

A stylized graphic of a Gothic window is positioned on the right side of the image. It features a large, dark green archway with a red outline. Inside the arch, there are several rectangular panes. The top two panes are green, while the others are dark red. The entire graphic is set against a solid red background.

Through His Own Redeeming Love

Through His Own Redeeming Love

A DEVOTIONAL FOR THE 2019-20 ADVENT,
CHRISTMAS, AND NEW YEAR SEASON

by Wheaton College President Philip G. Ryken

Of Peasants & Kings, Babes & Monarchs

On the eve of every Christmas since 1919, the world-renowned choir of King's College in Cambridge, England presents "A Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols"—a service of music and Scripture readings, the latter of which are explored in the following pages.

From the back of the college's magnificent Gothic chapel a still small voice initiates the program. A lone boy, a soprano chorister, lifts his voice

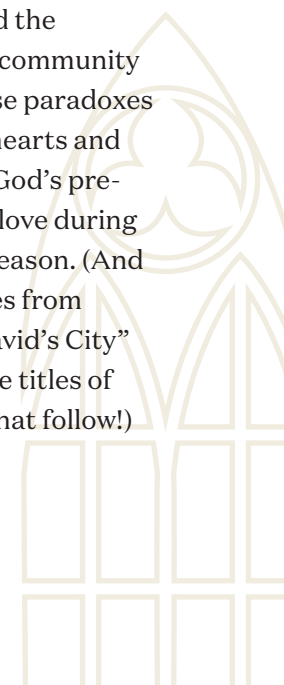
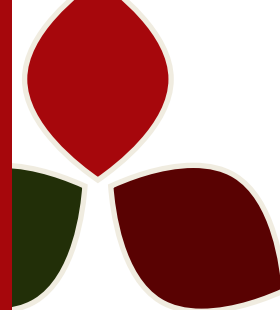
toward the largest vaulted ceiling in the world. Exuding heart-stopping innocence, the robed child sings the first line of "Once in Royal David's City," a cappella, as he leads one of Britain's preeminent choirs into a magnificent sacred space more than 500 years old.

Together the choir and the boy sing verse two, also a cappella, and then the entire Cantabrigian congregation joins in for the final verses, accompanied by the heart-thrilling strains of the organ.

"Once in Royal David's City" began as a simple poem by the Irish Anglican author Cecil Frances Alexander, who penned it in 1848 in an attempt to explain the Apostle's Creed to a perplexed child.

The evening's carefully crafted liturgy and spectacular pageantry embody the seeming contradictions of the gospel story—a story about Christ's redeeming love that juxtaposes peasants and kings, babes and monarchs, a heraldic birth and an ignominious death, a humble beginning and a glorified conclusion, still awaiting final consummation.

Please join me and the Wheaton College community as we ponder these paradoxes and prepare our hearts and minds to receive God's precious, redeeming love during the coming holy season. (And see how many lines from "Once in Royal David's City" you can spot in the titles of the meditations that follow!)





FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT *December 1, 2019*

With the Poor and Mean and Lowly

*And they heard
the sound of the
LORD God walk-
ing in the garden
in the cool of the
day, and the man
and his wife hid
themselves from
the presence of
the LORD God
among the trees
of the garden.*
—GENESIS 3:8

Iven before they could wipe the juice from their chins, Adam and Eve knew that they were guilty. It may have been the most anticlimactic moment

in human history. Satan had promised Eve that she would be “like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:5).

What did Eve know? That she was naked—hardly the intellectual insight she had been promised! But it was not only their physical nakedness that shamed our first parents. They also felt exposed psychologically, ashamed of their souls, and unwilling to be known for who they were.

Their sin is universal as well as personal. Adam’s fall was our fall, the fall of humanity into sin. It results not only in our alienation from God, but also in our alienation from each other.


Paradise was lost; but through his redeeming love, God promises that one day it will be regained.

Yet even in the first couple’s expulsion from the Garden of Eden God planted the seeds of hope, declaring to the serpent: “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” (Genesis 3:15). This is the protoevangelium—the Bible’s very first reference to the message of salvation.

The word “offspring” is both singular and plural. As a plural it means that Eve’s descendants will be at war with Satan. As a singular, it means that one individual, a single champion (namely, Jesus Christ), will destroy the serpent by crushing his head.

Through the gift of his Son Jesus, God has rescued us from the power of Satan and the consequences of our first parents’ fall. Paradise was lost; but through his own redeeming love, God promises that one day it will be regained.

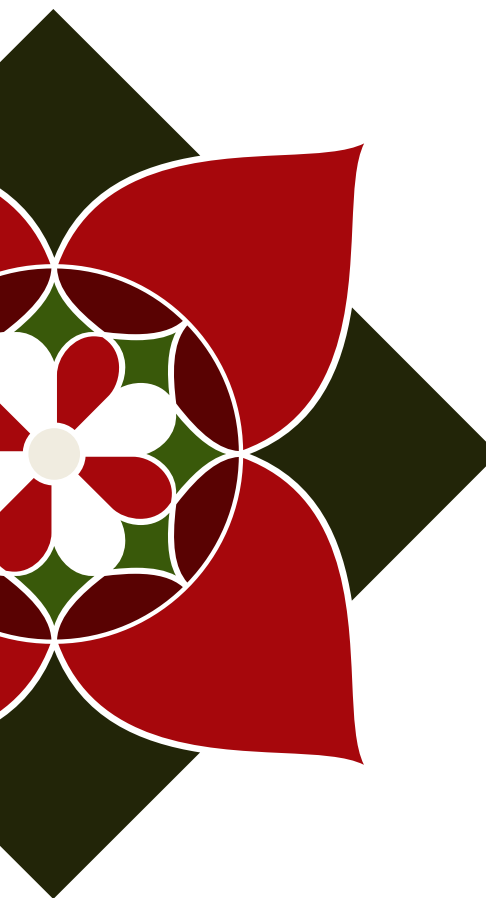
*With God’s help, what steps can you
take to repair your estrangement from
God and others?*



SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT *December 8, 2019*

Where Like Stars His Children Crowned

And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven and said...I will surely bless you, and...multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. —GENESIS 22:15-17



There is no better place to see the heavy price of God's promise to redeem Adam and Eve and their descendants than through his covenant with Abraham.

Abraham's offspring, God promised, would be as numerous as the stars. His family would grow into a mighty nation that would bless all the nations of the world. There was only one little problem: Abraham didn't have any children yet. And, at 75, he wasn't getting any younger!

When Abraham pointed out the huge gap between God's promise and his reality, God answered by sealing his promises with his own

Christ's journey from the manger to the cross is evidence of God's unbreakable commitment.

blood. He directed Abraham to bring him a heifer, a goat, a ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon. Abraham cut each animal in half (with the exception of the birds) and laid them side by side, with space in between (Genesis 15:9-10).

Later, after the sun set, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between the halves of the carcasses. The sacrificed animals were symbols of the price that God would have to pay if the covenant was ever broken. God was saying, "May I be cut in two if I ever fail to fulfill this promise."

Here is evidence of God's redeeming love for humankind. In his covenant with Abraham—which promised blessing to all nations, like stars in the heavens—God invoked a curse upon himself for any failure to keep the covenant. Look at Christ's journey from the manger to the cross, and there you will see his unbreakable commitment to save us at the cost of his own blood.

Have you, like Abraham, ever asked God for reassurance in the fulfillment of a promise? What was his answer?



THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT *December 15, 2019*

Where a Mother Laid Her Baby

*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone....
For to us a child is born, to us a son is given.... —ISAIAH 9:2, 6*

The darkness that covers the world is not only the darkness of sin, but also the darkness of death. What people who are wandering in darkness need is light—bright, shining, radiant light.

Thankfully, God did not leave us to wander in the perpetual darkness of sin and death, for he sent his glorious light into the world in the form of the Christ Child. The light of the Christ Child was not for Israel alone. God wanted fully to display

the radiance of his glory. This required a salvation that was not for the Jews only, but for all nations.

Isaiah promised a real human being, a Messiah born of a woman, who thus became one with his people.

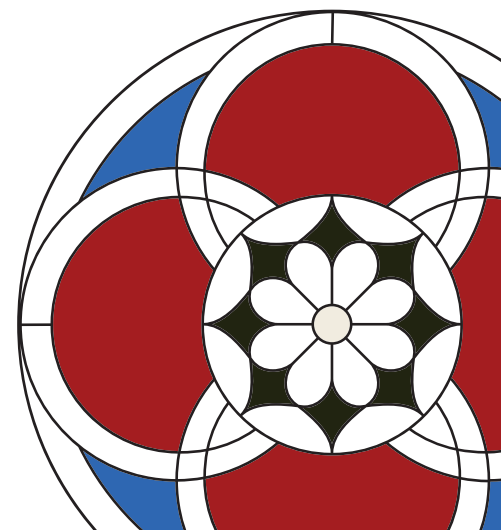
By itself, however, Christ's humanity does not explain his dazzling light. How could a mere human being serve as a light to the nations? Not even a king has enough candlepower to bring his people out of darkness and into the light.

Christ's brightness is the radiance of God's glory.

Jesus Christ—God's Son and our Messiah—is divine as well as human, and thus he shines with the very glory of God. His brightness is the radiance of God's glory.

God invites us to come into his light by receiving Jesus as our Messiah. Choosing to remain in the darkness instead of entering the light of his redeeming love would be folly, for what Jesus has to offer us is exactly what we need.

Where do you find yourself choosing to remain in darkness instead of fully entering into the light of Christ's redeeming love?



FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT *December 22, 2019*

Who Is God and Lord of All

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. —ISAIAH 11:1-2

Buy a plant from a nursery, and it comes with a small stick with instructions on how to care for it and information on how the plant will grow. The first five verses of Isaiah 11 are like a plant stick for the Messiah, explaining how he will save his people from their sins and become the Branch who will one day blossom and bear fruit.

In verse one, we learn that the Branch started as a shoot from the stump of Jesse, the father of King David. The people of God had been chopped down by the judgment of God, and only the bare remnant of a stump remained.

If there was to be a true King and a true Messiah for a true Israel, then God had to make a new beginning. Where once there had been only hard, rough wood, a new and tender shoot would grow.

Jesus sprang like a fresh shoot, a new and unexpected growth from the broken stump of Israel's kingship.

Jesus was the branch from the stump. When the child was born in Bethlehem, Herod was king, and he wasn't even an Israelite, let alone the proper successor of King David. And so, when Mary welcomed her firstborn into "a lowly cattle shed" and laid him "in a manger for his bed," he sprang up like a fresh shoot, a new and unexpected growth from the broken stump of Israel's kingship.

But the Christ Child did not remain a shoot for long. The twig became a sapling, and then a full branch, just as Isaiah had promised. What kind of fruit did he bear?


Filled with the strength of the Father, in the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus received wisdom, understanding, counsel and power, and knowledge and the fear of the Lord—all the spiritual qualities that make him a wise teacher, an insightful friend, a just king, and an obedient Son, even unto death, leading to life eternal.

What areas of your life need pruning so that fresh growth might emerge through the life-giving work of Jesus Christ?

CHRISTMAS EVE & DAY *December 24 & 25, 2019*


Mary Was That Mother Mild

And the angel said to her....“Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.... And the LORD God will give to him the throne of his father David....” And Mary said, “Behold, I am the servant of the LORD; let it be to me according to your word.”—LUKE 1:30-32, 38



No work of the Holy Spirit is more miraculous than what occurred in Mary’s womb, enabling the Virgin to give birth to the Son of God. Few heroes of the faith have been as trusting as Mary, the Mother of God. Mary believed the words of the angel immediately. She did not raise any objections or hold out for an easier calling.

How rare it is to find someone who is willing to trust God for the impossible and then obey him without hesitation. Think of Moses, who asked God to send someone else to lead Israel’s exodus from Egypt (Exodus 4:13). Or of Gideon, who said he couldn’t deliver Israel because he was the weakest man from the weakest tribe (Judges 6:15).



It is rare to find someone like Mary who is willing to trust God for the impossible and then obey him without hesitation.

Mary trusted God, even when it seemed impossible. But her service also led to great suffering. There were the rumors about her that circulated in her community as well as the physical pains of pregnancy and childbirth. And there were many hardships that Mary could not have predicted: the journey to Bethlehem, the exile in Egypt, the hatred of Herod.

But the greatest suffering came when Jesus grew to be a man and became the center of dangerous controversy. At the very end, of course,

Mary had to endure her first-born’s arrest, trial, crucifixion, and burial.

This all happened to Mary because she was willing to obey. And this is what it means to be a Christian. Indeed, we might even say that Mary was the first Christian. To be a Christian means being willing to say, by the grace of God, through faith in Christ, and by the work of his Holy Spirit, what Mary said: “Have it your way, Lord, not mine—I am ready to do your will.”

In what areas of your life do you most struggle to submit to God’s will, and how is God calling you to obey?

FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS DAY

December 29, 2019

Once in Royal David's City

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.... And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. —LUKE 2:1, 4-5

Luke Chapter 2 shows us the far reach of Caesar's power, and also its undoing. Although he would never know it, by calling for a census Caesar had unleashed a chain of events that would turn the whole world upside down, for among the millions who had to register with the Romans was a man named Joseph, with his fiancée Mary. This one little family, seemingly swept up in the tide of earthly power, gave birth to a son who would rule the world.

Here King David receives double mention. Luke has already told us that Mary's child would be David's son, and the angel promised that God would "give to him the throne of his father David" (Luke 1:32). Now Luke tells us that Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus, also came from the royal line of David.

To qualify as the Savior, Jesus had to be born in Bethlehem.

The grand purpose of these statements is to establish the child's credentials. In order to fulfill the promise of salvation, Jesus had to be a direct descendant of King David (cf. Romans 1:3; 2 Timothy 2:8). Joseph's lineage also explains why he took his family to Bethlehem, which was the "city of David"—the hometown of the ancient king—and thus the place where Joseph was required to register. To qualify as the Savior, Jesus had to be born in Bethlehem.

What at first appeared to be a great show of Caesar's power actually proved the supremacy of God's sovereignty. God rules all things for his own glory. This is true not only for the great events of salvation history, but also for the ordinary events of daily life. God is working out his will, and he will see that he gets the glory in the end, often in spite of the things that people do.

Why does the Bible go to such great lengths to demonstrate Jesus' direct lineage to King David?

NEW YEAR'S DAY *January 1, 2020*

With the Ox Standing By

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.... And the angel said to 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."
—LUKE 2:8, 10-11

The first people to hear the Good News of Christ's birth were shepherds. First came the angel's announcement of a joyful birth. Second came the identification of the baby. Who was this child?

He was the son of David—an essential fact alluded to when the birthplace was identified as "the city of David," meaning Bethlehem. This is the sixth time that Luke has mentioned David's name. The child born to the shepherds was David's royal son.

The child was also the Savior. This is another special title in the book of Luke, which uses the language of salvation more than any other Gospel. A Savior is a deliverer—someone who rescues people from death and destruction.

Jesus was also the Christ. Eventually this became part of the Savior's name, but it is really a title. "Christ" is the Greek term for Messiah—literally, "the anointed one," calling to mind the kings and priests of the Old

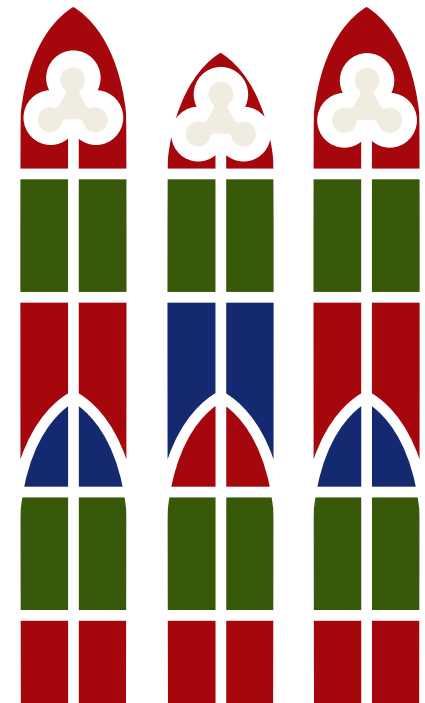
The promised and anointed Savior was none other than God himself, appearing in the flesh.

Testament who were anointed with oil as a sign of their office and mission.

The last title the angel gave to Jesus was Lord. This term of honor points to his deity, and to his sovereign rule over our lives. This is the first time that Luke brings together the words "Christ" and "Lord." It is an unprecedented combination: Jesus is the Lord Christ. This means that the promised and anointed Savior was none other than God himself, appearing in the flesh.

The lowly shepherds never would have known this Good News if the angel had not appeared to them. This shows how much we need the preaching of the gospel. To understand what God has done, we need to have someone explain it to us. This is how God saves us: not simply by sending Jesus to be our Savior, but also by preaching us the gospel so that we can believe in his saving work.

Why do you suppose God chose the shepherds to be the first to hear of Christ's birth?





SECOND SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS DAY

January 5, 2020

Set at God's Right Hand on High

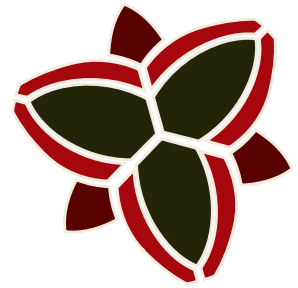
Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem.... And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. —MATTHEW 2:1, 11

When God first gave us the marvelous gift of his own redeeming love, there were some learned men who rightly sensed the need to reciprocate. These men were the Magi, the Wise Men from the east who visited Jesus at Bethlehem.

The worship the Magi offered was significant because they were kings in their own right. Thus, by bowing down in worship, they were acknowledging Jesus as King of kings. Their adoration was also the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy:

"Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising" (Isaiah 60:3).

The treasure the Magi brought was also significant. Gold is a gift fit for a king and a symbol of royalty. Incense was often used for religious worship, and myrrh, specifically, was used in the embalming process. Each of these gifts was uniquely appropriate for Christ because each was prophetic of some aspect of his saving work: gold for his kingship, incense for his priesthood, and myrrh for his atoning sacrifice.

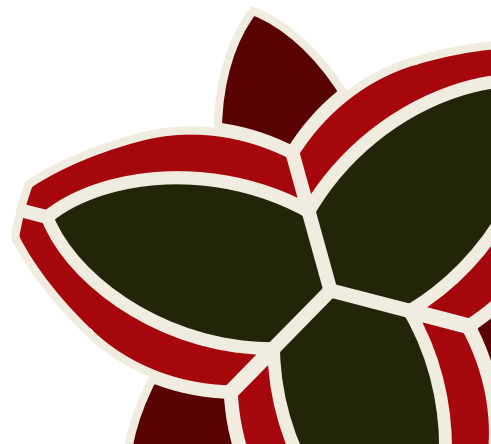


The most important Christmas gift to receive is the gift of eternal life through God's own redeeming love.

At the first Christmas, gifts of eternal significance were exchanged. The gift of God was a Son to be our Savior. The gift of the Magi was the treasure of the nations, symbolizing the exalted kingship of Christ and his humble, saving death.

When it comes to Christmas gifts today, the most important thing is to receive the gift that God has given—the gift of eternal life through his own redeeming love. The next thing to do is to offer ourselves back to God in worship, the way the Magi did. The treasure we offer is not gold, frankincense, or myrrh, but our lives for his service.

When you give a gift to someone who has no claim on your generosity, how does it impact the recipient? How does it impact you?



EPIPHANY OF THE LORD *January 6, 2020*

He Came Down to Earth from Heaven

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.... But to all who did receive him.... he gave the right to become children of God....

—JOHN 1:1-3, 12

In Old Testament times, the tabernacle was God's dwelling place on earth. But then the Word became flesh—God the Son became a man in the person of Jesus Christ.

The new tabernacle is not made of goat hair or acacia wood but of flesh and blood, knit together in the Virgin's womb by the miraculous power of God the Holy Spirit.

Jesus is the true tabernacle. Jesus' body—the physical body that was born of a woman, died on the cross

for our sins, and was raised from the tomb in triumph—is the tabernacle of God. If we want to meet God—if we want to know him and experience him—all we have to do is come to Jesus.

And our eyes at last shall see him,

Through his own redeeming love,

For that child so dear and gentle

Is our Lord in heaven above.



This stained-glass window inspired the artwork in this year's devotional. Housed at St. Columb's Cathedral in Derry, Northern Ireland, the triptych commemorates Cecil Frances Alexander's treasured hymns, which include "Once in Royal David's City."

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For Christ and His Kingdom

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