



O COME LET US
Adore Him



PRIEST
PROPHET
KING

Welcome to HOMWF Bible Study

We are so happy you have decided to join us on this Advent to Christmas journey. We hope that you'll dive in, grow in the Lord, and share with others what beauty God reveals to you through it. Begin Monday 12/4/17, resting on Sundays as a day of reflection.

If you are doing this study independently, know that we at HOM are here for you. A LARGE community of women through our website and social media are participating with you! You are truly never alone!

If you are completing this study in a group setting, we are excited that you have found a local community to grow with, in addition to our online sisterhood. Please use this free study journal for your reference and resource during your meetings and the personal time leading up to it.

God bless you all!

To Jesus through Mary.

Your Heart of Mary Team

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About this Study

A Covenant, or an agreement between God and man, has long been a sign of God's love for and faithfulness to us, even in our brokenness and imperfections. In the Old Testament, there are five major covenants that God makes with His people--found in the stories of Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David. Reading through their stories, we know that each one of these covenants is broken on the side of humanity; however, all of these covenants are ultimately fulfilled, not by fallen men, but by God Himself made man.

Advent is the time of preparing to meet our God face to face in the person of Jesus Christ. This Advent, we will be going through the covenants made with Abraham, Moses, and David to prepare our hearts for the Savior and King prefigured in each covenant.

We at HOM hope and pray that you will delve deeply into this mystery of Love that existed before time itself and that God is calling you to be a part of.

Happy Advent, dear sisters!

Love, Carissa and your Heart of Mary Team

Advent/Christmas Writing Team



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The 1st Week of Advent

Genesis 17:1-10

According to Bishop Robert Barron from Word on Fire, a priest in the Old Testament was someone who performed a sacrifice, united divinity and humanity, and brought God and humans together. Before we understand the meaning of the covenant God made to Abraham, we need to understand what the word "covenant" means. It's not just a contract or a promise.

A covenant is a solemn agreement between human beings or between God and human beings. Contracts have specific terms and have time limits. Promises are just about one thing. God's covenant with Abraham is an open-ended, fully consensual commitment, a bond that can never be broken.*

So this covenant that God makes with Abraham is one that lasts forever. This is why God promises that Abraham will have many descendants, and that his children will continue to honor God. The Lord also promised Abraham land to live on. So not only was Abraham going to have a legacy in the form of many descendants, his children would have a place to live.

This covenant foreshadows the New Covenant, "*ratified in the blood of Christ.*"* This covenant is an eternal, binding our hearts to Christ from the moment we are baptized. Millenia has passed since God's promise to Abraham and, even now, the covenant still lives on through the Jewish people and through us. Even if we are unfaithful to this Covenant, God will always be faithful to us. To quote an old country song, "*God is going to love us forever and ever, amen.*"

*Thanks to Msgr. Stuart W. Swetland, STD from Relevant Radio's "Go Ask Your Father" for providing this particular information.

When was a time when God showed you his amazing grace in the midst of darkness and struggle? What have you promised God ? How have you kept it?

The Promise of Isaac's Birth

Genesis 18:1-19 Genesis 21:1-7

There are many women out there who can probably relate to Sarah, who desperately wanted a child of her own. It's hard to understand why God makes us wait for the things that we want most, especially the things we know He promised us. In times like this, we need to be patient. The only question is how? Most of us struggle with patience in the middle of a traffic jam!

It starts by remembering that patience isn't something we just have, it's something we practice. We are on God's time. We should never compare ourselves to others who seem like they're on the fast lane to happiness. The truth is that all the things we see on our social media feed are just the highlights of people's lives. We need to focus on walking with God without looking to the side to see if someone else has it better. Basically, we need to be patient with ourselves.

When we are asking God for something, we need to trust that He will help us towards what is best for us. Sometimes God says "No" or "Not yet," but it doesn't mean "Never." He might lead us towards something we would never consider on our own, something that seems impossible and out of reach. Just remember, my sisters in Christ, that with God all things are possible.

Through practicing patience, we can begin to see God's blessings in our everyday lives and not just in the "highlights."

What prayer have you prayed that you feel has gone unanswered?

The Sacrifice of Isaac

Genesis 22:1-19

The thought of sacrificing one's own child is unimaginable. At the time that Abraham was asked to do this, I can imagine that child sacrifices were probably commonplace. So what made Abraham's God so different from all the others? Because in the end, Abraham didn't need to sacrifice Isaac. He had faith the the Lord would provide a sacrifice to take Isaac's place. At the same time, he was still willing to put God first, even over his own child.

The loss of a child is unimaginable. I know several women who have lost children to miscarriage, or have had trouble just bringing a child into this world. Add to that all the women who chose to abort their child...the pain from that loss is insurmountable. The last thing these women need is to be shamed about their loss.

If I could do anything for the women of this world who lost their child in some way, I would lead them to the Cross. The ram that God provided for Abraham to take Isaac's place foreshadowed the sacrifice that Christ would have to make. Mary stood at the Cross, just as Abraham stood in front of the bound and gagged Isaac. I can't make any promises that things will get better. The child that was lost will never be replaced. Nevertheless, we can share our sorrows with Mary, place them on the Cross, and let Jesus transform our sorrows.

Let Jesus take what has hurt us and give us new life through His love. What have you learned from loss? How does God fit into it?

Zechariah Rendered Silent

Luke 1:5-24

I hate not being able to talk. Even though I consider myself an introvert, once you get me talking about something I love, I **never** stop. Just ask anyone who knows me. At the same time, I understand the need for silence. I love the silence of Adoration and meditating in prayer. It gives me such a sense of renewal and strength.

So why was Zechariah silenced when he questioned Gabriel? My best guess is that he was doubtful and cynical. After all, he and his wife, Elizabeth, were old and had never been able to have children. Even though he was standing in the presence of an angel, he might have lacked the faith or the desire to understand the way that Mary did later on in the chapter.

Mother Teresa said that God speaks in the silence of our hearts. Zechariah's nine months of silence allowed him to watch as the child grew inside of Elizabeth and, for part of that time, watched another example of perfect faith in his vicinity. Silence can teach us so much if we give ourselves time and allow God to speak to us.

Take some time this Advent to go to Adoration and let God speak to you there. Even if you're not sure what to pray or what to say to Him, let your mind focus on Jesus, present in the Sacrament, and offer all your worries to Him. The brief period of silence will be a great blessing in this hectic time of year.

May God speak in the silence of your hearts this Advent, sisters in Christ.

How can you spend time in silent adoration this Advent?

Canticle of Zechariah

Luke 1:67-79

If you pray the Liturgy of the Hours, especially Morning Prayer, you're probably *very* familiar with the Canticle of Zechariah. It's a wonderful way to start the morning because the prayer is one of praise and gratitude for God, ending with a promise of light breaking through the darkness.

We tend to brush off positive chance encounters as just "*coincidence*," such as finding a dollar bill on the street or getting something on sale for a very low price. In truth, many things in life are little instances of Divine Providence. This canticle reminds us that God has always taken care of us and will keep on doing so by sending people or little events that remind us of His presence.

One example of this came from the story of Sister Alicia Torres, a Franciscan sister of the Eucharist who works at a soup kitchen in Chicago. She competed on the Food Network show *Chopped* as part of a Thanksgiving special featuring soup kitchen cooks. In spite of her lack of professional cooking experience or classes, Sister Alicia impressed the judges with her appetizer, entree, and dessert, and won \$10,000 for her order. Although the host told her she could use the money however she saw fit, the money went to her order because, according to them, they needed the money to help serve the poor and fix the plumbing! If that's not divine providence, I don't know what is!

Never forget that God is always here for us. Think of all the times that God has helped you in your life and trust that He will provide what you need in the future.

Reflect on a time of divine providence, when God provided you with something that you needed.

The Power and Responsibility of the Priesthood

"Only Jesus is the true priest; the one who can offer sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins. Every other priest in the world simply shares in his priesthood."-CCC #1545

Being a priest isn't just a job. It's an entirely new life for a man. The two books that revealed to me just how much a priest does is *To Save a Thousand Souls* by Fr. Brett Brannen and *Geekpriest* by Fr. Roderick Vonhogen. In *To Save a Thousand Souls*, Fr. Brannen lists all of the things a priest does. In addition to celebrating Mass, a priest also baptizes babies, celebrates marriages, visits the sick, and buries the dead.

Diocesan priests take care of a parish or, in the case of Father Roderick, specialize in a certain job. Some priests are teachers and others help out in communities dedicated to serving the poor. A priest can be called to visit a hospital at a moment's notice, or give counseling to someone who is discerning a vocation. In other words, the priesthood is a vocation with a lot of responsibilities.

In *Geekpriest*, Fr. Roderick recounted a time in his life when he took on too much and felt like he was failing as a priest. After spending a rainy day in Disneyland Paris and talking with a counselor, he realized that he was trying to handle every problem on his own and said "Yes" too many times. He started asking for help when he needed it and he learned that sometimes, you have to say "No" to make sure you're taking care of yourself.

Sisters in Christ, we can learn a lot from priests. We are tasked with a lot of responsibilities in our lives and we have to learn to rely on God to help us instead of trying to handle things on our own. There's no shame in lifting our hands and asking God to carry us. Just ask Saint Therese!

Say a prayer for a priest you know and love today. Who is that Priest?

To Jesus through Mary-*Monique*

The 2nd Week of Advent

Who was Moses?

Deuteronomy 34: 10-12

Happy Second Week of Advent! Advent is one of my favorite times of year. There are so many amazing feast days to celebrate, preparations to make before Christmas, wonderful music to listen to, it just makes me so happy. Something I absolutely love to do every Advent is to go to confession on the last possible day before Christmas Eve – not because I procrastinate, but because the choir is there practicing for the Christmas Masses, volunteers are setting up Christmas decorations, and the atmosphere is just so different from regular confession times.

This week we will be studying about Moses and God's Covenant, why God chose to send angels to appear to shepherds to announce the birth of Jesus, and comparing similarities between Moses and Jesus. Let's discuss Moses and his story. Before Moses was born, Pharaoh ordered the death of all Hebrew boys because he was worried they would grow up to become soldiers and take over Egypt. When Moses was born, his mother kept him hidden for several months, then made a basket and sent him floating down the Nile River. He was found by Pharaoh's daughter and raised as her own. Because Pharaoh's daughter adopted him, he became a prince. His mother was brought in as a wet nurse, though the Egyptians did not know about their relation.

As Moses grew up in Egyptian court, he learned how to read and write. He later went on to write the first five books of the bible. One day while watching his people work, he noticed an Egyptian beating a fellow Hebrew. When no one stepped in to break them up, Moses killed the Egyptian and buried his body. Pharaoh found out and tried to kill Moses, but he left Egypt and went to live in Midian. While there, he came to the rescue of seven sisters who had been driven away from a well by a group of shepherds.

He ended up marrying one of the sisters, named Zipporah, who later gave birth to a son named Gershom. Sometime after, God appeared to Moses in the form of a burning bush and told him that he was to free the Israelites and lead them out of Egypt. God told Moses that he would *"stretch out {His} hand and strike the*

What did the Angels tell the Shepherds?

Luke 2: 8-9

Today is one of my favorite feast days of Advent: Our Lady of Guadalupe. As a homeschooling family, our home school was named after Our Lady of Guadalupe. For as long as I can remember, my family has spent today enjoying Mexican food and watching the CCC video of Juan Diego. What better day for this feast day to fall on than Taco Tuesday?

So now we're going to jump over to the New Testament, to a quiet night in the middle of a field of sheep. After a long day's work, a group of exhausted, smelly, dirty shepherds were resting on the ground, keeping watch over their flock. Rain or shine, winter or summer, shepherds stayed in the fields with their sheep throughout the night to keep watch and protect them from predators and other thieves.

While these shepherds were hanging out, perhaps while brewing a pot of coffee over a small fire, out of nowhere an angel appeared to them surrounded by a shining light. Not surprisingly, the shepherds were frightened. Who wouldn't be, when a shining angel interrupts a routine, boring evening in the field?

The angel told them, *"Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."* And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, *"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased."* Luke Chapter 2

What important news! I wonder if these shepherds knew the significance of what they had just been told. What do you think they talked about as they journeyed to the stable? What were they thinking? Did they just leave their flock and start walking? Did they rock-paper-scissors for who got to go and who got to stay

What was the Covenant between God and Moses?

Exodus 19:3-6

Happy Feast of St Lucy! My kids love this feast day, which has been celebrated since I was a young girl. Traditionally, the oldest daughter (but sometimes we've done the youngest instead) dresses in a white gown with red sash, wearing a wreath that has leaves and candles. She goes around waking up her family, with a plate full of baked goods – in our case, we have always baked hot cross buns or cinnamon rolls. If you don't have time to bake today, maybe you can stop by a local bakery or coffee shop and support a small business while celebrating this fun liturgical feast day with a delicious treat. The Christmas season is my favorite time to support small businesses and keep my money within my local economy. Instead of helping a major corporation get even richer, help a family buy Christmas presents this year by shopping small. Your dollar(s) will go much further! As a small business owner myself, I am so appreciative of everyone that chooses to support small/local businesses when they can.

We're going to hop back over to the Old Testament again and learn about God's covenant to Moses. Three months after Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, they arrived at Mount Sinai. The first time Moses went up the mountain was in Exodus 19:3 where God told him, *"...If therefore you will hear my voice, and keep my covenant, you shall be my peculiar possession above all people: for all the earth is mine. 6 And you shall be to me a priestly kingdom, and a holy nation..."* God told Moses to consecrate the Israelites and then bring them to the mountain three days later so that He could speak within earshot of them.

The Israelites already knew they were God's chosen people because of the covenant with Abraham. The point of this new covenant was to establish rules about their life. As God said, it was to establish Israel as a *"priestly kingdom, and a holy nation."* When Moses brought them to the mountain, God gave them the Ten Commandments. Later written on two stone tablets, these commandments were God's way of showing love and protection, to help keep them (and us) away from sin. In addition to the Ten Commandments, God

also gave Moses a large amount of additional rules for them to follow (Exodus 20-23) including, *"You shall not make gods of silver, nor shall you make to yourselves gods of gold"* and *"You shall make an altar of earth unto me, and you shall offer upon it your holocausts and peace offerings, your sheep and oxen, in every place where the memory of my name shall be: I will come to thee, and will bless thee."*

Moses explained everything to the Israelites, and they agreed to follow God's word. He built an altar at the foot of the mountain, sacrificed calves to God, and then used the blood to seal the covenant. He poured half of the blood on the altar, read the book of the covenant to the Israelites, and then sprinkled them with the other half of the blood. Moses then went up into the mountain for forty days, returning with the two stone tablets. But despite promising to follow God's word, the Israelites broke their promise during those forty days and began worshiping an idol. This angered Moses so much, he smashed the tablets as a visual to show the people that they broke the covenant before it had even been completed. However, in His mercy and compassion, instead of abandoning the covenant, God renewed it. Moses went back up the mountain and fasted for another forty days, then returned with a new set of stone tablets on which were written, *"The words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments."*

How wonderful that we have such a forgiving and merciful God! He WANTS us to be with Him in Heaven, and He gives us chance after chance to get there. We just have to follow His commandments and abandon our sinful ways. The foundation of the covenant was grace. We must allow ourselves to be open to receiving God's grace, mercy, and forgiveness.

Do you have a hard time allowing yourself to be forgiven by God? What are some steps you can take to open yourself up to His grace and forgiveness? This is the perfect time to head to confession if you haven't gone yet this season. Open yourself up to God's forgiveness.

Why Shepherds?

Luke 2: 8-14

As we learned a couple of days ago, a host of angels appeared to some shepherds during the night and announced the birth of Jesus. Of all of the people that God could have chosen to announce the birth of Jesus, why do you think He chose to have His angels appear to shepherds? Why not appear to scholars or royalty? Why not the Pharisees or the Wise Men? Why was the most important news in the history of the world delivered to a group of tired, smelly, poor shepherds?

Because they were humble. Because they were looked down upon. Because they weren't important (in the eyes of others). Because it made a statement, that no one is too insignificant or unimportant for God. By choosing the shepherds, God was demonstrating His love for everyone, no matter their circumstances. Jesus came to save everyone, and appearing to a poor group of shepherds proved that. This wasn't the first time God chose someone who seemed like an interesting choice... look back to the story of young Gideon and his army against the Midianites, or tiny David versus the giant Goliath, or even the unwed, teenage virgin Mary to be the mother of God. God always chooses unlikely people to accomplish big things.

Another reason I believe the shepherds were chosen is because God is our shepherd and we are His sheep. So it is perfectly fitting that The Shepherd would choose to announce the birth of His Son to a group of shepherds. There are so many occasions in the bible where God is compared to a shepherd and we are compared to His sheep. It is also believed that this particular group of shepherds took care of sheep that were raised for sacrifice. The Lord is our shepherd, and the Lamb of God sacrificed His life to save us. See where I'm going here?

"Dear Lord, today I rejoice with the shepherds in the Good News of Jesus' birth. Help me to set aside those traditions that have become commonplace and explore the amazement of Jesus' birth. Thank You for sending a Savior for me. I want to spend my life sharing this news. In Jesus' Name, Amen."

www.proverbs31.org

Comparing Moses and Jesus as Priest, Prophet, and King

Deuteronomy 18:15

I had actually never made these connections before I started preparing for this study, but there are many similarities between Moses and Jesus. Today we'll be comparing their two lives through typology. Typology is where a person or event in the Old Testament foreshadows a person or event in the New Testament; in this case, Moses and Jesus. St Paul actually came up with this concept in Romans, where he referred to Adam as a type of Christ.

When you see their lives side by side, it's really amazing to see just how similar they were. As infants, they were both supposed to be killed by order of the current ruler: Pharaoh had ordered the death of all Hebrew boys, and Herod had ordered the death of all boys two and under in Bethlehem. Moses and Jesus were both saved by family members: Moses' mother kept him hidden for three months and his sister kept watch while he was floating down the river in a basket, suggesting his own mother (unknown to the Egyptians) as a wet-nurse when Pharaoh's daughter decided to adopt him; while Joseph and Mary fled to Egypt for their protection. That led to another similarity, that both were in Egypt for a period of time in their childhood. Can you imagine the fear those poor mothers had for their children?

Though not much is known about their transition from childhood to adulthood, the similarities continued. Moses became a prince of Egypt, while Jesus is called the Prince of Peace. Moses then went from being a prince to becoming a pauper, while Jesus went from being God to man. They both had a mission to redeem people from slavery: Moses saved Israel from slavery to Egypt, while Jesus saved us from slavery to sin. Moses fasted for forty days on Mt Sinai, while Jesus fasted for forty days in the desert.

Moses changed water into blood while still in Egypt, and Jesus changed water into wine, and then wine into his Precious Blood. They were both rejected by their own people.

Advent

"Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to prepare the ways of Thine only-begotten Son, that through His coming we may be worthy to serve Thee with purified minds. Who livest and reignest, with God the Father, in the unity of the Holy Ghost, God, world without end. Amen." -

As we head into the last week before Christmas, I want you to spend some time pondering what the season of Advent means to you and how you can continue to use this time to grow in your relationship with Christ.

Advent has been a time of preparation since the fourth century. It is a time of new life and marks the beginning of the new church year. We are to make ourselves ready for the arrival of Christ – not only the celebration of the birth but also for the future return of Christ. Plan a time to go to confession (many parishes offer confession on Saturday afternoons so even if yours doesn't, a nearby parish might), continue to meditate on God's word, and spend extra time in prayer this week.

Tomorrow is Gaudet Sunday, which means, *"rejoice."* Advent is a time of great joy, and it is specifically recognized on the Third Sunday of Advent. The priests wear rose instead of purple, which is a sign of rejoicing. This coming Wednesday, Friday and Saturday are known as Winter Ember Days, which are optional days of fasting and prayer. Some people observe Ember Days on every Wednesday and Friday of the year, but it is no longer a requirement in the United States. You are absolutely welcome and encouraged to observe them this week if you'd like though. It is a wonderful way to focus on the reason for the season of Advent.

Beginning tomorrow are the O Antiphons, which are another great way to prepare for the coming of Christ. The antiphons are part of the Evening Prayer in the Divine Office and they use ancient bible imagery from the Old Testament to address Christ with seven Messianic titles. There is one for every day until Christmas Eve. The first letter in each of the titles spells out the Latin phrase *"Ero cras"* which means, *"Tomorrow, I will come."* One custom that is fun comes from monasteries, where monks would bring extra treats to the

community every day. Preserved fruit and wine were two treats that were shared by the monks, but you can just have simple treats with dinner, especially if you have children.

How has this Advent been for you so far? Have you kept up with your goals? Have you grown in your relationship with Christ, and prepared yourself for His coming? What can you do this week to continue to prepare and grow? Pray the O Antiphons this coming week before dinner (or at a convenient time for you/ your family). They are included in this journal.

To Jesus through Mary *Adrianna*

O Antiphons

December 17 – O Sapientia or O Wisdom O Wisdom of our God Most High, guiding creation with power and love: come to teach us the path of knowledge!

December 18 – O Adonai or O Lord and Ruler O Leader of the House of Israel, giver of the Law to Moses on Sinai: come to rescue us with your mighty power!

December 19 O Radix Jesse or O Root of Jesse O Root of Jesse’s stem, sign of God’s love for all his people: come to save us without delay!

December 20 – O Clavis David or O Key of David O Key of David, opening the gates of God’s eternal Kingdom: come and free the prisoners of darkness!

December 21 - O Oriens or O Rising Dawn O Radiant Dawn, splendor of eternal light, sun of justice: come and shine on those who dwell in darkness and in the shadow of death.

December 22 – O Rex Gentium or O King of the Nations O King of all nations and keystone of the Church: come and save man, whom you formed from the dust!

December 23 – O Emmanuel O Emmanuel, our King and Giver of Law: come to save us, Lord our God!

From: Catholic Household Blessings and Prayers-<http://store.usccb.org/catholic-household-blessings-and-prayers>

The 3rd Week of Advent Gods Covenant with David

1 Samuel 16

Today we begin looking at the third covenant in this study, the last covenant of the Old Testament of which Christ is the fulfillment--God's covenant with David. And where better to start than God's anointing of David?

In 1 Samuel 16, Samuel is told by God that a new king of Israel must be chosen after Saul's disobedience. God tells Samuel that the king can be found among Jesse's sons in Bethlehem (Mmm...Bethlehem..sound familiar? But more on that later this week).

Samuel meets each of Jesse's sons beginning with the oldest, but the Lord rejects each one saying: "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature... for the Lord sees not as man sees. Man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." When it appears that Jesse has run out of sons, the youngest son, David, is brought in from tending the sheep. When David arrives Samuel anoints him with oil, recognizing him as King.

Our plans and God's plans don't always seem to look exactly the same. Like Samuel, it is easy to think that we know best, but *"the Lord sees not as man sees."* Sometimes the Lord's plans surprise us, like salvation for the entire human race coming through a small child, or the King of the Universe meeting us as a helpless newborn lying in a manger. Often He surprises us by asking great things of us, and even more often we surprise ourselves by accomplishing those great things when we freely choose to allow God to work through us.

Do you have difficulty seeing as the Lord's sees? How can you come to a better understanding of the Lord's plan during this Advent season?

The Ark of the Covenant

2 Samuel 6:11-22

The Ark of the Lord, also known as the Ark of the Covenant, was a tabernacle of sorts that housed the pot of manna, Aaron's rod, and the stone tablets containing the Ten Commandments. It was created by God's instruction and stood as a sign of His covenant with Moses and the Israelites. In Exodus, it is said that a *"cloud covered the tabernacle of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle."* It was more than a box that held sacred artifacts. The Ark was where the Lord Himself dwelled.

By the time we reach this scene in 2 Samuel 6, the Ark had been kept at the house of Abinadab for twenty years, but is now being restored to its rightful place in Jerusalem. It was a joyful celebration for the entire kingdom, and the king himself was right in the heart of the celebrating. It says: *"David came dancing before the Lord with abandon, girt with a linen ephod."* But because of this, there were some who looked on him in disdain. How he was acting was below his post as King! But David wished he could lower himself even more before the Lord.

I always found this scene a funny one to imagine--a king, almost naked, wildly dancing through the streets of Jerusalem before a golden box. As silly as it seems, both to me and to those watching him at the time, his actions are certainly admirable. A king, a man chosen above other men, unabashedly danced before the Ark. The person in the highest position in Jerusalem was unafraid of looking like a fool for the Lord.

Are we willing to humbly acknowledge the presence of the Lord in our own lives? Or are we more concerned with the thoughts and opinions of others? As we approach the manger this Advent, are we approaching Christ with the admiration and love that is due to Him?

Do you acknowledge God's presence in your daily life, even when you face challenges and negative opinions? What is one way you can humbly give yourself to Him this Advent?

David

2 Samuel 7: 1-17

Today we look at the covenant God made with David. As we read yesterday, the Ark of the Covenant has been brought to Jerusalem and placed in a tent, where David sacrificed burnt offerings to the Lord. But the Lord asks David to build Him a home in which to dwell. In return, the Lord promises David to make his name great and to give the people of Israel a safe place to dwell. However, the most significant promise God made to David was this: "When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up offspring after you...He shall build a house for my name, *and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.*"

While we will look more deeply into the significance of this tomorrow, let's focus today on how big of a promise this actually is.

The Lord promises David that his kingdom will last F-O-R-E-V-E-R. Let that sink in. He promised eternity. If it wasn't God making it, it certainly would be an impossible promise.

The Lord can and wants to do great things in our lives too, but, at least for me, that is a truth I have difficulty accepting. Sure, I recognize that God has done incredible things and made miracles happen, but why on earth would he do that for me? Even if I trusted Him enough to do these things in my life, I'd still having a hard time believing that He would be faithful to that promise, especially when (similar to David) I couldn't see His entire plan unfold.

During this Advent season, He is asking us to trust Him, even just a little. He wants to do great things in our lives, just like He promised to do in David's. He only asks that we trust Him enough to ask great things of Him.

What is that big prayer you have on your heart that you avoid giving to God because you are afraid He would never respond? Ask Him for it.

The Genealogy of Christ

Matthew 1:1-17

Today we read the Genealogy of Christ found in Matthew's Gospel. Now I know this reading can be difficult to focus on. I'll admit that it was once a reading that I would zone out on at church, except for the occasional chuckle at a strange name, but I've come to a deeper appreciation of it in recent years.

Along with our focus this week on God's covenant with David, we see God's promise coming to fruition, as David and his son, Solomon, are some of the more noticeable names on the list. You'll remember from yesterday that God promised David: *"I will raise up offspring after you...He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever."*

We will see Jesus referred to as *"Son of David"* many times throughout the New Testament. It's a title that not only tells us about Jesus' family history, but it is a Messianic title. When this title is used, His role as the long-awaited deliverer was being acknowledged. Born in David's city, Bethlehem, from Mary, wife of Joseph of the House of David, Christ comes to this Earth to take His place as rightful king. The Jews that heard this would understand the significance of these words.

Even though Solomon, David's son, did not uphold his end of the covenant, God remained faithful--even to the point of stepping in and fulfilling the role of the everlasting King. As promised to David, Jesus came in order to establish the throne of the kingdom in heaven, and in order to make all of us partakers in this eternal gift. This is the gift He wants to give us this Advent and Christmas Season.

Do you believe God will keep His promises?

Joseph

Matthew 1:18-25

While Luke's Gospel focuses on Mary's side of Christ's miraculous birth, Matthew's Gospel focuses on her husband, Joseph. As we looked at yesterday, Matthew started with Christ's genealogy through Joseph's side of the family, and today we see an angel asking Joseph to be a part of God's plan of salvation.

Although not biologically his father, Joseph plays an incredibly important role in Christ's life. When Joseph says "yes" to God and takes Mary into his home, he becomes the earthly father of Christ. Through this adoption, Jesus enters into David's lineage, allowing Him not only to fulfill God's promise to David, but also to become the prophesied Messiah.

After the angel appear to him, Joseph became Jesus' earthly father and took on all of the responsibilities that went along with this role. Even though we hear very little about Joseph in the Gospels, we know that as the man who filled this paternal role for Christ, he was the one who taught Jesus his trade, and was the example Jesus had growing up as what it means to be a man. When Joseph said yes to God's plan, he was not only saying yes in that moment, but giving God his entire life.

When God calls us, He wants us to respond like Joseph did, with our whole selves without reserve. This Advent season, God is asking us to make a gift of ourselves to Him and to others.

Reflect: How can you make a gift of yourself to God, especially in this season of preparation for the birth of Christ?

The King of Kings

Matthew 2: 1-12

It's likely we are all familiar with the three wise men, who arrived at the Nativity scene, even if only through the Christmas hymn "*We Three Kings*." But we know relatively little about them. Early writings and Church traditions tell us that they were named Melchior, Balthazar, and Gaspar, and instead of Kings, as they are often portrayed, they were more likely Persian priest astrologers who could interpret the stars. Most likely, they had been watching the sky for years, waiting for alignments that would foretell the birth of the prophesied Messiah.

After years of waiting, and after following the star over such a long distance, I am sure the last thing they were expecting to find was a small child in a stable. How could this unlikely and helpless creature hold the world's salvation?

But when the Magi arrived, they didn't hesitate. They saw and they knew. And similar to David when the Ark entered the city, the men did something unexpected; they fell on their knees and offered gifts to the newborn Lord and His Mother, the Ark of the New Covenant. They presented Him with gifts of Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh--gifts of great value and gifts made for a king.

St John Chrysostom says, in a homily on this Chapter of Matthew: *"If the Magi had come in search of an earthly King, they would have been disconcerted at finding that they had taken the trouble to come such a long way for nothing. Consequently they would have neither adored nor offered gifts. But since they sought a heavenly King, though they found in Him no signs of royal pre-eminence, yet, content with the testimony of the star alone, they adored: for they saw a man, and they acknowledged a God."*

Are we searching for a heavenly King when we seek Jesus? Or are we seeking an image of Him of our own invention? Are we seeking truth or are we seeking what we want truth to be? As this season of Advent draws near a close and as we prepare to welcome the Christmas season, we have an opportunity to recognize the King the Magi saw in this little babe. We are able to encounter Christ as He truly is--a God who loves us

Christmas Day

John 1:1

Today we celebrate the arrival of the King of kings!

During Advent we experienced the ancient prophecies of the coming of the Messiah. We were reminded that God's plan of salvation was at work long before he came to earth as Man. Now we rejoice with the angels!

How do we, the Church, celebrate the move from waiting and preparing, to the arrival of the Babe in a manger? Mass is offered four different times to usher in the Redeemer.

On Christmas Eve we can sit Vigil and look back in order to see what is now present. St. Matthew reveals God's faithfulness to himself – his words and actions – and to us, as he records the genealogy of Jesus.

At Midnight, Isaiah tells us that what God's people are longing for shall be: out of the darkness a great Light will shine, for unto us a Child is born, to us a Son is given and the government of God shall be on his shoulder." Who is this Child? "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace!" St. Luke takes us on the last leg of the journey out of gloom. It is the path to Bethlehem when Caesar Augustus calls for a census of the people. And in that over-crowded and noisy village, quietly in a shelter for animals, the Virgin gives birth to a Son. The angel of the Lord breaks through the dark night and proclaims to the shepherds who protect their sheep nearby, "*For to you is born this day in the City of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.*" Suddenly the messenger is joined by countless numbers of angels who light up the sky and sing glory to God in the highest. Gone is the dark and gloom of past, present and, potentially, the future.

We can awake early to break the night at Dawn Mass with our newborn King. Isaiah calls out, "*Behold, your salvation comes; behold, his reward is with him and his recompense before him. And they shall be called the holy people, the redeemed of the Lord.*" The psalmist sings, "*The heavens proclaim his righteousness; and all the peoples behold his glory.*" And St. Luke wraps up the celebration of the Word with the action of the shepherds – the lowliest of all people – who rush to see the good news they have heard. They find him in a feeding trough, a manger. They glorify God as dawn breaks the darkness.

Mass readings on Christmas Day record the foretelling of what this manger scene is for us. From the prophet Isaiah and the letter to the Hebrews we hear that all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God,

The Feast of Saint Stephen

Matthew 10:19

The house has been cleaned, the packages wrapped and then opened, the company's been fed, we've laughed and cried and shared new and old memories, the house is a mess again. So often the first thought before we drag ourselves out of bed the day after Christmas is, "Now, what?"

The Church teaches that Christmas has only just begun. We discovered at Christmas Mass that even as our hearts and homes prepared for his coming through Advent, that the fulfillment is not in a day or an event. The fulfillment is more like a continuum. We now have one Savior and Redeemer of all. And by his Grace through the Sacrament of Baptism he has been lifted from the manger into our hearts. We are responsible for this Child whom we now carry within, the One who came to set us free and who leads us. Are we prepared for life as a disciple of the Baby Jesus? What does all this mean?

Today we honor the life of St. Stephen, the Church's first martyr. We are reminded by this well-placed feast that being a follower of Jesus means first being willing to sacrifice – even our very lives. Stephen clearly lived the admonition of the Lord to deny himself and pick up his cross, just as the One he followed. Stephen gave his life for Love, as did the One he followed. Are we also willing to give up all for Jesus?

How did Stephen reach that point where, as we read, he was *"full of grace and power and did great wonders and signs among the people?"* In fact, we learn that no one could *"withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke."* In other words, there was no denying that he spoke with an authority not his own and that was hard for people to grasp. He spoke with such bold authority because he was a man of deep faith. He believed and he acted on that belief. Stephen allowed the Light of Christ to shine through him into a dark world. And in that submission, God filled him with wisdom beyond human capacity and knowledge.

Being a Christian comes with a price. Martyrdom is not the fate of all followers of Jesus. But all followers must be willing to die for their faith. In the United States, where I live, we do not often face the consequence of death for not renouncing our faith. But in other parts of the world, that decision for Christ is presented almost daily. In the United States the question more often presented might be, *"Am I willing to lose my friends for Jesus?"* Or, *"Am I willing to live an austere lifestyle in order to give more of my time and talents to the poorest of the poor?"* What am I really willing to sacrifice?

The Feast of Saint John the Evangelist

1 John 1:1-3

If the birth of the Son of God calls us to action, what action is that? Today we celebrate St. John the Apostle and Evangelist. His feast is in perfect placement for us. There is no time wasted by the Church to teach us how to take action: tell the good news.

What did John, one of our many models for that call on our lives, actually do? He spent time with Jesus. He watched Jesus and listened carefully to every word spoken by him. He didn't use his personality or station in life or upbringing to distance himself from life with Jesus. And he allowed the teachings and presence of Jesus to change him. But the real action? He told the world what his relationship with Jesus meant to him and he shared insights gained through that relationship. Everywhere he went he told the Good News of salvation through God's Only Begotten Son. Why did he do this? Because Jesus told him to.

John saw firsthand the life of Jesus and then proclaimed all that he saw. What about us? By the Grace of God, we have firsthand knowledge, as well. We see him in the consecrated bread and wine that, literally, becomes his Body and Blood. John saw and believed. Do we believe that God the Son is made manifest in the bread and wine at the Eucharistic Table? If we do, then our call to action is the same as for John: Proclaim the Good News wherever we go. The question remains: how?

God calls evangelists and missionaries to change the world in foreign countries or in our own (now) secular nation, much as John did. He calls some to be Priests, Deacons and Religious. But those called to such vocations are few in comparison to the number of people on earth, even to the number of those who believe in Him and His plan of salvation. As the Bible tells us, we are many parts of one Body.

So what is my part of the Body of Christ, and yours? Am I a hand, a foot, a mouth? We can only know the answer by seeking his face daily in prayer, by receiving him in the Eucharist often, by participating in the Sacraments, and by setting aside time to worship him. And then, we surrender to his will in our life, because we trust that his way is better than our way. He will lead. He will speak in many ways - to us directly in prayer and as we worship, through our Spiritual Director, or through a homily, to name a few ways. And then, we follow, knowing that my part of the Body is exactly who I am today. Then...from this spot, we proclaim the Good News. But, again, how?

Holy Innocents

Matthew 2:13-18

It is all well and good to speak of carrying the Light of the Child of Bethlehem into the world when life feels good all around us. But what about the times of great sadness and tragedy as in the death of a child to illness or abuse or accident? Or when a young father is senselessly murdered or a mother of young children dies of cancer? What about the travesties of terrorism? Isn't it then that we cry out angrily and ask how a loving God could allow such horrors against his people? And then we wonder, how can we possibly proclaim the Good News when some things are just not good or fair?

When Joseph fled in the night with Mary and the Baby Jesus because an angel had warned him of Herod's designs on the life of the child, they were surely extremely fearful. Most likely, during their trek to Egypt they heard the unbearable news: Herod's men went door to door throughout Bethlehem and the entire region, in search of any boy under the age of two in order to kill them and give assurance to Herod of his throne. Surely Joseph and Mary were conflicted. God warned them but not the others. Their child was safe, the others gone. How could this be?

I don't think that just because they knew their child was the long awaited Messiah that they were able to continue on their journey and on with their lives. I think they trusted God implicitly, which was already proven in Mary's fiat and Joseph's taking her as his wife. That trust gave them courage and strength to carry on and to live a life worthy of parenting the Only Begotten Son of God.

We still might ask, *"What kind of God is this?"* And then we must remind ourselves of Truth: What kind of god? The kind who proved his unfathomable Love by allowing His Only Child to pay with his life for the sins of all - those created in his image. He made a way for us to choose to live with him forever, because his Son's death and subsequent resurrection, demolished sin and death. This kind of God loves us that much. It's so important that we keep this eternal perspective in times of strife and anguish, or we will lose all hope. And if we lose hope, we have really lost life itself.

St. Joseph and Mary Mother of God continued to trust God in the face of horrific circumstances, in order that the world would see Jesus, as they raised him and as they lived a life worthy to parent him. Life is not always easy. In fact, life can be downright unbearable at times.

Fifth Day Octave

Luke 2:22-32

Is it still Christmas? Today is the 5th Day of the Octave of Christmas, which is why we continue the message brought to us by the birth of the Christ Child. In the Church, every day within the octave is as the original solemnity of the Nativity of our Lord. Here is a beautiful reminder at communion, which is spoken when Eucharistic Prayer I is used on this 5th Day:

Celebrating the most sacred night (day) on which blessed Mary the Immaculate Virgin brought forth the Savior for this world, and in communion with those whose memory we venerate, especially the glorious ever-Virgin Mary, Mother of our God and Lord, Jesus Christ...

From this Baby we continue to learn what is expected of us who call ourselves by the name Christian. When old Simeon laid eyes on Jesus, he was immediately at peace. He knew he could face death because he had, at last, seen the Light. Simeon spent his entire life waiting for that day. We can imagine he spent his days seeking God in prayer and worship. At our Baptism, we are brought into the Light of the Kingdom of God. We are called to seek God in prayer and the Sacraments, as well. Why? So that we can remain in the Light.

I work from our home that no longer has little children scurrying about, needing fairly constant attention. Though I am quite busy with my writing, my business, and my commitments at our parish, besides household responsibilities and my husband to spend time with, I have a good amount of time to offer to God in study, prayer, and worship at Mass and Adoration. I can even spend hours a week in Ignatian Imaginative Prayer or Lectio Divina. These actions the Lord has spoken to me of, and some are that which The Church has also laid out for me. In a sense it is what is 'required' of me to grow as a Catholic Christian, just as Mary and Joseph did what was required of them by Mosaic Law - the presentation of their Child at the temple. At this time of my life, I have little excuse not to be deepening my faith in the Light.

But you might be a mom with several children living at home, who need you to meet most, if not all, of their needs. Or perhaps you are not a mom but are steeped in a time-consuming career. Perhaps you are a full time care-giver. Where is your time to grow?

Grace is the answer for us all. God knows every one of our commitments and how our time is often not our own. Thankfully, he judges our heart, not our clock or calendar. Whatever time we can set aside just for him throughout the day - be it minutes or hours - will faithfully be used by him to re-fill us with the knowledge of

Sixth Day Octave

Luke 2:36-40

It is the 6th Day of the Octave of Christmas and our readings continue to show us how to respond to the birth of the Christ Child. When Anna saw Jesus, she didn't wait until the temple cleared of people who might think she was a crazy old woman. She immediately gave thanks to God. Then she proclaimed to everyone who would listen that the long-awaited Messiah had arrived.

We are blessed beyond our imaginings because we no longer must wait for the Messiah. We have been born into an age when He has already lived and died and lived again. We live in the age since He ascended into heaven for us. We have the presence of God the Holy Spirit in our very hearts. What is our response upon seeing Him in the manger?

When I ask that question there are too many answers. I should feed the hungry, and clothe the poor. I should care for the widow and the orphan perhaps by teaching them or even bringing them into my home. What about making homes for the homeless? I should tend to the sick and visit the lonely and those in prison. Should I teach religious education or Bible study for the women in my parish? Maybe I should give glory as a choir member or in the Altar Society. I could visit nursing homes or clean the yards of the elderly. Perhaps I am to comfort the dying or those who have lost loved ones. I could be a social worker or counselor for the parish or work in a soup kitchen or crisis pregnancy center. I could write stories or articles that help people know Jesus. It's dizzying to think there are so many ways I could serve this Child, many of which I would be quite good at. There is one thing I know for sure: I can't do it all.

We want to live the reality of man reconciled to God through the life, death and resurrection of his only Son. We want the whole world to know! But how can we decide our part?

Try this: Close your eyes and imagine a night sky black as ink, twinkling with billions of stars. One huge Star is so bright it blinds the naked eye. The Star beams onto a cave where a manger filled with hay holds a tiny baby boy, wrapped tightly in cloths. See yourself standing just inside the cave opening, hands clasped in front of you, head slightly bowed but still lifted enough to witness this greatest event in the history of the universe. The Baby's breath puffs through tiny lips as he sleeps peacefully. Leaning beside him is his weary, young mother. As tired as she is, her face is bright. She won't let her heavy eyelids close. Instead, she keeps them fastened in awe at the Child she has just delivered. Squatting by her head, arms resting on his

knees, is an older man with a tired face, but whose eyes are lit in amazement as they, too, are not permitted to close. There is not sound or movement in the cave for even the animals sense something mighty has just occurred. Keep your eyes closed. Can you breathe in the scents of animals, and fresh hay, and even the Infant? Do your ears tingle in the silence? Is your heart pounding harder? Do you even feel a bit faint?

And now pray, "Lord, God Almighty, through the life, death and resurrection of this Child, your only Son, you have redeemed me of my sins and offenses against you and you have reconciled me to you. I want to tell the world of your great love through my life. I want to show the world who you are. There are so many ways, it's hard to decide. But I know just as you have created each of us individually, you also have a unique task for each. I ask you now, in the quietness of my heart, and as I silence my own thoughts, to show me how you would like me to tell the world that Love was born this day. Show me how you would have me live your Light. In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

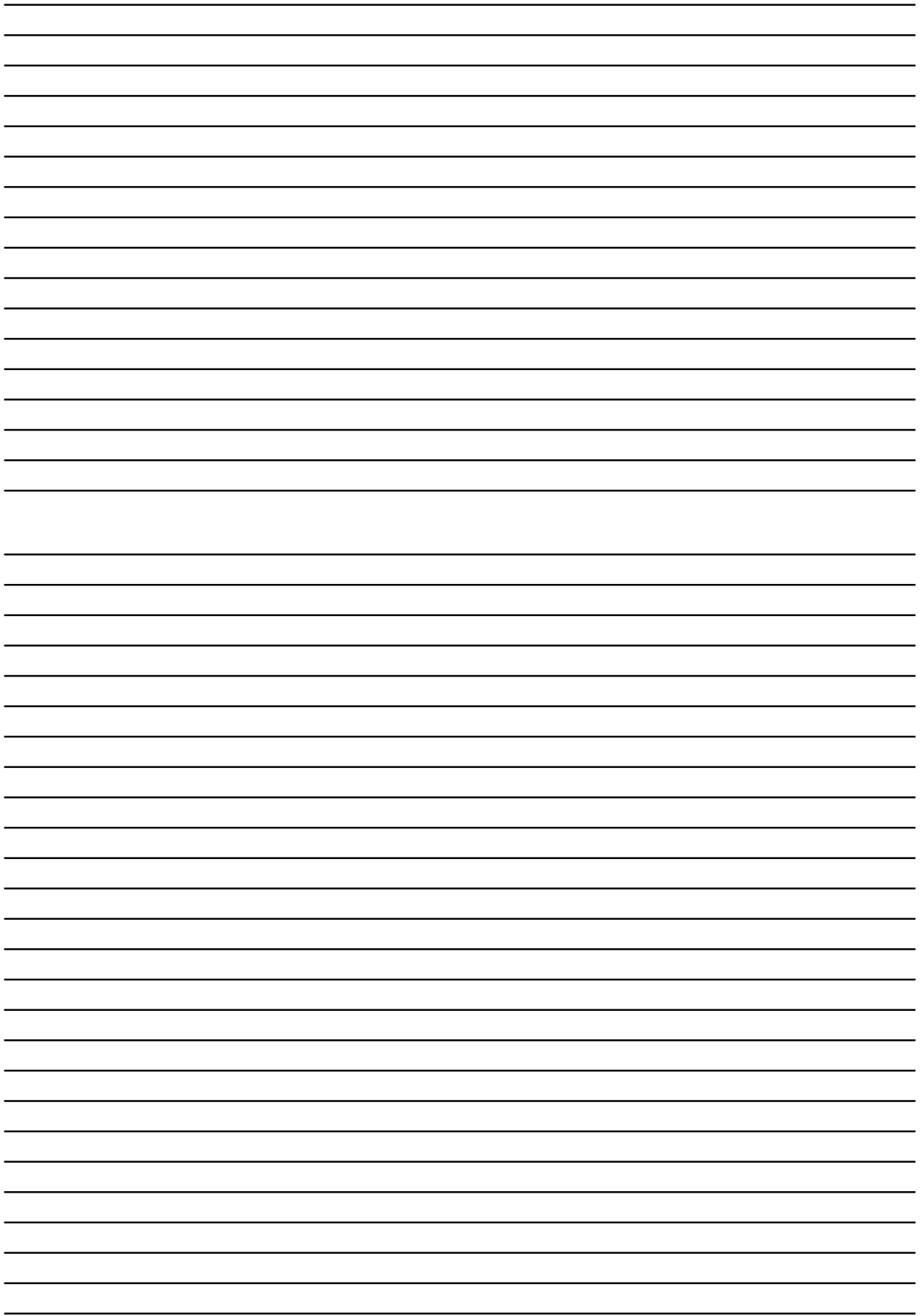
And then wait. No more words. Just wait. If the first time you imagine that first Christmas night and recite this prayer, or one similar, there seems to be no response, do not fret. Pray it again tomorrow. And again, if need be. Sometimes our self is in the way of hearing and it takes a good amount of emptying our thoughts in order to hear.

But keep this in mind: what you perceive as no answer may actually be God saying, "Be a woman who loves me. Live my Love as a daughter or sister, a friend or co-worker, a wife, a mother. Just as you already are."

Give thanks to God for He knows the best way for each of us to shout to the world this Christmas and everyday: Love was born on Christmas Day!

How do I hear God leading me? What part in his story does he want me to play?

To Jesus, through Mary - Cheryl



Thank you for joining us at
Heart of Mary Women's Fellowship.

We look forward to your joining us in our Lenten Bible
study. May God bless you and your family with love and
peace!

Much Love,
Your Heart of Mary Team

Check out our January Devotions,
beginning January 1, 2018,
"Bearers of Light"

