

Monday, December 25. Read Luke 1:46-55. We often call today's reading "The Magnificat" (magnificat is the first word of Mary's song in the Latin Bible). Mary's song was full of joy, anticipation and hope about the honor of bearing God's Son. Her song (which echoed the song Samuel's mother sang in 1 Samuel 2:1-10) also said her pregnancy showed God's care for the lowly, hungry and oppressed. The eternal king God was sending would upend many human values. Mary's song alluded to Old Testament promises that God would one day deliver Israel from oppressors (Romans in her day). More than just being a mother, Mary rejoiced that through her son God would make real the promise of ending all the world's oppression and evil. What do you rely on to keep your faith strong? We still await evil's final destruction, but what are some ways you can think of in which the Christmas child's influence helped reverse evil and oppression?

Tuesday, December 26. Read Luke 1:67-79. In a poetic psalm, Zechariah, John the Baptist's father, spoke about the meaning of Jesus' birth. He said of the child Mary would bear, God "has raised up a mighty savior for us in his servant David's house.... He has brought salvation... he has shown mercy." The angel Gabriel had said John would "turn many people in Israel back to their God... herald God's arrival in the style and strength of Elijah... kindle devout understanding among hardened skeptics... get the people ready for God" (Luke 1:17, The Message). Zechariah said his boy would proclaim, "The dawn from heaven will break upon us, to give light to those who are sitting in darkness." Through the prophet Nathan, God told King David, "The Lord will make a dynasty for you.... I will raise up your descendant—one of your very own children—to succeed you, and I will establish his kingdom.... Your dynasty and your kingdom will be secured forever before me." (2 Samuel 7:11-16). At first that seemed to describe King Solomon, but history made it clear no human king could live up to this promise. The first Christians declared that, in Jesus, the promise came true. What meaning does "Jesus is king of my life" have for you? In what ways have you given Jesus authority to rule over you? When people in the Judean hill country heard of the events around John's birth, they asked, "What then will this child be?" Zechariah, who'd listened to the angel, knew about his son John's mission, as verse 76 showed. Who played John's role in your life—who prepared the way for your faith, and introduced you to Jesus?

Wednesday, December 27. Read Luke 2:21-38. Jesus' parents, devout Jews, followed the laws about a newborn (cf. Exodus 13:2, 12; Leviticus 12:8 allowed poor Israelites to bring doves instead of a lamb). Joseph and Mary wouldn't have known many people in Jerusalem. It must have been unexpected, maybe even alarming, when the elderly Simeon and Anna came up to them. In the busy Temple court, where others saw only a poor couple with a baby, those two elderly saints recognized Jesus as the Savior. They praised God, blessing the parents and the baby. Simeon's words echoed Isaiah 42:6 and 49:6, which said "the servant of the Lord" would be a light to the Gentiles. When later even many of Jesus' followers struggled to accept Gentiles (cf. Acts 11:2-3, 15:1-5), what qualities do you think allowed Simeon to see and accept Isaiah's far-reaching vision? Most American Christians are Gentiles ethnically. Who are the "Gentiles" you might struggle to accept in God's family today? Simeon warned Mary that many would reject Jesus, and pain like a sword would pierce her heart. Cary Gibson wrote, "Mary couldn't control or protect Jesus, and the personal cost to her as a mother was severe (John 19:25-27)." What helps you trust God and live out God's purposes when it's not easy or popular? Has following God ever brought you pain, as well as good things?

Thursday, December 28. Read Matthew 2:1-6. The Greek word *magoi*, which Matthew used here, usually identified students of the stars. They most likely came from modern Iran, though "from the east" could mean a whole range of places. They arrived at an unspecified amount of time "after Jesus was born in Bethlehem." These notable visitors said, "We... have come to worship him." Israel was just a minor Roman province. No one would expect non-Hebrew scholars to travel far to see, much less worship, even a "king of the Jews." Roman historians Suetonius and Tacitus both wrote that at the time Jesus was born, an ancient prophecy led many to believe a world ruler would rise in Judea. Both historians said the prophecy must have meant Emperor Vespasian. Those Romans missed the true king, but so did the priests and legal experts who rattled off Micah's prophecy about Bethlehem. The eastern wise men didn't. In what ways can you keep your mind and heart open, so as not to miss where God is at work? In Ezekiel 34:1-16, as well as in Micah 5:2, God promised Israel that he would shepherd them. Jesus, grown up, claimed to be the promised "good shepherd," offering those who follow him "life to the fullest" (John 10:1-15). In what ways do ads for everything from cars to computers, alcoholic beverages to hair-care products, hold out that promise? How easy or hard do you find it to trust, in your day-to-day life, that Jesus truly offers you the fullest, most satisfying life?

Friday, December 30. Read John 1:1-8. The prologue to John's gospel daringly linked the worlds of Greek and Hebrew thought. Numerous Greek philosophers had identified "the Word" (Greek logos) as the great Idea behind the world. The Hebrew Bible began (like John) with "in the beginning," and said God spoke into being all that is. John's poetic prologue said Jesus embodied all that power and wisdom. "In the beginning," in any language, carries us back to areas of mystery of which, even today, science is just scratching the surface. John didn't say the Word "began" in the beginning; he said the Word "was." It was a way of saying Jesus has always been here, and will always be here. He is eternal; he is God. In what ways does it matter to your faith that Jesus is more than just a good man? "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness doesn't extinguish the light" wasn't just poetry. As we see on Christmas Eve, even a large room full of darkness cannot hide or put out the light of the one small Christ candle when it comes into the room. When has it felt to you that darkness was trying to put out God's light in your life? What spiritual practices have you found that help keep you close to God, so that God's light keeps shining in you?