

Greetings friends,

I ask that as we begin our spiritual journey together we begin to take some time daily (if you are not already) to read the Scripture and pray. I thought it would be beneficial for us to focus on the same passage of Scripture for the week. This week, we will focus on Sunday's texts (See below). If you were not present in worship on Sunday and have not yet watched it, I encourage you to do so. The Scripture used on Sunday was **Matthew 1:18-25**. Matthew was one of Jesus' disciples, who was a tax collector for the Roman government when he was called. In the Gospels of Mark and Luke he is referred to as Levi. Though he did not put his name on the Gospel, the early church knew it to be his work. Matthew is the one who hosted a dinner at his home, with Jesus in attendance, which then the Pharisees commented negatively about Jesus hanging out with "tax collectors and sinners" (Matt. 9:9-13). Matthew writes for a primarily Jewish audience, with a Jewish perspective, and often references the Old Testament. Because of the Jewish focus and tradition, Matthew begins his gospel with the lineage of Jesus through Joseph, as societally Jesus would have been identified with the male genealogy. To point out the fulfillment of prophecy for the Messiah and his relationship with Israel, Matthew traces Jesus' the lineage to King David, and then to Abraham, the founder of Judaism. This passage focuses on the male perspective of the birth story, with how Joseph wrestled with what was happening, God intervening, and Joseph's ultimate decision to marry Mary.

Format-this is a repeat from every week, and will be consistently present for anyone new and as a reminder for all. It is listed at the bottom for review and for anyone who is new to this exercise. Please remember that it is a suggestion. There is no pressure to do it in the format suggested, to do everything on the days that are listed, or to even to answer all the questions. Allow the Holy Spirit to lead you. If one question takes up the time because you are moved in your spirit, then stay with it. The idea of this is to spend some intentional time with the Scriptures, in the presence of God, and in prayer and reflection- in whatever way that works for you!

Scripture: Matthew 1:18-25 (NIV)

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about^[d]: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet^[e] did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

²⁰ But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus,^[f] because he will save his people from their sins."

²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³ "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").

²⁴ When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. ²⁵ But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

Other Scriptures referenced:

2 Corinthians 3:6

He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

Luke 1:26-56 (the story of Mary with Gabriel, and then going to visit Elizabeth)

Deuteronomy 22:21 (that Mary could have been stoned to death)

DAILY QUIET TIME WITH GOD:

Monday: v.18 “This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about”- can also be translated as “The origin of Jesus the Messiah was like this.” In Matthew 1:1 it begins “This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah (or the Christ, or the Anointed One) the son of David, the son of Abraham.” Then, after tracking Jesus’ lineage, Matthew reasserts his primary focus- that Jesus is the Messiah. “His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph”- Mary and Joseph were “betrothed,” a legally binding agreement with expected fidelity and purity, with no sexual intimacy permitted, until after they would marry a year later. “But before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit”- Just a note that in contrast to the Roman Catholic tradition that believes that Mary was a perpetual virgin, Protestants view this as an indicator that Mary and Joseph did have sexual relations once married and Jesus was born. Protestants also believe that Jesus’ siblings were from Mary and Joseph, born after Jesus, and not Jesus’ step-siblings from Joseph’s past.

At this point in the story, Mary has already been told by the angel Gabriel that she would conceive by the Holy Spirit. She then went “in haste” to spend three months with her cousin Elizabeth (who was six months pregnant and whose pregnancy was also a sign of God’s miraculous power). At that time then, Elizabeth would have borne John (the Baptist), and Mary returned home. Mary would need to reveal to Joseph that she was a virgin and yet pregnant, something both Matthew and Luke want to establish. It says that Mary was “found” to be pregnant, which in the original Greek is *heuriskó*, a verb meaning to learn, discover, especially after searching (biblehub.com). We do not know how Mary went about informing Joseph of the pregnancy, or if it was somehow obvious and there was an accusation, but it was discovered when she was about three months pregnant. We don’t know when and how Mary filled Joseph in on the full story, not only that she was pregnant but that the Holy Spirit was involved, but Matthew states Mary’s full circumstance and how it occurred as a fact. But, just because something may be true, doesn’t mean that it is always accepted quickly, easily, or at all. This was true back then and is still true today. For instance, the Gospel is the truth, the Bible the true Word of God, and yet many will not accept it. For many, the reason is because once something is really accepted, really believed, then it would change their life, and they don’t want that. Living as a Christian disciple, although there are countless benefits such as salvation and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, also has risks, sacrifice, and expectations. Did you ever experience hearing the truth of God, and yet not wanting to accept it because it didn’t fit with your

preconceived ideas or because it would mean changing the way you live? If so, how did you wrestle with it, and what was the outcome? Take a moment to pray, and ask God if there is any truth that you have not been accepting. If so, confess, repent, and live into God's truth.

Tuesday: v.19 "Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law"- although they were not yet married, husband is the term used during the betrothal period. "Faithful to the law"- I appreciate the NRSV for this, "Her husband Joseph being a righteous man." This all means that Joseph is a good, moral person of faith, who seeks to follow God and obey every commandment. This is excellent! It's something that all believers aspire to. Yet sometimes, people can get so particular about following the rules that they neglect the real reason the rule was made in the first place. We have to always be mindful to follow the Spirit of the law, and not just the rule of law. Paul addresses this in 2 Corinthians 3:6, "He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant- not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." Jesus also went continually against the Pharisees about this, such as when they got upset that Jesus healed someone on the Sabbath (John 5:1-18). Undergirding the law of God and the practice of being righteous is grace fueled with compassion. "And yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly"- Mary being pregnant meant that she had been unfaithful, and breaking a betrothal required a legal divorce. How much it must have hurt Joseph to find Mary pregnant, and then as he would've perceived it, telling a tale of it being a supernatural occurrence. It would have meant that she was unfaithful, a cheater, and a liar. He believed she had broken their covenant, broken his trust. Have you ever had a time when someone betrayed you, lied to you, broke your trust, or hurt you deeply? Most of us have, unfortunately, to varying degrees. Take a moment and consider any heartbreak from the past, or if applicable, the present. What was the circumstance? Were there misunderstandings or was someone purposeful in causing harm? As you consider any moments like this, pay attention to what comes to mind and any feelings that arise. If you encounter deep wounding and sorrow, pray for healing. If you encounter deep anger and bitterness, repent and forgive, allowing God to guide you through letting it go and giving it to God. Consider too, any time that you may have been falsely accused, or times when you caused pain and harm to another. If something comes up and you experience guilt or shame, pray about it, asking for healing, giving it all to God, and forgive yourself. If God leads you to make amends or make restitution, follow through and repair what you may have broken. Thank God for his mercy and grace!

Wednesday: v.19b continued- "And yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly" Joseph must have loved Mary. He had rights that he was planning to willingly give away. He had a right to publically shame Mary. He even had a right to have her stoned to death. By not wanting to expose Mary to public disgrace, Joseph was attempting to give mercy. Even in his pain and heartache he was planning to protect Mary. It's a lesson for all of us- offering grace, giving people an opportunity to "save face," not condemning or shaming another. Instead, offering a peaceful solution to a painful problem, and doing so quietly. Mary still would have likely encountered shame and condemnation from society. The secret of her pregnancy wouldn't be a secret for long. But, none of that would come from Joseph. It was a plan that he came up with because he understood the Spirit of the law. Many of us have encountered both sides of this. Did you ever experience a time when people called you out,

embarrassed, or shamed you? How did this make you feel? How did you react? What impact did it have on you? Again, if any negative memories or emotions come flooding forward, God is inviting you to heal. Pray, and experience God's comfort and love. Though most of us probably do not seek to do any of this to another, sometimes it happens. Have you ever purposely, or even inadvertently, harmed another in this way? What happened? How and when did you realize what you had done? What did you do about it? As people of God who have received God's mercy and grace, we need to be mindful, careful of and for others, protecting and giving mercy and grace. When we make a mistake, which will happen, seek to find a solution quietly, and in a way that allows people from all sides to experience grace through you. In considering what may be very painful memories, it is important to follow through with God. Please take time with God, expressing your heart, letting go, allowing healing, and listening to God's affirmation of love for you. Because God does love you. No. Matter. What.

Thursday: v.20 "But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife"- Does God speak to us sometimes in dreams? Yes. God speaks to people in dreams all throughout Scripture and is doing so even today. But, not every dream is from God- sometimes it's just something you ate! But many have a notepad next to the bed, and they write down dream details before rising and forgetting, and then reflect and pray about it. Here, an actual angel appeared in Joseph's dream! That's a pretty clear indication it's from God! Why do you think God chose to have the angel give him the message in a dream? Have you ever experienced God speaking to you through your dreams? If so, how did you identify that it was from God, and what the message was saying?

"Joseph son of David"- Mathew again pointing out Joseph's lineage, and therefore Jesus' legal lineage, pointing back to King David. "He had considered"- Notice first that it was Joseph considering his own plan to protect Mary and divorce her quietly, using Godly principles, yet God himself is now entering into the equation. So often we can find ourselves doing this- considering something ourselves, even using Biblical principles, and yet neglecting to include God into the determining process. Yet God needs to be the first one we consult, the first one we include. God needs to be the first one so that God is not being included later, being asked to bless whatever we decided, but is instead leading the way! When God leads, we know we are participating in God's will. We often find, as Joseph does, that God's ways are not our ways. God pushes the boundaries, colors outside the lines, and often leads into abundant grace which usually requires some kind of sacrifice. This is what Joseph is being asked by God to do.

"Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife"- this is Joseph's sacrifice. There is reason for Joseph to be afraid to marry Mary. Although Joseph's actions would have protected Mary, they would have also protected Joseph. Joseph's reputation was on the line. He was known for being faithful, righteous. If Mary was pregnant before they were married, and he didn't break it off with her, it would imply that he is responsible- that he really isn't as righteous as he led people to believe. People could say that he took advantage of Mary, and he would be the one carrying the scorn and shame. Also, since he did not yet believe Mary's story about the Holy Spirit, or maybe she hadn't even told him that part, it would mean entering into marriage with someone who had broken their vow, and quite possibly was not to be trusted. He would raise someone

else's child. Have you ever been faced with doing something like this- taking the shame and blame you didn't deserve, enduring people's slander for someone else, sacrificing your reputation because God wanted you to live into an abundant and sacrificial grace for someone else? If so, how and why did you make your decision? How did it turn out? How did it make you feel? Did it have any long-term impact upon you or someone else? Take a moment and relate all of this to your relationship with Jesus Christ, who bore your sin and shame, and offered abundant and sacrificial grace for you on a cross. How does this make you feel? What does it make you think of (your own sins, people, situations, circumstances, etc.)? Pray thanks for the sacrifice Jesus made on your behalf, and the abundant grace given!

Friday: v.20b-21 "Because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins"- "conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit" is either informing or confirming. Either way, it means it is a miraculous movement of God and that Mary is one who has actually been faithful and trustworthy. It means that God is moving in a powerful way, performing a miracle, and that God was wanting Joseph to be a part of it! It wasn't to be a fear-filled torment to take Mary as his wife, it would be a hope-filled, promise-driven, miracle-working opportunity to be a part of God's greater plan! Sometimes, as God's plan, opportunity, and blessings are presented, God asks us to step into things that are difficult, frightening, and sometimes even risky. Joseph would likely still encounter scorn and shame from others, but it would be bearable, worth it, because Joseph knew the true story. Have you ever had something you dreaded or found frightening become a blessing? Have you ever recognized that God was using you for a greater purpose? Maybe you sensed it at the time, or maybe you looked back and recognized the signs, or maybe someone later came and told you how God moved through you- because you were willing to step into God's miracle-action at work. Reflect on any of those times, and treasure them. Consider journaling about them, because in moments when you might not recognize God moving, or you are experiencing turmoil and dismay and not knowing which way to turn, reading and remembering that God is a miracle-worker who works through and blesses you is good to hold onto. It inspires trust, obedience, and surrender. Consider times when God asked you to do something that required this kind of commitment. How did it make you feel? What happened? V.21 "She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins" "Jesus," which means "Yahweh saves," and salvation, would be people from their sins. Looking back at this as a Christian, knowing the full story of Jesus' ministry, death on a cross, resurrection, and ascension, it makes perfect sense. Imagine Joseph hearing this- what could this possibly mean? What are some ideas of how Joseph may have understood this? We are thankful and praise God's incredible gift of salvation!!

V.22-24 "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us")" the reason why Matthew and Luke make such a point of Mary being a virgin, that she was pregnant "before they came together" (v.18) was because this was fulfillment of prophecy. If Mary was just a young woman who became pregnant the natural way, there would be nothing

miraculous in that. But fulfillment of prophecy meant that it was God's plan, from long ago, that it was a miracle! For Joseph, he would have known of this prophecy, as well as that the Messiah would come from the line of David, hence the angel calling Joseph with a reminder- "Joseph, son of David" (v.20). What does it say about God that salvation was planned all along? What does it say that God would do so through humanity, as a baby?

V.23 "Immanuel (which means "God with us")" – People will recognize through Jesus that God is with them, and Jesus is named for what he will do. God became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14), and God is still with us today. Any time, at all times, remember that God is with you! God with us, because Jesus was born to us, to save us. Salvation is offered to everyone. Consider those who are not yet in a saving relationship with Christ. Pray for God to clear their mind, to create an openness for the Gospel, that their heart may be fertile ground to receive Christ and accept God's gift of grace.

Saturday:

V.24-25 "When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus." We never hear Joseph speak, but his actions speak louder than words. Believing, obedient, faithful, loving, sacrificial. Can you think of any other terms to describe him? Joseph did what God wanted and lived into God's miracle plan of salvation.

"When Joseph woke up"- have you ever had a dream, vision, or God-encounter of any kind where you just knew it was God, knew what God wanted you to do, and without question you just did it? If so, describe it. What happened? How would you describe your certainty?

"But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son"- another note of a different perspective from the Roman Catholic tradition of Mary being a perpetual virgin, Protestants note the word "until" and take that to mean that consummation occurred after Jesus was born. Joseph respected God and Mary and refrained from sexual relations until God's Son was born.

"And he gave him the name Jesus" just as he was told to do by the angel. It was typically the male role to name the child, and naming the child implies familial ownership, adoption as his own.

"Took Mary home as his wife" though a rough beginning, with the misunderstanding and upset about the pregnancy, this couple is off to a strong future. Based on Joseph's obedience to God's command, I believe they had the focus that all couple's would be wise to have- God as the focus and leader of the family (this is what the Bible teaches!). With God at the center of their relationship they would be able to heal from the past. Though it's not recorded, it is very likely that when Joseph found Mary to be pregnant that there may have been words said, hurt feelings for Joseph but also Mary as she was accused and not believed. It would've been a

painful time. But God is our healer, and their belief in God and commitment to follow God will be what keeps their relationship strong. This is true of all relationships, as when everyone is focused on God they become in alignment with God's ways and will, which creates a loving, caring, compassionate atmosphere in which relationships thrive. Take a moment and reflect on your relationships. How much is God at the center? If you are in a relationship with someone who is not a believer, consider how you can keep God as your center, and the impact that would have on the other. If you are in a relationship with a believer, is God at the center? If so, reflect upon it and describe how God moves in a positive way through that. If not, consider why that might be. Ask God how you can grow in your relationships, in keeping God at the center. Ask God to come into your relationships and begin to move in ways that build you closer to God and one another.

Other items:

Advent Candle Reading

Jeremiah 33:14-16 "The days are coming,' declares the LORD, 'when I will fulfill the good promise I made to the people of Israel and Judah. In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David's line; he will do what is just and right in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. This is the name by which it will be called: The LORD Our Righteous Savior."

With expectation and anticipation we relight the candles of HOPE and JOY, and light the third candle, the candle of LOVE. Jesus demonstrated self-giving love in his ministry as the Good Shepherd. Advent is a time for kindness, compassion, thinking of others, and sharing with others. As God is love, let us be love also, as God loved us by giving his most precious gift, his Son, Jesus Christ.

O Lord, teach us to love, as we follow Christ's footsteps. May we always remember to put You first, that we may know Your love and show it in our lives. As we prepare for our celebration of Jesus' birth, fill our hearts with love for the world, that all may know Your love and the One whom You have sent, Your Son, our Savior. Amen.

Responsive Reading (adapted from Psalm 25:1-10, NIV)

Leader: In You, Lord our God, we put our trust.

People: O God, we trust in You;

L: Do not let us be put to shame,

P: No one who hopes in You will ever be put to shame,

L: Show us Your ways, Lord,

P: Teach us Your paths.

L: Guide us in Your truth and teach us,

P: For You are God our Savior, and our hope is in You.

L: Remember, Lord, Your great mercy and love,
for they are from of old.

P: According to Your love remember us,
for You, Lord, are good.

L: Good and upright are You Lord;

P: You guide the humble in what is right
and teach us Your way.

All: All Your ways are loving and faithful
toward those who keep Your covenant.

Unison Prayer

Holy and Eternal God,
You are our Hope and Joy.
Make us righteous by Your Spirit,
With Your light within us all.
Receive us by Your mercy,
Guide us by Your grace,
For You are Love,
For us, for others, for the world.
In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Song Lyrics:

Hail to the Lord's Anointed #203

1. Hail to the Lord's Anointed,
great David's greater Son!
Hail in the time appointed,
his reign on earth begun!
He comes to break oppression,
to set the captive free;
to take away transgression,
and rule in equity.

2. He comes with succor speedy
to those who suffer wrong;
to help the poor and needy,
and bid the weak be strong;
to give them songs for sighing,
their darkness turn to light,
whose souls, condemned and dying,
are precious in his sight.

3. He shall come down like showers
upon the fruitful earth;

love, joy, and hope, like flowers,
spring in his path to birth.
Before him on the mountains,
shall peace, the herald, go,
and righteousness, in fountains,
from hill to valley flow.

4. To him shall prayer unceasing
and daily vows ascend;
his kingdom still increasing,
a kingdom without end.
The tide of time shall never
his covenant remove;
his name shall stand forever;
that name to us is love.

God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen v.1,7, We Three Kings Medley

God rest ye merry gentlemen
Let nothing you dismay
Remember Christ our Savior
Was born on Christmas Day
To save us all from Satan's power
When we were gone astray

O tidings of comfort and joy
Comfort and joy
O tidings of comfort and joy

Now to the Lord sing praises
All you within this place
And with true love and brotherhood
Each other now embrace
This holy tide of Christmas
All others doth deface

O tidings of comfort and joy
Comfort and joy
O tidings of comfort and joy

O, star of wonder, star of night,
Star with royal beauty bright,
Westward leading, still proceeding,
Guide us to thy perfect light.

Glorious now behold Him arise,
King and God and sacrifice,
Hallelujah! Hallelujah!
Worshipping God Most High.

O, star of wonder, star of night,
Star with royal beauty bright,
Westward leading, still proceeding,
Guide us to thy perfect light. (and either end here OR add a tag)

God rest ye merry gentlemen
Let nothing you dismay
Remember Christ our Savior
Was born on Christmas Day!

O Little Town of Bethlehem #230 v.1,3,4

1. O little town of Bethlehem,
how still we see thee lie;
above thy deep and dreamless sleep
the silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
the everlasting light;
the hopes and fears of all the years
are met in thee tonight.

3. How silently, how silently,
the wondrous gift is given;
so God imparts to human hearts
the blessings of his heaven.
No ear may hear his coming,
but in this world of sin,
where meek souls will receive him, still
the dear Christ enters in.

4. O holy Child of Bethlehem,
descend to us, we pray;
cast out our sin, and enter in,
be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels
the great glad tidings tell;
o come to us, abide with us,
our Lord Emmanuel!

Format (this is a repeat from last week, and will be consistently present for anyone new and as a reminder for all):

Find a quiet place and time to focus on the Word, and to hear from God through it. It doesn't have to be long, for some it will be longer than others. I encourage you, if possible, to do this practice in the morning. You will then find that God brings it to your mind throughout your day.

For greater impact I encourage you to get some paper and a pen and journal daily what thoughts and impressions God brings to mind. Write out also your own thoughts and your own prayers, making sure to leave space within your time for God's response. Listen intently, and notice what rises up within you- what you are thinking, feeling, memories that arise and ideas that spring up. It may be something God would want you to address within yourself and/or with others. It may be something God is inspiring you to begin or end. God's possibilities are infinite! After time, it is often beneficial to go back and read what you have written, and notice how God has been moving in your life (and praise God for it!).

Begin with prayer, quieting yourself within and opening up to hearing what God would like to reveal to you. Praise God for who he is, for loving you, being with you, and more. Then ask God to speak to you; to open your heart and mind to hear his message. (if you are journaling, you could write out the prayer)

Read the Scripture passage over twice; once as a read through, and the second time slowly, meditatively. Notice what God illuminates for you. Notice what words or ideas are "jumping off the page at you," impacting you from the Scripture. Ask God why that is being highlighted for you. What is God saying to you? What is God asking you to say, do, change, pray about, etc.? What is the application for my life today? **Most importantly- what am I going to do about it? (If you are journaling you could write it all out, which reinforces it in a greater way)

I have put together some daily questions based upon the Scripture. You may use those, but also feel free to deviate away from it if God is leading you there. They are simply offered to prompt contemplation with God. There is much more in this passage, feel free to delve in more!

At the end of your time pray again. I recommend praying throughout, but the ending prayer would include praise, thanking God for revelation, and asking for the Holy Spirit to continue to reveal, bringing to mind God's will. Ask God for the courage, empowerment, and opportunity to do what you have determined God is asking you to do.