



CROSSWALK

wonder

THE SERIES GUIDE

© Lovewell Creative

This is a work for hire for Lovewell Creative.

Lovewell Creative
10421 Corporate Drive
Redlands CA, 92374
www.lovewellcreative.org

INTRODUCTION

I don't know what you were taught growing up, but in my household, Christmas was a magical time filled with all kinds of wonder.

As soon as Thanksgiving was over and the Christmas decorations started coming out, my heart began to beat faster, wild with anticipation. I believed in all the stories I was told about Christmas - Santa Claus and the elves at the North Pole, Frosty the Snowman, and yes, even Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. In fact, throughout the month of December, as my family and I would drive around at night, I'd see those red lights blinking at the top of what I assumed were radio towers, and I was sure it was Rudolph taking practice runs for the big night.

But as is often the case, as I got older, the wonder of Christmas began to wane. Christmas became a busy season of shopping and scurrying about in order to spend a few moments with loved ones.

However, if I'm honest, on Christmas day, I still had a stirring of wonder in my heart, but it shifted from Santa Claus and Reindeer, to looking at the night sky and thinking about the story of Christ. I started thinking about that night, over 2000 years ago, when magi arrived from the east, having followed the light from a star that led them to a

manger in a small town called Bethlehem. I thought about the angels appearing to the shepherds to announce the birth of the new king. And if I'm honest, I even wondered at the beauty of getting a few quiet and peaceful moments with those that I love most.

This year, for Christmas at Crosswalk, we'll be exploring the Christmas story found in Luke 1-2 through the lens of wonder. Wonder is defined in our dictionary as "a feeling of surprise mingled with admiration, caused by something beautiful, unexpected, unfamiliar, or inexplicable." In the Bible, however, wonder is often associated with the idea of seeing God more clearly among our humanness.

I often associate wonder with a child-like sense of awe at something you can't quite put into words, something so wonderful, so beautiful, so amazing, that it almost takes your breath away. And if it involves seeing the divine among our humanity more, then wonder is what happens when I witness an incredible sunset, hear a baby giggle, sing a song in worship that brings tears to my eyes, and so much more.

In order to let our selves wonder at this story, however, we're going to have to let something go first. You see, one of the biggest enemies of wonder is familiarity. The more familiar we become with something, the less inspiring it seems, or the less mystery it entails, and thus, the less wonder we have for it.

I liken it to the main character in the Pixar movie WALL-E, that came out in 2008. WALL-E was a robot left on a post-apocalyptic world, whose job it was to gather the garbage left behind in hopes to one day restore life on planet earth. But WALL-E did something interesting. Every day, he collected something that caused him to wonder; a broken watch, an old rubik's cub, and other items we consider garbage. To WALL-E, these items were beautiful and they filled him with awe and wonder (I have a figure of WALL-E in my office to remind me to live with wonder).

So let go of the familiar and prepare your hearts to live through these next four weeks with a sense of awe and wonder, with child-like eyes wild with anticipation, and the story of a God who became human, in order to bring us back to Him.

Grace, Peace, and Merry Christmas,

Pastor Paddy and the Series Guide Writing Team.

Day 1

THE WONDER OF A PROMISE



Isaiah 7:14

14 All right then, the Lord himself will give you the sign. Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel (which means 'God is with us')

Isaiah 9:2, 6-7

2 The people who walk in darkness will see a great light. For those who live in a land of deep darkness, a light will shine. 6 For a child is born to us, a son is given to us. The government will rest on his shoulders. And he will be called: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. 7 His government and its peace will never end. He will rule with fairness and justice from the throne of his ancestor David. for all eternity. The passionate commitment of the Lord of Heaven's Armies will make this happen!

When this prophecy was given, Ahaz was king of Israel and they were living in dark times. It's easy to lose hope when nothing ever seems to go your way, especially when that phenomenon happens year after year after year.

So God makes a promise to the Israelites to give them hope. First, he says He'll give Israel a sign that what He says will come true. That sign will be a virgin who will give birth to a son. That son will bear the name, Immanuel, which means God with us.

I'm sure that because of their circumstances, which were ultimately self-inflicted, it felt as if God had abandoned them. Gone were the days of old, when the ark of the covenant dwelt in their midst representing the very presence of God. Yet God makes a promise that He hasn't abandoned them, and a child born of a virgin will be the proof.

Along with this sign comes a dangerous promise to give to a people living in darkness. In Isaiah 9:1, God says, "Nevertheless, that time of darkness and despair will not go on forever." Hope is dangerous because it opens you up for disappointment if the promise isn't fulfilled. It's hard to get excited, to wonder at God's promises, when your present life sucks.

But then we go on to read more about the promise. This child that is coming will be all the things we've always needed: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. And the yearning in our hearts for justice, for things to be put right, it's all going to happen. Not only that, this new government, or rule, will never end; it will grow and grow throughout eternity.

Oh, if only the Israelites could believe in the promise, hope in the promise, and experience the wonder of a God who never actually leaves them or abandons them.

Thankfully, we serve a God who fulfills His promises; maybe not as quickly as we want Him to, or even the way we want Him too, but He always fulfills in the way we most need Him too. So for today, I wonder at the promise of a coming king, the promise of a time when the darkness will be removed, the promise of a kingdom coming that will seek to set all things right and will never end. Those are promises I can wonder in.

QUESTIONS

1. When you think of the promises given throughout Scripture, what promise of God's do you most need fulfilled in this season of life?
2. For Israel, the darkness included slavery, deportation, attempts to assimilate them to foreign gods and religions, and oppression. What darkness do you see in our world today?
3. What is the light that is most needed in those spaces and what are some ways you could be a bearer of that light, of God's hope?

Day 2

THE WONDER OF A PROMISE



Luke 1:5-7

5 When Herod was king of Judea, there was a Jewish priest named Zechariah. He was a member of the priestly order of Abijah, and his wife, Elizabeth, was also from the priestly line of Aaron. 6 Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous in God's eyes, careful to obey all of the Lord's commandments and regulations. 7 They had no children because Elizabeth was unable to conceive, and they were both very old.

There seems to be a contradiction into today's passage, did you catch it?

In verse 6, we read that Zechariah and Elizabeth were "righteous in God's eyes, careful to obey all of the Lord's commandments." If this is true, many of us probably struggle with the next line, "They had no children because Elizabeth was unable to conceive."

Having children in Biblical times was so important to a family, and as we see throughout Scripture, it was also a part of a woman's self-worth. To be barren was a particular struggle. So for us, it doesn't it seem to make sense that if

Zechariah and Elizabeth were truly right with God and obedient to His laws, that they were barren.

I think often, we have to work on managing our expectations when it comes to our spiritual lives. We tend to think that if we pray a certain amount each day, read our Bibles, and treat others well, that we should not only receive blessings, but we should be able to sense God's presence regularly, maybe even hear His voice.

And when those things don't happen, we find ourselves deeply disappointed. If life takes a real negative turn, and we lose a loved one, or a career, or suffer any number of unfortunate incidents, then we sometimes throw our faith out the window because what did it give us back in return.

But imagine if you treated your human relationships this way; as if you're only in them to get what you want out of them. The minute you don't get what you want, you're out.

Problem is, that's not what commitment means, nor is it what love is.

Take for example the promises a couple commits to on their wedding day, things like; loving each other in sickness and in health, in good times and in bad, for richer and poorer as long as we both shall live. That sounds like you're committing to the relationship whether things go well or not, whether you get everything you want out of the relationship or not.

I once read that Mother Teresa struggled to sense the presence of God from the moment she accepted the call to serve the poorest of the poor in India. Now, this is a woman who loved so much, gave so much, that you would expect her walk with God was powerful and continuous. However, that wasn't the case, at least it's not how she felt. But Mother Teresa never abandoned that relationship just because she didn't get what she wanted; to sense God's presence. She was committed to God come what may and her life was proof.

Zechariah and Elizabeth were faithful to God, serving and loving even though they never had children. Now in their old age, God's going to flip the script on them in a way they could have never imagined. They will be filled with wonder and one of them will be speechless.

QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever experienced disappointment in a relationship from an unmet expectation?
2. Have you ever been disappointed in God, especially in a time when you thought you were doing all the right things?
3. What expectations might you need to let go of today in order to experience God anew?

Day 3

THE WONDER OF A PROMISE



Luke 1:8-17

8 One day Zechariah was serving God in the Temple, for his order was on duty that week. 9 As was the custom of the priests, he was chosen by lot to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and burn incense. 10 While the incense was being burned, a great crowd stood outside, praying.

11 While Zechariah was in the sanctuary, an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the incense altar. 12 Zechariah was shaken and overwhelmed with fear when he saw him.

13 But the angel said, “Don’t be afraid, Zechariah! God has heard your prayer. Your wife, Elizabeth, will give you a son, and you are to name him John. 14 You will have great joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, 15 for he will be great in the eyes of the Lord. He must never touch wine or other alcoholic drinks. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even before his birth. 16 And he will turn many Israelites to the Lord their God. 17 He will be a man with the spirit and power of Elijah. He will prepare the people for the coming of the Lord. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children,

and he will cause those who are rebellious to accept the wisdom of the godly.”

The author of this gospel, Luke, speaks of angels and their activity in our world far more than any other gospel, or New Testament, writer. Both Luke and Acts are full of angel encounters, places where heaven and earth collide.

As is often the case, our human response to being able to peak behind the divine curtain is fear, or in Zechariah’s case, “shaken and overwhelmed with fear.”

But the angel’s response is always the same to our human response, “Don’t be afraid.” I believe God longs for the day when we no longer respond to Him with fear, when our world and His are one, as they were meant to be in the beginning.

Then came the words that likely made Zechariah both weep and doubt. The angel said, “God has heard your prayer.”. Which prayer? The angel tells us, it was the one about a son for Elizabeth. Oh how they’ve prayed for this day, how they’ve waited, how they’ve yearned.

But hold on. Twenty or thirty years ago these words would have made sense. But now? Now, Zechariah and Elizabeth are old as we see more in tomorrow’s reflections. So though Zechariah wants to hope, wants to believe, reality is going to hit hard.

Before that reality fully sets in, however, the angel is going to talk about this alleged child to be born to this old couple. He'll be "great in the eyes of the Lord," "filled with the Holy Spirit," "a man with the spirit and power of Elijah." This wasn't going to be an ordinary child, this child was going to be a force for the kingdom of God. There are even allusions in this passage to the long-awaited Messiah, allusions that this priest would have known well. Was it really time for the Messiah to come? Was Zechariah and Elizabeth really going to play a part? It was hard to take in, so hard that Zechariah couldn't right away.

QUESTIONS

1. What's some of the best news you have ever received in your life? What made it some of the best?
2. Is there something you've been praying about for a long time but haven't received?
3. How might you surrender that something to God and trust in Him for His way and His timing?

Day 4

THE WONDER OF A PROMISE



Luke 1:18-20

18 Zechariah said to the angel, “How can I be sure this will happen? I’m an old man now, and my wife is also well along in years.”

19 Then the angel said, “I am Gabriel! I stand in the very presence of God. It was he who sent me to bring you this good news! 20 But now, since you didn’t believe what I said, you will be silent and unable to speak until the child is born. For my words will certainly be fulfilled at the proper time.”

And there it is, doubt. In fact, a pattern we’ll see repeated in the Christmas story is that often, when God calls us or makes a promise, our first response is to look at ourselves and our limitations instead of who God is.

For Zechariah, he knows how old they are. I love how good of a husband he is in this encounter with the angel. Notice how he says he’s an old man, but his wife is just “well along in years.” Zechariah would get brownie points for sure for his description of his bride.

Does this story sound familiar at all to you? It should. Back in the book of Genesis, there was another old couple who had been promised a son, in fact, they were promised a nation to come through them. However, their promise came years before it actually happened.

One difference between the story of Abraham and Sarah is that they got tired of waiting and took matters into their own hands, whereas Zechariah and Elizabeth continued to be faithful and believe. Well, at least that's what happened after Zechariah was struck speechless by the angel for his lack of belief.

And some see Zechariah's speechlessness as a punishment. I actually see it as a blessing. For the next nine or so months, Zechariah would get the opportunity to listen for God's voice in a new way. He'd learn to trust in Him more. Then, after Elizabeth became pregnant, Zechariah would get to continue to reflect on the words the angel spoke in the temple that day about what the boy would do. Those words would become so seared into his mind that he couldn't forget them even if he wanted too. Those words would be his guide as he would raise this boy to fulfill God's call.

QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever gone through a struggle that turned out to be a blessing? What was it and what blessing came from it that maybe surprised you?

2. Why do you think we're so quick to look at our own faults and weaknesses whenever God calls or makes us a promise?
3. What's something you need to trust God with today?

Day 5

THE WONDER OF A PROMISE



Luke 1:21-22

21 Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah to come out of the sanctuary, wondering why he was taking so long. 22 When he finally did come out, he couldn't speak to them. Then they realized from his gestures and his silence that he must have seen a vision in the sanctuary.

It's taken me a long time to admit it, but I am a talker. When I was little, my older brothers called me "mouth," which I hated, so I tried to prove them wrong but here I am, 49 years later, and I've finally accepted it.

I can't imagine what it would have been like for Zechariah to come out of the sanctuary with some of the best news of his life, and not be able to shout it from the mountaintops. Now sure, maybe he was still wondering how the promise of a son could or would be fulfilled, but either way he had seen an angel, and peaked into the other realm. This was

cause for celebration, for sharing, but all Zechariah could do was flail his arms about and maybe write a message in the sand.

But here's the deal that may seem controversial to some - I think God still speaks and still shows up in our world today. The reason we miss it so often is because we're so busy, because there is so much noise all around us competing for our attention, and because the devil will continue to do whatever he can to make us think God either isn't there, or doesn't care.

Again, maybe this was the reason for the "gift of silence" for Zechariah. For I believe that when we can quiet the other voices and turn our attention to God, we will hear Him speak. Maybe it won't be an audible voice, or a visit from an angel, but maybe it will be a word from the Lord through the Scriptures that speaks to us in a way it never has before, when we need it most. Or maybe it comes through a sunset that steals our breath away. Or maybe a friend sends us a word of encouragement, or even of correction, at a time when we most need it. I believe God still speaks and if we're open to the many ways He does, we will hear Him.

I remember a hike one day during a difficult season of my life. I was battling my anxiety and trying desperately to sense God's presence. I was up against a decision that needed to be made and I had no idea what to do.

During the hike, I suddenly sat down by a rock and cried. Tears are often so healing, they are the words we can't say but God hears.

After the cry, which I needed more than I realized, I took three deep breaths, breathing in some words of truth, "I am God's child, whom He loves." And breathing out, "With whom He is well pleased." After those deep breath prayers, I began walking the path again and within a few feet, I saw a plant full of flowers that were in the shape of hearts. I knelt down and began to cry again, but these were tears of gratitude, not fear or pain. I believe with all my heart that it was a way God chose to speak to me that day, reminding me that no matter what, He is with me and He loves me.

Had I not slowed down before that clump of flowers, I'm sure I would have missed it. But thankfully, I did slow down and because I did, I saw God speak. Wonder what would happen if we practiced more slowing and listening in our lives?

QUESTIONS

1. What's the most recent "big news" you had to share with others and how quickly were you able to share it?
2. Have you ever had a moment where you felt God was speaking to you in some way or another (a song, a friend, a verse, a thought, etc...)
3. What are some of the biggest sources of noise in your life right now and is there a time in your week that you can set aside to quiet that noise and listen more?

Day 6

THE WONDER OF A PROMISE



Luke 1:23-25

23 When Zechariah's week of service in the Temple was over, he returned home. 24 Soon afterward his wife, Elizabeth, became pregnant and went into seclusion for five months. 25 "How kind the Lord is!" she exclaimed. "He has taken away my disgrace of having no children."

A few years ago I was at a conference in another country, at a place where they were a little more open to how the Spirit moves and works among us now. I was listening to a pastor pray over married couples who had thus far been unable to have children. It was a beautiful prayer, but what caught me off guard, in a humorous way, was what the pastor said after his prayer.

He said, "Ok friends, we've prayed to God and asked for His blessing. In other words, we've done the faith part. But you know that book of James says that faith without works is dead, right?" Then he finished, "Ok, so now go get to work."

The crowd burst into laughter, but I know some couples left that day with the hope that the words prayed over them would come true.

They did for Elizabeth. Not long after Zechariah's angelic encounter in the temple. Elizabeth's pregnancy test came back positive (not sure what that was in those days, but it probably wasn't as convenient as peeing on a stick).

I can't imagine the joy she had after living so long, childless. After praying for so long to be with child. Yet here she is, when it seemed impossible, and God had blessed them with a child.

Her response? "How kind the lord is! He has taken away my disgrace of having no children"

Surely the disgrace she felt and had believed all these years came from both external and internal sources. I'm sure the women in town would look at her and shake their heads as they held their babies. I'm also sure that Elizabeth would cry herself to sleep at night, longing to have a baby of her own to hold, a bassinet to rock, and even diapers to change.

But now, after all these years, she wondered at the God who fulfills His promises.

There is not a single promise that God has made that He hasn't fulfilled, or is in the process of fulfilling. That may

be hard to hear if you're waiting for something you feel He's promised you, but rest assured, God's promises come from His love, which we're told "always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres." A love that "never fails." (1 Corinthians 13:7-8a, NIV)

God is certainly a WONDER-filled and WONDER-filling God, which we'll continue to see through the Christmas story as God not only makes promises, fulfills promises, but also becomes the promise, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.

QUESTIONS

1. Do you feel any disgrace in your life right now, either from external or internal sources?
2. What would it take for you to let God's grace, His kindness to you, wash over you and heal you from those feelings of disgrace?
3. Today, try to hear God's words remind you of who you really are - His child, whom He loves, and with whom He is well pleased.

Day 7

SMALL GROUP STUDY

INTRODUCTION

The following is a guide to help facilitate discussion between you and the person you're studying with or with your Connect Group. Feel free to add, subtract, or change questions to fit the conversation, and pray for the Spirit to lead in all things.

OPEN QUESTIONS

What is one of your favorite things about the Christmas season? What's one of your least favorite things?

HEAD

1. Read Luke 1:5-25 together and share any wisdom, insights, or thoughts that come to you from the reading.
2. What is wonder to you and how, and where, do you think it fits into the Christmas story?
3. Do you think Zechariah and Elizabeth ever felt bitter towards God for serving Him well, but not getting what they wanted?
4. In verse 8, we see Zechariah continuing to be faithful and obedient to God. How can you and I be faithful and obedient even through tough times?
5. Angels always have to assure us to not be afraid. Why do you think that is?

6. Why did Zechariah struggle to believe the angel? Was it just the age or something else?

HEART

1. An angel, a promise, an answered prayer, a pregnancy. Where do you see wonder, that which is extraordinary and even beyond explanation, in the story for this week?
2. Do you think there is any connection between the story of Abraham and Sarah, and that of Zechariah and Elizabeth? If so, what?
3. Why can hope be such a dangerous thing for someone who hasn't had it for so long (Zechariah and Elizabeth and having a son, as well as Israel and the promised Messiah)?
4. What do you think the silence of the next nine months afforded Zechariah?
5. How freeing it must have felt for Elizabeth to finally be free from her disgrace! How can you and I seek to help free other people from whatever disgrace they or the world have held onto?

HANDS

Make a list of promises that you feel God has made and fulfilled for you up to this point in your life, as well as promises that He has made that have yet to be fulfilled. Spent time in gratitude for all God has done, and all that He promises to do. Do you think there might even be something He's working on now that you just can't see?

Remember, God is always at work and He loves you more than you can even imagine.

LIVING WORDS FOR YOUR WEEK

Your unfailing love, O Lord, is as vast as the heavens; your faithfulness reaches beyond the clouds.

Psalms 46:10 NLT

Day 8

THE WONDER OF POSSIBLE IMPOSSIBILITIES



Luke 1:26-27

26 In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee, 27 to a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David.

Luke is setting us up for the fulfillment of a long awaited prophecy. He's mentioned the promised predecessor, John the Baptist (aka, Elijah); he introduces us to a virgin girl

(Isaiah's prophecy); and what is about to transpire will be done through the lineage of King David, who was told by God through the prophet, Nathan ...

“Your house and your kingdom will continue before me for all time, and your throne will be secure forever.” (2 Samuel 7:16, NLT)

So rest assured, something big is about to happen, and for the Israelites, it's been 500 years in the making. 500 years is a long time to wait, to hold onto a promise, to not give up hope.

I don't know if I could have held on. I waited 33 years for my football team to get into the playoffs, and my hope meter had dropped to about 2%. I've been waiting 38 years for a remake to my all-time favorite movie, *The Three Amigos*, but that's never gonna happen. It's hard to hold onto hope for such a long time.

For Israel, as they have been oppressed by one super power after the next, I'm sure the hope of the coming of the promised Messiah was waning thin. In fact, there were some who appointed themselves to be Messiah Israel needed, but none of those worked out, they all ended in death.

However, over the course of my life I have come to realize that when the weight of what seems impossible bears down on us, that's when God's power truly shines. Or maybe a

better way to say it, is that when we are most aware of our need, we are most open to recognize how God has been at work all along.

As Jesus taught Paul when it came to his own struggles, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” (2 Corinthians 12:9, NLT). In other words, when we’ve run out of all of our resources, when we know there’s now way we can fix the problem on our own, God shows up to remind us that we’ve never been alone and with Him, the impossible becomes possible.

What’s interesting about this story over last week’s involving Zechariah and Elizabeth, is that this time, the angel comes to the woman, not the man. Something different is in the air involving what is about to happen; something that will break down the walls we’ve created between each other; something that will bring unity and equality back, remind us that we are all children of God. Oh the wonder of a God who makes possible what we think is impossible. I, for one, can’t wait to see what He’s going to do next.

QUESTIONS

1. Can you remember back to a time when you were promised something that you had to wait a long time for? What was the anticipation like and did it ever wane?
2. Has there been anything that you thought was impossible in your life, that God made possible?

3. When was the last time that God rendered you speechless?

Day 9

THE WONDER OF POSSIBLE IMPOSSIBILITIES



Luke 1:28-29

8 Gabriel appeared to her and said, "Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!" 29 Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean.

Here again, as in the story from last week, an angel appears onto the scene; heaven and earth collide, and a human is allowed to peak behind the curtain into the realm of the kingdom of God.

I would have been awestruck and wonder-filled, and as we learned with our earlier description of wonder, there is always a little bit of holy fear mixed in. It is hard for us as humans to comprehend the heavenly realms, but here, Mary is given the opportunity to try.

Then comes the line, “favored woman.” Not sure about you, but I have often wondered what it was about Mary that made her favored in God’s eyes. Was she particularly devout? Did she pray morning, noon, and night? Did she treat other people with a love and respect that rose above those around her? What was it about her that made her so favored that an angel would come and tell her what part she was to play in the most important event to happen in all of history?

But the problem with those questions is that it makes Mary the focus, which is our common go-to response in the western world. We love to make things all about ourselves. However, the language Gabriel uses speaks to something else entirely.

The word used here for favor is better translated, “Greetings woman who is being pursued by grace.” God had chosen Mary out of His limitless grace, and grace is often defined as an act of kindness beyond what is due or common. So Mary being favored is really about God, more than about Mary.

Now this doesn’t diminish Mary’s role. I’m sure God chose her for a reason, but what made her the most special was God’s choice, His grace, as well as the promise that He is with her. Which, incidentally, the wonder and promise of His presence is one that is given to us all, as stated in Jesus’ last words before His ascension, “I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20, NLT), as well as

with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit given in the book of Acts.

Mary's response to this angel and the words shared is common; she's confused, disturbed, but again, that's what happens to us when heaven and earth collide. Thankfully, Mary doesn't run. She stays in the conversation to see what impossible thing God's going to make possible next. Oh the wonder of it all.

QUESTIONS

1. Where, when, and how have you seen God's favor, His grace, show up in your life?
2. Has God ever called you to something that confused and disturbed you?
3. When God's call for our lives seems like more than we can handle, how do you respond? Who do you reach out to for help or to make sense of it all?

Day 10

THE WONDER OF POSSIBLE IMPOSSIBILITIES



Luke 1:30-33

30 “Don’t be afraid, Mary,” the angel told her, “for you have found favor with God! 31 You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. 33 And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!”

The most common response to a heavenly encounter is, “Don’t be afraid.” To encounter something so perfect, so holy, so other worldly in the midst of our broken world is startling to say the least. Others have fallen down as if dead in the sight of an angel or visitor from the other realm. But to each of these encounters, we hear God’s tender voice say, “It’s ok, it’s me, your Creator, the One who loves you more than you know, so don’t be afraid.”

When I read these encounters, I often think about my dad. My dad was a large man, 6’2”, 320 lbs. His stature fit more

of a football player than a respiratory therapist, which was his profession.

When my brothers and I did something we weren't supposed to, dad's presence was menacing. We were often in tears and repenting of our sins long before the actual punishment came (which the punishment was rarely as bad as his stare downs before the punishment).

But when a storm hit outside, bringing tornado warnings or deafening thunder claps, the place I most wanted to be was in my dad's arms. It was the safest place I could think of. That's often how I associate these moments of both wonder and fear.

Then, the angel tells Mary something that seems to her to be impossible. She will give birth to a Son? His name will be Jesus, which means, God saves? His ancestor will be David, he'll reign on David's throne, and his kingdom will never end? Why, if she didn't know better, and she does, the angel is speaking of the long-awaited Messiah!

Tomorrow we'll talk about Mary's response, but for today, we'll focus a moment on the wonder of anticipation. This is the moment the Israelites have been waiting 500 years for; the hope they had that they wouldn't always live under oppression. This promise would have left many a Jew both speechless and elated.

For today's reflection, however, I'd like to end by having us consider the idea of a kingdom that will never end. The Jews thought this meant an earthly kingdom where Israel was top dog, never to be ruled by another nation again. But we know God was speaking about the kingdom of heaven, , and Isaiah said that his government will never end. What this means is that His reign will continue to grow and expand for all time, and as citizens of that kingdom, He uses us to continue to expand His reign. We do this by putting Him first in our lives, by following His teachings, by loving one another and helping bring more of heaven to earth.

It truly is only by God's grace, His favor towards us, that He has chosen to partner with us to expand His kingdom. May we submit each day to His reign in our lives, and help Him usher in more of His kingdom here on earth.

QUESTIONS

1. Do you feel as if you've ever had an encounter with God in some way? If so, what happened. If not, how does that make you feel?
2. Do you think there is a healthy way to have both wonder and fear when it comes to your walk with God? Why might both responses be appropriate to any encounters you may have with Him?
3. How can you and I lean more into the idea of God's kingdom reigning today, as opposed to the believing the world we see with our eyes is all there is?

Day 11

THE WONDER OF POSSIBLE IMPOSSIBILITIES



Luke 1:34

34 Mary asked the angel, “But how can this happen? I am a virgin.”

Throughout Scripture, it is common for someone who receives a call from God to first look at themselves and see all the reasons why they can’t possibly do what God has called them to do.

Sarah was too old.

Moses was a scared stutter..

Jeremiah was too young.

Isaiah was too sinful.

Zechariah and Elizabeth were also too old, and Mary was too much of a virgin to have a child.

But the things we see as impossible, are simply not with God. Abraham and Sarah give birth to Isaac in their old age; Moses leads the people of Israel out of Egypt. Jeremiah

and Isaiah become two of the most famous prophets in all of Israel. Zechariah and Elizabeth have a son and name him John. Mary becomes pregnant, as a virgin, and is the vessel God chose to bring His Messiah into the world.

The impossible is always possible with God.

And what I love about God in all these stories is how patient He is with us. When we doubt, He doesn't write us off and toss us aside for someone with greater faith. No. He meets us where we are and helps us recognize what He's capable of if we let Him use us. Yes, it involves submission and surrender and an incredible amount of trust, but as hard as those things are to do, God walks alongside us to help us grow in each of these areas as we learn to lean on Him.

So what is God calling you to do that seems impossible? Volunteer at your church? Confront a friend who's behavior is hurting them and those around them? Invite a neighbor to church? Share your story in front of others? Whatever it is, I'm sure it feels impossible, and that you could write a long list of all the reasons why you can't possibly do whatever it is God is calling you to do.

My challenge to you would be to spend a week putting yourself in the shoes/sandals of one of the stories mentioned above. See the encounter with God at the burning bush through Moses' eyes. Listen to Mary's heart as she responds to God's call for her life. See their doubts, feel their fears, then watch as they eventually accept God's

call with both trepidation and courage. Then go back to what God is calling you to do and see if you can find that same courage to say yes.

QUESTIONS

1. Have you felt God tugging on your heart to do something that at the moment, you think is too tough, or maybe even, impossible?
2. What would it take for you to say yes to God right now?
3. Mother Teresa once told someone looking for clarity that she has never had clarity involving God's call in her life, what she has had is trust. So pray for God to grow your trust in Him and be prepared for the homework He'll give you to do just that.

Day 12

THE WONDER OF POSSIBLE IMPOSSIBILITIES



Luke 1:35-37

35 The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God. 36

What's more, your relative Elizabeth has become pregnant in her old age! People used to say she was barren, but she has conceived a son and is now in her sixth month. 37 For the word of God will never fail."

I am sure that Mary had no idea what it meant when the angel said, "the Holy Spirit will come upon you... overshadow you." However, I am sure that she knew that what was about to happen was supernatural, beyond her own comprehension, and also, the fulfillment of a promise given a long time ago. I am sure she knew how her people longed for this day, and how important it would be. If I were her, I would have had a mixture of feelings that would have included humility to be chosen for this important task, but also fear that I wouldn't be enough to do what was needed.

But God knows what we need more than we do, and God gives Mary another incredible gift; community. She won't have to go through this alone. Her relative, Elizabeth, is also pregnant, and she also shouldn't be pregnant. Elizabeth would be able to empathize with Mary and encourage her, because they were going through similar experiences.

What an amazing gift! God is so good!

Then the angel reminds us of what has been true since the beginning of time, even when we as humans have failed to believe it; "the word of God will never fail."

These words remind me of other words from Scripture. Like when God told Abraham that Sarah would have a child in her old age, and Sarah laughed. God's response to her was, "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" And in their story, Sarah becomes pregnant and God's promise was fulfilled, just as He said it would be.

I think of Jesus' words when he tells his disciples that it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. The disciples how, "Then who in the world can be saved?". Jesus replies, "What is impossible for people, is possible with God." (Luke 18: 25-27)

I think of where Paul tells the church in Corinth that "all of God's promises have been fulfilled in Christ with a resounding 'Yes!'" (2 Corinthians 1:20)

And I think of the famous chapter on love from I Corinthians 13 when Paul says, "Love never fails." (I Corinthians 13:8a, NIV)

Friends, we serve an ever-faithful God who fulfills His promises, even if it takes time to do so. Our job is to learn to trust in Him, even when those promises seem impossible. Remember, there is always more going on than what we see with our eyes, so may we lean into His faithfulness, always remember that "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness.

Instead, he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” (2 Peter 3:9, NIV)

QUESTIONS

1. For what concerns in your life do you need to be reminded that God is faithful, that His Word never fails, and that He keeps His promises?
2. Do you have people in life to journey with, who can help remind you of God’s faithfulness when you struggle to believe?
3. Proverbs 3:5-6 says to, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.” Ask God to help you trust in Him more, especially when your understanding of what’s happening may be different from His.

Day 13

THE WONDER OF POSSIBLE IMPOSSIBILITIES



Luke 1:38

38 Mary responded, "I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true." And then the angel left her.

I doubt that Mary fully understood all the implications of what the angel Gabriel told her in this moment. Like the Christmas song, "Mary Did You Know," I think there were a whole lot of things that Mary had no idea about.

Did she know that her baby boy was coming to make all things new; to give sight to the blind and calm the storm with His hand? Did she know that her baby boy would save our sons and daughters; deliver us; and rule the nations?

I don't think she did, nor could she have possibly known the pain she'd have to endure, watching her baby boy give His life to save humanity by suffering the most painful death ever designed by men.

And yet, she trusted God enough to surrender and submit to His plans.

I think sometimes, when we seek God's will in a certain situation, we think that knowing His will means we won't have fear over the direction He wants us to take. Or that we'll have a sense of perfect peace and be able to boldly say, "Here I am Lord, send me!" But in my life, and maybe I'm unique, most of God's calls have been feel with wonder in the full sense of the word - awe at the idea that God would choose me, and fear that He may be choosing

poorly. Following God, for me, has always taken a step of faith, trusting that He knows what He's doing, even when I can't see the full path in front of me. In fact, I often only see far enough to know where to put my foot next.

I pray that all of us would be the kind of people who are able to answer God's call, even when we don't know everything He's up to at the time. I pray we could trust in His favor, which we saw earlier is His grace extended to us. And I pray that we could be a community of faith that steps boldly into the unknown as we partner with God to be His vessels to keep bringing Jesus into our world.

QUESTIONS

1. What do you need to surrender to God today?
2. In what areas do you need to trust Him more, even when you don't know what all is going to happen?
3. Please, take a moment to pray today for our communities of faith to be bold in saying yes to God, so that Jesus comes more to life in us as we seek to share Him with our world that is in desperate need of more of Him.

Day 14

SMALL GROUP STUDY

INTRODUCTION

The following is a guide to help facilitate discussion between you and the person you're studying with or with your Connect Group. Feel free to add, subtract, or change questions to fit the conversation, and pray for the Spirit to lead in all things.

OPEN QUESTIONS

Have you ever done something that you thought was impossible for you to do? Stand up and give a speech? Kill a spider? Jump out of an airplane? If so, what did it feel like after you did whatever you had previously thought was impossible?

HEAD

1. Read Luke 1:26-38 together and share any wisdom, insights, or thoughts that come to you from the reading.
2. Why do you think God sent the angel Gabriel to Mary, instead of to Joseph, first? What might the significance of this choice mean?
3. Why do you think Mary was so confused and disturbed by Gabriel's greeting?
4. Why do you think the angels have to continually reassure us to "not be afraid" when we encounter them?

5. Verse 33 talks about God's kingdom expanding throughout all time, it will never end. How do you think this happens? What does this look like in our world today?
6. We know that not only does God tell Mary about Elizabeth, but Mary goes running to Elizabeth and spends some time with her. Why do you think this was so important for the both of them?

HEART

1. If the word, "favored" in verse 28 is more about God pursuing you because of His grace, than it is about something you did to earn it, how does it make you feel to know God pursues you?
2. Mary immediately looks to her own weaknesses, the reasons she can't possibly do what God has said. How do you and I do the same things, today? Give examples of ways we limit God.
3. What makes it so hard for us to believe that God's word, His promises, will never fail?
4. Mary accepts God's message even though she doesn't fully understand all of it's implications or even how it's going to occur. Why is it so hard for us to believe that God wants to use us, and can use us, if we let Him use us?

HANDS

The study this week is really about learning to trust in God and what He is up to, even when you have no idea how He's going to fulfill His promises, and you don't believe He can

use you to do it. So this week, each day, take time to pray the simple prayer of asking God to help you trust in Him more. Memorize Proverbs 3:5-6, making it a part of that prayer time.

LIVING WORDS FOR YOUR WEEK

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. Seek his will in all you do, and he will show you which path to take.”

Proverbs 3:5-6, NLT

Day 15

THE WONDER OF ANTICIPATION



Luke 1:39-45

39 A few days later Mary hurried to the hill country of Judea, to the town 40 where Zechariah lived. She entered the house and greeted Elizabeth. 41 At the sound of Mary's greeting, Elizabeth's child leaped within her, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

42 Elizabeth gave a glad cry and exclaimed to Mary, "God has blessed you above all women, and your child is blessed. 43

Why am I so honored, that the mother of my Lord should visit me? 44 When I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. 45 You are blessed because you believed that the Lord would do what he said.”

By the time you’re reading this reflection, we are just 10 days away from Christmas and I’m sure that for anyone in your household under the age of 12, the excitement is palpable. Maybe you’ve already wrapped presents to put under the tree and they’re spending every waking moment trying to figure out what they could be. Or maybe you have relatives coming to your house that you haven’t seen in a while, or you’re traveling to see them, and you can’t wait to get your arms around them and spend time playing games, laughing together, and reminiscing.

Christmas is full of the wonder of anticipation.

I absolutely love today’s passage, when Elizabeth tells Mary that as soon as she heard her greeting, “the baby in my womb jumped for joy.” Palpable excitement. Not even the baby in her womb could contain his joy at what was about to be fulfilled. My heart is racing just writing these thoughts.

Just imagine the anticipation in that room. Elizabeth was pregnant, a pregnancy she had longed for her whole life. She used to daydream about feeling the growth of life in her belly, and now, every night, she goes to bed feeling John move and keep her up at night. She is so filled with

joy, awe, and wonder that soon, her wait will be over and she will be a mommy.

Of course, the passage starts off with Mary hurrying to the hill country of Judea to see her relative, because she's anxious to share the news with someone. She's anxious to not feel so alone. She's anxious to find someone who knows a bit of what she's going through and who won't judge her for being pregnant before she is married.

Then lastly, they are both wild with anticipation and the promised future of the children in their wombs. One will usher in the other, and both are a part of God's plan to bring freedom, forgiveness, and a new reign to their world. As they spent time together, I imagine a their level of excitement similar to those children on Christmas morning, who wake up at 5am to run downstairs and rip open those gifts that have been staring them in the face for weeks.

I can't help but think of two songs; Joyful, Joyful and Joy to the World.

Joyful, joyful, we adore you, God of glory, Lord of love. Oh how my heart yearns for this joy to be my ever-present response to the God who loves us so much that He came down to rescue us.

We rejoice because we know, "He will rule the world with truth and grace, and wonders of his love."

Oh the wonder of anticipation, even expressed by some of the last words found in Scripture, “Even so, come Lord Jesus.” (Revelation 22:20, NIV)

QUESTIONS

1. When it comes to the Christmas season, what are some things you look forward to with great anticipation?
2. Have you ever been so filled with joy in the Lord that your body responded without your prompting? If so, what happened?
3. What’s one of your favorite Christmas songs and why?

Day 16

THE WONDER OF POSSIBLE IMPOSSIBILITIES



Luke 1:46-56

46 Mary responded, “Oh, how my soul praises the Lord.

47 How my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!

48 For he took notice of his lowly servant girl, and from now on all generations will call me blessed.

49 For the Mighty One is holy, and he has done great things for me.

50 He shows mercy from generation to generation to all who fear him.

51 His mighty arm has done tremendous things! He has scattered the proud and haughty ones.

52 He has brought down princes from their thrones and exalted the humble.

53 He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away with empty hands.

54 He has helped his servant Israel and remembered to be merciful.

55 For he made this promise to our ancestors, to Abraham and his children forever.”

56 Mary stayed with Elizabeth about three months and then went back to her own home.

The great song of Mary's heard, often referred to as Mary's Magnificat. It is named that after the Latin, Magnificat anima mea Dominum, which means “My soul magnifies the Lord.”

Mary is so overwhelmed by God's goodness, impacted by His grace, that she can't help but sing.

I think maybe seeing Elizabeth's belly helped Mary realize that her encounter with Gabriel wasn't a dream. It helped confirm that what was said was going to happen, will in fact and is in fact, happening. She will become pregnant, she

will give birth to the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, and God has shone His incredible grace by choosing her to bring Him into the world.

In her song, Mary ties the whole story of the Scriptures together by connecting her present moment, with the promise given 100's of years before to Abraham. This helps her and us realize that all of our stories are somehow tied together by a thread. I call that thread, the gospel. That God has always been, and always is, and always will be working in our stories to lead us to Him. His desire is to restore us and Him to how things were meant to be. As it says in Revelation, "Look, God's home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them." (Revelation 22:3b, NLT)

As we walk this planet, knowing that something is wrong and not how it was intended to be, God has also been anxiously awaiting the day when He can be with His creation, face to face, as we were in the beginning. He is going to save us, He is going to restore us, because His love for us is higher and wider and longer and deeper than anything we can possibly imagine (Ephesians 3:14-21, NLT).

So may we learn to join the choir of voices, along with Mary, that sing Oh, my soul praises the Lord. How my Spirit rejoices in God my Savior!"

QUESTIONS

1. Think of a gift you desperately wanted when you were a child that you did end up getting. How did it feel to get that gift, how did you respond?
2. Can you remember wanting a gift that you never received? What was that disappointment like? Were you able to move on, get over it? What happened?
3. How would you live your life today, if tomorrow you knew that you would see Jesus?

Day 17

THE WONDER OF POSSIBLE IMPOSSIBILITIES



Luke 1:57-64

57 When it was time for Elizabeth's baby to be born, she gave birth to a son. 58 And when her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had been very merciful to her, everyone rejoiced with her.

59 When the baby was eight days old, they all came for the circumcision ceremony. They wanted to name him Zechariah, after his father. 60 But Elizabeth said, "No! His name is John!"

61 "What?" they exclaimed. "There is no one in all your family by that name." 62 So they used gestures to ask the baby's father what he wanted to name him. 63 He motioned for a writing tablet, and to everyone's surprise he wrote, "His name is John." 64 Instantly Zechariah could speak again, and he began praising God.

I know what it was like for me, on the day I became a father for the first time. I was excited, scared, and so full of emotions that I couldn't put into words. So those feelings just kept leaking out my eyes in the form of tears.

But I was 25 when I became a dad, not old like Zechariah and Elizabeth. And for Elizabeth, she had endured the shame that came in those times with being barren. Likely, she had endured years of people walking by her, shaking their heads. And now, here in her old age when everyone else, including her, had written off this ever happening, now, Elizabeth holds her sweet baby boy in her arms.

Of course, once babies are born, the names come next. And in their culture, it was common practice to name newborns after a family member. So when Elizabeth remained obedient to what they angel had told Zechariah, naming the baby John, the people were shocked. They didn't understand. It made no sense, just like it didn't

make sense that an old couple could become pregnant and give birth to a healthy child.

So they turn to the patriarch in the family, father knows best, right? They hand Zechariah a writing tablet, and he begins to write but they can't see what he's writing until he turns that tablet to face them. To their shock, they read the same name. Elizabeth gave, John. Then all of a sudden, the man who hasn't been able to speak for the last nine months, begins to speak. And the first thing he does with the return of his voice? He praises God!

May we always remember God's words through the prophet Isaiah, when He told the children of Israel, "For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts." (Isaiah 55:9, NLT)

We won't always be able to explain, with human words and with human understanding, everything there is to know about God, about Scripture, about how faith works or even about who God is. There will always be a gap between our understanding, and His. Jesus came to be a bridge between us and God, but still, there are things too lofty for us to comprehend. Instead of bemoaning that gap, may we turn our limitations into praise to the One who was and is and is to come. May we rejoice in His promises, trust in His presence, and accept the fact that we'll never have all the answers. The best we can do each day is be faithful to our next step.

For Elizabeth and Zechariah, that next step was naming their boy, John. Then tomorrow, they'd have to wake, and be faithful again to what God was asking them to do next. The same would be true for every day of the rest of their lives, but as they remained faithful, they were also going to witness things said and done that they only dreamed about before, as they watched their boy grow into the one who would "clear the way for the Lord's coming!" (John 1:23b, NLT)

QUESTIONS

1. If you're a parent, think back to all those feelings of welcoming your newborn into the world. Can you even put how you felt into words?
2. If you aren't a parent, have you ever seen a new life come into the world either through a physical birth, or even via baptism? What was it like to witness and be a part of that moment?
3. When was the last time you were speechless before the Lord? What happened?

Day 18

THE WONDER OF POSSIBLE IMPOSSIBILITIES



Luke 1:65-66

65 Awe fell upon the whole neighborhood, and the news of what had happened spread throughout the Judean hills. 66 Everyone who heard about it reflected on these events and asked, “What will this child turn out to be?” For the hand of the Lord was surely upon him in a special way.

Awe, wonder, fear, even dread, fell among those who knew what had taken place with Zechariah, Elizabeth, and their newborn baby, John. In essence, all these events were more than they could comprehend. Why, even thinking about it, trying to answer everything with human reasoning, was giving them a colossal headache.

And yet, God was at work. He was putting in place everything that He said He would to bring about salvation, reconciliation, and introduce a new king and a new reign over the earth.

Every year, on the night of Christmas, I find a place to pull away from everyone who has gathered together, to spend a few moments with God. The wrapping paper has been put away, the leftovers fill the fridge, and those that have gathered are either in a state of food coma, or playing games, or simply sharing stories and enjoying each other's company.

But for a few moments, I find a quiet place and look out to the sky, pondering all that God did to bring about the Christmas story. Often, I can't put anything into words, my heart is just in awe. I can't say that in these moments, I feel fear or terror. These moments are more about peace, joy, gratitude, and yes, even anticipation as I wait for the day when Jesus comes again.

But I do get the fear part. When you are aware that something fully of God has taken place, you wonder if you'll be able to stand in it's presence. You wonder if you'll be brave enough to do what God asks, when He asks. And yes, any time the curtain from this world into the next is open even just a crack, it is hard to comprehend. Our job is to trust that God knows what He's doing, and what He's up to, even if we don't. To trust that God's hand is on us, steering, directing, opening doors to new opportunities. We may not always have the words, but I pray we have enough strength in our lives to put one foot in front of the other, and follow God wherever He leads.

QUESTIONS

1. If you get time to reflect during the Christmas season, what do you find yourself thinking most about?
2. Think back to a time of meaningful worship, maybe even worship that left you in tears or speechless. What was it about those moments that caused that kind of reaction for you?
3. In what ways do you think, today, right now, we can see the curtain separating this realm from God's realm, move back just enough for us to catch a glimpse? How might you and I prepare our hearts to notice this happening more often?

Day 19

THE WONDER OF POSSIBLE IMPOSSIBILITIES



Luke 1:67-79

67 Then his father, Zechariah, was filled with the Holy Spirit and gave this prophecy:

68 "Praise the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has visited and redeemed his people. 69 He has sent us a mighty Savior

from the royal line of his servant David, 70 just as he promised through his holy prophets long ago. 71 Now we will be saved from our enemies and from all who hate us. 72 He has been merciful to our ancestors by remembering his sacred covenant –73 the covenant he swore with an oath to our ancestor Abraham. 74 We have been rescued from our enemies so we can serve God without fear, 75 in holiness and righteousness for as long as we live.

76 “And you, my little son, will be called the prophet of the Most High, because you will prepare the way for the Lord. 77 You will tell his people how to find salvation through forgiveness of their sins. 78 Because of God’s tender mercy, the morning light from heaven is about to break upon us, 79 to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide us to the path of peace.”

After months of silence, of reflection, of thinking again and again about his encounter with the angel, Zechariah is able to speak. His first words were words of obedience, naming his son John, and his next words were words of praise.

Now, I have been accused more than 12 times of being a talkative individual. I am what doctors call, verbose. I like to communicate. I can’t imagine what all I’d say after nine months of not being able to talk, but I’d like to think the first thing I’d do is offer up praise as well (after telling my family I love them, so they could hear it from my voice after all that time).

This praise Zechariah offers reaches back to the sacred covenant between God and their ancestor, Abraham. It recognizes that though they thought God had abandoned and forgotten them, it turns out that God had actually been at work in their lives this whole time.

Oh how quick we are to forget how good and faithful God is. One day, an answer to prayer that leads to rejoicing. The next day, a tragedy strikes and we curse God. We are so fickle, so easily swayed by the blowing wind of our present circumstances.

But God shows time and time again that even when you think He's gone silent, He's actually about to unveil something you wouldn't believe even if He told you, and sometimes He has told you. It often comes down to who we believe God to be. Is God a loving God who longs to restore our relationship to Him, to save us and dwell among us forever? Or is God a vengeful and angry God, anxious to punish us for our weak faith?

I believe the former is true. I believe that though we long with wild anticipation for God to return to this earth and make all things right, that it's actually God who has been longing for it the most. When Adam and Eve took a bite of the fruit in the Garden of Eden, what were the first words out of God's mouth?

“Where are you?” (Genesis 3: 9)

God knew where they were, He's God after all. It wasn't a question of location, but a question of position. There was separation between them that He hadn't felt, nor had they, before, and it hurt.

Then, a few words later, God asked them, "What have you done?" (Genesis 3:13)

Only God knew the full consequences of their decision. Yes, there would be separation. Yes, there would be death and mourning and crying and pain. Yes, His children would struggle and do unspeakable things to each other over centuries. But He also knew that He would stop at nothing to restore the relationship He lost in those moments. He knew that the day would come when He Himself, clothed in human skin, would come to this earth in order to reconcile us and restore our relationship to Him. Why? Because He loves us more than we can possibly imagine. Why? Because it is who He is. Why? That is a question that will cause us wonder and worship from now to eternity.

QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever lost your voice and been unable to speak for a day, a week, or longer? If so, what was that like and do you remember your first words once your voice came back?
2. The late, Brennan Manning, once said that he believed that at the end of time, God would have one question

for us, “Do you believe I loved you?” Well, do you? Why or why not?

3. When you think about the ultimate reunion day, when we get to see Jesus face to face, what do you think will be the first thing you do or say?

Day 20

THE WONDER OF POSSIBLE IMPOSSIBILITIES



Luke 1:80

80 John grew up and became strong in spirit. And he lived in the wilderness until he began his public ministry to Israel.

Ahh, and we are left at the end of Luke 1 with our equivalent of “To Be Continued...” Luke sure knows how to tell a story in a way that leaves us wanting more. What did he do in the wilderness? Where were his parents and did they live to see him become an adult? Did he commune with God in the desert, clarifying his call for when the appointed time would come?

We're left with so many questions, but what we do know is that the ball is rolling. The first of the miracles has happened and the predecessor to the coming of the Messiah has entered into this world. His coming, announced by an angel. His birth, a miracle, His name given from on high. And now, we wait. But instead of wondering if God's promised Messiah would take years, decades, or centuries to come, as readers, we know that we're down to months and days. It's an exciting time.

As we wait for the next promise and miracle, John spends much of his life in the wilderness. The wilderness was the go-to place in the Scriptures for where one came to know God and themselves better. It was the place one went to prepare to receive God's call when it did come. Though many, on the surface, would see the wilderness as a place of punishment and isolation, in Scripture, it is often our training ground for whatever comes next.

But we have an advantage that they didn't have as this story was unfolding in real time. We know that John will become known as "the Baptist" and will call people to repent of their sins and turn to God. He's helping them prep their hearts for the coming of the Messiah. There are some in the crowd, who hear him preach, that know that's where this story is leading, and rest assured, they are wild with anticipation.

For now, on day 20 of this series, we wait. We wait for the next promise. We wait for the miracle of Jesus, when God

took on flesh, and we wait to rejoice with the shepherds, the angels, and the wise men. But we're not there yet, and so we wait.

QUESTIONS

1. Can you remember something in your life that you had to wait for, that seemed at the time to take forever? What was it like to finally receive what you had been waiting for?
2. Though we know the story of Christmas, we continue to be people who wait. We are waiting for the next Advent of Jesus, when He returns in the clouds to make all things right. What are some ways that we can wait and keep the hope of His return alive and well deep down in our bones?

Day 21

SMALL GROUP STUDY

Small Group Study Guide

INTRODUCTION

The following is a guide to help facilitate discussion between you and the person you're studying with or with your Connect Group. Feel free to add, subtract, or change questions to fit the conversation, and pray for the Spirit to lead in all things.

OPEN QUESTIONS

Think back to Christmas' of old, and a gift that you wanted so bad you could taste it. What was that gift and do you remember the feeling of waiting? If you can, describe that feeling.

HEAD

1. Read Luke 1:39-80 together and share any wisdom, insights, or thoughts that come to you from the reading.
2. Why do you think Mary was so quick to go to Elizabeth's house?
3. Imagine Elizabeth's joy, that not only was she pregnant, but her relative was too and both from divine intervention. What do you think that kind of emotion was like?
4. Mary's song is so beautiful, full of praise and humility. Talk about what you think the conversations were like that Elizabeth and Mary had around the breakfast table in the mornings.
5. Oh the joy of Zechariah and Elizabeth to have a healthy baby boy! But they went against tradition by naming him John and the people were surprised. However, this act of obedience gave Zechariah his speech back. Imagine being in the crowd watching all this unfold. What do you think it would have been like?
6. What do you think Zechariah spent his time in silence thinking about? And why do you think his first order of business after naming his boy John was to praise God?

HEART

1. Why do you think it's so important to have other people to journey with in this life of faith, much like Mary and Elizabeth had each other to help navigate the miracles that were to come?
2. I'm sure some saw Zechariah's months of silence as a punishment. Why might it have been a gift instead?
3. Praise for all that God has done is a common theme in this first chapter of Luke. Of course, it's easier to praise when you finally see the fulfillment of things you have waited for. It's harder to praise when life is tough and you don't see what God is up to in the moment. What are some ways we can help each other remember to praise, to worship, even when life is difficult?
4. When was the last time you were rendered speechless at something that happened around you? What was it and why do you think it caused such an affect?
5. Have you ever had a wilderness experience like John, or Jesus during his temptations, or the Israelites as they wandered? Did you come out of that experience having learned anything about yourself or about God?

HANDS

For this week, take a moment to write out your own Magnificent to God. Reflect back on all the good that He has done in your life, even if you're currently in a difficult season of life. How has God blessed you? How has God shown up for you? What has God taught you?

LIVING WORDS FOR YOUR WEEK

“Let everything that breathes sing praises to the Lord! Praise the Lord!”

Psalm 155:6, NLT

“Let all who fear the Lord repeat: His faithful love endures forever.”

Psalm 118:4, NLT

Day 22

THE WONDER OF HEAVEN & EARTH COLLIDING



Luke 2:1-5

1 At that time the Roman emperor, Augustus, decreed that a census should be taken throughout the Roman Empire. 2 (This was the first census taken when Quirinius was governor of Syria.) 3 All returned to their own ancestral towns to register for this census. 4 And because Joseph was a descendant of King David, he had to go to Bethlehem in Judea, David's ancient home. He traveled there from the village of Nazareth in

Galilee. 5 He took with him Mary, to whom he was engaged, who was now expecting a child.

Finally, we're just days away from the Christmas, and during the next few days of our study, we will see the wonder of heaven and earth colliding like never before.

But here on day one, we see something interesting. With Luke introducing us to the historical figures and leaders of the time, emperor Augustus, and governor Quirinius, we will see and be reminded that no matter who holds any position of earthly power, God can still use them to accomplish His plans. That may be a good reminder for us in the world we live in. No matter who is "in control," or who runs the government, God is still bigger and can use anyone, even a donkey, to further His plan for His people (see Numbers 22: 21-41)

So God used these rulers to assure that the prophecy of the Messiah being born in Bethlehem would come to fruition.

There's a great scene in the movie entitled, "A Nativity Story," where a very pregnant Mary is being led on a donkey by Joseph (I can't imagine that being comfortable in the slightest). As night fell and they set-up camp, they find themselves sitting around a fire and talking about their coming future.

Mary asks Joseph a question. She says, "Are you scared?" Joseph smiles and says, "Yes, absolutely." She admits that

she is too, but asks what scares him most. He says, “How will I be able to teach the son of God anything?”

Now, whether or not Mary and Joseph were fully aware of who this baby really was, it’s must have still been daunting to think about caring for such an important passenger on this earth. After all, He may be the Messiah, but they would be the ones to feed him, burp him, change his diapers, and raise him in the way he should go. Those are always frightening things to think about when you’re first becoming parents, but add to that the weight of this baby being the Messiah, called the Son of God, and wow! I can’t imagine all the thoughts that raced through their heads.

But I am thankful they were willing to say yes to the journey. Just as I am thankful for every person that signs on to serve the missive of the kingdom of God. Every one of you who says yes to serving is yet another person that helps bring Jesus into this world; whether you’re teaching the lesson of the day in the children’s classroom, fixing a latte for a new visitor to enjoy, singing your lungs out as you lead us in worship, or being that warm smile at the door that lets an anxious newcomer know that everything is going to be ok. Every time you say yes to Jesus, you help bring more of Him into the world and the rest of us sit in awe and wonder, as we get to witness, through you, heaven and earth collide.

QUESTIONS

1. Do you believe that God can use anyone to accomplish His will? Why or why not?
2. Have you ever felt God calling you to do something that caused you to feel scared or overwhelmed? What ending up happening?
3. What is one thing you need to say yes to for Jesus today, to help bring more of Jesus into this world?

Day 23

THE WONDER OF HEAVEN & EARTH COLLIDING



Luke 2:6-7

6 And while they were there, the time came for her baby to be born. 7 She gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no lodging available for them.

I love how Luke, the doctor, makes this moment sound so perfect and serene. It is nothing like what I experienced in the birthing rooms of both my children.

There were screams, pounding hearts, tears, anxious moments, and that's just what I experienced. My wife, Tricia, had a whole other set of emotions, pains, and feelings.

But among all the chaos that hung in both those rooms, that chaos was immediately silenced the moment our children entered our world. It was as if time itself stopped. In both moments, for me, I was fully aware that the last person who held my children was God, that is if you believe as I do, that, "...made all the delicate, inner parts of my body and knit me together in my mother's womb." (Psalms 139:13 NLT)

I can only imagine what it was like to hold, not just another child, but the Savior of the world in my arms. Of course, we know that wasn't just another human being, but it was the God who loved us so much that He took on human flesh. We call it the incarnation. So here in this moment, a created being held in her arms the One who had created her. I don't know about you, but I just got chills writing that statement. Those chills are one way my body expresses wonder.

And so here, in just two verses, everything changed. Whereas the world had been on the road to destruction, ruled by an evil prince, now, the king of the universe had arrived to save us all. Everything was going to be different now. Heaven and earth didn't just collide; in this moment, through a tiny infant, they became one.

QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever experienced a moment that you could only describe as other worldly, divine, a time when heaven and earth collided? What happened?
2. What does it mean to you that the Creator of the universe was willing to take on human skin, to become one of the most fragile beings possible, in order to save you and prove to you His love?
3. In what ways do you experience wonder?

Day 24

THE WONDER OF HEAVEN & EARTH COLLIDING



Luke 2:8-20

8 That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep.

9 Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were

terrified, 10 but the angel reassured them. “Don’t be afraid!” he said. “I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. 11 The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! 12 And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger.”

13 Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God and saying, 14 “Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased.”

15 When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, “Let’s go to Bethlehem! Let’s see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

16 They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger. 17 After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child. 18 All who heard the shepherds’ story were astonished, 19 but Mary kept all these things in her heart and thought about them often. 20 The shepherds went back to their flocks, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. It was just as the angel had told them.

I gotta tell you, when we talk about child-like wonder, this story with the angels and the shepherds speaks to it perhaps more than any other in the Christmas story.

In fact, I have often felt that the reason the angels came to the shepherds, instead of to the religious elite or the other rulers of the world, had to do with the child-like hearts of the shepherds, their openness to believe in the impossible. Night after night they stared at the stars in the sky and wondered what else was out there, who else was out there. On this night, they were shown as the veil that separates this world from the next was pulled wide open.

And here, as before, the angels have to assure the humans that there is nothing to be afraid of. Then they go on to tell them that they have good news to share. That term for good news is what we call gospel, and it wouldn't just be good news for those shepherds that night, or just good news for the children of Israel, but good news for everyone who had ever lived, were living, or would live.

The news? The long awaited Messiah, the Savior and Lord, has come into the world in the way the prophecies foretold; in Bethlehem, the city of David. The king of the universe was lying in a manger, wrapped in swaddling clothes, completely dependent on those that he created to care for his every need. Oh the wonder of it all!

It's hard to imagine the next scene; a vast army of angels filling the sky. Night must have become day in that moment, and though Luke says the angels said the next line, we all know they sang it... "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace and goodwill to men!" (that's how I hear it in my head).

Finally, the Savior was here!

In all the commotion of these moments, I've always been drawn to the subtle line describing how Mary responded. It simply says, 'Mary kept all these things in her heart and thought about them often.' That's what mom's do. They watch over their children, they care for their every need, and the beam with joy, pride, and humility, that they get to raise them to become the people God created them to be. Of course, it's a little different when the baby you're beeping over is God, but still, it's important for all of us to take moments where we step back and reflect on all the things that God has done, is doing, and has promised to do in our lives.

In fact, I love how the NIV translates what Mary does in these moments. It says she "treasured up and pondered all these things in her heart." (Luke 2:19)

May you and I take time each day to think about all that God has done for us, building up our own treasures in our heart. For those little treasurers sure are a great help in those more challenging seasons or dark nights of the soul. So for now, treasure the coming of Jesus and never let Him go.

QUESTIONS

1. Thinking back over the course of your life, what was one of the places/moments you worshipped like you've

rarely worshipped before? What was so meaningful about it?

2. As you think back over the life of your faith, what are some of the treasures you hold onto that help you remember all that He has done?
3. Pray today for a heart like a child, that you may be better prepared to see those moments when God pulls back the curtain between this world and the next

Day 25

THE WONDER OF HEAVEN & EARTH COLLIDING



Luke 2:25-35

25 At that time there was a man in Jerusalem named Simeon. He was righteous and devout and was eagerly waiting for the Messiah to come and rescue Israel. The Holy Spirit was upon him 26 and had revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Messiah. 27 That day the Spirit led him to the Temple. So when Mary and Joseph came to present the baby Jesus to the Lord as the law required, 28 Simeon was there. He took the child in his arms and praised God, saying,

29 “Sovereign Lord, now let your servant die in peace, as you have promised. 30 I have seen your salvation, 31 which you have prepared for all people. 32 He is a light to reveal God to the nations, and he is the glory of your people Israel!”

33 Jesus’ parents were amazed at what was being said about him. 34 Then Simeon blessed them, and he said to Mary, the baby’s mother, “This child is destined to cause many in Israel to fall, and many others to rise. He has been sent as a sign from God, but many will oppose him. 35 As a result, the deepest thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your very soul.”

Here again we have someone who has been waiting, his whole life, for something beyond special. In fact, he’s even been told that he most certainly wouldn’t die until he received that which he had been promised.

I’ve often wondered how Simeon knew that the baby Mary and Joseph held in their hands was the promise he’d been waiting for. Did God tell him? Was there a light shining on the baby that only Simeon could see? Whatever it was, Simeon knew that the promise had been fulfilled and immediately took the child in his arms and praised God.

Now, if you’ve ever been a first-time parent, you know how protective you were. No one could even come close to your baby unless they were fully healthy, and they disinfected their hands, probably twice. Even then, you somehow

knew in your heart of hearts that no one would care for your child as well as you, so you were hesitant to let anyone else hold them.

But Simeon wasn't just anyone, he was a man of God who had something different about Him. That difference was the Spirit of God resting on Him. I believe people were drawn to Simeon, and for him to pick up the baby would have been an incredible honor. But then came the words he spoke over the child; "salvation, light, nations, glory for Israel." This was a mountain top moment for Mary and Joseph for sure. New parents love when others gloat over their children, but this was next level. Simeon was confirming everything they had been told in the promise leading up to Jesus' birth.

But then came some unexpected words. Remember, the people of this time had a different understanding of who the Messiah was and what he would do, so to hear that he'd cause man in Israel to fall wasn't quiet what they were expecting. Then, there would be opposition? Why? The Messiah was coming to free us, who wouldn't want that? But that last line, that was the line that would haunt Mary until that fateful day on a hill called Calvary, "a sword will pierce your very soul."

A moment that started with joy and praise, ended with more questions than answers. Mary and Joseph couldn't have known what all Simeon meant, all they could do is continue to be faithful and put one foot in front of the

other, doing their best to raise Jesus each and every day in the best way they knew how. And because that would never be enough, because our human efforts never are, they had to lean on the promise that God would be with them every step of this journey; during the good times, and the bad, when it felt like He was with them and when it didn't. That was a truth they'd need help remembering, just like you and I do every day.

QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever meant someone who you just knew was a person of God? What was it about them that led you to that conclusion?
2. How do you think Mary received the more difficult words Simeon had to say about her child? Do you think she took them in, put them aside, or ignored them altogether?
3. What helps you remember that God is with you even during the difficult seasons of life?

Day 26

THE WONDER OF HEAVEN & EARTH COLLIDING



Luke 2:36-38

36 Anna, a prophet, was also there in the Temple. She was the daughter of Phanuel from the tribe of Asher, and she was very old. Her husband died when they had been married only seven years. 37 Then she lived as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the Temple but stayed there day and night, worshiping God with fasting and prayer. 38 She came along just as Simeon was talking with Mary and Joseph, and she began praising God. She talked about the child to everyone who had been waiting expectantly for God to rescue Jerusalem.

Whenever I read the story of Anna, I can't help but think of my Grandmother McCoy. Like Anna, my Grandmother lost her husband in their prime, and like Anna, my Grandmother never remarried. My whole life, whenever my grandfather was mentioned or she began talking about him, she had a look of love in her eyes. She married right the first time, and she had no reason to do so again. She was devoted.

Anna was devoted as well. We don't know how she felt about her husband who had passed, but we do know that she lived completely devoted to God for the rest of her life. In fact Luke tells us she never left the Temple.

What's interesting to me is that both Simeon and Anna are old, as were Elizabeth and Zechariah, where as Mary and Joseph were young. It's as if through the telling of this story, Luke is bringing together the old and the new. Yes, God is up to something new (Isaiah 43:19), but He's doing it by bringing the old and the new together. Jesus, himself told us in the sermon on the mount, ““Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.” (Matthew 5:17 NIV)

Something old and something new. Christmas is full of these things. Old traditions practiced with new family members and friends. Old songs sung in new ways. Old recipes shared with the next generation to make them their own. There's something beautiful that comes when the new is able to learn from the old to create something even better, even more complete.

Anna's presence confirms the words of Simeon, and her devotion is an example to us to put Jesus first, always, in all things. Our lives will take us in many different directions, but if we remain devoted to Christ, then we already know the end of our stories (which is really, just the beginning).

QUESTIONS

1. Do you, or did you, have as sage in your life that was a source of wisdom for how you live your life today?
2. What happens when we destroy or get rid of our history in order to head in new directions?
3. In what way can you show Jesus your devotion to Him today?

Day 27

THE WONDER OF HEAVEN & EARTH COLLIDING



Luke 2:39-40

39 When Jesus' parents had fulfilled all the requirements of the law of the Lord, they returned home to Nazareth in Galilee. 40 There the child grew up healthy and strong. He was filled with wisdom, and God's favor was on him

And so ends the birth story of Christ, but if you're anything like me, you're left with more questions than answers,

especially when you realize that the next chapter in Luke finds Jesus as an adult.

What happened in those childhood years? Did Jesus always know who He was, or was there a moment, something that happened, when it all came rushing to Him? How did He relate to other children? Did He continue to teach in the synagogues and what did the religious leaders think of Him as He grew up? So many questions.

But Luke has told us what we need to know. Jesus was born, as it was prophesied that the Messiah would be born. He had a predecessor, his cousin John. His birth fulfilled all sorts prophecies and came with many signs and wonders. This was no ordinary birth story, for Jesus was no ordinary boy.

I do like how Luke harkens back to Gabriel's encounter with Mary by the phrase, "God's favor was upon him." As God's favor was upon Mary, so it was upon Jesus. I guess it ran in the family.

Whatever the coming days, weeks, months, and years of Jesus' life would hold, we know where His story will lead. He will come to His cousin John, to be baptized in the Jordan River to begin His public ministry. He will prepare for that ministry in the desert for forty days, battling and gaining victory over the devil along the way. He will choose twelve men to follow Him, and wherever He goes, the curse from the garden will be reversed. Or in His own words,

““Then he told John’s disciples, “Go back to John and tell him what you have seen and heard—the blind see, the lame walk, those with leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, and the Good News is being preached to the poor.” And he added, “God blesses those who do not fall away because of me.”” (Luke 7:22-23 NLT)

But let me challenge you as we come to a close. Don’t ever lose the wonder that comes with to us thru Christmas story. For that story represents that God who came down to be with us, and through His Holy Spirit, remains with us until the day we get to see Him again, face to face. Until then, let Him inspire you; let Him take your breath away; let Him wow you and fill you with awe, rendering you speechless with His power and creation. May we never let go of the Wonder of Christmas, for in that Wonder, we may see Jesus.

QUESTIONS

1. What kinds of questions do you have about the missing years of Jesus’ childhood and teenage years?
2. What aspect of the Christmas story stirs up the most wonder in your heart?
3. What is one thing you look forward to about that day we all long for, when we see Jesus coming again in the clouds above?

Day 28

SMALL GROUP STUDY

INTRODUCTION

The following is a guide to help facilitate discussion between you and the person you're studying with or with your Connect Group. Feel free to add, subtract, or change questions to fit the conversation, and pray for the Spirit to lead in all things.

OPEN QUESTIONS

What is the single best gift you ever got for Christmas, or your single best memory of Christmas?

HEAD

1. Read Luke 2:1-20, 25-40 together and share any wisdom, insights, or thoughts that come to you from the reading.
2. What does it mean to you that God can use anyone, even rulers and authorizes that don't know him, to advance His will on this earth?
3. Why do you think Jesus came in such a lowly way, to a carpenter, born in a manger, away from all the lights of the big city and accolades that would be afforded any other king?
4. Why do you think the angels came to the shepherds and not the religious rulers?

5. Simeon had waiting his whole life to see the Messiah come. Describe what you think this moment was like for him?
6. Do you think Mary had any idea what Simeon's words might mean, "a sword will pierce your very soul."? Explain your answer.
7. Luke brings the story of the old and new together through the birth of Jesus. Why might it be important for our own stories, our own pasts, both personally and denominationally, to allow the old to inform the new?

HEART

1. How might you and I keep our childlike wonder when it comes to the Christmas story, as well as all throughout our faith journey?
2. The shepherds weren't told to share the news of Jesus, but they did it immediately (verse 17). How might this story inform how we go about evangelism (i.e. encouraging others to share with others about Jesus) today?
3. Simeon and Anna both waited their whole lives for Jesus. What can we learn about their devotion to take into our own faith journeys as we too await for the Advent of Jesus?
4. Why do you think we have so little information on the childhood and adolescence of Jesus?

HANDS

Christmas is full of traditions. This year, think of one tradition that you could begin, either for you personally or

for your family, that could help remind you to keep your child-like wonder in tow, letting God continue to surprise you with His love, with the fulfillment of His promises, and with the many different ways that He shows up in this world. Maybe it's a new ornament on the tree, a moment of reflection during the season, a song you sing each year, etc...

LIVING WORDS FOR YOUR WEEK

“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, good will toward men.”

Luke 2:11-14 KJV



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Padraic “Paddy” McCoy –Crosswalk Portland Lead Pastor a part of the Teaching Team for the Crosswalk Global Network of Churches.