



AN ADVENT DEVOTIONAL

HEROES & VILLAINS

THE CHRISTMAS DRAMA

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Once again, Dr. David Case has provided an invigoratingly fresh perspective of Advent. The reader will find new insight from a look at the cast of characters included in the marvelous Incarnation of Christ. The fact that God works in, with, through and sometimes in spite of people is the common thread of this account. You will discover or rediscover the rich tapestry of individual lives interwoven in the arrival of the Babe in Bethlehem who was called Jesus. Whether heroes or villains, the characters of Advent provide a story line unlike any other. Be enriched as you engage this devotional.

Pastor Jonathan W. Morgan

December 1

Introduction

Several years ago, James Bishop wrote a book entitled, The Greatest Story Ever Told. It was the account of Passion Week, the last week of the human, Jesus of Nazareth, on earth. It was an instant success. But, as we all know, the last week of a man's life also had a beginning. The beginning of the life of Jesus of Nazareth is the focus of this year's devotional.

Two of the four Gospel writers contain details on the birth of Jesus. Matthew, chapters 1-2 and Luke, chapters 1-2, will be the source of our reading of *Heroes and Villains: The Christmas Drama*. In these readings we will find the most often talked about cast of characters, and note some of the secondary individuals. The drama, to be understood in its completeness, must include all characters, both great and small.

A pageant retelling the Christmas story is a familiar event during this season of the year. A viewing of *A Charlie Brown Christmas* reminds us of this fact. It is my hope and prayer that as you review the beginning of the life of Jesus of Nazareth, it will prepare your heart for the Greatest Story Ever Told.

December 2
Luke 1:26-38

Mary

The pageant telling the beginning of the life of Jesus of Nazareth will necessitate a cast of many characters. Some will play leading roles while others will play minor roles. It will take all players to faithfully tell the story.

The leading role for this story is a little teenage girl named Mary. She grew up in a strict Jewish home where she learned the skills necessary to ultimately get married, rear a family, and keep a house for her husband. Mary had learned her duties well and she was now ready to get married.

Mary loved Jehovah God and He had a special mission for her. The angel Gabriel came to her one day with a startling announcement: *You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him, Jesus.* With amazement, Mary exclaimed: *How can this be, since I am a virgin!* This is a question of *how* this will happen, not a *rejection* of what the angel had said. Gabriel told her: *The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God.*

The answer to the question of *how can this be* is simple – it will be a divine work of God! A little teenage girl may not have understood all the implications of what Gabriel had told her but her response was, *do it to me according to your word!*

December 3

Matthew 1:18-25

Joseph

The other leading part in this pageant is the role of the male-figure. His name is Joseph. He is an older man. He has his own trade – he works with wood. He has his own home. He lacks one thing – a wife. It was the custom of the day for an older man to marry a younger woman. Mary is betrothed to Joseph. This was a legal arrangement that lasted for a full year. After the year they would be married. The only way for this legal arrangement to be broken was if one of the parties died or if there was a moral issue.

During the betrothal year a problem arose. Mary was found to be pregnant. We learn much about the character of individuals in moments such as this. Joseph was a righteous man and did not want to disgrace Mary. His first option was to send her away secretly.

While he considered this option, an angel of the Lord appeared to him with this message: *Joseph, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.* It took a man with a great amount of faith in Jehovah God to obey the word of an angel.

Joseph did as the angel commanded him, took Mary as his wife, kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son, and called His name Jesus!

December 4

Matthew 2:1-21

Herod the Great

A good story not only has heroes like Mary and Joseph, but also has a villain or two. In the pageant regarding the birth of Jesus, there are plenty of villains. We meet one of them in today's reading by the name of Herod the Great.

Representing the Roman government, Herod the Great ruled from 37 BC until his death in 4 BC. He was supreme in Jerusalem, king of all Judea, Samaria and Galilee. Two characteristics are notable about Herod's rule: first, his insecurity – political, to start with, then becoming psychological. Having fought his way into power, he faced continuing opposition and uncertainty in the early years of his reign. He successfully played different Roman leaders against each other, and ruthlessly put down internal opposition to his rule.

A second more positive characteristic of Herod's reign was his achievement as a builder. He built fortresses, palaces, temples and theatres. For the study of the New Testament, the most important aspect of his building career was his work on the Jerusalem temple. This was started around 19 BC, and the work on the main part of the temple took about ten years to complete. The Second Temple (built around the time of Nehemiah), was a modest affair; not in good repair when Herod came to power. However, he transformed it into one of the wonders of the ancient world. He extended the temple area so as to cover twice the area of the original temple built by Solomon (the First Temple).

The account in Matthew, chapter two, of Herod's murderous reaction to the announcement of the birth of a King of the Jews is entirely in character.

December 5

Luke 1:57-66

John, the Baptizer

John, the Baptizer, was born to an elderly couple, Zacharias and Elizabeth. He was the older cousin of Jesus. He got his name by baptizing those individuals who responded to his preaching. While he is not directly mentioned in the narratives about the birth of Jesus, he would be present as the pageant unfolds standing in the background, as he understood his place in the total story.

It is important to understand the movements of life and one's place in them. John understood that point. He grasped he was not the Messiah. God's great plan was working through his cousin, not himself. John knew this and was comfortable with that knowledge. John was a great preacher. His powerful message of repentance attracted crowds from Jerusalem. Those who responded to this call for repentance were invited to step into the river Jordan and be baptized by John.

A delegation from the Pharisees wanted to know John's identity. His actions of baptizing individuals were interpreted to mean that he was the Christ, or at least Elijah or the Prophet (John 1:24 ff.). John denied all such titles. He was a voice, announcing the coming One. John said, *I baptize in water, but among you stands One whom you do not know.* John understood that he must decrease, but the coming One must increase!

Upon hearing of John's death, Jesus said, *of one born of woman, there was none greater than John.*

December 6

Matthew 1:1-17

Matthew's Genealogy

In today's society, there is considerable interest in discovering one's DNA. The discovery of one's ancestry is important for many people. The New Testament records the ancestral lineage for Jesus and today's reading provides us with Matthew's version. The title of the genealogy in Matthew 1:1 hints at its overall structure, namely, *Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham*.

The most notable structural characteristic is pointed out by Matthew himself in 1:17: the names in the list are gathered into three groups of fourteen with significant historical events placed at their junctures. Matthew's desire for symmetry is seen clearly by the fact that he has omitted the names of four Davidic kings. It was not at all uncommon to drop names from a genealogical table as is shown in Ezra 7:1-5. The term *son* may refer to a grandson or a descendant even further removed and the *all* of 1:17 is simply a reference to all of the names Matthew mentions, not a statement that his list is all-inclusive.

Genealogies can serve a number of purposes, such as: to show identity and duty, to demonstrate credentials for power and property, to structure history and to indicate one's character. Matthew's genealogy structures Israelite history in a memorable fashion and rehearses royal Davidic lineage leading up to the birth of Jesus. Jesus was the fulfillment of the Messianic expectation of Israel and Matthew's genealogy presents his ancestral credentials. Indeed, in reporting the genealogy of Jesus Christ, Matthew makes the title, Messiah (Greek: *christos*) part of Jesus' name.

December 7

Luke 3:23-28

Luke's Genealogy

The writer, Luke, has a genealogy for Jesus as well. He placed this ancestral record at the beginning of Jesus' ministry in chapter three. The placement resembles the genealogy of the tribes of Israel and of Moses in Exodus 6:14-25. Luke provides an unstructured, uninterrupted list of seventy-seven names and traces Jesus' ancestry backward in time from Jesus through David through Abraham to Adam, son of God.

The very different structure and placement of Luke's genealogy from that of Matthew suggest different purposes as well. While Luke seems similarly concerned to show Jesus to be a descendant of David, he traces the Messianic line through David's son, Nathan, instead of through Solomon. While Jesus as the Son of God is more than a human ascription in Luke, his genealogy seems to underscore Jesus' humanity and his ancestral credentials as God's selected agent.

What is clear in Luke and Acts is that Luke saw all peoples, Jews and Gentiles, invited into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. The Jews were the vehicle by which God brought the savior of all humanity into the world. Luke's point is not that all humanity will be saved, but that salvation is equally offered to all of humanity. By placing this all-inclusive genealogy at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, Luke indicates that the benefits of Jesus' ministry will be available to all.

These genealogies show *the crowd of witnesses* overseeing this pageant.

December 8

Luke 2:1-7

Caesar Augustus

The character in today's reading is Caesar Augustus. This individual was born Gaius Octavius in 63 B.C. His great-uncle was Julius Caesar, whom he fought beside in 47 B.C. Augustus impressed his great-uncle so much during battle that when Julius Caesar was assassinated in 43 B.C., he had appointed Augustus as heir to his political and personal fortune in his will. Augustus, at the age of 19, accepted the inheritance from Caesar's will and was quickly plunged into the complicated world of Roman politics.

After fighting several battles, Augustus was acclaimed a hero. With skill, efficiency, and cleverness, he secured his position as the first Emperor of Rome. Augustus reorganized Roman life throughout the empire. He passed laws to encourage marital stability and renew religious practices. He instituted a system of taxation and a census while also expanding the network of Roman roads. He founded a postal service and established a regular police force and fire brigade in Rome.

Augustus expanded the empire, annexing Egypt, part of Spain, areas of central Europe, and even lands in the Middle East, such as Judea in A.D. 6. These additions, along with the end of civil wars, fostered the growth of an enormous trading network.

Augustus died outside Naples, Italy in A.D. 14. His body was returned to the capital. Businesses closed the day of his funeral out of deep respect for the Emperor. He was a ruler of ability and vision and at his death, Augustus was proclaimed by the Senate to be a Roman god.

December 9

Luke 2:8-20

The Shepherds

In the Christmas pageant, several individuals would play the part of shepherds. These men play an important role in the whole story. First of all, shepherds were considered outcasts in Jewish society. They were assigned the lowest of tasks – watching over animals. In Jewish society, two groups of people were not permitted to give testimony in a court, women and shepherds.

On the other hand, they provided a unique service to Jewish society, especially in their temple worship. Animals used for daily sacrifice in temple worship were kept out in the near-by fields. That is where our story begins today. Shepherds were out in the field keeping watch over their flocks at night. They kept watch against thieves and predatory animals.

Out in the field this night, they had a life-changing experience. An angel of the Lord appeared to them with a report of good news. That very evening the Savior had been born in Bethlehem. They would find the Child wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. They arrived in Bethlehem in a hurry and found their way to Mary, Joseph and the baby as He lay in the manger.

For once in their lives, the shepherds were able to testify about something! They made known the statement which had been told them about this Child. Those who heard their testimony wondered at its content, but Mary treasured all these things pondering them in her heart.

The shepherds returned to their usual job watching over sheep. But they were changed men. They glorified and praised God for what they had been allowed to hear and see.

December 10

Luke 2:6-7

The Innkeeper

Today's reading presents an interesting dilemma. It revolves around the phrase, *there was no room for them in the inn*. Taking this phrase at first glance, it would appear that Bethlehem was filled with visitors who had come to the city to register for the census. One can picture inn after inn with *no vacancy* signs in front. Perhaps the reader has heard a sermon on that cruel inn owner who turned away a pregnant girl who was about to give birth. The only place Mary and Joseph could find was a stable and there among animals she gave birth.

Is this a correct interpretation of the situation? An examination of a couple of other texts may help us get a better picture of just what is going on here.

- Luke 1:39-40 – Mary arose and went in a hurry to the hill country, to a city of Judah! Why? Mary was reared in a strict Jewish home. Her parents disowned her and she had nowhere else to go. She went to live with Elizabeth.
- Matthew 1:24 – Joseph took Mary as his wife. Why? Since they were betrothed, Joseph had say over Mary. He could send her away secretly. Instead, he took her as his wife.
- Luke 2:7 – There was no room for them. Why? Joseph is returning to his hometown. Perhaps he has relatives there. It would be natural to stay with them while in town. But there is one problem. Joseph is travelling with Mary who is obviously pregnant. If her parents had disowned her it is probably true that his relatives would do the same!

December 11

Matthew 2:1-12

The Magi

Every nativity scene has wise men present. Today's reading reminds the reader of the visit of the Magi. The number of wise men is usually three. The text does not tell us the number, only the fact that they presented Jesus with three gifts provides us with a clue. Who were these mysterious individuals?

The Magi were a caste of wise men specializing in astronomy, astrology, and natural science. Perhaps they were from Persia or southern Arabia, both of which are east from the Holy Land. Since they were looking for the King of the Jews, they naturally came to the Jewish capital city.

The reference to the King of the Jews indicates the Magi were Gentiles. Matthew shows that people of all nations acknowledged Jesus as King of the Jews and came to worship Him as Lord. They were guided by a star, probably not an ordinary star, planet or comet.

King Herod did not know the circumstances surrounding the birth of Jesus and called Jewish people to provide information. They pointed to a prophecy of Micah and pinpointed the city of Bethlehem as the place of Jesus' birth.

Contrary to tradition, the Magi did not visit Jesus at the manger on the night of his birth, as did the shepherds. They came some months later and visited Him as a child in his house.

December 12
Luke 1:39-45

Elizabeth

The character we are highlighting in today's reading is Elizabeth, a relative of Mary. The thing most people remember concerning Elizabeth is she could not give birth to a child for the major portion of her married life. In fact, Elizabeth had received the unkind reputation of *the barren one* (v.36).

As the story of God's great plan for his world unfolded, it often involved a woman who was barren, unable to bear a child. It began with Sarah in the Abrahamic narratives in Genesis. It continued with Rebekah (Gen. 25:21). Barrenness was the theme of Rachel (Gen. 30:2). The theme of barrenness can be further developed, but one more example will be sufficient, Hannah (1 Sam. 1:2). A human frailty, like barrenness, is no roadblock to God when he desires to bring his will to pass.

Elizabeth's barrenness is linked to Gabriel's announcement to Mary that she would give birth to the Messiah. To encourage Mary to believe God's plan for her, Gabriel tells Mary that Elizabeth, the barren one, is six months pregnant. Then he added these words: *For nothing will be impossible with God!*

Mary went to the home of Zacharias and Elizabeth. When Mary entered their home something special happened. To make certain everyone knew that God was in their lives, upon Mary entering their home the baby in Elizabeth's womb leaped for joy. Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, blessing Mary and praising her for believing God would fulfill his promise to her.

Mary stayed there until John was born.

December 13
Luke 2:25-32

Simeon

The Bible clearly states there was an expectation among the Jewish people that their God would one day visit his people with His anointed One, the Messiah. This expectation was at a fever pitch in the early days of the first century. In the book of Acts, chapter 5, we read of Gamaliel's wise counsel concerning two individuals in their days by the name of Theudas and Judas of Galilee, both of whom claimed to be the messiah. They gathered disciples around them but when they died, their followers fell away. Messianic expectation was high; understanding just what God had in mind as the Messiah was harder to understand!

Today's reading tells us of one man in Jerusalem by the name of Simeon. He was a devoted Jew, looking for the comfort the Messiah would bring to his people at his coming. The Holy Spirit was upon Simeon so that he would recognize the Messiah when he appeared. Simeon was also promised that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah!

Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem to be circumcised. As the parents brought Jesus into the temple, they were met by Simeon. He took the child into his arms, blessed God, and said the fourth Nativity Song recorded in Luke's birth narrative. It is found in verses 29-32 and is known as *The Nunc Dimittis*, from the first words of the Latin Vulgate translation meaning, *now...you are releasing*.

Simeon, an old man with a devoted heart for God, could now die in peace. He had seen God's plan for the salvation of the entire world. The Messiah will be a light to the Gentiles and glory for Israel.

December 14

Luke 2:7

The Animals

Perhaps we all recall the folk-tale that says at midnight on Christmas Eve, animals talk. This is to express the idea that even the animals in the shed where Mary gave birth to Jesus, discussed among themselves this great event and its ultimate meaning. It is true that animals played a real part in the birth narrative. Mary, being with child, rode on a donkey for ninety miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Sheep were out in the field being watched by shepherds the night Jesus was born. Magi travelled from the East on camels. If you were purchasing a nativity set today, you would have a variety of animals to choose from to complete your set. A point can be made that all of God's creation acknowledged this unusual birth and all creation worshiped the new born Child.

Stanza two of an old English carol, *Away in a Manger*, helps one to appreciate the moment:

*The cattle are lowing, the poor Baby wakes,
But little Lord Jesus, no crying He makes.
I love thee, Lord Jesus, look down from the sky
And stay by my side 'til morning is nigh.*

Charles H. Gabriel

December 15

Matthew 2:16-23

Satan

The context for today's reading is about Herod's cruelty when the Magi did not return to tell him where the Baby was born. He killed every baby boy in Bethlehem two years old and under. This is called *The Slaughter of the Innocent*. Their only crime was looking like the baby Jesus. These innocent babies were the first martyrs of the Christian era.

However, it is not the actions of Herod that interests us. What drove Herod to do this? Ultimately, it was Satan himself. Satan would be standing in the shadows of this pageant watching the events unfold. Consider Satan's actions in this story:

- Mary, as an unwed mother disowned by her family.
- Joseph, as a confused future husband, thinking about putting Mary away privately.
- Mary, riding a donkey on a ninety mile journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem.
- The unsanitary conditions of Jesus' birth.
- The escape of Joseph, Mary and Jesus to Egypt, being warned by an angel of Herod's desire to kill Jesus.

Satan had been hard at work to keep Jesus from being born. Satan was at work to kill Jesus after His birth. Satan will continue to oppose Jesus for the next thirty-some years!

December 16
Luke 1:19- 26

Gabriel

The character from today's reading is the angel, Gabriel. Only four appearances of this angel are recorded in the Bible. In Daniel 8, he explains the vision of the horned ram as portending the destruction of the Persian Empire by the Macedonian, Alexander the Great, after whose death the kingdom will be divided up among his generals, from one of whom will spring Antiochus Epiphanes. In chapter nine, after Daniel had prayed for Israel, we read: *the man Gabriel...flying swiftly touched me*, and he communicated to Daniel the mysterious prophecy of the *seventy weeks* of years which should elapse before the coming of Christ. In the New Testament he foretells to Zacharias the birth of John the Baptist, and to Mary that of the Savior.

Gabriel is, throughout, the angel of the Incarnation and of Consolation, and so in Christian tradition Gabriel is ever the angel of mercy while Michael is the angel of judgment. At the same time, Gabriel is, in accordance with his name, the angel of the Power of God, and it is worth while noting the frequency with which such words as *great*, *might*, *power*, and *strength* occur in the passages referred to above.

Gabriel's own words, *I am Gabriel who stands before God* (Luke 1:19), have led some to think that he must belong to the highest rank, but this is generally explained as referring to his rank as the highest of God's messengers.

December 17
Matthew 2:22

Herod Archelaus

The character in today's pageant is Herod Archelaus, for a time the ruler of Samaria, Judea, and Idumea between 4 B.C. and 6 A.D. Herod Archelaus was born in 23 B.C. as the son of King Herod and his wife Malthace; he was full brother of Herod Antipas and a half-brother of Philip. With these brothers, he was sent as a hostage to Rome where he received his education. In his father's testament, Herod Archelaus was appointed king, but the Roman emperor Augustus wrote him that he had to content himself with the title of ethnarch (national leader) of Samaria, Judea and Idumea.

Immediately after his accession in 4 B.C., things went wrong. When Herod had fallen ill, two popular teachers, Judas and Mattias, had incited their pupils to remove the golden eagle from the entrance of the Temple. The teachers and their pupils had been burned alive. The new king had to face an angry crowd that demanded rehabilitation of these martyrs; some three thousand Jews were killed during the celebration of Passover.

Archelaus traveled to Rome to have himself crowned by the emperor Augustus. In his absence, there were fresh riots. Archelaus' troops were unable to cope with them and the Roman governor of Syria had to intervene. Matthew implies that Jesus' parents Joseph and Mary were afraid to go to the territories ruled by Archelaus, and therefore settled in Galilee (Matthew 2:22).

Herod Archelaus ruled so badly that the Jews and Samaritans unitedly appealed to Rome to request that he should be deposed. In 6 A.D., Archelaus was banished to Vienna in Gaul where he died not many years later.

December 18

Luke 2:2

Quirinius

The character in today's drama is Quirinius, a Roman aristocrat. After the banishment of the ethnarch, Archelaus, from the tetrarchy of Judea, Quirinius was appointed legate governor of Syria, to which the province of Judea had been added for the purpose of a census.

Born into an undistinguished family, Quirinius followed the normal pathway of service for an ambitious young man of his social class. He successfully led many military campaigns which gave him attention among his superiors and for which he was awarded several honors.

After the banishment of the ethnarch, Herod Archelaus, Judaea (the conglomeration of Samaria, Judea and Idumea) came under direct Roman administration with Coponius as Prefect. At the same time, Quirinius was appointed Legate of Syria, with instructions to assess the Judea Province for taxation purposes. One of his first duties was to carry out a census as part of this order.

The Jews already hated their pagan conquerors, and censuses were forbidden under Jewish law. The assessment was greatly resented by the Jews, and open revolt was prevented only by the efforts of the High Priest, Joazar. Despite efforts to prevent revolt, the census did trigger the revolt of Judas of Galilee and the formation of the party of the Zealots, according to Josephus.

December 19

Luke 1:5-23

Zacharias

Today, the character in our Christmas pageant is Zacharias, the husband of Elizabeth and the father of John the Baptist. Both he and his wife were righteous in the sight of God. They did have one problem. Elizabeth was barren and to further complicate their situation, they were both advanced in years. It seemed as if their plight would never be resolved.

Zacharias was a priest. It was required that a priest would enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. It was a terrifying experience. No one volunteered to do this – to enter into the very presence of God! The one to perform this priestly action was chosen by lot. The lot fell on Zacharias. He would enter the temple.

As he entered the temple, the whole multitude of the people was in prayer outside at the hour of the incense offering. Inside the temple, an angel of the Lord appeared to Zacharias. The angel told him that the many prayers of both he and his wife had been heard, that Elizabeth would bear a son and the child was to be named John. The new born son would grow up to be great in the sight of the Lord. He would live an austere life and ultimately become a forerunner for the coming Messiah.

This news was too great to be believed. Zacharias asked the question, *How will I know this for certain?* Gabriel gave this response, *You shall be silent and unable to speak until the day when these things take place, because you did not believe my words.*

The people on the outside of the temple were wondering at his delay in the temple. When Zacharias finally came out, he was unable to speak to them.

December 20

Matthew 1:20; 2:13; 2:19

The Angel of the Lord

Every nativity scene has an angel in it. The angel of the Lord played an important role in the account of Jesus' birth in Matthew's Gospel. This birth story is like no other birth story. It is the mixture of the human with the divine. In John's Gospel, we find this same thought. In John 1:1: *In the beginning was the Word*. The divine Son of God. At 1:14: *And the Word became flesh*. The human side of the story. To communicate the divine/human story will require messengers from the divine! This is where *the angel of the Lord* will be found.

In Matthew's account of this story, three occasions are referenced to indicate the activity of the *angel of the Lord*.

- At Matthew 1:20, we find the angel speaking to Joseph. He is betrothed to Mary. This is a year-long period of time prior to their actual marriage. Mary told Joseph that she was pregnant. Under Jewish law, she was to be stoned. Being a just man, Joseph was thinking about *putting her away privately*. An angel appeared to Joseph and told him this was a divine activity and to take Mary as his wife. He did so, keeping her as a virgin until Jesus was born.
- At Matthew 2:13, we find the angel speaking to Joseph and instructing him to escape to Egypt with Mary and the new born Child. King Herod was looking for the Child to destroy him.
- At Matthew 2:19, we find the angel instructing Joseph that it is now safe to return to the land of Israel. Those who sought the Child's life were dead!

December 21

Luke 1:35

Holy Spirit

The angel Gabriel had just told Mary she would give birth to Jesus, the Messiah. She asked a natural and honest question: *How can this be since I am a virgin?* The answer to her question was simply this – it would be a divine moment! It would be the workings of the third member of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit.

On December 15, we mentioned that Satan Himself would be standing in the shadows during the Christmas pageant. Today, we have another other-worldly character in the pageant, the Holy Spirit. The forces of good and evil come together during this pageant. It begins the fulfillment of the truth of Genesis 3:15: *the seed of the serpent will bruise His heel; the seed of the woman will bruise the head of the serpent!*

The answer to Mary's question is that it will be a God-moment. While it is thirty-some years before the Day of Pentecost, The Holy Spirit will come upon Mary in the true reality of Pentecost. The power of the Most High will overshadow Mary. Just as the presence of Jehovah God overshadowed the tabernacle in the Old Testament, so the Holy Spirit will cover Mary. Because of the activity of the Holy Spirit, the holy Child shall be called the Son of God.

As we view this pageant, it may appear that it is the playing out of the lives of men and women, kings and low shepherds, and the birth of a baby. In reality, it is the great drama of two forces from another world as prophecy is fulfilled concerning good and evil, Satan and the Holy Spirit.

December 22

Micah 5:2; Matthew 2:1; Luke 2:4

The Scenery

Every pageant is dependent on scenery. The Christmas Pageant is no different. The scenery for this story is the little town known as Bethlehem situated in the Judean Hills five miles south of Jerusalem.

Bethlehem is first mentioned in the Bible in connection with Rachel, who died on the wayside there (Genesis 35:19). It is the setting for most of the Book of Ruth and the presumed birthplace, and certainly the home, of Ruth's descendant, King David; there he was anointed king of Israel by the prophet, Samuel. The town was fortified by Rehoboam, David's grandson and the first king of Judah after the division of the state between Israel and Judah. During the Jewish return to Palestine after the Babylonian Exile (516 B.C.), the town was repopulated.

The site of the Nativity of Jesus was identified by Justin Martyr, a second century Christian apologist, as a manger in *a cave close to the village*; the cave, now under the nave of the Church of the Nativity in the heart of the town, has been continuously venerated by Christians since then.

Helena, mother of the first Christian Roman emperor Constantine, had a church built over the cave; later destroyed, it was rebuilt in substantially its present form by Emperor Justinian who reigned 527-565 A.D.

December 23
Luke 2: 13-14

Heavenly Host

Today's reading requires a number of characters in the pageant. We read today of *a multitude of the heavenly host* that appeared with the angel. Verse 14 is the third of four Nativity Hymns that Luke includes in his account of the birth of Jesus. In Luke, chapter one, we find The Magnificat (1: 46-55), and The Benedictus (1:68-79).

This third hymn is known as The Gloria in Excelsis Deo. The title comes from the first words of the Latin Vulgate translation. The angels recognized the glory and majesty of God by giving praise to Him. They continued with *on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased*. Peace is not assured to all, but only to those pleasing God, the objects of His good pleasure.

The Roman world was experiencing the *Pax Romana* (Roman Peace), marked by external tranquility. But the angels proclaimed a deeper, more lasting peace than that, a peace of mind and soul made possible by the Savior. Peace with God is received by faith in Christ, and it is believers *with whom He is pleased*.

The Davidic Messiah was called *Prince of Peace* (Isaiah 9:6), and Christ promised peace to His disciples (John 14:27). But Christ also brought conflict, for peace with God involves opposition to Satan and his work.

December 24
Luke 2:36-38

Anna

Many individuals who were alive in the first half of the first century were looking for God's Messiah. There were those who claimed to be the messiah, only to die and their followers fall away into history. Still the faithful Jew was looking and longing for God's promised Messiah. Previously, we have considered Simeon and his longing to see the Messiah. Today's reading gives us a glimpse into the life of the prophetess, Anna.

The Bible mentions other women who bore that title. There was Miriam (Exodus 15:20), Deborah (Judges 4), Huldah (2nd Kings 22:14), and the daughters of Philip (Acts 21:9).

The name Anna is the same name as the Old Testament Hannah (1st Samuel 1:2), and means gracious. Anna praised God for the child, Jesus, as Hannah had praised God for the child, Samuel (1st Samuel 2:1-10).

The text provides a glimpse of an elderly lady, eighty-four years old, a widow who never left the temple serving night and day with fasting and prayers. Herod's temple was quite large and included rooms for various uses and Anna may have been allowed to live in one of them. On the other hand, we might understand her situation to mean that she spent her waking hours attending and worshipping in the temple.

As Anna found the Baby in the temple, she began giving thanks to God, and continued to speak of Him to all those who were looking for the redemption of Israel.

December 25

Luke 2:9-11

Baby Jesus

While a pageant of this size will have a large cast of characters, there is always the leading character. The Christmas Pageant is no different. Most leading characters will have the most speaking parts, sing the most songs, or spend the majority of time on stage as the central character. But this story is different. Our leading character speaks no dialogue and makes His appearance only at the very last of the story. Our leading character is Baby Jesus.

The birth announcement of our leading character is told in Luke 2:11. Three things claim our attention from this announcement. First, there is a certain up-to-date aspect to the announcement. It is a message for today! Of course, a certain day is intended to give the shepherds the good news. But far greater, there is a sense of *now* every time this story is told. It never gets old. It never gets lost in dusty history. The announcement of what God has done in human history is as current as today's news. This Good News is a **present** reality.

Secondly, the birth of Jesus is for you. It is **personal**. Now, *you* would include the shepherds, but the *you* goes much further than just these men. The gift of God's Son is for everyone. It is God's personal gift to all.

Thirdly, this is a **precious** birth. The good news is that God gave humankind exactly what we needed. We did not need another prophetic voice. We did not need another moral philosopher. God gave us what we so dearly needed, a Savior! The Baby Jesus is One that could redeem us from our sin.