

December 24. Read 1 Samuel 16:1-13. In Luke's Christmas story, on the night of Jesus' birth the angel said, "Unto you is born this day, in the city of David, a Savior." Today we read about David and his city. God sent Samuel, the prophet, to Bethlehem to find one of Jesse's sons and anoint him as Israel's ruler. Little could Samuel (or David) envision how far into the future that story would reach. In verses 6-7, Samuel looked at Jesse's oldest son and thought, "This must be the one." But God said, "The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." What factors do you look at when choosing friends, a place to work, a church to attend, or even a mission project to support? What would it mean for you to base your choices on "the heart"? • Jesse, told to bring "his sons" to meet the prophet, left David home, and seemed hesitant to call him even when Samuel asked. Have you ever been an outcast, as David seemed to be here? How can God turn even unfair experiences to good purposes?

December 25. Read 12.25.10 John 7:37-52. This isn't a usual Christmas Day reading. But Christmas is tucked away in it, almost as unseen as the first Christmas itself. Jesus' enemies were arguing that he couldn't possibly be God's Messiah. They used his growing up in Galilee as proof: "Does not Scripture say that the Messiah will come from David's descendants and from Bethlehem, the town where David lived?" (verse 42) And, of course, he did—if they had only paid attention. Pastor Roger Frederickson captured John's skill in telling this story: "In their ignorance about the origin of Jesus, these people unknowingly speak the truth. John is a master of so arranging his material that mistakes or ignorance become a subtle means of underlining the truth." Has a claim of which you felt sure ever crumbled in the light of fuller information? Jesus, born in Bethlehem ("house of bread") was the bread of life, the source of living water. How will you allow him to nourish your soul this Christmas?

December 26. Read Micah 5:1-4. Micah was a prophet in Jerusalem about 700 years before Christ. (Jeremiah 26:8 mentioned him.) As the armies of the mighty Assyrian Empire threatened Jerusalem, Micah looked beyond the immediate danger. God would send a deliverer, he said. This divine ruler would be born in Bethlehem, but his greatness would "reach to the ends of the earth." Okay, Bethlehem we know, but what's this "Ephrathah"? It means "fruitful," and was the name of the district around Bethlehem. Like the gospel writers centuries later, Micah stressed God's ability to do big things in people and settings that seemed insignificant. When have you seen God do something big through something "little"? Micah said the coming ruler would "shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD... And they will live securely." Early Christians, even when the Roman Empire imprisoned or killed them, still saw Jesus in this prophecy. How were they "living securely"? In what ways does security in Christ differ from the ways we usually define "security"?

December 27. Read Luke 2:1-7. Caesar Augustus' purpose was to collect more taxes for his far-flung empire. God "bent" Caesar's decree to divine purposes, using it to bring Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem, a hard trip for pregnant Mary. There the baby Jesus was born, as Micah prophesied. The Christmas story shows God's Great Reversal. Augustus, a human who thought he was a God, forced Mary and Joseph to make a hard trip with just a decree. Jesus, God become human, spent his first night on earth in an animal shelter. Where do you see God's power in the Christmas story? How does that redefine "power" for us? "That there was no room in the inn was symbolic of what was to happen to Jesus...He sought an entry to the over-crowded hearts of men; he could not find it...His search—and his rejection— go on." (William Barclay) Does your heart have room for Jesus?

December 28. Read Luke 2:8-20. We're used to the shepherds in manger scenes, Christmas pageants and paintings. Yet when Jesus was born, no one looked for shepherds. They were obscure (like Mary). Most priests shunned them because, caring for flocks, they couldn't keep the rituals "holiness" required. But God loved them. When Jesus grew up, he said, "I am the good shepherd" (John 10:11). The angel gave the child born in Bethlehem three titles. A "Savior" rescued people from danger. "Messiah" (a Hebrew term) meant "anointed ruler." "Lord" was a word Greek-speaking Hebrews used to refer to God. How did each of these words capture some of the many facets of who Jesus was and what he did for us? Jerusalem was only a few miles from Bethlehem. Was God biased against the people of power and influence at that time? Why didn't the "herald angels" sing in the Temple courts, or at the high priest's luxurious house in Jerusalem? How can you keep your heart and your home open to God's presence during this season?