

Introduction

This little devotional took shape after I picked up John Mark Comer's book, *Practicing the Way*. I've listened to him speak and read some of his other works, but this was the first time I'd sat down to immerse myself in this one. Part of the reason I hesitated? The Village already incorporates much of what Comer advocates for. Yet one of his practical suggestions gave me pause, and eventually turned my thoughts to Advent.

Comer urges his readers to fast from digital screens—phones, watches, computers, TVs. That sparked a realization: we're all too aware of the anxiety these devices stir up in us and our children. They've become masterful transmitters of what is perhaps the only anxiety that's truly contagious—the fear of missing out. This fear, tangled up with a sense of losing control, deepens with each glance and swipe, as short bursts of dopamine keep us hooked.

Advent at the Village holds a special place in my heart. It carries a distinctive rhythm that sets it apart from other communities. While many churches press on with their regular activities, the Village designates December as "Fallow Month"—a time to pause, let the ground lie still, and allow the noise of the season to quiet. Everything slows down, except for Sunday services. Leadership takes the free time Advent and Fallow month provide to pray and plan for the year ahead, and the congregation is invited to seek God through prayer and fasting, celebrating in the company of family and friends.

This deliberate restfulness made me wonder: what if we began Advent with a three-day digital fast, accompanied by a devotional that turns our hearts toward Christ? God, in the Psalms, offers a direct command, "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10)? In a world obsessed with constant connection, silence becomes a rare and powerful gift. As we shut down our screens, we could use these moments to remember how the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us (John 1:14). What better way to enter the season of expectancy than by stripping away the distractions that obscure our view of the One who came to dwell with us—Immanuel, God with us?

This could be a time of realignment, of tasting again the goodness of Jesus' coming. Like a fallow field being prepared for new growth, we would allow the noise to fade, inviting the Holy Spirit to plant seeds of joy, peace, and hope in our hearts. So, let's begin this Advent season not by adding more, but by choosing less—less digital clamor, less information overload. Let's make room for the stillness where the voice of God can speak.

December 1: Advent: A Fallow Beginning (December 1st - 8th)

“Jesus isn’t asking you to do something you’re not already doing. All of us are abiding. The question isn’t, Are you abiding? It’s, “What are you abiding in?”

— **John Mark Comer, Practicing the Way: Be with Jesus. Become like him. Do as he did.**

A Three Day Digital Fast

Fasting: Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday (December 2nd - 4th)

For as long as I can remember, I’ve wrestled with a love-hate relationship toward my phone and computer. I’m a Gen Xer—52 years old. I didn’t grow up with a TV. Instead, I spent countless hours in the backyard, exploring the desert, wandering through forests, or navigating the urban jungles of wherever we happened to be living at the time. No cell phone. No television. But my father, even back in the early ’80s, would bring home personal computers from work, and I found myself captivated by them.

Fast forward to today, and my world is flooded with digital devices. There’s a TV in my bed-room, hooked up to more streaming services than I can count. My phone constantly buzzes, urging me to answer emails, read news, catch up on social media updates—most of which do little more than stir up envy or discontentment. And my computer? It’s a blessing, yes, enabling me to write, create music, record podcasts, make videos, and play games. Yet all these good things come with a cost. These screens are not neutral—they’re always calling my name, whispering to me who I should be, what I should value, and how I should think. As Paul warns in Romans 12:2, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.” Too often, these devices conform us, bending our thoughts and affections away from Christ.

I imagine your experience is similar. You might have a tighter grip on self-control or, like me, find yourself more prone to distraction. Either way, I’m inviting you to join me in a three-day digital fast. Let’s turn off the noise and realign our hearts and minds with the voice of the Shepherd, who said, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). Together, let’s re-center on Jesus and rediscover His peace that transcends understanding (Philippians 4:7).

Suggestions For Getting Started

Set Clear Boundaries: Before you begin, decide what you will and won't engage with. No scrolling through social media or checking news feeds. Delete the apps temporarily if you need to. Keep the phone out of reach unless it's for calls or emergencies. Just as Jesus often withdrew to quiet places to pray (Luke 5:16), let this be your way of withdrawing from the digital noise.

Start and End Your Day with Scripture: Use the time you'd normally spend in front of screens to open the Word. Read a psalm in the morning to ground yourself, or reflect on a passage like John 15:5—"I am the vine; you are the branches"—before you go to sleep. Let these sacred words become your anchor and guide throughout the fast.

Replace Screen Time with Prayer Time: Whenever you feel the itch to pick up your phone, turn that urge into a moment to pray or meditate on a verse. Take a walk and talk with God, or simply sit quietly, breathing deeply and allowing the Holy Spirit to recalibrate your soul. Just as fasting from food reveals our dependency, so too will fasting from screens reveal where our hearts cling.

Journal Your Experience: Keep a small notebook nearby to jot down what you're feeling or noticing each day. Record any moments of restlessness or peace. Write out your prayers and reflections. This exercise can help you see more clearly where your attention is divided and remind you that you are "fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psalm 139:14), not defined by the digital world.

Rekindle Relationships: Use this fast as an opportunity to engage in meaningful face-to-face conversations. Call a friend instead of texting. Share a meal with family and really listen to one another. Let your relationships—like iron sharpening iron (Proverbs 27:17)—be refreshed without the constant pull of notifications.

Revisit Your Purpose for the Fast: Each time you feel the urge to reach for a screen, pause and ask yourself why you started this fast. Remember Jesus's words in Matthew 4:4: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." Your life is not sustained by digital consumption but by the life-giving presence of God. Recenter, breathe, and continue on, knowing that you're seeking a greater depth and freedom in Christ.

Advent and the Gospel of Matthew

The Gospel of Matthew offers a unique approach to Advent, beginning with a genealogy that doesn't just name Jesus' ancestors but tells a deeper story of inclusion, grace, and fulfillment. Matthew's list isn't a sanitized lineage; it includes individuals like Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba—each bringing their own complex story, revealing that Jesus came from a line marked by scandal, struggle, and redemption. This genealogy reminds us that Jesus enters a broken world and a flawed family history, fulfilling God's promises through an unexpected, messy lineage.

Advent in Matthew also touches raw places in the human experience—fear, anger, and aloneness. We see it in the story of Herod's rage, a reaction to the news of the coming King that brings violence and sorrow to innocent lives. It's easy to read over this part of the story, but in reality, it carries a weight of fear and isolation for those affected. In Advent, as we anticipate Christ's arrival, Matthew doesn't shield us from the real consequences of a world waiting in darkness, where power and pride spark conflict and suffering.

There's also a loneliness that comes through in Matthew's account. Joseph and Mary find themselves isolated, facing the unknown with only each other to lean on. The path they take isn't grand or filled with celebration; it's a journey in which they must wrestle with doubt, questions, and uncertainty. Advent, then, isn't just a time of cozy anticipation but an invitation to sit with the harder parts of our own story—those moments of wondering, waiting, and trusting in God's quiet promises.

Through Matthew's lens, Advent becomes a season that embraces the full spectrum of human experience. It reminds us that Jesus comes into a world of fear, anger, and loneliness, not to bypass these things but to meet us within them. This Gospel draws us into a hope that doesn't ignore pain or pretend away the struggle. Instead, it brings God's love into the reality of our lives, showing us that even in the hardest places, God's promise remains steady.

Chapter One: Matthew 1:18-25 (December 5th - 8th)

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

Alone: Thursday December 5th

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph, her husband, was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

Joseph's situation was both painful and complicated. When he found out that Mary, his fiancée, was expecting a child, it likely felt as if everything he had dreamed of was falling apart. Legally, he was considered her husband, though they had not yet come together. Under Jewish law, he had the right to expose her apparent unfaithfulness, publicly denounce her, and walk away from the relationship with his own honor intact. A public divorce would have vindicated him in the eyes of his community, and any suspicion or shame would have shifted squarely onto Mary. Yet, Joseph's character as a righteous man stood in tension with such a harsh response. His heart seemed to break at the thought of making her a public spectacle, and so he resolved to divorce her quietly, minimizing her shame even as his own dreams lay shattered. His willingness to protect her at his own cost reveals the depth of his love and character, yet it must have been a lonely decision, shrouded in grief and confusion.

1. **When have you felt like circumstances upended your expectations, leaving you in a position where you had to make a choice between preserving your own sense of dignity and protecting someone else's well-being?** *Reflect on a time when, like*

Joseph, you faced a decision that no one else could fully understand or validate. How did the loneliness of that moment impact your relationship with God and with others?

2. **Joseph's instinct was to quietly walk away, bearing his pain in isolation. When you encounter deep disappointment or a broken dream, do you tend to withdraw quietly like Joseph, or do you reach out for support? What might it look like to hold onto your integrity while still being vulnerable enough to share your struggles with those you trust?**

3. **Though Joseph was isolated from the understanding of others, his obedience brought him closer to God's purpose. How have you seen God use seasons of loneliness in your life to deepen your sense of connection to His presence and calling? In what ways can Joseph's story help you reframe your own sense of being misunderstood or alone as a space where God can draw nearer to you?**

Alone: Friday December 6th

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

Then the angel’s message arrived, calling Joseph to an obedience that would test his resolve and deepen his sense of isolation. Taking Mary as his wife and claiming the child as his own meant embracing a path that would be misunderstood, questioned, and ridiculed. Who would believe that the child was conceived by the Holy Spirit? Even if they accepted the story, his reputation would be tarnished; whispers of immorality would follow them for the rest of their lives. He would be branded as the man who defied the law or acted improperly before marriage. Such stigma would weigh heavily on his shoulders, creating distance between him and his closest relationships. Obedience to God often comes with a price, and for Joseph, it was the cost of social isolation—a step of faith into a future marked by uncertainty and the loss of everything familiar.

- 1. When have you experienced loneliness because of a decision that required you to follow God’s call, even when others misunderstood or questioned you?** *Reflect on how you handled that season of isolation. Did you, like Joseph, wrestle with the fear of rejection or loss, and how did that affect your sense of connection with others?*
- 2. Joseph’s decision to take Mary as his wife meant stepping into a future filled with uncertainty and potential stigma. What situations in your life have made you feel cut off from familiar comforts and left you standing alone in obedience to God?** *Consider how your desire for relational safety and approval has influenced your willingness to follow God’s leading.*
- 3. How do you respond when God calls you into a path that feels lonely or counter to what others expect of you?** *Joseph moved forward despite the social cost and sense of isolation—what internal struggles or fears have kept you from stepping into similar acts of faith? How might recognizing God’s presence with you in those moments change your experience of loneliness?*

Alone Saturday December 7th

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”). When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

Joseph’s loneliness must have been profound. Who could he turn to? The very people who once celebrated his betrothal were now suspicious and disappointed. Even those who might have believed him would struggle to understand the weight of the divine calling he was embracing. His decision to keep Mary and the child placed him on a path filled with misunderstandings and judgment. But in that quiet obedience, Joseph most likely discovered a profound companionship with God Himself. As he stepped into the unknown, he became part of the story that fulfilled Isaiah’s prophecy: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (Matthew 1:23). Alone in many ways, yet accompanied by the presence of God, Joseph’s faith and courage continue to echo through history as a testimony of trust and steadfastness amidst life’s deepest trials.

1. **When you’ve faced loneliness because others misunderstood your decisions or intentions, how did it affect your sense of identity and belonging?** *Consider how Joseph’s obedience to God set him apart from those around him, yet allowed him to enter into a deeper relationship with God’s presence.*
2. **In moments when your path felt isolated or confusing, have you sensed God inviting you into a deeper companionship with Him?** *Reflect on how Joseph’s faithfulness amidst loneliness revealed God’s faithfulness to him in return, even when it meant stepping into the unknown without human support.*
3. **How might embracing God’s calling in your own life require you to release expectations of approval or understanding from others?** *Think about Joseph’s willingness to set aside his own reputation and social standing in order to follow God’s purpose, trusting that “Immanuel”—God with us—was enough to sustain him through the uncertainty.*

Sunday December 8th

“The story Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John tell is the story of how God became king—in and through Jesus both in his public career and in his death.”

— N.T. Wright, **How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels**

Chapter Two: Matthew 2:1-12 (December 9th - 15th)

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

*"But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel."*

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Risk: Monday December 9th

"After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.""

The birth of Jesus unfolded in the ancient town of Bethlehem, nestled within Judea, during a tumultuous time ruled by King Herod. Herod the Great, a man who held the title "King of the Jews," was known for his fierce, often ruthless leadership. History remembers Herod as a cunning and ambitious ruler, a man who clung to power with a tightly clenched fist. His reign, marked by architectural achievements and intense paranoia, left a mixture of awe and fear. He built towering fortresses and grand temples, including the expansion of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, yet his paranoia also drove him to brutal acts, including the execution of family members he suspected of betrayal. Herod's rule was anything but serene.

Into this realm stepped the Magi—astrologers, sages, perhaps even royalty from the East. These mysterious figures, revered for their wisdom and knowledge of the stars, would have been both a curiosity and an enigma to the people of Jerusalem. Following a star they had seen rise, they entered Herod's domain, their question clear: "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?" This question reverberated through the halls of power, unsettling a king who held tight to his title. It was an act of audacious faith and courage, one that challenged the established order.

1. **Pause and consider: *What would compel me to leave the comforts I've carefully built, to step out from my circle of control and security, and to genuinely seek truth?*** Is there a longing within me that no comfort can satisfy? What am I willing to let go of to discover the heart of what's real?

Shepherd King: Tuesday December 10th

"When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel." Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.""

The question of the Magi sent ripples of unease through the heart of Jerusalem. Herod, the man whose very existence hinged on control, felt his world tilt. Matthew, the gospel writer, wants us to feel this moment—the quiet of the land, the ordered yet oppressive peace under Herod's rule, suddenly shattered by whispers of a new king. This was not just any king, but one whose birth had been written in the ancient prophecies, a king whose arrival had been awaited by generations. The possibility of his coming unsettled Herod to his core. He knew that the presence of another king could stir the people to hope, perhaps even rebellion, and that would bring the heavy hand of Rome crashing down upon them all. An uprising would disrupt the delicate balance Herod maintained with his Roman overlords, threatening both his rule and his life.

Yet, the truly astonishing part of this passage is not Herod's fear but the knowledge held by the priests and religious leaders. They knew. They knew the prophecies, the sacred words of the prophet Micah, who centuries before had written of a ruler to come from Bethlehem. "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel... He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God." (Micah 5:2, 4). Micah spoke of a shepherd, a king with a heart for his people, one who would guide and protect, not out of a lust for power but out of love and divine authority.

This promised king would not mirror Herod's rule. Where Herod wielded fear, this king would extend grace. Where Herod sought to crush opposition, this king would heal the brokenhearted and set captives free. The God-King born in Bethlehem was not coming to seize power or incite fear; he was coming to be a shepherd to his people. And so, while Herod clutched tightly to his throne, this new king would offer his hand to the lowly, embracing humility and servanthood instead of dominance and control.

- 1. As you pause to consider this moment, let yourself wonder what it means to live under the reign of a King who rules, not with a heavy hand but with a tender heart. Imagine a King who doesn't coerce your loyalty through fear, but who stirs your deepest longing with love. *This is a King who desires your heart, not your compliance; He waits for your trust, not your reluctant submission. What might it look like for you to respond—not out of duty, but from a place of true desire for Him? What might change if you let your heart be moved by His gentle strength?***

Worship: Wednesday December 11th

“After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.”

In the first century, news didn't travel through headlines or broadcasts, but word of the Magi's arrival in Jerusalem would have spread like wildfire. These were not merely a few travelers on camels. The Magi likely arrived in a sizable entourage, perhaps a hundred men strong, their presence unmistakable. They came as an entourage of scholars and dignitaries, dressed in the splendor of the East, bearing gifts fit for royalty. Herod, a king known for his paranoia, would have been alerted to their presence immediately. His network of spies and informants kept close tabs on anything or anyone that might threaten his power. In Herod's mind, such a grand caravan was more than just an arrival—it was a potential threat. Yet the Magi's intent was not political. They had journeyed under the guidance of a mysterious star, a light that had led them through distant lands, drawn by the promise of a newborn king.

When they did find the child in humble surroundings, the Magi did not recoil or question. Instead, they bowed low, offering their treasures without hesitation. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh—gifts that would symbolize Jesus' kingship, divinity, and the suffering he would one day endure. These treasures, rare and valuable, would provide for Mary, Joseph, and Jesus for

years to come, supporting them in times of uncertainty. The Magi asked for nothing in return. They worshiped, left their gifts, and departed. And when warned in a dream, they took a different path home, slipping away from Herod's reach and vanishing into the distant mist, their lives forever marked by this divine encounter.

1. **What would it look like for you to bring your most treasured gifts to God with open hands? To give without seeking His favor, without bargaining for blessings, simply as a way to worship? I believe it requires a level of trust that says, "Lord, You are worth everything I have to offer, and more." It's a posture of quiet surrender, one that says, "My gifts belong to You, and I am content to give without conditions." In that place, we begin to know God not for what He gives us, but for who He is.**
2. **Consider the courage it took for them to change their path, following divine guidance even when it required a new route.** Is there a part of your journey where God might be asking you to take a different path?

Matthew 2:16-18

"When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: "A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.""

Anger: Thursday December 12th

When Herod realized that he had been outwitted . . .

When Herod realized he had been outwitted by the Magi, his rage flared. His carefully laid plans unraveled, and he felt the sting of losing control—a feeling he could not tolerate. I am Herod. No, I haven't gone to Herod's extremes. I haven't committed unforgivable acts to secure my position, nor do I have a throne to protect. But I do feel the same tightening in my chest when I sense that control slipping away. I don't like being outwitted, whether it's in a casual game with friends, a missed detail at work, or a scam attempt that nearly catches me off guard. There's something in me that craves to be on top of things, to know, to manage, to avoid looking foolish or incompetent. Like Herod, there's a demand within me to hold the reins, to stay in command, and the stronger that demand grows, the more foolish my reactions can become.

This need for control, if I let it, can lead me down paths I don't want to walk. I see it in the words that spill out before I can stop them, the tense moments where I let frustration drive my decisions, the times I react harshly instead of stepping back. Herod's story stands as a warning—a picture of what can happen when the grip on control tightens to the point of destruction. It's a reminder that the tighter we hold on, the more we risk losing our way, making choices that hurt others and ourselves.

1. **Consider: is there an area in your life where this relentless pursuit is leading you to actions you'll ultimately regret? Perhaps it's in your relationships, where the need to manage outcomes overshadows genuine connection. Or maybe it manifests in your work, as you strive for perfection, sacrificing peace for performance.** *Acknowledging this desire for control is not merely an exercise in introspection; it's an invitation to explore how it shapes your choices and affects those around you. In recognizing the cost of this craving, you may find the grace to relinquish it and embrace a more authentic way of living.*

Anger: Friday December 13th

He was furious, and he gave orders to kill . . .

Herod was enraged—a seething anger, deeply familiar to him, gnawed within. Fury seized him in the darkest corners of his soul, demanding swift, brutal action. He felt his grip loosening; his control over this so-called “King of the Jews” slipping through his fingers. Desperate to cling to power, he ordered his soldiers on a ruthless journey into the night to silence innocent lives.

We recoil at Herod's murderous decree—and rightly so. But consider this: we, too, have let anger govern our words and actions, even as Jesus taught us, “Anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment” (Matthew 5:22). There are times we've watched control slipping away and grasped for words to hold it back. Words spoken in haste, in fear, or in anger—words that wound and scar the people we love. The proverb reminds us, “The tongue has the power of life and death” (Proverbs 18:21). How often have we used it to harm, to control, or to wound, without a thought to the life or death our words might carry?

1. **Consider the impact of your words—those utterances born from anger or fear. How have they shaped the hearts and lives of those around you?** In the quiet moments of introspection, ask yourself: how can you deliberately choose words that breathe life into your relationships, words that uplift and heal rather than wound?

Anger: Saturday December 14th

and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: "A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.""

No one can truly grasp how many children fell to Herod's soldiers on that dark night. For Bethlehem, it was a day of unbearable grief, a day when innocence was shattered and lives were stolen. We are left breathless by the sheer brutality, our hearts heavy with the sorrow of parents who lost their beloved children to the cruelty of a tyrant. Life is so fragile, so fleeting—one moment here, the next gone, leaving only whispers of love and haunting memories of what was lost. Into this world of brokenness, Jesus came—a world where His own childhood peers were ruthlessly taken, a world where He and His family had to run from a tyrant bent on destruction. Jesus' arrival was not one of splendor or celebration; it was quiet, slipping into a world marked by suffering and sorrow. He came to carry our burdens, to enter our pain, and to be a light in the midst of the darkest shadows. The Prince of Peace did not avoid the harsh realities of this world; He stepped into them, lived among them, and brought hope into places no one else dared go.

1. **Take a moment to reflect on the darkness and suffering in our world today. How does knowing that Jesus entered into such a world change the way you face pain and loss?** Consider the ways His light can bring hope to the places that feel too dark to bear.

Sunday December 15th

"Joy is the simplest form of gratitude." — **Karl Barth**

Chapter Three - Matthew 2:13-15; 19-23 (December 16th - 22nd)

When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."

So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son."

After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child's life are dead."

So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets, that he would be called a Nazarene.

Get up: Monday December 16th

"When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."

Dreams. That mysterious world of the mind where reality blurs and the impossible becomes possible. Back in the early 90s, when I was in college, I took a class on the brain, diving into the mechanics of sleep and the purpose of dreams. It was a fascinating glimpse into the complexity of the human mind, and ever since, I've been captivated by the science of the brain and its inner workings. Over the years, scientific advances have shed light on many aspects of our dreaming world, from REM cycles to neural pathways. But for all the research and discovery, one profound mystery remains untouched by science: the intersection of the spiritual and the dream world. Despite all our knowledge, we still cannot explain those moments when something beyond us seems to reach into our sleep, guiding, warning, or comforting.

Sometimes, I believe Jesus uses these twilight moments—the space between waking and sleep—to whisper directions we may miss in the clamor of daily life. For Joseph, those whispers came as clear commands, guiding him with urgency and precision. "Get up," the dream commanded. "Go to Egypt." It was a call to flee, to escape the coming wrath of Herod and

protect the life of the child entrusted to him. Joseph's dream wasn't a murmur or a suggestion; it was a divine directive, one that shifted his path and altered the course of his family's story.

1. **Reflect on your own dreams and moments of stillness. Have there been times when the quiet nudges of your heart felt like more than just fleeting thoughts?**

Consider what it might look like to listen closely to the guidance that sometimes comes in unexpected ways, and ponder where they might be leading

Anxiety: Tuesday December 17th

“So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called my son.””

The text tells us that Joseph got up in the night, gathered his family, and fled to Egypt. As a child, I used to imagine what that moment must have been like—a terrifying dream where an angel's urgent voice broke through the night, telling him to run, to take his family far from the threat that loomed over them. I picture Joseph, shaking off sleep, waking Mary, and gathering their few belongings in haste. Perhaps he loaded them onto a camel or two, and in the stillness of night, they slipped away toward Egypt. I wonder if he hired guards to protect them on the journey, or if he knew anyone in Egypt who might offer shelter. How would they survive in a foreign land? This was a moment of immense risk, of stepping into the unknown with no clear plan.

I don't like uncertainty. I don't like change, and I'm not a fan of taking risks I haven't meticulously thought through. But God, time and again, steps into my plans and disrupts them, inviting me into deeper trust. He asks me to trust him with my future, my family, my finances, my hopes, my church—all of it. Like Joseph, I want to respond with faith. When the world feels hostile, when everything seems uncertain, I pray I will get up and move in the direction God calls me, even if I don't understand it fully. I pray that I won't shrink back, that I won't run from his direction. Instead, I hope to embrace his guidance with the same courage Joseph showed, trusting that he knows the way, even when I don't.

1. **Take a moment to reflect on a time when God asked you to step into the unknown. How did you respond?** Is there an area in your life now where he might be calling you to trust him more deeply? Consider what it means to follow his lead, even when the path ahead is unclear.

Dreams: Wednesday December 18th

“After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt”

Once again, an angel visits Joseph in a dream. I wonder if he went to bed each night with a sense of anticipation, wondering if a divine message would come as he slept. Maybe he lay

down with a heart full of questions, hoping for guidance, or maybe—just maybe—he felt a strange kind of friendship with these heavenly messengers. I like to imagine him lying there, drifting off, feeling almost accustomed to these encounters, as though speaking with angels was becoming a familiar part of his life. For many of us, the thought of such divine guidance feels like a far-off dream, something we wish for—a clear voice in the night, a message from God about the path ahead.

But here's the remarkable truth: we have been given the Holy Spirit, God's very presence with us, continually reminding us of Jesus' words, guiding us in our daily lives. Jesus, in the Gospel of John, speaks plainly about the connection between knowing him and obeying his commands. Obedience, it seems, is not just about following rules; it's about staying close to him, about letting his voice shape our choices and lead us forward. And maybe that's one reason why God chose Joseph to be the guardian of Mary and Jesus—because he was willing to listen and obey, even when the call was mysterious or hard to understand.

1. **Reflect for a moment: Do you seek God's direction with the same openness as Joseph?** Are there areas of your life where you sense his guidance but find it hard to obey? Ask God for the courage to follow him - trusting that God's guidance, whether subtle or clear, is worth every step of obedience.

Obedience Thursday December 19th

“and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child's life are dead.” So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel.”

Returning home. Once again, Joseph is called to move his family. With Herod gone, the danger has passed, and the time has come to return and start anew. The path that once led them into exile now brings them back to the familiar. In the book of Hebrews, it says that Jesus learned obedience, and I often wonder if he began learning it from Joseph. Imagine young Jesus watching his earthly father, seeing the quiet strength in his obedience, the way he listened to God and moved without hesitation.

The phrase “So he got up” appears often in Joseph's story, but it's more than just a detail; it's a window into his character and his walk with God. Joseph didn't argue or delay; he simply responded. I have no doubt that there were other crisis moments, ones we'll never read about, where Joseph had to act quickly to keep his family safe, to follow the path laid out before him. And in those moments, I imagine Jesus watching, learning what it looks like to follow the will of the Father. Joseph's obedience became a model, perhaps, that shaped the obedience Jesus would one day live out, even unto the cross.

1. **Reflect on the idea of obedience. What does it look like in your own life to “get up” when God calls?** Are there areas where you hesitate or question, or do you move in trust? Consider how God might be inviting you to follow with a heart like Joseph's.

Afraid: Friday December 20th

“But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee,”

Fear isn't always a bad thing. It's a natural, even healthy, response to danger. In the Gospel of Mark, we see Jesus himself feeling the pressure of the crowds pressing in, so much so that he expresses concern about being crushed. We live in a world filled with things beyond our control—elections, unexpected crises, even a simple encounter with authority can provoke anxiety. Joseph, too, was afraid. He feared not just for his own life, but for Mary's and for the life of Jesus. How remarkable, even strange, that the Creator of the universe would place himself in such vulnerability, utterly dependent on Joseph's ability to hear and respond to divine guidance in his dreams.

But Joseph didn't stay in Egypt. Many of us, when faced with fear, cling to the safe places, choosing security over stepping out in faith. Joseph, however, trusted the way God spoke to him—in dreams that directed his path. When the time came, he packed up his family and moved toward Galilee, following God's call into the unknown yet again. As I look back on my own life, I can see the times when I chose to stay in “Egypt,” held back by fear. Childhood and adulthood alike are marked by moments where I surrendered to safety instead of trusting in the goodness and faithfulness of God.

1. **Reflect on where you might be staying in “Egypt.” Are there places in your life where fear is holding you back from following God's direction?** Consider what it would look like to step forward in faith, trusting that God's guidance will lead you through the unknown.

Sovereignty: Saturday December 21st

“and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets, that he would be called a Nazarene.”

The prophets foretold it, and so it came to pass: Jesus settled with his family in Nazareth, growing up in a quiet town far from the spotlight, known to all as a Nazarene. We know little about these years, the hidden seasons of his life, but one thing stands out—the way divine sovereignty wove itself seamlessly with human frailty, free will, and earthly understanding. Watching Joseph's story unfold, we see this miraculous partnership between heaven and humanity. God entrusted Joseph with an unimaginable task: the safety and upbringing of his own Son, the Messiah, the Savior. It's a staggering thought—God himself, vulnerable and dependent on a carpenter's obedience and courage.

This fills me with hope. If God could work so powerfully through Joseph, guiding him, entrusting him with such a profound purpose, then I believe He can do the same in my life. I'm reminded that God is not distant; He's actively involved, willing to guide me, to point me in the direction of things that matter for His Kingdom. I am invited into this divine-human dance, where my choices, my strengths, and even my weaknesses can be part of something far greater.

1. **Take a moment to reflect on where God might be inviting you to partner with Him. Are there areas in your life where He's nudging you to step out in faith, trusting that your small actions can contribute to His larger plan?** Write down your thoughts, and consider how God might be calling you into something beyond yourself.

Sunday December 22nd

"Strength is found in weakness. Control is found in dependency. Power is found in surrender."

Dan B. Allender, Tremper Longman III (2009). "Breaking the Idols of Your Heart: How to Navigate the Temptations of Life"

Chapter 4 Luke 2:1-7 (December 23rd - 25th)

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

The Birth: Monday December 23rd

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register.

Since I was a kid, I've heard and read the birth narrative of Jesus in Luke's Gospel countless times. Yet even now, I find myself wondering—who was this Caesar Augustus, and why did he hold so much power? As a pastor, I now understand who Augustus was and how his influence reached even a humble carpenter in Judea. There's much to say about him, but what captivates me most is his role in ushering in the Pax Romana—a time of relative peace and stability after years of civil war. Under his reign, prosperity flowed across the empire, and it was in this setting that the true Prince of Peace entered the world.

Even though I know better, I still find myself looking to earthly leaders for security and stability, hoping they might bring the peace I long for. I'd go as far as to say that my heart feels like the Roman Empire—vast, restless, always searching. I turn to my phone, my bank account, my family, my hobbies, hoping that somehow they will bring me peace. But there, in the middle of my striving, the true Prince of Peace waits. He invites me to pause, to step away from the noise, and to join a humble carpenter and his young wife on their journey to Nazareth, where true peace can be found.

1. **Take a moment to consider where you seek peace and security in your life. Are there places, like me, where you look to temporary comforts instead of the Prince of Peace?** Consider what it would mean to set aside those distractions and follow Jesus on the path to true peace.

The Birth: Tuesday December 24

And everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.

Christmas Eve has always held a special place in my heart. As a child, it meant gathering with family, the anticipation thick in the air, and the thrill of getting to open one present early. My mom would fill our stockings with care, her love for giving evident in every detail. She'd cook a meal that made you feel like you never wanted the moment to end, a celebration so warm and inviting that time seemed to pause. But Mary and Joseph's experience couldn't have been more different. Instead of comfort and festivity, they found themselves on a difficult journey—a pregnant woman on a donkey, guided by a man doing his best to protect her, moving toward a crowded town filled with unknowns. There was anxiety, discomfort, and likely moments of weariness that wouldn't fully make sense until told in the light of the miracle that was about to unfold.

Advent invites us to reflect on this journey, bringing us face-to-face with the vulnerability of Jesus. The Creator of all things, the Word that was with God and was God, traveled in the womb of a young woman, rocked by the motion of a donkey's steps. Tomorrow, the world will celebrate the birth of the Prince of Peace, but tonight we remember the fragile, faithful path that brought him here. Let's thank God for Mary and Joseph's courage, for the safe arrival in Bethlehem, and for their unwavering obedience in a time filled with uncertainty.

- 1. As you pause on this Christmas Eve, consider the journeys you have taken—the ones filled with discomfort and uncertainty. In what ways has God been faithful along the way, bringing you to places of meaning you couldn't have foreseen?**

The Birth: Wednesday December 25th

While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

Luke's account of Jesus' birth doesn't give us many details, leaving much to the imagination. But one thing is clear: this was no warm, cozy homecoming. Jesus was born out among animals, likely in a simple shelter under the stars. With all the holiday focus on gifts and Santa Claus, it's easy to lose sight of just how dramatic, world-altering, and awe-inspiring this moment truly was. God became flesh. The King of Kings entered the world, not in a palace, but in the quiet shadows, surrounded by the sounds and smells of animals. This happened in the very land under Herod, a puppet king, and Caesar Augustus, who claimed to be the "Prince of Peace." The irony is as profound as it is humbling.

I often wonder what must have been going through Joseph's mind in these moments. He was stepping into one of the most significant roles any person could take on—the protector of the King of Kings, God in the flesh. Joseph would soon be called to trust in divine guidance delivered through vivid, urgent dreams, and he'd have to respond without hesitation. He would need a faith that clung to the belief that God knew exactly what he was doing, even when the path seemed uncertain. As I reflect on this, I feel Advent inviting me to walk in Joseph's footsteps. To serve the King with obedience and readiness. Get up. Go. Obey.

- 1. Take a moment to reflect on the call to obedience in your life. Where is God inviting you to get up, go, and trust him fully? Write down your thoughts, and let this Christmas season be a time to step into the role of serving the King with faith like Joseph's.**