DECEMBER 1: The Gift Anticipated

Believers can be a living personification of the hope found in Jesus Christ.

UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT:

Just as Israel longed/hoped for the Messiah to deliver them from their physical bondage, our world today needs deliverance from many forms of bondage: spiritual, emotional, physical. Our world longs/hopes for the gift of a Messiah who brings deliverance and salvation. As believers, we have a responsibility to be living examples of hope for those who are either unaware the Messiah has come or are as yet unwilling to accept Jesus as the Messiah. Is my relationship with Christ an example of hope to those around me? Am I living in such a way those around me are drawn to Christ? Is my hope in Christ obvious as I deal with life’s struggles and challenges? Does my hope in Christ impact the way I will celebrate Christmas?

FIRST THOUGHTS:

There is nothing like the anticipation of Christmas for a kid. As the summer heat fades into fall and Halloween comes and goes, the pumpkins and hay bales quickly surrender their places on porches and front yards to twinkling lights and garland. The build-up for Christmas begins before the turkey is cooked on Thanksgiving. Christmas plans are made and gifts begin to pile up around the tree. The anticipation builds as kids look at the gifts; feeling, shaking, listening, and hoping that by some chance they can break the code and discover what gifts are wrapped for them under the tree. Except for that one gift. Every kid knows the gift. It is wrapped awkwardly, it is soft and a sort of odd rectangular prism—SOCKS! Socks are a delight for an adult, but for most kids a package of socks is akin to a slap in the face of Christmas anticipation. Kids are looking for fun and adventure. Socks represent utilitarian boredom.

Jesus was born into a world filled with expectation, but for some Jews who longed for a military ruler to overthrow Rome, Jesus was more like a package of socks than the long-awaited Messiah. What kept Israel from seeing the truth about who Jesus was? What do you think keeps people today from seeing and understanding the truth about who Jesus is and what He can do for them?

EXPLORE THE TEXT:

Israel longed for the hope of a Messiah (Isaiah 9:6-7).

The world into which Jesus was born was one filled with anticipation. N. T. Wright, a pastor and New Testament scholar from the United Kingdom says that Jesus was born into a perfect storm.1 The Jewish world was full of hope, unrest, and upheavals. The period of time around Jesus’ birth saw many men rise and fall with messianic claims. The oppression of Roman rule was real and led many first century Jews to be very open toward and hopeful for a Messiah who could come and rescue Israel from the bondage that they endured under Rome.

Just as God sent Moses to deliver his people from Egypt, so too the people longed for a deliverer to come and lead a new exodus. Rather than leading the people out of Rome and into

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the promised land, they longed for a leader who would lead them out of slavery by driving the Romans away from the promised land. Most ordinary Jews expected a political and military deliverer, a king who would set up his rule from Jerusalem and drive out their Gentile oppressors.

Israel longed for deliverance, but their understanding of a Savior was too small. The salvation they needed was not merely from earthly oppression, but salvation from the chains of sin and shame that held them hostage.

**Question:** When was a time in your life when what you wanted from God was not the same as what you needed from God?

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**Our world today needs the hope of a Messiah (Romans 1:18-23).**

Some people mistakenly believe that Christ is Jesus’ last name, but Christ is actually a title for Jesus. Jesus’s name means, “God saves.” His title means “savior” or “deliverer” and it is the Greek translation of a Hebrew word, “messiah.” When we speak of Jesus as the Christ or as the Messiah, we are not talking about Jesus’ last name, instead we are acknowledging Jesus’ special title. He is Jesus the Deliverer!

Jesus was born into a world longing for a Messiah. They wanted salvation from Rome. We live in a world that needs salvation, but many people don’t recognize what they need. Instead of looking to Jesus, people turn to any and all kinds of other enticements to fill the emptiness in their lives. John Calvin said that our hearts are idol factories. We were made to worship and, as worshipping beings, if we do not worship God, we create things to worship.

**Read:** Romans 1:18-23.

Notice how Paul showed the idolatry of sinful human beings. The world needs a Messiah—a deliver—but in their sin, humans actually suppress the knowledge of God and attempt to fix their broken lives with their own efforts. Not surprisingly, these efforts leave people more broken and more desperate. Even in a world filled with more and more distractions and entertainment, people appear to be lonelier, angrier, and more depressed than ever.

The world into which Jesus was born longed for a Messiah. They didn’t know exactly what this Messiah would bring, but they knew they needed deliverance. In today’s culture, many people know that they need help—that they need deliverance—but what they don’t know is that the Messiah they need must come from without and not from within. The world needs more than entertainment and distraction. It need real hope, and that hope is found only in Jesus. He was the long-awaited deliverer of the ancient Jews, but He is also the deliverer of His people in the twenty-first century. Jesus is as much a savior today as He has ever been, and it is the privilege of his followers to make Him known to the world.

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**Question:** Read Matthew 1:21. Why should this verse about Jesus give you confidence as you share the gospel?

God gave the world hope through the gift of His one and only Son (Daniel 7:13-14 and Zechariah 9:9).

Hope can be used as a verb or a noun. In much of American life, the verb form is used to express desire: “I hope we can go to the movies,” or “I hope we can eat tacos on Tuesday.” The verb form is closely related to the idea of a wish or a want. When Christians say that that God gave the world hope through the gift of His Son, they are saying much more than that God granted their wishes or gave the world what it wanted. The hope that Jesus brings is rich and lasting, but He is not the granted wish of a genie in a lamp.

In fact, the Bible tells us in multiple places that Jesus was not exactly what the world wished for. Consider the following verses:

- Psalm 22:6-7: But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by mankind and despised by people. Everyone who sees me mocks me; they sneer and shake their heads
- Isaiah 53:3: He was despised and rejected by men, a man of suffering who knew what sickness was. He was like one people turned away from; He was despised and we didn’t value him.
- John 1:11: He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.
- John 5:43: I have come in My Father’s name, yet you don’t accept me. If someone else comes in his own name, you will accept him.
- Acts 4:10-11: let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified and whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing here before you healthy. 11 This Jesus is the stone rejected by you builders, which has become the cornerstone.

Jesus’ message of denial and repentance doesn’t tickle the ears of sinful humanity. The road to hope through Jesus runs counter to our natural tendencies, and for that reason the world doesn’t readily accept a savior who demands total surrender. Jesus isn’t shiny and polished like pagan idols. He doesn’t promise to fulfill our wishes or make us healthy, wealthy, and wise. The hope of Jesus is a hope for the future but a hope that might mean suffering in the present.

The hope that came through Jesus was not the fulfillment of a weak wish and it was more than a feeling of expectation or a strong desire for something to happen. Jesus came bringing salvation and deliverance. He came into a world darkened by sin and shame, and He offered
the possibility that death and destruction do not have to be the end of the story. In a world where suffering and pain are normal, Jesus makes it possible for people to be optimistic. Jesus makes it possible for people to believe that something better can be expected. Jesus isn’t merely the fulfillment of hope, He is the beginning of hope for people who only know defeat.

**Question:** In our broken world, it can often be difficult to hold onto the hope of Jesus every day. Read Daniel 7:13-14 and Zechariah 9:9. How do these prophecies point to hope in the future regarding Jesus?

**Believers are to be living examples of the Hope of Jesus Christ (John 3:16)**

Fruit is identified by the tree or plant it grows on. No one ever looked at a banana and assumed it came from an apple tree or a mango and thought it grew in a strawberry patch. The same should be true for Christians. Disciples of Jesus should look like Jesus. Paul said as much in Galatians 5:22-26 as he wrote,

> But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The law is not against such things. Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.

Followers of Jesus are signs pointing others to the cross and the empty tomb. The fruit that we bear should direct others to Jesus. The focus verse for this series is John 3:16. It is probably the most famous Bible verse in the world, but the context is not always considered. John 3 tells the story of a Pharisee named Nicodemus who approached Jesus at night and said these words, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could perform these signs you do unless God were with him.” Pay attention to the fact that Nicodemus saw Jesus’s ministry and knew that he had come from God.

As Christ’s ministers on earth, Christians bear the responsibility to serve as living examples of the hope of Jesus. The best news in the world is that “God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish, but have eternal life.” But, it is only good news if the news gets there in time. It is only good news if followers of Jesus are sharing the gospel with others and living out their salvation.

**Question:** Christmas is supposed to be a time of joy and celebration, but for some people it is a time of hurt and pain. How can you offer hope to those who may be lonely or depressed this Christmas season?

**IN MY CONTEXT:** How will I personify hope to my family, neighbors, community, and world this Christmas?
APPLICATION QUESTIONS:

- How does your relationship with Christ affect the way you spend money this Christmas season?

- How can you lead your family to spend their time differently to honor Christ and make him known to others?

- “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” is one of the oldest Christmas hymns of the church. Look up the lyrics in a hymn book or search for them on your smart phone. How does this hymn speak of the joy of Christ’s first advent and of the anticipation of His second advent?
Believers can find in Jesus an example of giving their best to God.

UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT:

Wise men responded to The Gift by bringing their BEST. Their gifts surpassed the minimum expectation. Their response to the birth of Jesus was extravagant worship and extravagant gifts. The first and best gift of the season should be to God. (Obviously, we think of our gift/stewardship in terms of money – which is the main emphasis of this lesson, but we are also expected to give the best of ourselves as well as our money.) Like the wise men, do I give Jesus my best? Are my tithes and offerings given because He is worthy of my best or out of obligation? Is my response to Christ extravagant, or do I take him for granted? Where does Jesus rate on my Christmas shopping list?

EXPLORE THE TEXT:

The Book of Matthew is the only one of the gospels that tells the story of the magi, or wise men, who visited Jesus. We know little about these men, but scholars speculate that they were most likely astrologers from the East who observed the heavens regularly. Even though tradition holds that there were three wise men named Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthazar, we have no way of knowing the names of the wise men nor even how many of them there were. The Bible only tells us that there were three gifts, not three men.

What we can assume pretty confidently about the wise men is that they were of a noble class and were educated men. They had knowledge of the heavens so that they could identify a change, they had understanding of navigation so that they were able to find Bethlehem, and they had financial means sufficient to travel to Bethlehem and to present Jesus and Mary with expensive gifts. In addition, the wise men had apparently studied the Hebrew Scriptures. They knew the prophecies of Micah 5:2 that told of a king born in Bethlehem. They were also aware of Balaam’s prophecy in Numbers 24:17, “I see him, but not now; I perceive him, but not near. A star will come from Jacob, and a scepter will arise from Israel. He will smash the forehead of Moab and strike down all the Shethites.” Taking all of these things into account, the wise men observed a disruption in the heavens and traveled from the East to see the one who had been born King of the Jews.

**Question:** Have you studied the Scriptures well enough to discern the signs of the times as the wise men did?

God gave the world His best gift – His One and Only Son (John 3:16)

When God considered the needs of sinful humanity He spared no cost in providing a way for their salvation. God created Adam and Eve as the crown of His creation; When He had spoken everything else into being, the Bible teaches that God said, “Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness” (Genesis 1:26). He took such care to create mankind in His likeness,
that He even created humanity differently. Rather than *speaking* humanity into existence, Genesis 2:7 teaches that God “formed man out of the dust from the ground and breathed the breath of life into his nostrils, and the man became a living being.”

God fashioned humanity through a unique kind of creation and gifted them with His own image. Yet, as the Bible teaches, Adam and Eve did not celebrate their unique place in creation by trusting God and honoring Him with their lives. Instead, they rebelled against God’s good plan for their lives, and, as a result, sin entered the world. Since the fall of Adam and Eve, every human being in the world has been separated from God by their sin.

But God, who is rich in mercy, saw fit to give humanity His best, not once but twice. He gave humans His best by gifting them with His image. Then, even after humans marred that image with sin and shame, God again gave His best in the person of Jesus Christ to be the propitiating sacrifice for our sins. The Book of Hebrews says that Jesus’ death was the perfect sacrifice:

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\text{Every priest stands day after day ministering and offering the same sacrifices time after time, which can never take away sins.} \text{ But this man, after offering one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God.}
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Jesus is the perfect sacrifice for sins, accomplishing in full what the blood of goats and cattle could only accomplish in part. Jesus secured for all of humanity the opportunity to be made right with God. God spared no cost; He gave His only Son so that we could live.

**Question:** How is Jesus the fulfillment of the Old Testament sacrifices?

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**Wise men responded to the birth of Jesus by giving their best (Matthew 2:1-12)**

It has been commonplace for most of known history for gifts to be given to people of importance or nobility. United States presidents are only allowed to keep gifts that are valued at less than $375, while more expensive gifts are sent to the national archives. Regardless of the final resting place of the gifts offered, foreign dignitaries like to leave an impression with the unique or expensive gifts that they give. Gifts given to presidents in the past have included luxury cars, votive candles, ceremonial daggers, and even a puppy gifted to George W. Bush by the president of Bulgaria.

When the wise men visited Jesus in Matthew 2, they did not present Him gifts as some sort of first century baby shower. They presented Him with gifts as a form of honor. They probably did not recognize Him as God incarnate, but they were confident that He was a king. These noble men recognized royalty when they saw it in the heavens, and they responded appropriately.

Wise men still respond to Jesus by giving Him their best. The best that people have to give to Jesus certainly includes financial gifts, but it cannot stop there. Jesus deserves the best of our time, talents, and treasures. In a time of economic flourishing or struggle, it is important to remember that the tithe belongs to the Lord, but it is also important to remember that God wants more than your wallet. He wants your heart.
When Jesus was asked about the greatest commandment, He didn’t hesitate, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Matthew 22:37). Where your heart leads, your wallet will follow. The wise men gave generously to Jesus and His family because they were utterly convinced that Jesus was deserving of their gift. Their hearts were set on worship, and their wallets followed right along.

**Question:** Are you convinced that Jesus deserves your best? Why or why not?

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**Our relationship with Jesus calls for extravagant response (2 Corinthians 8:1-5)**

The wise men are not the only people in the New Testament who responded to Jesus’ love with extravagance. Consider Paul’s testimony about the churches of Macedonia in 2 Corinthians 8:1-5:

_We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that was given to the churches of Macedonia: During a severe trial brought about by affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. I can testify that, according to their ability and even beyond their ability, of their own accord, they begged us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in the ministry to the saints, and not just as we had hoped. Instead, they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us by God’s will._

When the people of Macedonia considered the grace of God that was given to them in their salvation and the need of other believers, they gave above and beyond their ability. They begged for the “privilege” of sharing in the ministry to the saints. Serving Jesus and contributing to the ministry of the church is not a duty to be discharged with drudgery, it is an opportunity to be met with joy.

Christians don’t give to earn God’s love. God’s grace is free and salvation is unearned: “For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God’s gift—not from works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9). Christians do not give to earn. Rather, they should respond to God’s love and salvation with extravagance. When you consider all that God has done for you in Christ, it is impossible to out-give God, but it is also inconceivable to not honor Him with the best of what He has given to you.

**Question:** What would it look like in your own life to respond to Jesus with extravagant giving? How might your finances change? How would your time commitments change?

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Jesus is worthy of the best of our worship, finances, time and talents (John 3:16)
What is the hardest thing for you to give up? This is a very personal question. For some people who are struggling financially, money might be hardest thing to part with. For others in a more comfortable financial position, they may value their time above their money. For still others, their talents are the things that they just can’t imagine sharing.

Of course, in some instances, the Bible has another name for the things that control our attention: idols. An idol is anything that competes with God for your attention. Put another way, any time a good thing becomes a god thing it becomes a bad thing.

Jesus is worthy of our best. The greatest way to learn to be more generous with our time, talents, and treasures is to change our heart and our state of mind—you have to become convinced that Jesus is the ultimate good and that the best things you have will always pale in comparison to Jesus.

At Christmas, as people are focusing on gift-giving, some churches challenge their members to give to Jesus first—many Southern Baptist churches challenge their members to give their largest Christmas gift to the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering. As you turn the focus of your giving toward unreached and unengaged people groups, as you consider that millions of people are lost and going to hell without any access to the gospel, it becomes a little more urgent to direct your giving to the places where it is actually needed.

Jesus is worthy of our best. People without access to the gospel are also in need of the saving grace of Jesus. This Christmas, give the greatest gift of time, talent, and treasure to Christ. You won’t regret it, you may just change a life, and God will be glorified.

**IN MY CONTEXT:**

- What will be the first gift I give this Christmas?
- How can you lead your family to be more generous?
- Read Matthew 6:3. How can you balance the tension between modeling generosity and not letting your left hand know what your right hand is doing?
DECEMBER 15: The Gift is Shared
Believers can give others the gift of the Good News of Jesus’ birth.

UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT:

As a response to the gift we have received in Christ, we have a responsibility to share the good news today. The purpose of this lesson is to model a simple method of sharing the gospel. We will be using the five symbols from Kings Witness.

EXPLORE THE TEXT:

What is the gospel? It is good news. Specifically, it is the good news of salvation brought by Jesus. When the angels appeared in the heavens declaring good news of great joy, in some ways they were proclaiming an early “gospel” of Jesus. They were declaring the good news that Christ had come.

Evangelism is often one of the most daunting tasks for Christians. Some people are afraid to share the gospel because they simply feel unqualified to do so. The angels that proclaimed Jesus’ birth didn’t present a dissertation or a well-crafted sermon. They simply told the truth of Jesus’ birth and their experience. As you think about evangelism this week, work to shift your mindset. Think of evangelism as less of a heavy burden and more as great news that needs to be told. After all, that’s exactly what it is.

Angels and shepherds responded to the birth of Jesus by telling others (Luke 2:8-18)

When Paul set out to explain the gospel to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 15:3-7, he didn’t begin with big theological terms or even with his own experiences. When Paul explained the gospel to the Corinthians, he did so using concrete, historical terms:

For I passed on to you as most important what I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve. Then he appeared to over five hundred brothers and sisters at one time; most of them are still alive, but some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one born at the wrong time, he also appeared to me.

In Luke 2, the angels sang the good news of Jesus’ birth, praising God and informing the shepherds on a hillside. When the shepherds recovered from the shock of their angelic encounter, they went and found Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus who was lying in a manger. After such a shocking encounter, the shepherds did not decide that their incident was a personal experience that was not to be shared with others. The experience and joy of seeing God’s heavenly army and worshiping at the feet of a newborn king was too much to keep inside. According to the Bible, everyone who heard the news of the angels and the newborn king “were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.”
Question: Are people still amazed when they hear the gospel? Why do you answer as you do?

Many families have Christmas morning traditions of calling grandma or other family members to report all of the gifts that were under the tree. The advent of video calling has made this tradition even more fun. Rather than trying to explain their newest toy of mass destruction, kids can FaceTime Grandma and Grandpa while they chase their parents through the house, blasting toy darts rapid-fire.

These Christmas morning rituals seem natural because we love to tell others about our new gifts. Likewise, the shepherds responded to the good news of Christ’s birth by telling others.

Question: What is the best Christmas gift you ever received? Who did you want to tell first about it?

We have received the gift of salvation through God’s Son (Ephesians 2:8-9)

Salvation is a gift from God. This is not just a sentimental thought for the Christmas season; it is the word of God. In Ephesians 2:8, Paul wrote, “For you are saved by grace through faith; and this is not from yourselves; it is God’s gift.” Salvation is God’s gift. No one does anything to earn it. Paul went on in Ephesians 2:9 to explain that salvation is “not from works, so that no one can boast.”

Salvation is a gift freely given to a sinful people who were dead in their trespasses and sins. Every human being is born in sin (Romans 3:23) and is in need of the grace of God to save them from their sin. If you are a Christian, it is not because you did anything special. You are a Christian because Jesus died for you even when you didn’t love Him. “But God proves his own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

Question: Why do many people find it difficult to view salvation as a gift and not as something that they have earned?

Our response to receiving the gift of salvation should be to tell others (Luke 2:17-18)

For those who are in Christ, He is the greatest gift ever received. Surely, when you accepted Christ, your first inclination was to tell someone. When you understood the power of the gospel to wipe away your sin and guarantee a place for you in heaven, everything in your being wanted
to share this good news with others. Unfortunately, the cares of life often dampen our excitement and lessen our desire to share our good news with others. This is especially true when life is comfortable and easy. C. S. Lewis warned of this in *The Screwtape Letters* as two devils converse about their job of keeping humans from receiving salvation in Christ:

> And how disastrous for us is the continual remembrance of death which war enforces. One of our best weapons, contented worldliness, is rendered useless. In wartime, not even a human can believe that he is going to live forever.¹

People are dying and going to hell, but you have the answer to their lost condition. You have the hope of salvation. Remember what you have and what they need. Regardless of how comfortable life is today, the world still needs Jesus. Christians can’t afford to forget this.

Commit this Christmas season to returning to the excitement and joy you felt about your testimony right after you were saved. You have the greatest news in the world.

**Question:** What are the barriers in your life that keep you from regularly sharing the gospel?

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**Telling others about Jesus need not be complicated (Luke 2:19-20)**

Every story has a beginning, a middle, and an end. For Christians, each of our stories has a beginning before Christ, a middle regarding our conversion to Christ, and the end that is being lived out as we honor Christ with our lives. If you can tell a story, you can share your testimony. But you can do more. You can even share the hope of the gospel. You don’t have to be a pastor or a professor, you just need the desire and the opportunity. You can even do it on a napkin at your favorite restaurant using the King’s Witness diagram below.

- **He Came**—“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. We observed his glory, the glory as the one and only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).
- **He Died**—“He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree; so that, having died to sins, we might live for righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed” (1 Peter 2:24).
- **He Arose**—“Don’t be alarmed,” he told them. “You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they put him” (Mark 16:6).
- **He Ascended**—“So the Lord Jesus, after speaking to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God” (Mark 16:19).
- **He’s Coming Back**—“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne” (Matthew 25:31).

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Your testimony, the story of God’s change in your life, and the simple gospel as outlined above is all you need to lead someone else to Jesus. You can share all of that in less than five minutes—before your coffee is even cool enough to drink.

Will you join in the adventure with Christians around the world, rescuing sinners from the brink of destruction? Will you take your story and the simple gospel and watch God change lives? It doesn’t have to be complicated, but it can still be glorious!

**Question:** What are some reasons you think we sometimes make the gospel overly complicated? How does this week’s lesson change your perspective?

**IN MY CONTEXT:** Who will I share the Good News with this Christmas season?

Maybe you can’t change the world today, but you might be able to change just one person. Perhaps the idea of evangelism still seems overwhelming as you consider all of the people who need to hear the gospel. This Christmas season, start with just one. Who is the one person for whom you can be praying and with whom you can share the gospel this Christmas season? Write that name on a card and put it in your Bible to remind you to pray for your one. Pray for them to be willing to hear the gospel, pray that God will give you courage to share, and pray that God will provide an opportunity.

The greatest gift that you can share this Christmas season is the gift of eternal life. Share the hope of Jesus, and watch God work!
DECEMBER 22: The Gift is With Us

Believers can become Jesus to others through words, deeds and acts of service.

UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT:

The Gift became flesh and took up residence among us. If we believe Jesus is truly among us, and if we believe Jesus resides in us, then we become Jesus to the world around us through our words, deeds, and acts of service.

EXPLORE THE TEXT:

The idea of God living with sinful human beings really seems too good to be true, and yet the testimony of God’s word and the life of Jesus shows that God loved the world so much that he did the unthinkable. In John 1:14, we read that “The Word became flesh and took up residence among us.” In Greek (the original language of the New Testament), the word translated “took up residence” is *tabernacled*. If you will remember, in Exodus 25, God commanded Moses to build a special tent where His presence could dwell among the Israelites who had just been delivered from slavery in Egypt. This tent was called a sanctuary or a *tabernacle*. The Old Testament tabernacle was the representation of God’s presence until the temple was built in Jerusalem. It was the place where Moses and later the high priest would go to meet with God and offer sacrifices.

When John wrote about Jesus and wanted his readers to really understand what Jesus’ presence on earth meant, he reflected back on God’s presence among the Israelites and made a noun into a verb—*tabernacle* became *tabernacled*. Jesus is the living tabernacle that came to live among sinful humanity. The tent of meeting was a mere shadow pointing toward the greater presence of God that would be experienced as Jesus lived among mankind.

**Question:** How loved would you feel if God decided to build a house and move into your neighborhood?

The Gift became flesh (John 1:14)

The book of Isaiah was written during a time of transition and change. Isaiah was a royal prophet during a time of peace and security in Judah, but his vision from the Lord in Isaiah 6 came “in the year that King Uzziah died.” King Uzziah reigned in Jerusalem for 52 years. When he died, it was the end of an era and a time of unrest and confusion in Judah. In the midst of that uncertainty, God spoke to Isaiah with words of promise and hope.

One of the greatest hopes given to Isaiah was that the earthly king would one day be replaced with an even greater ruler. The God who ruled Israel from afar through kings and prophets would one day rule directly. This ruler would be Immanuel, which means, “God with us.”

The book of Matthew connects the dots for us in the very first chapter. Matthew wanted to make sure that his readers understood that Jesus, the Messiah, was none other than Immanuel.
spoken of in Isaiah. Just as John pointed out that Jesus was the Word of God made flesh, Matthew asserted that Jesus was God in the flesh. God came to rule and love His people by living among them. Jesus is the King and great High Priest who can empathize with His people because He has lived as they lived and experienced all that they have experienced. This is stated clearly in Hebrews 4:14-16; we serve a God who understands us and loves us anyway.

*Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens—Jesus the Son of God—let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin. Therefore, let us approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in time of need.*

**Question:** Can you relate better to God knowing that Jesus understands your trials and weaknesses? Explain.

**Question:** What does it mean to you to know that in the person of Jesus Christ, God left the splendor of heaven and lived in flesh among human beings?

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**We are God’s representatives to those around us (2 Corinthians 5:20)**

Shirley Temple became famous as a child actor in the 1930s, bringing joy to many through her smile and dancing while the US was in the midst of the Great Depression. As an adult, however, she left acting behind and became involved in politics. She served as a United States ambassador to both Ghana and Czechoslovakia under presidents Ford and George H. W. Bush. As ambassador, she represented and spoke for the president and the government of the United States of America.

Followers of Christ are God’s representatives to the world around them. The apostle Paul used an even stronger word in 2 Corinthians 5:20 when he wrote, “Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us.” Ambassadors are important government officials. They speak on behalf of kings or presidents. In the ancient world, the role of ambassadors was even more important than it is today. With the advent of instant communication, the role of ambassador is often overlooked because world rulers can speak to anyone, anywhere, at literally a moment’s notice. In the ancient world, however, ambassadors were the representatives of kings and monarchs. Anything that an ambassador said was perceived to carry the weight of the king’s authority. The ambassador spoke as the king’s mouthpiece to the world.

Paul said that Christians are Christ’s ambassadors. They are called upon to speak Christ’s words to the world. But Paul made it clear that the responsibility of Christians as ambassadors is not just some sort of religious window dressing. Christ’s ambassadors have an important role to play in His kingdom. God is making His appeal through us, therefore, according to Paul, “We
plead on Christ's behalf: 'be reconciled to God’” (2 Corinthians 5:20). Christians are, by definition evangelists, calling others, yes even pleading with others, to repent of their sin and be reconciled to God.

**Question:** Why is it sometimes hard to speak Christ's words to others in your life? How does your perspective change to think of yourself as God’s ambassador in the world?

**We may be the only Jesus some people will see (2 Corinthians 5:20)**

In the movie business, actors sometimes have a stunt-double. These are people no one knows but who are trained to do all of the dangerous and exciting stuff. They drive fast, wreck cars, fight it out with the bad guys, and occasionally get blown up. But, the entire time, their goal is to look as much like the primary actor as possible. If everyone is successful, the viewer never realizes there was a substitute.

Jesus is God’s gift to mankind. He is God in the flesh, but the only God that many of your friends, relatives, associates, and neighbors will see is the Holy Spirit living in you. When you consider the fact that you may be the only Jesus that other people will ever see, you should first ask, “How would Jesus have me to serve this person?”

*What would Jesus do?* has become a bit cliché, but it is an important question to consider as you contemplate your role as a fill-in for Jesus. Remember that as a Christian, you represent Jesus for good or ill. People around you are forming an opinion of Jesus based on your actions. If you are influencing the way that people view Jesus, it is appropriate to ask what He would do. Your goal should be to love others and serve them as Jesus would have done.

**Question:** If other people are forming their opinion of Jesus based on your actions, what do they believe Jesus to be like?

**God has given us everything we need to serve others (1 Corinthians 12:4-12)**

Some Christians never serve their churches and their neighbors because they have believed a lie. They have believed that they don’t have anything valuable to offer God’s church or His kingdom. According to the Bible, however, it is impossible for Christians to not have something valuable to offer.

Read Paul’s words to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 12:4-12

*Now there are different gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different ministries, but the same Lord. And there are different activities, but the same God produces each gift in each person. A manifestation of the Spirit is given to each person for the common good: to one is given a message of wisdom through the Spirit, to another, a message of knowledge by the same Spirit, to another, faith by the same Spirit, to another, gifts of...*
healing by the one Spirit, to another, the performing of miracles, to another, prophecy, to another, distinguishing between spirits, to another, different kinds of tongues, to another, interpretation of tongues. One and the same Spirit is active in all these, distributing to each person as he wills.

For just as the body is one and has many parts, and all the parts of that body, though many, are one body—so also is Christ.

Notice that “a manifestation of the Spirit is given to each person for the common good.” Each person receives a manifestation of the Spirit. In Eugene Peterson's translation/paraphrase of the Bible called The Message, he translates 1 Corinthians 12:7 this way, “Each person is given something to do that shows who God is: Everyone gets in on it, everyone benefits.” In the Holy Spirit, God has given everything that needs to be given for the good of the world and the glory of His name. But don’t miss this: God has not just given gifts and His Spirit to certain special Christians, He has given gifts and His Holy Spirit to every Christian.

You are valuable in God’s kingdom. You have a special role to play. You have been given gifts that are needed in Christ’s church and in the world. It is wonderful if you can teach or preach. The church needs these gifts. But, if you can’t teach or preach, that is OK too. God has given you a gift that is important for His church. The church is the body of Christ, and just like any other body, it is made up of many parts. The part you play is integral and important and is necessary for the church to fulfill its mission of serving as Christ’s ambassadors to the world.

Jesus came at Christmas and lived among us. He made earth His home and lived among sinful humanity. At Christmas time and throughout the year, the church has the opportunity to be like Jesus, living among a lost world, serving as a light in the darkness. That is what God has called the church to do, and as a part of His church, that is what He has called and gifted you to do. The Holy Spirit of God lives within you giving you everything you need to fulfill your purpose. Get busy!

**Question:** What has the Holy Spirit gifted you to do? How are you using your gifts and fulfilling your purpose in the church and in the world?

**Question:** Read 2 Corinthians 1:21-22. What did Paul mean when he called the Holy Spirit our “down payment” and how does that encourage you as you consider your gifts in ministry?

**IN MY CONTEXT:** How will I be Jesus to my family, neighbors, community, and world this Christmas?

- Brainstorm ways that you can serve as Christ’s ambassador, speaking on His behalf to your lost friends and neighbors.
- Discuss how you might serve others as Jesus’ hands and feet this Christmas season.
DECEMBER 29: The Gift Received

Believers can grow in the image of Christ by maturing physically, emotionally and educationally as well as spiritually.

UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT:

How should we can respond to Christ? Just as Anna and Simeon acknowledged and received the gift, we too have a choice of how we will respond and live out the Christian life. Anna began to proclaim Jesus, The Gift, to everyone around her. She knew they had been longing for the coming of the Messiah and were looking for redemption. Redemption had come! How would the people respond? God makes His salvation visible and discernible—light for revelation to the Gentiles. Verse 40 ties to the Vision 20|20 for January/February: “The boy (Jesus) grew up and became strong, filled with wisdom and God’s grace was on Him.” Jesus matured physically, emotionally, spiritually and educationally. In what areas of my life will I strive to grow in 2020? Like Anna, how am I prepared and excited to tell others about Jesus?

EXPLORE THE TEXT:

We no longer have to anticipate a Savior - We have a Savior (Luke 2:25-32)

Anxiety and anticipation are both forms of stress, but they are not equal. Anxiety is a negative form of stress related to fears of what might happen. Anticipation is an excitement about what is expected to happen. As you read through the narratives of Simeon and Anna this week, think carefully about their anticipation. They were not anxious about the arrival of the Messiah. The coming of the Messiah was not an event to be feared, instead it was a moment to be anticipated and celebrated. Remember, Messiah means deliverer. Simeon and Anna were captives waiting for the arrival of their deliverer.

When Simeon met the baby, Jesus, in the temple, he knew that he was no longer living in anticipation, he was living in realization. The revelation that had been given to him by the Holy Spirit had been fulfilled. This is what Simeon meant when he praised the Lord with these words, “My eyes have seen your salvation.” Perhaps Simeon had Job’s words from 42:5 in the back of his mind as he held Jesus: “I had heard reports about you, but now my eyes have seen you.”

As Christians living on this side of Christ’s birth, death, and resurrection, we don’t live in anticipation, we live in realization. The “Light for revelation to the Gentiles and glory to your people Israel” has dawned, and the darkness has fled from His presence. His own did not receive Him, but like a blinding light in the darkness, Jesus could not be hidden. The darkness has run from the blinding light of Jesus, and we are blessed as the recipients of His salvation. We don’t have to wait eagerly for the arrival of a deliver, we need only to meet the deliverer who has come to bring salvation to the World.

Question: How often do you praise God for the gift of salvation that has been given to you in Jesus? Why should this be a regularly pattern in our worship?
Anna and Simeon acknowledged and contemplated the great gift they had received (Luke 2:33-35)

Simeon turned his attention from praise and glory to God to a word of prophecy directed toward Mary and Joseph. Imagine Mary and Joseph, making their way into the temple complex with this baby born from the Holy Spirit. Their life had been wild for the last few months. Mary had given birth among animals in a stable, angels had announced His birth and, out of nowhere, shepherds had shown up to worship the newborn King. Trying to be good parents and good Jews, they made their way to the temple to present the boy there and were immediately greeted by a man and woman who knew exactly who Jesus was. Before they could even respond to this spectacle, Simeon turned from loud exclamation to a word of caution and contemplation.

Simeon essentially turned his attention from who Jesus is to what Jesus was going to do. Have you taken time this Christmas season to consider both who Jesus is and exactly what He has done? It can be easy at Christmas to lose the life of Jesus if our focus is only on His birth.

Don’t forget, without the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, His birth wouldn’t register as much more than a blip on the radar of history. What is the gift that came at Christmas? He is the Messiah. However, He didn’t bring salvation through His birth, but through His cross and the empty grave.

**Question:** Have you spent time this Christmas season meditating on Christ’s death and resurrection as well as the glory of his virgin birth? Why is it important to hold these events together?

Like Anna and Simeon, we can respond with gratitude and proclamation (Luke 2:36-38)

Apparently, Simeon had caused quite a scene, so much that Anna, a prophetess who had been a widow for 84 years, came up immediately and began to “thank God and to speak about him to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.” It really shouldn’t come as a surprise that Anna was so grateful and responsive when Jesus arrived. She had been in the temple serving the Lord for 84 years, and in those years she had grown in her anticipation of the long-awaited Messiah. The longer you wait for something to arrive, the greater your joy when it appears. Imagine, Anna had waited at least 84 years for the Messiah to arrive and to bring about the redemption of Israel. When she laid her eyes on Jesus, there is no way that she could be anything other than thankful, and there is no chance she could have kept quiet about this blessing for which she had prayed so long.

Do you regularly feel a sense of gratitude when you consider the blessing of salvation that has come to you in Jesus Christ? Unfortunately, people sometimes stop showing gratitude because they forget just how much they needed Jesus when they were saved.

Take some time to think about your salvation story. Think back to your life before Jesus and think of the specific ways that you recognized your need for Jesus (for the record, everyone knows that sin is the answer, but it is also vague). Get specific about what Jesus did for you.
What holes did He fill up, what sins did He wipe away, what pain did He free you from? Anna and Simeon were thankful for what Jesus represented and what He would bring. They were so thankful that they couldn’t keep their mouths shut. Perhaps we should imitate them.

**Question:** Who might be blessed to hear your story of salvation? How might your story of God’s deliverance cause others to respond with praise and gratitude for what God could do in their own life?

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**Our gratitude is shown in how we grow up in God’s grace**

*Talk is cheap* is a common saying. The phrase simply means that it is easier to say something than it is to actually do something. As it relates to the Christian life, talk can often be cheap in the way that we show our thankfulness for God’s grace in our lives. It is easier to talk about Jesus than to actually grow in grace and godliness. A talked about life is easier than the disciplined life.

Yet, even though the disciplined life is harder, it is infinitely better. In fact, there is good evidence from the Bible that the disciplined Christian life is the only true Christian life. Jesus said as much in Luke 9:23, “Then he said to them all, ‘if anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me.’” Anna thanked God, but she also told others about Jesus. She showed her gratitude by sharing the good news.

**Question:** Who have you told about Jesus this Christmas season? How does our willingness to share with others about Jesus reveal the authenticity of our relationship with Him?

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**Growing in the image of Christ includes maturing physically, emotionally and educationally as well as spiritually (Luke 2:39-40)**

When Jesus was asked about the greatest commandment, He didn’t waste any time; He responded this way, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important command” (Matthew 22:37-38). Loving the Lord with all your heart, soul, and mind looks a lot like growing up in the image of Christ. Even though you aren’t Jesus, part of being His follower is to seek to imitate Him in every way possible. The Bible says that Jesus grew up and became strong, filled with wisdom, and God’s grace was on Him.

As you look toward 2020, consider how you might grow in Christ. For some people the idea of becoming godlier may seem like a daunting task, but this is possible through the power of God’s Spirit and there is no better time to commit to growing as a Christian than the present. Here are a few steps you can take to grow in your faith in 2020:
• Commit to reading your Bible every day. You can read through the entire Bible in one year by reading about ten minutes every day. Even if you don’t make it through the whole Bible by the end of 2020, imagine how much your life would change by spending time in God’s word every day.
• Pray every day. You don’t have to offer carefully scripted prayers to God, He knows the desires of your heart.
• Offer to pray for your servers at restaurants or cashiers in the check-out line. You will bless others and receive a blessing yourself.
• Share your faith. Make a commitment to have at least one intentional gospel conversation each week in 2020.
• Start a spiritual journal recording your prayers, your blessings, and even your longings before God.
• If you don’t serve in our church, find a place and plug in.
• Go on a mission trip.
• Begin tithing.

CONCLUSION:

Our theme verse for this series is John 3:16. Remember, as you seek to grow in gratitude and godliness, you don’t do so to earn God’s love. Your labors for the Lord shouldn’t weigh you down. You don’t serve to be forgiven or welcomed into his family. God loves you. That is already true. He loved you enough to send His Son to save you from your sin. Your goal in Christian growth is to live into His love, to learn to enjoy Him and glorify Him forever and in so doing to fulfill the purpose for which you were born.