

Monday, December 18. Read Luke 1:39-45. Elizabeth's young, unmarried relative, Mary (cf. Luke 1:36), came to her home unexpectedly. Elizabeth's baby "leaped in her womb," and she welcomed Mary with God-given insight, offering her affirmation and encouragement. What an amazing atmosphere of support and faith must have enveloped Elizabeth and Mary as they compared notes about their unexpected pregnancies! Elizabeth summed it all up, saying, "Happy is she who believed that the Lord would fulfill the promises he made to her." Elizabeth knew God was at work, and that Mary's child was uniquely wonderful. In fact, Elizabeth was, it seems the first person to call Jesus "Lord": "Why do I have this honor that the mother of MY LORD should come to me?" In what ways does calling Jesus "Lord" involve surrendering the right to live your life any way you please? In what ways has Jesus' lordship changed your way of life? Notice how fully Elizabeth gave Mary "the spotlight," despite her joy about her own amazing pregnancy, saying, "Happy is she who believed that the Lord would fulfill the promises he made to her." How easy or hard is it for you to give the spotlight to someone else, rather than drawing it back to yourself? Who can you affirm and encourage today?

Tuesday, December 19. Read Psalm 121:1-8. Psalm 121 was in a collection of psalms closely linked to a journey all devout Hebrews made, or aspired to make, often. Psalms 120-134 appear to be collected as a songbook or prayer book for travelers on the journey to and from Jerusalem. It seems likely that this song promising God's protection would have been on Mary's mind (and perhaps her lips) as she went to see Elizabeth. Sometimes, when life got difficult, even psalmists were tempted to think that maybe God had dozed off (cf. e.g. Psalm 44:23). But although God does not always prevent situations that we find hard, Psalm 121:3 carried the assurance that "your protector won't fall asleep on the job." In what parts of your life has that promise especially mattered for you? Typically, people built shrines to Canaanite idols at the top of hills and mountains. Verse 2 said those "gods" couldn't help people. The God who made the mountains was the only dependable source of help and strength for life. What are some of the "gods" our culture today tells us to look to for security, strength and safety? What helps you to remember that in the end "My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth"?

Wednesday, December 20. Read Psalm 130:1-8. As we saw on Monday, Elizabeth praised Mary for trusting that God would keep God's promises. One of those promises was that, even when we had strayed from the path, God would forgive and show mercy. Trust and hope in that promise was the central theme of Psalm 130, another of the "journey songs," or "psalms of ascent." This resilient, persistent hope is one reason we light the candle of hope every year on the first Sunday of Advent. In verse 6, the psalmist repeated for emphasis the image of a watchman in a dark, dark night (there were no electric streetlights!) waiting, hoping, for the morning. Then he said, "Israel, wait for the Lord!" (verse 7) A spiritually dark world waited for the arrival of a Redeemer. Jesus' birth made that hope a reality. Where do you see "darkness" in your life, in your world? How can Jesus still bring the light of hope into darkness? There was a historical basis for the psalmist's hope. Faithful love is one of the fundamental qualities of God revealed right after God had forgiven Israel for their sin of making a golden calf. (see Exodus 34:6). This served as the foundation for the confidence stated in Psalm 130:8. In what ways does the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus give you an even stronger historical basis for trusting in God's forgiveness?

Thursday, December 21. Read Matthew 1:24-25. Whether because he told the story from a man's point of view, or perhaps simply because his sources gave little information, Matthew wrote almost no details about Jesus' actual birth. His succinct account didn't even identify where the birth took place until after the fact (cf. Matthew 2:1). But he reported two key facts: despite his earlier reluctance, Joseph did marry the pregnant Mary, and he named the child she bore "Jesus" (the Greek form of Joshua, which meant "God saves"). Luke 1:38 showed Mary saying, "I am the Lord's servant. Let it be with me just as you have said." Matthew 1:24 said Joseph "did just as an angel from God commanded." Neither of them could see it at the time, but today millions, perhaps billions of people worship during Advent because two humble Hebrew peasants listened, believed and obeyed. What is God calling you to listen to, to believe, and then to do or be this Advent season?

Friday, December 22. Read Luke 2:1-5. Caesar Augustus' purpose was straightforward. He wanted to collect more taxes for his farflung empire. God "bent" Caesar's decree to divine purposes, using it to bring Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem (a difficult trip for pregnant Mary). There the baby Jesus was born, as Micah 5:2 had prophesied. There, only a few miles from where Herod feverishly plotted and schemed as to how he might deserve the title "the Great," the truly great God-man who would reshape all of human history was born in a humble setting. Adam Hamilton wrote, "This was not a journey Mary wanted to take.... Of course, this was not to be the last of Mary's unwanted journeys. A short time after Jesus' birth, Herod would try to kill the child, and she and Joseph would take the infant Jesus and flee to Egypt as refugees. Thirty-three years later, there would be another journey she would take with her son, this time down the Via Dolorosa as she followed him to Calvary.... All of us take unwanted journeys, but God always walks with us on these journeys. God works through them and redeems them, and these difficult journeys will never be the end of our story!" What unwanted journeys have you

faced, or are you facing right now? How can Mary's story bring you hope that, beyond what we see or imagine, God is at work even during those unwanted journeys?