abraham and Isaac)

After waiting for nearly one hundred years, how happy do you think Father Abraham was to have a son?

He was so very happy. Isaac was his son, his only son, whom he loved, his own best beloved. And I suppose that Isaac and Abraham did all the sorts of things you might expect a father and son to do together. I bet Isaac was Father Abraham's best helper of all. And, best of all, I'm certain they worshipped God together.

One day, Father Abraham woke up early in the morning and got his donkey ready and told Isaac to get ready, too, because they were going on a special trip to a special mountain to worship God. Father Abraham chopped up wood to burn an offering on, because that's what God told him to do. And then they set off for the mountain. Do you think Isaac was excited to be taking such a

special trip with his father?

On the third day—yes, the third day, remember—Abraham saw the special mountain that God wanted him to worship on. So he took the wood for the offering and put it on Isaac's shoulders. And Isaac, Father Abraham's son, his only son, whom he loved, his own best beloved, got to carry the wood for the sacrifice all the way up the mountain. He must have been a really good helper to do that.

"My father!" said Isaac.

"Hineni, my son," said Abraham. Hineni is a very special and very ancient Hebrew word that means "Here I am, at your service." Hineni was a very sweet and tender word for Father Abraham to say, and he said it because Isaac was his son, his only son, whom he loved, his own best beloved.

"We have fire and wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" asked Isaac, for it was Father Abraham's custom to offer a lamb to God.

"God will provide the lamb, my son," said Father Abraham. Those are very important words, dear ones, so listen to them again very carefully and try not to forget them: "God will provide the lamb."

You see, long before they started their trip, God came to Father Abraham in a dream. And he said, "Abraham!" And Abraham said, "Hineni!" which is a very special and very ancient Hebrew word that means, "Here I am, at your service," and is always the right thing to say when God calls your name.

And God said these very hard words to Abraham, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love to a special mountain and offer him there as a burnt offering."

Isaac was the lamb.

Oh, my dear children. You cannot imagine how hard those words were to hear. Father Abraham had waited so long for a son to be his own best beloved. And then God had given him that son, and then God had told him that son would be the first of many sons, more sons than the stars of the sky. And now God wanted Father Abraham to kill Isaac, his son, his only son, whom he loved, his own best beloved? How could it be? Oh, how could it be?

But Father Abraham feared God. And he trusted Him. If God promised to give him Isaac and then promised to make Isaac the first of many sons and then said Isaac was to be a burnt offering, then somehow, some way, God would bring Isaac back, even from the dead. Because God always keeps His promises.

Do you think you would have had such faith? Father Abraham did, which is one of the many reasons we call him Father Abraham.

So Father Abraham made an altar of stones. And he took the wood for the sacrifice off of Isaac's shoulders and piled it up on the altar. And then he took Isaac, his son, his only son, whom he loved, his own best beloved, and put him on the altar and tied him up.

Do you think Isaac was afraid? Do you think Father Abraham was afraid?

Then came the hardest part. Father Abraham took the knife in his hand and stood before the altar. The Bible doesn't say, but I would not be surprised if he was crying and praying and maybe even trembling. He raised the knife high over his head, and then—

“Abraham! Abraham!”

It was the Angel of the Lord.

“Hineni!” said Father Abraham.

“Do not touch the boy, for now I know you fear God, since you have not kept from me your son, your only son, whom you love.”

Oh, can you imagine how happy Father Abraham was? And how do you think Isaac felt?

Then Father Abraham lifted up his eyes, and do you know what he saw? He saw a ram, with its horns caught in a thicket. God had provided.

Do you know what Father Abraham did? He took that ram and he sacrificed it on the altar he built, and he burnt it on the wood that Isaac had carried up that mountain all by himself, and he worshipped God together with Isaac, his only son, whom he loved, his best beloved.

And, can you guess what they called that place? They called it “The LORD will provide.” And this saying became a proverb among all of Abraham’s children and Isaac’s children, and even Isaac’s children’s children, passed down from father to son to father to son: “On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided.”

One day, God would provide, even on a mount. Even on the mount of the LORD. He would send His Son, His only Son whom He loves to be born, according to His most ancient promise made to Adam and Eve, and according to His promises to Abraham and Isaac. Because God always keeps His promises.

And that Son, who was a miracle baby just like Isaac, that Best Beloved Son would climb a mount called Calvary, carrying the wood for the sacrifice on His own shoulders. And then God would sacrifice His Son, His only Son, whom He loves, for our sins.

Jesus was the lamb.

And then God would raise Him from the dead on the third day—yes, the third day, remember—and make Him the High King, and

He would see to it that Abraham's children would outnumber the stars. Because God always keeps His promises.

Supplemental–Day 8.1: The Passover

Before we go further in the story of God's people and the coming Messiah, there's something we should stop and talk a little more about. We've already talked about how God used Moses to crush the head of the Snake King of Egypt. But do you remember all the plagues that God sent? Can you think what some of them were?

This is basically how the story went: God would command Pharaoh to let His people go. And Pharaoh would say no. So God would punish Pharaoh and the land with a plague, like flies or frogs or fire from heaven, and it would be so bad that Pharaoh would finally agree to let the people go. And so God would stop the fire or get rid of the flies. And then Pharaoh would harden his heart and change his mind. And then it would happen all over again.

That happened nine times. The plagues were terrible, but not terrible enough. So God decided to send the worst plague anyone could ever imagine. Do you remember what the tenth plague was?

God said that he was going to send the Destroyer to kill every firstborn child in the land of Egypt. God said he'd even kill the firstborn of the cows. And God said this about that plague, "There will be a great cry throughout all the land of Egypt, such as there has never been, nor ever will be again."

Do you remember when Pharaoh tried to kill all the baby boys of God's people, even Moses? God was about to give Pharaoh a taste of his own medicine.

God said the only way to be saved was to cover the doorposts of your house with the blood of a lamb, a perfect lamb. So Moses

told everyone just what to do. They each took a lamb, a perfect lamb, and sprinkled the blood on the doorposts of their houses. And they roasted and ate that lamb, that perfect lamb, with unleavened bread and bitter herbs, and they ate it quickly with their belts and their shoes on. Because that's what God told them to do.

At midnight, the Destroyer came. Whenever he came to a house that was covered with the blood of a lamb, a perfect lamb, he passed right over them. Not one of the children of Israel died, because they listened to God. They were protected by the blood of the perfect lamb.

But when he came to a house without the blood of a perfect lamb? The Destroyer went in and he killed the firstborn child.

None of the Egyptians had their houses sprinkled with the blood of a lamb. So the Destroyer killed all their firstborn children.

The next morning was awful. Someone was dead in every house in Egypt. Mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters were crying. The Destroyer even went to the Snake King's house and killed his oldest child. Can you imagine what it would've been like to wake up that morning?

The people of Egypt were done resisting God. They begged the children of Israel to leave. Pharaoh, the Snake King, was finally crushed.

God told the people of Israel to remember the time the Destroyer came and passed over their houses every year. And they did, and they called it Passover. Every year for hundreds and hundreds of years, families would sacrifice a lamb, a perfect lamb to God. And they would eat that lamb, that perfect lamb, along with bread and bitter herbs. And they would remember how the Destroyer passed over their houses and how God led them out of slavery and bondage to the Snake King. God did all of this so that when He sent His Lamb, His perfect Lamb, everyone would know it.

And then, one day, more than a thousand years later, in a little room, Someone celebrated that same Passover meal--Someone who was there for the very first Passover that night in Egypt. He broke the bread and poured the wine, and He told His friends to eat His body and drink His blood, and He would remind everyone how God saved His people because of the blood of a lamb, a perfect lamb. And then, the very next day He offered Himself up as a lamb, sacrificed to save His people.

Can you guess His name?

This was Jesus. Jesus is who these stories are all about. Jesus came to crush the Snake King, to deliver God's people from slavery to sin and death, and to pour out His blood to protect us from the Destroyer, the Angel of the Lord.

Jesus is the Lamb, the perfect Lamb.

Supplemental–Day 8.2: Rahab

Living in the land God had promised to Israel--the land of Canaan, in the city of Jericho--was a woman named Rahab. God hated Rahab's people. They were against God. God hated Rahab's city. It was against God. God hated Rahab's job. It was against God. But you know who God didn't hate? God didn't hate Rahab. In fact, He loved her. He wanted to make her one of His children. He wanted to give her a new people, a new home, a husband and children. He even wanted to make her the grandmother of a king. In short, he wanted to make her an important character in His big story. But now I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's go back to the beginning of the this story.

Now Rahab's house was part of the wall around Jericho. This wall was what kept Jericho safe from attack. One day two men came to Rahab's door, in the city of Jericho, and asked to stay at her house. She let them in. She looked at them carefully, and listened

to the way they talked. She could tell they weren't from anywhere nearby. Before long, she discovered that the king of Jericho was looking for them. Rahab acted fast. She took them to the roof of her house and hid them under some grain stalks laying out to dry. But before they laid down to hide, she told them this: "I know who you are."

She hid them, and it was just in time, too. A messenger came to the door, and he was looking for those two men. He told her the men were spies. And you know what? The messenger was right. The men were spies from God's people. They had come to spy out the land and the city of Jericho, because Israel was getting ready to fight and destroy it. Rahab told the messenger, "Oh yes, the men were here. But I didn't know who they were. They left my house and headed out of the city when it was getting dark. Hurry--you might still be able to catch them!" The messenger hurried away to catch the spies before they could get away.

Rahab had told the men, "I know God is going to give our land to you. We've all heard about you. We know about how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and how you utterly destroyed the two kings on the other side of the Jordan River. And we're all scared out of our minds. Our hearts melted when we heard about it." And then Rahab said something really amazing. She didn't just know that they were warriors with a fierce God on their side. She knew that their God was the true God above all. Rahab said, "For the Lord your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath."

Then Rahab told the two spies, "I helped you, now you help me. Swear to the Lord that you will save me and my family, and that you will not kill us when you come and attack our land." The spies agreed. They said, "Our life for yours. As long as you don't tell anyone about us, we'll save you." That night in the dark, Rahab took a rope and let them down from her window in the city wall, so they could escape. Rahab told them exactly where to go and how long to stay there so they wouldn't be found. But before they ran away, the spies said one more thing. "Listen," they

said. "You take this scarlet cord and tie it in this same window. And unless you and your family are in this house with this scarlet cord in the window, we will be free from our oath to protect you. And remember, don't tell anyone about us being here." Rahab agreed, the spies fled into the night, and Rahab tied the scarlet cord in the window.

That scarlet cord marked her house as a safe place, belonging to God. God's judgment was coming to Jericho, but for those in the house with the scarlet cord in the window, the judgment would pass them by. Can you think of another time when houses were marked with scarlet to show that the judgment of God would pass over them?

Before long, the spies returned with the warriors of Israel to attack the city of Jericho. But Jericho's wall was so strong, and the people of Jericho sealed it up tight when they knew the Israelites were coming. How could they win against a city so well-protected? For seven days, the Israelites marched around the city at God's command. And the priests blew their trumpets. But the people of God were perfectly silent. The people of Jericho had already been afraid, but now they were absolutely terrified. I imagine Rahab hearing a distant trumpet blast, and running up the stairs three at a time to get to the window. She must have checked again and again that week to make sure the scarlet cord was hanging from her window. She probably stood at that window and looked down at the Israelites marching past, just outside the wall, and wondered if she could trust those stony faces to spare her life.

Then on the seventh day, the people walked around the city of Jericho again. And all together, the priests blew trumpets and all the people shouted, letting out the most terrific battle cry. And then, can you believe it? The walls of Jericho fell down flat. And when I say flat, I mean flat. But there was one part of the wall that didn't fall. And dangling from a window toward the center was a scarlet cord, standing out bright red against the dark wall. And huddled inside were Rahab and her family, safe from the

destruction just outside and all around them.

Rahab and her family were not good people. God did not save them because their hearts were clean. God rescued Rahab out of a god-hating nation and adopted her as one of his own children because she acted by faith, marking herself and her family for redemption with that scarlet cord. From that moment on, Rahab was no longer a Canaanite. She was an Israelite, and God was her father, and she belonged. And one day, she would marry and have a baby boy named Boaz. And tomorrow we'll learn why his name is worth remembering!

Supplemental–Day 8.3: Ruth

Once upon a time there was a woman named Naomi from the little town of Bethlehem. At the time of her story, the people of Israel kept trying to forget about God. They were his people, but they kept trying to get away from him, and act like they didn't belong to anyone.

Now a famine came upon the land, and there wasn't enough food. So Naomi and her husband and sons packed up their things and moved to the land of Moab, where there was enough food. After a time, though, Naomi's husband died. And that was a very sad day in Naomi's story. By this time Naomi's sons were grown. They both married women from Moab. And for a time, they lived happily there. But then, disaster struck again. Both of Naomi's sons died. Now Naomi was left alone far from home. Her husband and sons were dead and gone. She would never have grandchildren. Naomi was heartbroken. She had lost everything dear to her, and she felt like God had turned against her. She considered her options, and decided it would be best to go back to Bethlehem, where her relatives lived.

Naomi called her daughters-in-law and told them about her decision. "Go back to your families," she said. "May God be good to you, just as you have been good to me, and to the ones

we have lost.” Both her daughters-in-law were still young, so Naomi hoped they could find new husbands before long. The three women stood there together, two young and one old, hugging and kissing and crying. And the first one said goodbye, and returned to her family. But the second daughter-in-law just wouldn’t go. Her arms were wrapped around Naomi, and she clung to her the way a little child does when he doesn’t want his mom to leave.

“Look,” said Naomi. “Your sister-in-law is going back to her family. You go too.”

But Ruth--for that was the name of this beautiful girl clinging to Naomi--wouldn’t let go. Through her tears she said, “Do not urge me to leave you or turn back from following you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus may the Lord do to me, and worse, if anything but death parts you and me.”

Naomi and Ruth got back to Bethlehem, and now it was Ruth instead of Naomi who was a stranger in a far-away land. But Ruth didn’t mind, because she had Naomi, and the God of Naomi’s people. And unlike God’s many of God’s own children, she wanted to belong to Him.

Now in those days, poor people would go into the fields when farmers were doing their harvesting. And they could gather the left-over grain that got dropped or left behind by the workers. In fact, God told His people to leave extras along the edges, just so there would be enough grain for the poor people to gather.

As it happened, Ruth and Naomi got back to Bethlehem just in time for the barley harvest. And Ruth went out into the fields to follow along behind the farmer’s workers and gather the extras. And it just so happened that the field she got permission to gather from belonged to a man named Boaz. Does his name sound familiar?

Now, Boaz came to look over the work in his fields that day. And it just so happened that he caught sight of the beautiful young foreign woman among the others gathering grain in his field. And Boaz asked one of his men, "Who is that?"

When Boaz found out who Ruth was, he went straight to her. "Don't go to any other fields," he said. Stay here and gather with my servants. Gather our grain. Drink our water. No one will bother you, I've made sure of that."

And Ruth--lovely Ruth--was stunned. She bowed down before Boaz and said, "Why have I found favor in your sight that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner?"

And Boaz replied, "I know all about you. I know how you stayed with Naomi even after your husband died, and how you came back with her to the land of Israel, leaving your home and your family far behind. May the Lord, under whose wings you have found refuge, bless you." So Ruth thanked Boaz. And at lunchtime, Boaz served Ruth food along with his own servants. And when Ruth got up to go back to the field, Boaz told his servants to pull out extra grain and leave it lying in the field for her to gather. On purpose.

When Ruth returned home to Naomi that evening, Naomi was astounded to see how much grain Ruth had gathered. When Ruth told Naomi the name of the man whose field she had gathered in, Naomi said, "Boaz? Boaz? He's one of our closest relatives!" So Ruth continued in Boaz's field until the end of the barley harvest, and then stayed on through the wheat harvest too.

Naomi considered her own story to be over, with a sad ending. But she wanted something better for Ruth. So she hatched a plan. Naomi told Ruth to dress up as nice as she could, and go down that night to where Boaz would be celebrating the end of his harvest. When he had finished celebrating and gone to sleep, Naomi told Ruth to do something very strange. And in a moment

you'll find out what it was, because Ruth did just what Naomi told her to do.

That night Boaz was startled awake, and when he looked down at his feet he was very surprised to see a woman lying there. I'll bet he thought he was dreaming. "Who are you?" he said.

"I am Ruth your maid," she said. And then she told him that she wanted to belong to him.

So Boaz said, "May you be blessed of the Lord." He told Ruth that it was kind of her to think of him that way, instead of looking for a younger husband. For Boaz was not a young man. But Boaz knew what it was for a woman to be adopted into the house of Israel, to learn what it was to belong.

The next morning, Boaz went to the city gate, for in those days, that was where people went to settle things. And there he made arrangements and let it be known to all the city that he would take the place of Ruth's husband who died. He would take the place of Naomi's son, and Ruth would belong to him.

Boaz and Ruth were married. And soon, along came a baby boy. And that is how, just when Naomi thought her life was a story with a sad ending, she instead found herself bouncing a baby on her knee--a baby that would one day be the grandfather of the greatest king in Israel.

