

# Mighty God

Long Beach Alliance Church • December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2011 • Pastor Brian Nastase

## I. Passage Observations:

II. Jesus is \_\_\_\_\_

III. Jesus is \_\_\_\_\_

IV. Jesus is \_\_\_\_\_

a. He is Mighty to \_\_\_\_\_

b. He is Mighty to \_\_\_\_\_

c. He is Mighty to \_\_\_\_\_

d. He is Mighty to \_\_\_\_\_

e. He is Mighty to \_\_\_\_\_

V. Where in your life do you need God to be mighty?

# PALESTINE IN THE TIME OF JESUS

- City
- City (uncertain location)
- ◉ Decapolis city
- ◉ Decapolis city (uncertain location)
- ★ Administrative capital
- ▲ Mountain peak
- Major roads
- - - Other roads
- First procuratorship
- Territory of Antipas
- Territory of Philip
- Syrian territory

Coponius was named the first prefect and established the administrative capital at Caesarea Maritima



# Engaging Advent

The word "Advent" comes from the Latin *adventus*, which means "the approach" or "the arrival." The Latin verb is *advenio*: "I arrive. I come. I am coming."

For centuries, followers of Jesus Christ have observed this season with a passionate anticipation of Christmas morning, marking the joy of the birth of God in the flesh, Jesus Christ.

Popular writer and pastor, Dr. John MacArthur, notes the importance of why we celebrate Christmas... "Christmas as a holiday was not observed until well after the biblical era. The early church of the New Testament celebrated Jesus' resurrection, but not His birth. In fact, Christmas was not given any kind of official recognition by the church until the mid-5<sup>th</sup> century.

Partly because so many Christmas customs seem to have their roots in paganism, Christians have often been resistant to some of the rituals of the holiday. The Puritans in early America rejected Christmas celebration altogether. They deliberately worked on December 25<sup>th</sup> to show their disdain. A law passed in England in 1644 reflected a similar Puritan influence; the law made Christmas day an official working day. For a time in England it was literally illegal to cook plum pudding or mince pie for the holidays.

Christians today are generally not opposed to celebrating Christmas. The holiday itself is nothing, and observing it is not a question of right or wrong. As Paul wrote, "One man regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God" (Romans 14:5-6).

Every day—including Christmas—is a celebration for us who know and love Him.

How we observe Christmas is the central issue. Do we observe it for the Lord's sake or for our own sinful self-gratification? Do we even think about why and how we celebrate it? That is the heart of the matter.

Christmas is an opportunity for us to exalt Jesus Christ. We ought to take advantage of it."

MacArthur's words ring in my ears when I think of what Christmas has become in our culture! Our world has largely captured this season and disguised it with Lord's-a-Leaping, Sleigh Bells Ringing, and a Jolly Old Elf.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with any of these special traditions... Unless we miss Jesus Christ in the midst of all the tinsel and trappings.

If we miss Jesus Christ, then we have missed Christmas, and we have missed the message of "Peace on Earth, and goodwill toward men..."

Will this year be any different?

Simply, you are invited to engage Advent, perhaps for the first time in your life.

Through this season, which encompasses the four Sundays which lead up to Christmas, there will be special Advent Scripture readings which you (and your family) are invited to read during the week. There will also be some readings from Christian writers who have contemplated Advent over the centuries.

Will you schedule a time each day to anticipate His coming? Will you engage Advent?

Join with the shepherds, walk with kings from the East, sit with Herod as he hears of the Christ child, exult with Mary & Joseph, gaze on the star of Bethlehem all over again, as though this is the first time...

# **Advent Scripture Reading**

**What does the birth of Jesus Christ mean for mankind? Let's read about the birth and connect with the story of God coming in the flesh.**

- **Read Matthew 1:18-25**
- **Read Luke 2:1-20**

**There were a faithful remnant of people who were awaiting Christ's birth. These were people who lived in the anticipation of the light coming into the world -- the same way we are to live today in anticipation of Christ's Second Coming. Learn from there faithful example.**

- **Read Luke 2:21-38**

**There were also people who surrounded the birth of Jesus Christ, those who were on the periphery. What were there reactions and how do these parallel modern reactions to Jesus Christ?**

- **Read Matthew 2:1-23**

**There is something profound in the coming of Christ as God in the flesh. Different writers catch different aspects of Jesus and give us an amazing view. Let's read it together and learn of our great Messiah!**

- **Read John 1:1-34**
- **Read Hebrews 1:1-13**
- **Read Philippians 2:5-13**



## **Advent Reading #2 ~ Dr. Gary Benedict**

Dr. Gary Benedict is the President of the Christian & Missionary Alliance, our church's denomination and partner in ministry. Dr. Benedict is serving as the eleventh president of the U.S. C&MA. Having received an honorary doctor of divinity degree from Nyack College in Nyack, New York, Benedict became the thirteenth president of Crown College in 1997. During his tenure, enrollment at Crown increased by 60 percent. Dr. Benedict's vision for the future of The Alliance includes healthy people leading healthy churches that will multiply themselves and reap a grand harvest. He also envisions a strong laity, which he refers to as a "sleeping giant." "There remains a huge, untapped ministry potential among our laity," says Benedict, who believes that the "true" headquarters of The Alliance is the local church. "Our mandate at the National Office is to serve the local church and to assist it in carrying out its Great Commission ministries. Grassroots ministry flows from our local churches to U.S. neighborhoods and to the nations of the world."

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### ***Lighting The Darkness***

It's that time of year again. Christians around the world are celebrating. Festive decorations, seasonal music and gatherings of all kinds proclaim the birth of Jesus. The signs of Christmas are almost everywhere you look, and the decorations come in all shapes, colors and sizes. Perhaps the most prominent feature of our holiday adornment is the multicolored and variously shaped lighting that seems to say, "Joy to the World the Lord is come!"

Light has always been associated with our Savior. Six centuries before Jesus' birth the prophet Isaiah wrote, "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned" (Isaiah 9:2). He was describing the spiritual condition of the world into which Jesus would be born – mankind desperately in need of illumination, hope and redemption.

Recounting Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, John wrote, "The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him" (John 1:9-10). Later, he adds, "This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil (3:19).

Not much has really changed in more than 20 centuries. Our world is still dark and broken. Sin holds mankind in its grip. People live

without hope, and the Light is unrecognized in many places around our world.

But there is an important difference: those who have chosen to follow Jesus are called "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9). With Christ in us, we are "light in the Lord" (Eph. 5:8). I remember well the day the Light burst into my life. It was February 1, 1966. By the grace of God I was translated from kingdom of darkness into the Kingdom of light, and my life was transformed!

Before He ascended into heaven, Jesus called His disciples together and told them to make disciples in all of the nations of the world. John, who heard Jesus' last words, said, "We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete. This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all (1 John 1:3-6).

As you enjoy the colorful decorations and lights of Christmas this year, please take time to reflect on the words of our Savior, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life (John 8:12).

For more than 120 years The Alliance has been committed to obedience to Jesus' Commission. Take the Light to the spiritually darkest parts of our world – in the United States and other nations – is our mission, and for the same reason that Jesus left the glory of heaven to come to the earth: Lost people matter to God. He wants them found.

Your gift to the Great Commission Fund helps to take the light of the gospel to people who have never heard that Jesus loves them and died for them. I believe that everyone should have the opportunity to follow our Savior – even those in the least-reached corners of our country and the world.

May God bless you as you celebrate and proclaim the birth of our Savior!

Lost people matter to God. He wants them found Luke 19:10

- Prayer is the primary work of God's people. Phil. 4:6-7
- Everything we have belongs to God. We are His stewards. 1 Chron. 29:14
- Knowing and obeying God Word is fundamental to all true success. Josh 1:8
- Completing the Great Commission will require the mobilization of every fully devoted disciple. Matt. 28:19
- Without the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, we can accomplish nothing. 1 Cor. 2:4-5
- Achieving God's purposes means taking faith-filled risks. This always involves change. Heb 11:6

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William Willimon is author of more than fifty books. He is a tremendously popular preacher, and is consistently listed as one of the best preachers in the English speaking world. Dr. Willimon is a bishop in the United Methodist Church serving in Alabama. He was formerly the Dean of the Chapel at Duke University, and is also a graduate of Yale Divinity School.

## ***The God We Hardly Knew***

*No one can celebrate a genuine Christmas without being truly poor. The self-sufficient, the proud, those who, because they have everything, look down on others, those who have no need even of God – for them there will be no Christmas. Only the poor, the hungry, those who need someone to come on their behalf, will have that someone. That someone is God. Emmanuel. God-with-us. Without poverty of spirit there can be no abundance of God.*

*~Oscar Romero*

PROBABLY MOST OF US have had the experience of receiving, right out of the blue, a gift from someone we really don't know all that well. And perhaps, to our consternation, the gift turns out to be nice, something that we didn't know we wanted and certainly didn't ask for, but there it is, a good gift from someone who is not really a good friend.



Now, what is the first thing we do in response?

Right. We try to come up with a gift to give in return – not out of gratitude (after all we didn't ask for it) or out of friendship (after all we hardly knew this person), but because we don't want to feel guilty.

We don't want to be indebted. The gift seems to lay a claim upon us, especially since it has come from someone we barely know. This is uncomfortable; it's hard to look the person in the face until we have reciprocated. By giving us a gift, this person has power over us.

It may well be, as Jesus says, more blessed to give than to receive. But it is more difficult to receive. Watch how people blush when given a compliment. Watch what you do when your teen-aged son comes home with a very expensive Christmas present from a girl he has dated only twice. "Now you take that expensive sweater right back and tell her that your parents won't allow you to accept it. Every gift comes with a claim and you're not ready for her claim upon you." In a society that makes strangers of us all, it is interesting what we do when a stranger gives us a gift.

And consider what we do at Christmas, the so-called season of giving. We enjoy thinking of ourselves as basically generous, benevolent, giving people. That's one reason why everyone, even the nominally religious, loves Christmas. Christmas is a season to celebrate our alleged generosity. The newspaper keeps us posted on how many needy families we have adopted. The Salvation Army kettles enable us to be generous while buying groceries (for ourselves) or gifts (for our families). People we work with who usually balk at the collection to pay for the morning coffee fall over themselves soliciting funds "to make Christmas" for some family.

We love Christmas because, as we say, Christmas brings out the best in us. Everyone gives on Christmas, even the stingiest among us, even the Ebenezer Scrooges. Charles Dickens' story of Scrooge's transformation has probably done more to form our notions of Christmas than St. Luke's story of the manger. Whereas Luke tells us of God's gift to us, Dickens tells us how we can give to others. A Christmas Carol is more congenial to our favorite images of ourselves. Dickens suggests that down deep, even the worst of us can become generous, giving people.

Yet I suggest we are better givers than getters, not because we are generous people but because we are proud, arrogant people. The Christmas story – the one according to Luke not Dickens – is not about how blessed it is to be givers but about how essential it is to see ourselves as receivers.

We prefer to think of ourselves as givers – powerful, competent, self-sufficient, capable people whose goodness motivates us to employ some of our power, competence and gifts to benefit the less fortunate. Which is a direct contradiction of the biblical account of the first Christmas. There we are portrayed not as the givers we wish we were but as the receivers we are. Luke and Matthew go to great lengths to demonstrate that we – with our power, generosity, competence and capabilities – had little to do with God's work in Jesus. God wanted to do something for us so strange, so utterly beyond the bounds of human imagination, so foreign to human projection, that God had to resort to angels, pregnant virgins, and stars in the sky to get it done. We didn't think of it, understand it or approve it. All we could do, at Bethlehem, was receive it. A gift from a God we hardly even knew.

This theme struck me forcefully a few years ago while counseling someone from my church. It was December. She was telling me about her worry and confusion over a number of problems. Having taken several counseling courses in seminary, I knew how to be a good counselor. That is, I knew to keep quiet, listen patiently, ask questions, and offer no direct guidance. After I had given her ample opportunity to vent her feelings, I remarked as I had been taught: "I believe that you have the solution to your problems within you. I believe that down deep, you know what your real problem is and that you have the resources to handle it."

You have heard the message before. One certainly does not have to come to church to hear this popular gospel: You have, within you, the solution to what ails you.

And then it hit me. It was the middle of December, late in Advent. In less than two weeks I would be standing in front of the congregation reading the nativity story from one of the Gospels, demonstrating through a strange story of a virgin birth to a peasant couple in Judea that the solution to what ails us has very little to do with us. After

having tried for generations to cure what ails us, God reached for something inconceivable. God put on our back doorstep a solution so radical that many missed it.

Rabbi Michael Goldberg, in his book *Jews and Christians*, says that as a Jew he is impressed in reading Matthew's account of the nativity by how utterly passive the actors are. As a Jew, he answers to the story of the Exodus, a story of how God liberated the chosen people through the enlistment and prodding of people like Moses, Aaron and Miriam. But the Christmas story implies that what God wants to do for us is so strange, so beyond the bounds of human effort and striving, that God must resort to utterly unnatural, supernatural means. It tells of an unimaginable gift from a stranger, a God whom we hardly even knew.

This strange story tells us how to be receivers. The first word of the church, a people born out of so odd a nativity, is that we are receivers before we are givers. Discipleship teaches us the art of seeing our lives as gifts. That's tough, because I would rather see myself as a giver. I want power – to stand on my own, take charge, set things to rights, perhaps to help those who have nothing. I don't like picturing myself as dependent, needy, empty-handed.

Working with students at a university, I've decided that this truth is a major reason why many children come to despise their parents. It's humbling to see one's life, talents, capabilities, values, weaknesses and strengths as gifts from one's parents. We would rather be self-made men and women, standing on our own feet, striding bravely into a new world of our creation. It's humbling to look into a mirror at twenty-one and admit, "My God, I look just like my old man."

I suspect that the difficulty of receiving is a factor in marriage, too. It's painful to be thrust into such close proximity to another human being, day after day, year after year, until one gradually comes to see that one's identity and character are due to an alarming degree, to what one has received from one's spouse. Marriage is an everyday experience of living in the red – debtors to someone whom we have just begun to know.

If one asks the Gift Records Office of my school who are our most

antagonistic alumni, they'll tell you they are the ones who were here on full scholarship. We talk a great deal about "right to life," "freedom of choice" and "self-determination," but not too much about indebtedness.

It's tough to be on the receiving end of love, God's or anybody else's. It requires that we see our lives not as our possessions, but as gifts. "Nothing is more repugnant to capable, reasonable people than grace," wrote John Wesley a long time ago.

Among the most familiar Christmas texts is the one in Isaiah: "The Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel" (Isaiah 7:14). Less familiar is its context: Isaiah has been pleading with King Ahaz to put his trust in God's promise to Israel rather than in alliances with strong military powers like Syria. "If you will not believe, you shall not be established," Isaiah warns Ahaz (7:9). Then the prophet tells the fearful king that God is going to give him a baby as a sign. A baby. Isn't that just like God, Ahaz must have thought. What Ahaz needed, with Assyria breathing down his neck, was a good army, not a baby.

This is often the way God loves us: with gifts we thought we didn't need, which transform us into people we don't necessarily want to be. With our advanced degrees, armies, government programs, material comforts and self-fulfillment techniques, we assume that religion is about giving a little of our power in order to confirm to ourselves that we are indeed as self-sufficient as we claim.

Then this stranger comes to us, blesses us with a gift, and calls us to see ourselves as we are – empty-handed recipients of a gracious God who, rather than leave us to our own devices, gave us a baby.