

A devotional journey through Advent
HOPE | LOVE | JOY | PEACE



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from the World President of Women's Ministries

PRAYERS AND LONGINGS



Read Luke 1:5-25; 57-80. In preparing this devotional, The Passion Translation was used.

We read of a couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth, who were 'both righteous before God, living virtuously and following the commandments of the Lord blamelessly.' They were childless; Elizabeth could not conceive and they were now in old age. A first miracle occurs when one day, while Zechariah is performing priestly duties, he encounters an angel who tells him that out of God's grace, their 'prayer for a child has been answered.' Soon after, Elizabeth became pregnant.

Many will understand just how deep Zechariah and Elizabeth's prayer goes. At this stage in their lives, this was a prayer no longer voiced out of the futility and hurt that comes with a reminder of such absence. How incredible that God shows up and tends straight to the source of their pain with empathy, grace and provision! How moving that, after over 400 years of silence between heaven and earth, an angel appears to bring such joy to the hearts of this older, faithful couple! When God answers this prayer, he demonstrates his intimate knowledge of and care for his people.

Zechariah's response was disbelief: 'How do you expect me to believe this? What sign can you give me to prove this will happen?' The angel Gabriel reminded him of his authority and, as a sign, muted him until the promise was fulfilled. So, Elizabeth becomes the voice of their story. She spends weeks with Mary, the expectant mother of Jesus, and together they experienced the Holy Spirit's movements in beautifully close step with the movement of the babies they were expectantly waiting to hold in their arms.

Upon the birth of the child, family and friends 'were overjoyed, for they realised that the Lord had showered his wonderful mercy upon her... Everyone assumed that the parents would name the baby Zechariah, after his father, but Elizabeth spoke up and said, "No, his name is John!"' (Luke 1:63) Asking Zechariah to confirm, he wrote the name 'John' on a tablet. Instantly, his voice returned. Out of months of silence, Zechariah burst into a prophesy that brims with hope: 'All because the merciful heart of our God is so very tender... The word from heaven will come to us with dazzling light to shine upon those who live in darkness, near death's dark shadow. And he will illuminate the path that leads to the way of peace.' (Luke 1:78-79)

In Zechariah and Elizabeth's journey of longing and hope for God's grace, we see ourselves reflected. The 'merciful heart of our God' is not only for them and for the people of their day, but it is for us, our prayers and our longings, too.

Consider the deep prayers of your heart. Is there a prayer you no longer utter because it has become too painful, too outrageous to even think about? Or maybe you feel that your request is too bold, too selfish, too prideful to bring before God? Are you silently longing for a miracle that you've given up hope for?

As you reflect, remember that God sees each one of us. He sees the most honest and pure version of us as it is revealed in our hearts and minds. While voicing our inner-most longings may be helpful on a path to healing, God's knowledge of us goes beyond what is audible to human ears or visible to human eyes. God's love reaches past our secrets and goes straight to the heart. He can take away our disgrace and our disappointment and replace it with hope. Just like Elizabeth, we can exclaim with joy, 'See how kind it is of God to gaze upon me!'

Meditate on the words of Psalm 37:3-7. Read the passage a second time and lean into the instructions 'trust', 'delight', 'commit', 'be still' and 'wait'. Upon reading the same Scripture for a third time, reflect on the promises of God that are found in these verses:

*Trust in the LORD and do good;
dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture.
Delight yourself in the LORD
and he will give you the desires of your heart.
Commit your way to the LORD;
trust in him and he will do this:
He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn,
the justice of your cause like the noonday sun.
Be still before the LORD
and wait patiently for him;
do not fret when men succeed in their ways,
when they carry out their wicked schemes.*

Listen to 'Arrival', by Hillsong Worship.

DESIRES AND DECISIONS



[Listen](#) to 'Make Room', by Casting Crowns.

[Read](#) Matthew 1:18-25.

If only the roads were straight more often in life! Many of us have experienced stress or uncertainty when our plans don't seem to line up with God's plan for our lives. During these periods, often described as 'being at a crossroads', we seek advice, opinions and intervention from our trusted people to help us in our decision-making. In Matthew 1, we meet a young man, Joseph, who is in the middle of his own dilemma.

His betrothed wife, Mary, had some news. She had become pregnant, not through human will but through the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit. It is safe to assume that Joseph was stunned! Joseph, a righteous man who was faithful to the law, had committed himself to Mary. But now he felt compelled to leave her. He had a hard decision ahead that would significantly alter his life, the life of his betrothed and of her unborn child. Scripture reveals something of his turmoil; he 'did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.' (Matthew 1:19)

In Jewish culture at this time, the engagement period was a prenuptial contract – known as a ketubah – usually entered into when a girl turned thirteen. The ketubah would not have affected some arrangements – Mary would have continued to live with her family and a sexual relationship would not have started between the bride and the bridegroom until a public marriage ceremony had taken place – but Joseph would have already received legal rights over Mary before witnesses. The agreement bound the two parties and could only be nullified through formal divorce process, which would bring shame and dishonour.

In one of the most relatable moments of the Christmas story, Joseph decided to sleep on it! While he was sleeping, an angel appeared to him in a dream and turned the desires of his heart towards what was right and true to God's plan, assuring him that he need not be afraid. When he woke, he resolved to honour his commitment to Mary and take her as his wife.

Consider the decisions you have made over the course of your life. Reflect on the sacrifices you or others have made in seeing those decisions materialise. Joseph's decision to marry Mary and, in turn, to accept Jesus as his son meant the relinquishing of his own dreams and desires. Is it not the same for us? If we want to be true worshippers of God – embracing the goodness and loving kindness of God – we must also make the choice to accept his son, Jesus, in our lives.

'Make Room', by Casting Crowns, touches on the consequences of having a heart that chooses Jesus over personal desires: You can come as you are, but it may set you apart when you make room in your heart and trade your dreams for his glory. For Joseph, the laying down of his dreams meant committing to something far greater and becoming the earthly protector of a heavenly family. Is there room in your heart for God to write his story?

Meditate on the words of Paul written in Acts 20:24, 28 (The Passion Translation) recognising they reflect his personal testimony.

In your reading, hold close to the thought that we do not need to see our lives or, more specifically, our plans as precious in our own eyes, because they are precious to God. We do not need to live in defence, shut off to hearing God's voice, because God knows our hearts and that is enough. As a leader in the early Church, Paul expressed:

'But whether I live or die is not important, for I don't esteem my life as indispensable. (I do not consider my life worth a single word.) It's more important for me to fulfil my destiny and to finish the ministry my Lord Jesus has assigned to me, which is to faithfully preach the wonderful news of God's grace.'

'So guard your hearts. Be true shepherds over all the flock and feed them well. Remember, it was the Holy Spirit who appointed you to guard and oversee the churches that belong to Jesus, the Anointed One, which he purchased and established by his own blood.'

Listen again to 'Make Room', by Casting Crowns.

*The road is straight and the burden's light,
For in his hands he holds tomorrow.
Is there room in your heart
For God to write his story?*

TREASURES AND PONDERINGS



Read Luke 1:26-45; 2:15-35

We receive our first glimpse of Mary's innermost thoughts and feelings when the angel Gabriel appeared to her. She was deeply troubled by the heavenly visitation, but the angel commanded her to not be afraid and a spirit of obedience surpassed her fear. Mary had been chosen by God, blessed among women for her belief and obedience.

Following the birth of Jesus, lowly shepherds and men of great wisdom humbled themselves in an act of worship in her son's presence. All who heard their reports were amazed, but we are told in Luke 2:19 that 'Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.' In this singular verse, we are told so much of Mary's personal adoration for Jesus through her joyful embrace and youthful curiosity about the miraculous child she had carried into the world.

Even though Mary knew the eternal favour and joy of the Lord, this happiness was never promised to last. When Mary and Joseph took Jesus to be presented at the temple, it was prophesied over Mary that her baby's earthly life would see great hardship that would cause her mother's heart intense pain, 'a sword will pierce your own soul too.' (Luke 2:35) From the humble scene of his holy birth to the empty tomb following days of deep grief, how did Mary continue to live a life that reflected the joy of the Lord?

We are not told that Mary was granted any supernatural protection or immunity from the emotional suffering she would endure as mother of the Saviour. Perhaps, in her wisdom, Mary knew to treasure the events following Jesus' birth – the excitement, the miracles, the gifts and the public offerings of worship – for days when glimpses of God's glory would be harder to see through the betrayal, the testing and the grief. Maybe Mary held onto the very first messages of the angel Gabriel and frequently repeated to herself, 'The Lord is with you... Do not be afraid', in times of hardship.

We will never know how this mother's heart coped with emotional stress, but we can be certain that Mary was a trusting and loving woman, wholly devoted to God. Mary's joy was not reliant on the way of the world or the circumstances of her day because it came from a heart that knew the true gift of Jesus, even before his very first breath.

Just to behold Jesus, to have held him and carried him into our world, was the greatest gift and blessing Mary knew she could ever receive. The deep joy of Mary, who gave of her life and love so beautifully, was both a natural response to God's favour and an intentional choice that honoured and glorified her Saviour.

Meditate on Mary's song of praise and thanksgiving, often referred to as the Magnificat. First, read Luke 1:46-49:

*My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me – holy is his name.*

Secondly, read Luke 1:50-55. Be guided to one of the many 'he has...' phrases and commit it to memory. Ponder its meaning and treasure it in your heart:

*His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.
He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful
to Abraham and his descendants for ever, just as he promised our ancestors.*

Consider the treasures and ponderings of your heart. Is the Treasure of Heaven, Jesus, the treasure of your heart? A helpful way of reflecting on this question may be to think about what holds priority or sovereignty over your life.

Do you preoccupy your mind with what is good and right and true and lovely? In full reliance on God, these are the things that will sustain when evil attacks with spite and suffering and horror and pain.

Listen to 'Best Part', by Maverick City.

*What a gift we have in Jesus!
Unending joy, amazing love...
He is worth more than silver,
More precious than gold,
Even more priceless than treasures untold,
So we lay down our lives.*

QUIETNESS AND SAFE SPACES



Read Luke 2:6-20. In preparing this devotional, The Passion Translation was used.

A group of men and boys from humble backgrounds were sitting in a field on the outskirts of a sleepy town. Sheep were grazing nearby, over whom they were keeping close watch, but the only other sound was the murmurings of their aimless conversation. Suddenly, out of the night sky, an angel of the Lord appeared and lit up the field with God's blazing glory!

It is probable that, like the shepherds, you would be terrified! Their hearts were startled and, noticing their terror, the angel told them not to be afraid. They were bringing 'the most joyous news the world has ever heard... and it is for everyone everywhere! For today in Bethlehem a rescuer was born for you... the Messiah.' (Luke 2:10-11) Heavenly praises soon flooded the air, as more angels came into view: 'Glory to God in the highest realms of heaven! For there is peace and a good hope given to the sons of men.' (Luke 2:14)

One of the deepest needs of the human heart is to find safety and security. Only in these conditions do most people begin to feel comfortable and contented, free from anxiety and nervousness. For the shepherds, their livelihood and their comfort was found in the fields. This was their safe space. So, when the angels appeared to them they were disrupting the stillness and the usual routines of the shepherds. 'Do not be afraid' related more to their physical and emotional being, it was spoken with the purpose of eliminating their immediate fear response. It is incredible that these divine beings would come and occupy the shepherds' space, but that they concerned themselves with the experience of their hearts is a humbling thought.

After this, the angels brought a blessing of heavenly peace to those on earth, further promoting acceptance, warmth and comfort in the hearts of the shaken shepherds. 1 Samuel 16:7 reads, 'The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.' The peace that the angels blessed the shepherds with went beyond meeting our basic need for safety and security. This gift of peace was symbolic of an unending peace that stemmed from a world made right now that Jesus was in it, and it continues to pervade human hearts today. This everlasting peace soothes our inner-being for it comes from a God who is concerned with the state of our hearts.

True and lasting peace is only found in Jesus. This peace reaches beyond how things seem to human eyes, it conquers our fears and anxiety, and it may not even make sense. For the shepherds, even when their quietness was compromised and their safe space was disrupted by a host of angels, the all-surpassing peace of God was upon them. This peace, announced in the angels' song, allowed them not to remain in their terrified posture, as they had initially been, but to jump into action and hurry to the Saviour with excitement and confidence. After such an event, perhaps their lives would never be quiet again, but they would always have peace!

Consider the differences between 'peace', 'quietness' and 'safety'. The purpose of Christ's coming to earth was for us, so that we might live by his earthly example which was characterised by peace and experience the fullness of life with God for ourselves. Reflect on where you find or have found peace.

Think about your safe spaces; it could be a place, a person or an activity that you frequently turn to for comfort when overwhelmed or afraid. Just as the shepherds saw their field, their safe space, become the sight of miracles, imagine how God could use your everyday to bring blessings of hope, love, joy and peace to your life and to the lives of others.

Listen to 'O Come All Ye Faithful (His Name Shall Be)', by Passion.

Meditate on Isaiah 9:6, a verse that recorded a prophecy of the coming birth and rule of Jesus on earth. Upon first reading, look out for verses that speak out who Jesus is and what he has done and will do for the world. As you read a second time, rest confident in the knowledge that God manages the world well:

*For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

Listen to 'When I Think Upon Christmas', by Hillsong Worship.

A CHRISTMAS GREETING



*'My thoughts of Christmas once, you know,
Were holly boughs and mistletoe,
And pretty greetings through the post
From all the friends who loved me most.
Inside my circle I was kept,
Towards those beyond my heart still slept...
He woke me up, my Christmas King,
My heart to him, he bade me bring,
And all my life to dedicate
To those who still in darkness wait.'*

This poem, penned by Brigadier Ruth Tracey, was printed in the 1922 Christmas issue of Canada's War Cry. Isn't it wonderfully honest? I love that, despite being shared 100 Christmases ago, Ruth's words ring so true today. How easy is it for us, in 2022, to be drawn in by the neatly wrapped, perfectly packaged Christmas we are sold today? How difficult can it be for our hearts to receive the gift of Jesus when there are so many distractions?

The truth is that Christmas is and always has been about the hearts of others. The account in Luke begins with God granting the long prayed for desire of Elizabeth and Zechariah's hearts. The angel Gabriel later reassures the heart of the 'deeply troubled' Mary as she contemplates the responsibility that is hers. The same young woman – expectant on the arrival of her Lord – glorifies God with a song that overflows from her very soul!

When Joseph plans to break his engagement to Mary, an angel turns his heart towards what is true and honourable, and he takes Mary as his wife. When the shepherds were shaken to their core, frightened by a heavenly host, the angels tell them, 'Do not be afraid.' Later, as they gaze upon the baby they had been told about, they give their hearts to him in an act of worship. So do the wise men, along with their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And we are told that Mary – the humble young girl who carried our Saviour into the world – 'treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.'

Do you know that your heart is also concerned in the Christmas story? In fact, your heart plays a significant role! Jesus came down to bring love, joy, peace and hope into the hearts of all people.

Jesus was born for you. For me, too! For the world that 'still in darkness waits.'

Consider what your heart needs to be reminded of this Christmas. What are the truths you know in your head, but want to experience in your heart? Like Elizabeth, are you quietly longing for a miracle that you've all but given up praying for? Like the shepherds, do the words, 'do not be afraid', need to wash over you with peace and comfort? Are you at a crossroads, seeking intervention and direction over your next steps, just as Joseph experienced? Or do you feel like you are carrying the weight of the world, unsure of how to fulfil the calling God has placed on your life? Like Mary, take heart in the knowledge that God is always with you and allow your soul to sing!

This Christmas, let us not forget that Jesus is God's gift – personal and individual to each of us – and so many hearts have not yet received him. It is our joy to share the good news with them; the good news that Christmas is more than a few days of festivities. The good news that Christmas is God saying, 'Your heart – your life – matters to me'. The good news that Christmas means there is no 'other' – there are just neighbours, brothers and sisters, brought together by the gift of a shared Saviour.

May your hearts be blessed this Christmas,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Rosalie Peddle".

Commissioner Rosalie Peddle

World President of Women's Ministries