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Crossways International  
Minneapolis, MN 55435 USA  
1-800-257-7308  
[www.crossways.org](http://www.crossways.org)

## The Revised Common Lectionary Notes

December 3, 10, 17, 24, 25, 31, and January 7  
by the Rev. Dr. Harry Wendt, founder of Crossways International

### December 3, The First Sunday of Advent: Mark 13:24–37

In 13:1–2, Jesus predicts the coming destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by the Romans—an event that took place in AD 70. His prediction of the coming destruction of the Temple prompts questions that the four named disciples put to Him in private concerning the time and the sign when all these things would take place (13:3–4). Jesus’ response to these questions is his eschatological (end-time) discourse prior to His approaching death. The discourse contains instruction and consolation exhorting the disciples and the church to demonstrate faith and obedience through the trials that they would soon have to experience (vv. 5–13). The sign is the presence of the desolating abomination (v. 14) of the Roman power profaning the Temple. Jesus urges them to flee from Jerusalem rather than defend the city based on misguided messianic hopes (vv. 14–23). Intervention will occur only after the destruction (vv. 24–27), which will happen before the end of the first Christian generation (vv. 28–31). No one but the Father knows the precise time, or that of the Parousia (Jesus’ Final Reappearing, v. 32); hence the need for constant vigilance (vv. 33–37).

**Vv. 24–25:** Mark 13:14–23 focuses on the suffering that will take place prior to the end of history. In 13:24–25, the message is: After the suffering comes the physical end of the world. The verses reflect Is. 13:10; 34:4; Ezek. 32:7–8; Joel 2:10, 31; 2 Esdras 5:4–5. (Mark 15:33 refers to the sun being darkened during the hours prior to Jesus’ death.)

**Vv. 26–27** refer to Jesus as the Son of Man. The term has its roots in Daniel 7, especially 7:13. The message in Daniel is that although God’s people have suffered under a series of foreign empires (the Babylonians, Medes, Persians, Greeks, and Ptolemies), the time is approaching when God will give His people, the “saints of the Most High” (of whom the Son of Man is a symbol) dominion over the nations of the world “forever and forever.” Jesus now refers to Himself (and eventually His followers, His brothers and sisters) as the true people of God who have been given dominion of the nations of the world. The Final Day is coming when His true identity will be revealed, and He will save His people from destruction and gather them from the four corners of the earth into His Eternal Home.

**Vv. 28–31:** When Jesus was on His way into Jerusalem on the *Monday* after *Palm Sunday* (11:12–20), He cursed a fig tree and then attacked the Temple System. The next day (*Tuesday*), when Jesus and the

disciples returned to Jerusalem, the fig tree was dead. Jesus' followers are to read the signs that take place in history and remind themselves constantly that although difficult days lie ahead, Jesus' promise of final deliverance for His people will most certainly come to pass.

**Vv. 32–36:** It is interesting to note that Jesus says that even He Himself does not know the “final date” for history; only His Father knows (v. 32). It may take place at any time—in the evening, or at midnight, at 3 a.m. (“cockcrow”), or at sunrise! Even so, Jesus' followers, His brothers and sisters, are to be on *constant alert* for that final event and, while waiting, are to devote life to believing, doing, and proclaiming the things of God's Kingdom. So, no spiritual dozing off! Keep awake (vv. 35, 37).

## **December 10, The Second Sunday of Advent: Mark 1:1-8**

**1:1:** Mark begins his Gospel with, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God,” 1:1. This statement might be better translated, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.” The “good news” is brought by Jesus and is about Jesus. He, the Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed One, is ushering in that New Age the Jewish people have been expecting for centuries. The “good news” is that they need wait no longer. The Messianic Age has arrived! The Messianic drama is about to begin. Mark's narrative focuses on the question, “What was the nature of the Messianic Age that broke in with Jesus? What does Jesus' Messianic mission imply for those who claim Him as their Savior and Lord?”

Traditionally, the term “Son of God” (1:1) is interpreted to mean that Jesus is true God. He was and is that. In Him, the fullness of Deity took into Himself the fullness of a human nature, so that in one Person, Jesus the Messiah, a union of two natures takes place. That which is fully God has united itself with that which is fully human. However, in 1:1 the term says more than that. In the Old Testament, the nation of Israel is called “the son of God,” Exodus 4:21–23; Hosea 11:1. Therefore, to call Jesus “the Son of God” is to declare that the traditional “son of God” (Israel) has been superseded by a new “Son of God.” The remnant of the true people of God now numbers one: Jesus the Messiah. This new Son of God is not some upstart or usurper. He is a descendant of such Jewish “greats” as Abraham and David. Through Him, God is not merely continuing the history of His people. God is making a new beginning to His people. The term “Son of God” would also have been a challenge to any 1st century audience steeped in the propaganda of the Roman Empire which declared that the emperor was the Son of God.

**1:2:** The prophet Malachi proclaimed (3:1a; see also Exodus 23:20) that God would send His messenger to prepare the way before Him. In quoting Malachi 3:1, Mark expects his readers to be aware of the second half of the verse (a Jewish practice referred to as *remez*), “and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to His Temple.” So, in and through Jesus, God will eventually visit the Jerusalem Temple, observe what is taking place within its walls, and express His opinion concerning what He sees.

**1:3:** This verse reflects the contents of Isaiah 40:3-5. Isaiah addressed these words to the exiles in Babylon. He assured them that God was about to come to Babylon to rescue His people from captivity and lead them back to their homeland. A great highway would appear—on which God would travel to Babylon, and along which He would lead the exiles back to Jerusalem. The height of the mountains would diminish, the valleys would be filled in, and rough and uneven ground would be made smooth. The return journey would indeed be a comfortable one! In the four Gospels, the message is:

God is about to carry out the great and final rescue of His people. They are captive, not to Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, or Rome but to the powers of sin, Satan, and death. They are also captive to their own traditions and rituals, and to their obsession with their descent from Abraham and family genealogies. Jesus is coming to free them from these bonds, and to lead them into the liberty of true children of God.

**1:4-8:** John the Baptist was the one sent by God to prepare the people for the coming of God's Messiah. He carried out his mission in the wilderness (see John 1:28), the place of expectations and new beginnings, the place where God said He would take His people to renew them and draw them closer to Himself, Hosea 2:14,15. People from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to John to be baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins in the process.

That Jews submitted to John's baptism is remarkable, for traditionally only Gentiles were baptized when they converted to Judaism. Furthermore, it would seem that John baptized people in the vicinity where the Israelites first entered the land under Joshua—suggesting that John's baptism constituted a new beginning, a new entry into the Promised Land, for the people of God.

John did not baptize to draw attention to himself. He did so to prepare the way for the One who would follow after him—One who would be much greater than he is. John declared that he did not deserve even to be the Messiah's slave, to perform the most menial task for Him—to untie the thongs of His sandals (a task that only a Gentile slave would perform). John could baptize with water, true! But the One to whom he pointed would baptize with the Holy Spirit. Imagine! He would bestow the Holy Spirit, not just on a few select ones in the Jewish nation such as judges, kings (Saul and David), and prophets, but on all who came to Him to receive what He had to give; see Joel 2:28,29. And eventually, the Holy Spirit would come upon the Gentiles, Acts 10:44-48.

## **December 17, The Third Sunday of Advent: John 1:6–8, 19–28**

The Gospel for this Sunday reflects the contents of Mark 1:1–8 (see the Gospel pericope for last week). In what follows, summary comments are offered in relation to John 1, including 1:6–8, 19–28.

John's opening chapter contains a list of titles stating who Jesus is and defining His mission. These are as follows:

- Word of God (1:1, 14)
- Lamb of God (1:29, 36)
- Rabbi or Teacher (1:38)
- Messiah (1:41)
- Son of God (1:49)
- King of Israel (1:49)
- Son of Man (1:51; see Daniel 7:13)

The series of titles ascribed to Jesus in John's first chapter reaches its grand finale in John 20 when Thomas falls down before the Risen Jesus and proclaims, "My Lord and my God!"

John 1:14 states, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (1:14). The word translated as *dwelt* literally means *tented* or *tabernacled*. John declares that God is now "encamped" among His

people, not invisibly in the Holy of Holies that only the High Priest could enter one day each year, but in the person of Jesus the Messiah. The invisible God becomes visible in the divine-human Word. The written Word bears witness to the Incarnate Word. God's Final, Living Word is Jesus the Messiah.

In 1:48 Jesus says to Nathanael, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." During previous centuries the hope was that, when the Messiah came, people would experience the peace and joy of sitting under their own vine and fig tree (Micah 4:4; 1 Kings 4:25; Isaiah 36:16). If Nathanael is sitting under a fig tree, the Messianic Age has broken in!

Most find Jesus' statement in 1:51 somewhat puzzling: "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man." The Holy of Holies in the postexilic and Herodian Temples was empty—apart from a low, flat stone built into the floor at its center. (The Ark of the Covenant was most likely destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BC.) This stone was called the "Foundation Stone" (*eben shetiyah*). It was about 18 inches square and two inches high. Jewish tradition held that Jacob was using this stone as a pillow when, in a dream, he saw a ladder reaching up to heaven with angels ascending and descending on it, and heard God speak to him (Genesis 28). When those who returned from Babylon rebuilt the Jerusalem Temple, they found themselves needing a symbol of God's presence. Again according to tradition, they went to Bethel, found this stone, and placed it in the Holy of Holies.

In Jesus' day, the rabbis ascribed numerous functions to this stone. It was "the navel of the earth," the point from which the world grew in the initial creative process. It was the point of contact between heaven and earth, between God and humanity. It held the subterranean waters in check and prevented them from flooding the earth. It was also that place where, on the annual Day of Atonement, blood was sprinkled to atone for the nation's sin. However, Jesus declared that He replaced that stone and the Holy of Holies, and their functions. This is but the first of numerous replacements that surface in the ensuing chapters.

In Mark 1–8, Jesus does not state in *words* who He is, and He discourages any reference to His being the Messiah until His *actions* have demonstrated what kind of Messiah He has come to be. About halfway through the Gospel, He asks the disciples who the crowds think He is and then asks who they themselves think He is (Mark 8:27–30).

John approaches the question of Jesus' identity quite differently. From the very outset, he declares who Jesus is, and why He has come. In doing so, John draws heavily on Old Testament and intertestamental concepts.

The expression "In the beginning" (1:1) reflects Genesis 1:1. John's desire is to declare that Jesus' life and mission brought about a new beginning to creation, history, and humanity.

Some interpreters detect hints of a seven-day scheme in 1:29, 35, 43; and 2:1. If there is a "next day" (1:29), there must have been a previous day; hence, the reference in 1:29 is to *Day Two*. (*Day One* is hinted at in 1:1, which reflects Genesis 1:1.) The reference in 1:35 is to *Day Three*, that in 1:43 is to *Day Four*, and that in 2:1 is to *Day Seven* (three days after *Day Four*). If this seven-day structure is intentional, it would seem that Jesus' goal is to free God's people from bondage to a rather legal religious system and to introduce them to God's final, eternal Sabbath rest.

Jesus, the Eternal Word, did not arrive unannounced. John the Baptist heralded His coming (1:6–8, 15, 19–28). John insisted that his own role was merely to prepare the way for the great final Exodus (*rescue*) that was soon to take place (1:23). The evangelist locates John’s ministry on the East Bank of the River Jordan (1:28), indicating that he called his Jewish hearers out of the land and made it necessary for them to enter it again through a water-crossing—at about the same spot where, long before under Joshua’s leadership, their ancestors entered the land to undertake the conquest.

In 1:19–28, John the Baptist states that he is not the expected Messiah, not the expected Elijah (Malachi 4:4, 6), and not the “new Moses” (Deuteronomy 18:15). Rather, he is the one called to prepare the way for the Messiah Who will carry out a new “exodus event,” or bring to their grand finale the hopes and dreams of those who began returning from Babylon to Judea and Jerusalem in 538 BC; see Isa. 40:3–5.

## **December 24, The Fourth Sunday of Advent: Luke 1:26–38**

Luke presents Jesus as the key to understanding God’s purpose in universal history. He divides history into three eras:

**First era:** *From ancient Israel to John the Baptist* (note 16:16): John’s work marks the end of the era of the Law and the Prophets. Redemptive hopes cherished during this era were not realized.

**Second era:** *The earthly ministry of Jesus* (note 4:21). This is divided into three sections:

- Jesus’ nativity in Bethlehem and early ministry in Galilee (1:1–9:50).
- Jesus’ journey from Galilee to Jerusalem and His ministry along the way (9:51–19:28).
- Jesus’ ministry in Jerusalem: His passion, death, resurrection, and ascension (19:28–24:53).

**Third era:** *From Jesus’ ascension until the end of the age* (see Luke 24:50–52; Acts 1:1–5, note vv. 4–5): During this period, Jesus, seated at the Father’s right hand (a symbol of cosmic authority), accomplishes His purposes through the power of His Holy Spirit at work among humanity.

After his introductory prologue (1:1–4), Luke presents his readers with a series of narratives—many of which contain the spirit of surprise. While the aged priest Zechariah is burning incense in the Holy Place in the Jerusalem Temple, the angel Gabriel appears to him and tells him that his aged wife, Elizabeth, is to conceive and bear a son. Because Elizabeth has borne no children, she is looked on as virtually an outcast (1:25). Childless women were often mocked! Zechariah entertains doubts about whether this prediction will come to pass and loses his power of speech. Elizabeth conceives and remains in seclusion for five months (1:24).

Six months after Elizabeth conceives, the angel Gabriel appears to Mary in Galilee of Nazareth, and tells her that she is to bear a son (1:26–38). Mary, a virgin, is betrothed to Joseph—but they are not yet living together and the marriage has naturally not been consummated. Mary is to name her son Jesus. He will be a descendant of King David and will be given the throne of David. The meeting between the angel Gabriel and Mary takes place at a time when Caesar Augustus in Rome is at the height of his power. (Augustus died in AD 14, and was succeeded by the ruthless Tiberius, who was already worshiped as a god in the eastern part of the Roman Empire.)

The announcement to Mary of the birth of Jesus reflects the announcement to Zechariah of the birth of John the Baptist (1:5–23). In both narratives, the angel Gabriel appears to a parent who is troubled by the vision (vv. 11–12; 26–29), and then told by the angel not to fear (vv. 13, 30). After the announcement is made (14–17, 31–33), the parent objects (18, 34), and a sign is given to confirm the announcement (20, 36). The focus of the announcement of the birth of Jesus is on his identity as son of David (32, 33) and *Son of God* (32, 35). In Luke 1:76, John the Baptist is referred to as “*prophet of the Most High*.” Luke uses the term “Most High” a number of times as a title for God (1:35; 6:35; 8:28; Acts 7:48, 16:17).

**1:34:** Mary’s questioning response is a denial of sexual relations and is used by Luke to lead to the angel’s declaration about the Spirit’s role in the conception of Mary’s child (1:35). According to Luke, the virginal conception of Jesus takes place through the Holy Spirit, the power of God, and therefore Jesus has a unique relation with God; He is God’s Son.

**1:36–37:** The sign given to Mary in confirmation of the angel’s announcement to her is the pregnancy of her aged relative Elizabeth. If a woman past childbearing age could become pregnant, why, the angel implies, should there be any doubt about Mary’s pregnancy? Nothing is impossible with God!

**1:38:** After Mary submits, the angel departs from her.

Eventually Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth, (already six months pregnant), who lives to the south of Jerusalem near Bethlehem (1:39–46). Elizabeth knows that Mary is pregnant and greets her as “the mother of my Lord.” Mary offers words of praise to God (1:46–55). After staying with Elizabeth for three months, Mary returns to Nazareth (1:56). One might ask: Did Mary remain with Elizabeth until she gave birth to John the Baptist?

### ***Crossways International Handout for Gospel Readings***

Below is a list of the **ten** passages we shall survey in the notes that follow. (Last month we surveyed only **four** pericopes.) For reasons that I do not understand, there is repetition and overlap in the ten selections. Furthermore, one might ask why Matthew’s account of Herod’s attempt to kill Jesus (2:13–23) is listed *before* his account of the visit of the wise men (2:1–12).

- December 24, Christmas Eve: Luke 2:1–14 (15–20)
- December 25, Christmas Day II: Luke 2: (1–7) 8–20
- December 25, Christmas Day III: John 1:1–14
- December 28, The First Sunday after Christmas: Matthew 2:13–23
- January 4, The Second Sunday after Christmas: John 1:10–18
- January 6, The Epiphany: Matthew 2:1–12
- January 11, The Baptism of our Lord / The First Sunday after the Epiphany: Matthew 3:13–17
- January 18, The Second Sunday after the Epiphany: John 1:29–42
- January 25, The Third Sunday after the Epiphany: Matthew 4:12–23
- February 1, The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany: Matthew 5:1–12

Seven of the above passages are from Matthew and Luke. In his genealogy, **Matthew** traces Jesus’ origins back to *Abraham* and *David* (1:1). His message is that in Jesus, *God is making a new beginning to the “chosen people”*; Jesus is a descendant of *Abraham*, the first of the original “chosen people.”

Furthermore, they are getting their kings back; Jesus is a descendant of *David*. They lost their kings when both Jehoiachin and Zedekiah were taken into exile in Babylon—Jehoiachin in 597 BC and Zedekiah in 587 BC. In 1:1, the NRSV refers to Jesus as “Messiah” —the message being that, in the Person of Jesus, the long-expected Messiah (a descendant of David) has come, and the Messianic Age has broken into history.

The first two sections of Matthew’s genealogical table (1:1–6a, 1:6b–11) are drawn from Ruth 4:18–22 and 1 Chronicles 1–3. In section two, Matthew omits the names Ahaziah, Joash, and Amaziah (and Athaliah, a woman who grabbed the throne of Judah after Jehu killed her son Ahaziah; cf. 2 Kings 11). In Matthew’s third section (1:12–16), the only known names are Jechoniah (or Jehoiachin, 2 Kings 22, 23), Shealtiel (Ezra 5:2), and Zerubbabel (Ezra 3:2). The five women listed (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary) bore sons in a rather unexpected manner—Mary’s Son by a creative act of God. The name *Immanuel* is used in the opening chapter of Matthew’s Gospel (1:23) and is echoed in its closing verses (28:19, 20).

In his genealogy, *Luke* traces Jesus’ ancestry back to *Adam* (3:23–38). In Jesus, God is making a new beginning to the human race, calling people to live as Adam (prior to the Fall) was meant to live. The implications are profound. Among other things, Jesus teaches and models how the first humans were to live together and what attitude they were to demonstrate in using and managing creation. He called—and calls—humanity to devote life to being “a provisional display of God’s original intention” (Karl Barth). The implications for today’s world are mind-boggling!

Although Matthew and Luke generally follow the outline of Mark’s Gospel, Mark tells us nothing about the birth of Jesus. Mark’s purpose is to present in narrative form the message of Jesus’ Messiahship and His atoning death and resurrection.

John does not present a birth narrative, either. However, he does refer to the expectation that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (7:49–52). Perhaps John wanted to emphasize that heaven is Jesus’ real home, that He is the Eternal One, and the historical circumstances of His birth were of little consequence (1:1–4).

The prophet Micah (5:2–5) had predicted that eventually a true and faithful King from the line of David would be born in *Bethlehem*. In his Christmas story, *Matthew* does not report any journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem *prior* to Jesus’ birth (1:18–25). However, he does state that the Holy Family returned to Nazareth *after* Jesus’ birth (2:19–23). In 2:23, Matthew states that Joseph *made his home in Nazareth* after returning from Egypt. Had he not lived there before? According to Luke, Joseph and Mary’s place of residence is *Nazareth*.

According to Matthew 1:18–25, after Mary found herself to be “with child from the Holy Spirit,” Joseph was understandably taken aback. Although he and Mary were betrothed, they were not as yet living together. The traditional expectation was that Joseph should divorce Mary, but had he done this, she might have been stoned to death for apparent unfaithfulness to him. However, after God communicated to Joseph in a dream the true cause for Mary’s condition, he kept her as his wife.

According to Luke’s version, the angel Gabriel tells Mary what will take place in her life (1:26–38). Mary then visits her cousin Elizabeth, who already seems to know what has taken place (1:39–45). Mary then bursts forth in a hymn of praise, commonly known as the Magnificat (1:46–55). After spending three months with Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah in the hill country of Judea (near Jerusalem and

Bethlehem!), Mary returns to Nazareth (1:56).

## **December 25, Christmas Day I: Luke 2:1–14 (15–20)**

## **December 25, Christmas Day II: Luke 2:(1–7) 8–20**

Some of the “traditions” referred to below are based on late second century apocryphal (non-authoritative) writings, e.g., *The Gospel of James*.

*Tradition* (not the text) says that Mary, who was in the advanced stages of pregnancy, rode on a donkey.

*Tradition* (not the text) suggests that Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem late in the afternoon or in the early evening—immediately prior to Jesus’ birth.

*Tradition* (not the text) suggests that they sought accommodation at an inn, but were told that no room was available.

*Tradition* (not the text) suggests that they found, or were offered, accommodation in a stable—and only just in time, for Jesus was born soon after they settled in. Another tradition suggests that Mary gave birth to Jesus in a cave.

*Tradition* (not the text) suggests that both the shepherds (mentioned in Luke) and the wise men (mentioned in Matthew) visited the Holy Family at the same time.

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Some of the insights that follow are taken from Crossways International’s publication, *Christmas: The Real Story* (© 2009, H.N.Wendt). Comments on **Christmas Day III** (John 1:1–14) will follow.

**Luke 2:1–7:** The Roman emperor issues a decree that an empire-wide registration is to be held. In Palestine, all go to their town of origin to be registered. Joseph apparently has family ties to Bethlehem, and possibly had been born there (Luke 2:3, 4). So Joseph and a pregnant Mary travel south from Nazareth to Bethlehem—a journey of about 80 to 90 miles.

There is something of an historical problem in relation to the “registration of Quirinius” (2:1, 2). Enrollments or registrations are known to have taken place in 28 BC, 8 BC, and AD 14. Quirinius came to power in Syria only in AD 6/7, and Jesus was born about 5/4 BC. However, what matters is the *theology* of the narrative, not its *chronology*.

When Jewish people traveled from Galilee to Judea, they usually avoided traveling through Samaria. After all, Jews and Samaritans harbored long-standing resentment toward each other, and disagreed strongly about whether Mt. Gerizim or Jerusalem was the only valid place for worship (John 4:20–26, Luke 9:51–56). Jews traveling south usually followed the Jordan River to have access to water along the way—and to bypass Samaria.

Bethlehem, about five miles south of Jerusalem, plays a prominent role in the nativity narrative. David was born there (1 Samuel 17:12), and his great-grandmother Ruth lived there (Ruth 1:19, 4:11). Micah prophesied that the fortunes of Judah would be restored through a ruler born in Bethlehem of the house of David (Micah 5:2).

Although both Matthew 2:1 and Luke 2:4 refer to Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, only Luke refers to Bethlehem as the city of David. However, in the Old Testament, *Jerusalem* is called "the city of David" after David captured it from the Jebusites (2 Samuel 5:6–10) in a bloody, brutal manner. For Jesus, Jerusalem became the city of death. His enemies lived within its walls and eventually crucified Him there.

Luke writes, "And Mary gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth (see Wisdom of Solomon 7:4-6) and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the *inn*" (2:7).

Was there an inn in Bethlehem? Although there certainly were inns in the Palestine of Jesus' day, they were usually built on Roman roads. Traders and Romans stayed in those inns; their language, culture, and politics were different from those of Palestine's citizens. Bethlehem was not on a Roman road, and there is no written or archaeological evidence that there was an inn in Bethlehem when Jesus was born.

What Greek word does Luke use for "inn"? The Greek word translated as *inn* in Luke 2:7 (*kataluma*) can have five meanings, three of which are "house," "guest room" and *sometimes* "inn." The same word is translated as "guest room" in Luke 22:11—a guest room being part of a house. When Luke makes reference to an "inn," he knows and uses the appropriate Greek word for it: *pandocheion*, as found in the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:34).

According to Luke 2:4, Joseph was a descendant of David—the most famous king in Jewish history—who had been born in Bethlehem. It is likely that Joseph was born in Bethlehem, and that he had family roots there. If so, Joseph's relatives would have ensured him a place to stay.

Even if there had been an inn in Bethlehem, would Joseph have asked to stay there? If, on arrival, someone had asked him, "Who are you?" he would have replied, "I am Joseph, son of *Heli*, son of Matthat, son of Levi," and so on, Luke 3:23ff.). (Note that in Matthew 1:16, *Jacob* is referred to as Joseph's father.) The immediate response would have been, "You are our kinsman! You are most welcome! What can we do for you?" A welcome of this kind was assured, even if Joseph's grandfather had left Bethlehem 100 years previously. Such is the custom still today among Palestinians where the culture of extending hospitality remains very strong.

Even if Joseph had no immediate relatives in Bethlehem, he would have only had to say that he was a descendant of David, and every door in the town would have opened to extend a warm welcome to him and Mary. At that time, Bethlehem's population was possibly only about 150 to 200 people. Even if no accommodation was available in Bethlehem, Mary had earlier visited her cousin Elizabeth (Luke 1:39). Elizabeth lived only a few miles to the northwest of Bethlehem. Without a doubt, Elizabeth would have offered Joseph and Mary accommodation had they needed it.

Furthermore, it would have been socially unacceptable, even insulting, for someone with relatives and roots in Bethlehem to seek accommodation in an inn, and it would have been socially unacceptable for Jesus to have been born in an inn. Babies at that time and place were born in houses.

Joseph and Mary were welcomed into a home that had a guest room, but the guest room was already occupied ("there was no room in the *guest room*," Luke 2:7). The host could not ask those who were already staying in the guest room to leave; see Sirach 29:26–28. Where might the guest room have been? A guest room was usually attached to the rear of the house or located on an upper level.

However, since people in that land at that time were used to living in close quarters, it would not have been a problem to find room for Mary and Joseph in the family area. At night, mats were rolled out for sleeping—on the floor. In the morning they were rolled up again and stored against the walls, so that sleeping space might again become living space.

Not all houses had a guest room; many comprised just one room, as some Middle East homes still do today. Understanding this helps us discern Jesus' message in Matthew 5:15, where He speaks of a person lighting a lamp that gives light to all in the house. One lamp could light a house only if it had *one room*.

In Jesus' day, a traditional home consisted of a one-room raised living area, with space for the family's animals at ground level just within the entrance door. Set into the upper platform level were several mangers where the animals, standing in the lower section, might feed after being brought in at night. So the house where Jesus was born would have had built-in mangers. Each night the family's animals were brought into the house to spend the night in the "house stable." Thus, they could not be stolen and could contribute their body heat to the house during the night. They were taken out first thing in the morning, and, if necessary, the space set aside for them was cleaned.

Only Matthew describes the visit of the wise men (Matthew 2:1–12). When the Wise Men came into Jesus' place of residence, they entered a "house" (2:11). The suggestion that the Holy Family moved from a stable to a house does not do justice to the cultural elements described above.

Luke writes, "Joseph went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child" (2:5). It is unlikely that Joseph would have asked Mary to make the long journey south if she was already eight months pregnant. Nowhere does the text say that she rode a donkey. Nowhere does it say that Jesus was born the night they arrived.

Not only that, but if it was obvious when Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem that Mary was about to have a child, it is unlikely that the women of Bethlehem would have ignored and neglected Mary in her hour of need. The "honor and shame" culture of the Middle East continues to see it as a disgrace to the entire community not to offer hospitality.

After reporting the couple's arrival in Bethlehem, Luke goes on to say, "While they were there . . ." (2:6), thereby indicating that the infant Jesus might have been born some months after their arrival. Most likely, when Mary was about to give birth, the women of the house and village would have come to her aid, and supplied the necessary bedding, towels, and hot water. The men of the house would have vacated it for as long as necessary. After Jesus was born, He would have been wrapped in swaddling cloths (see Ezekiel 16:4) and placed into one of the mangers.

It emerges, then, that David's "greater Son" was most likely born in a small house in a small village among ordinary people. This simple but profound story sows the seeds for the grand truths that eventually burst forth in the Gospels.

In Luke's narrative, the first to hear about Jesus' birth are outcast shepherds (2:8–20). When the angel of the Lord tells them about Jesus' birth, the glory of the Lord shines around them. Furthermore, the peace that Jesus will bring into the world is much more than the absence of war!

Note well! The glory of the Lord has departed from the Holy of Holies of the Jerusalem Temple, and

resides in the Person of Jesus. After the shepherds visit and see the Christ-child, their response is profound (2:17–20). They praise God and tell others Who and what they have seen.

## December 25, Christmas Day III: John 1:1–14

The Gospel of John has no Christmas story. John's prologue (as this section is called) begins not with *history*, but with *eternity*. Years ago, a movie was produced titled, "From Here to Eternity." John's Gospel begins with the coming of God's Son "from eternity to here."

The first three verses give us poetry, not with rhyming endings, but with the kind of biblical poetry found in the Psalms. Various statements form parallel lines of thought with further developments, usually reaching a climax. The first five verses might be translated and set out the following way:

In the beginning was the **Word**,  
and the **Word** was with God,  
and the **Word** was God.

He was in the beginning with God.  
All things were **made** through Him,  
and without Him was not anything **made** that was **made**.

In Him was **life**,  
and the **life** was the **light** of all people.  
The **light** shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Each group develops a new but related thought: the Word as God; creation through Him; life and light through Him. Only vv. 6–8 and 15 (the verses that speak of John the Baptist) do not have a clear poetic form.

**Vv. 1–5, From Eternity:** The first verses sound familiar. They recall the beginning of Genesis, "In the beginning when God created the heaven and the earth . . ." However, the "beginning" here in John is not in time; it belongs to eternity where there is no time. The Word has always existed with God, and has always been God. In the eternal realm, He has always been at God's side. After all, He Himself is God!

Jesus did not become a person when Mary gave birth to Him; He only became a man in addition to being God—and is now, and always will be, God and man in one Person.

Jesus is the One through whom God spoke to the prophets to reveal Himself and His will. He is also the Word through whom God created all things. Since He was God's agent at creation, everything has life in the Son of God.

But the description of the Son as Life and Light reminds us that Jesus gives life and the light of God's truth in a final sense. True life, what John often calls "eternal life" (see 3:15, 16, 36; 4:14, 36, etc.), only comes from faith in Jesus after He has enlightened our minds with the truth of God.

No mention is made of the Fall described in Genesis, but the word *darkness* recalls the truth that fallen humanity loves the darkness of ignorance and sin rather than the light of God's saving truth (see 3:19,

20). Nevertheless, this dark world has not been able to snuff out the light, even though it put to death the Son of God. Rather, the light now shines more brightly, and the Word rings out more clearly.

**Vv. 6–8, The True Witness:** Jesus the Word was and is *God*; John the Baptist was only a *man*. While the Word was always “*with God*,” John was “*sent by God*.” John’s role was to be no more than the first witness who defended Jesus’ claim to be the Son of God and the Light of the world (8:12). Refusing the spotlight, John pointed away from himself to Jesus. Why is this humility stressed again in v. 8? It is interesting to note that well into the second Christian century, there were disciples of John the Baptist who claimed that he was the Messiah and the Light. John’s Gospel wants to reject any such idea once and for all. Every time that John is mentioned, he is placed below Jesus, and his servant role is emphasized (see Acts 19:1–5).

**Vv. 9–13, The True Light:** Here the stage is set for the drama of the God’s Good News. Not John, but Jesus, is the true Light. But the tragic irony of history is that the world that Jesus has created does not recognize Him. His own people, the Jews who have the Hebrew Scriptures, do not welcome Him with open arms as they should. From the beginning, He is attacked, rejected, and accused of being a fraud.

But is Jesus’ story all tragedy and doom? Certainly not! There are those who believe in His name—that is, believe in all that He is and represents. Faith in Jesus gives the disciples the right to be called children of God—not merely products of human birth; *blood, flesh, and will of man* all describe the normal sexual process of conception and birth. A child of God is one who has been reborn by the will of God and the power of the Holy Spirit; see 3:3.

**V. 14, Glory Revealed:** Magnificent words! God stopped speaking to humanity as an invisible voice. The Word became a Person whom people could hear and see and touch. The timeless Son became a little baby—all to show us God’s grace and truth and to give us a glimpse of God’s own glory. Israel and Moses were terrified at the vision of God’s glory at Mt. Sinai (Exodus 19:16–21 and Hebrews 12:18–21). The prophet Isaiah was struck with fear when he saw the glory of God in the Temple (Isaiah 6:1–5). But there is no fear in the vision of God’s glory seen in the Father’s only dear Son. Grace, truth, glory: all have been seen in Jesus who was crucified and Who rose from the dead to show that God’s glory is to forgive sinners and to restore them to His way of life—as revealed in His Son, the forgiving Savior and Servant Lord.

**V. 15** interrupts the flow of thought from v. 14 to v. 16, and seems to be drawn from v. 30.

## **December 31, The First Sunday after Christmas: John 1:(1-9) 10–18**

See above under Christmas Day III.

## **January 7, The First Sunday after the Epiphany The Baptism of our Lord: Mark 1:4-11**

**1:4–8:** John the Baptist, who is dressed like Elijah (2 Kings 1:8), is the one sent by God to prepare the people for the coming of God’s Messiah. He carries out his mission in the wilderness (see John 1:28), the place of expectations and new beginnings. It is also where God said He would take His people to renew them and draw them closer to Himself (Hosea 2:14–15). “People from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem” go out to John and are baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing

their sins in the process. That Jews submitted to John's baptism is remarkable, for traditionally only Gentiles were baptized when they converted to Judaism. Furthermore, it would seem that John baptized people in the region where the Israelites first entered the land under Joshua—suggesting that John's baptism constituted a new beginning, a new entry into the Promised Land for the people of God.

John does not baptize to draw attention to himself. He does so to prepare the way for the One who will follow after him—One who will be much greater than he is. John says that he does not deserve even to perform the most menial task for Him—to untie the thongs of His sandals (a task that only a Gentile slave would perform). John can baptize with water, true! But the One to whom he points will baptize with the Holy Spirit. Imagine! He will bestow the Holy Spirit, not just on a few select ones in the Jewish nation such as judges, kings, and prophets, but on all who come to Him to receive what He has to give (see Joel 2:28-29). And eventually, the Holy Spirit will come on the Gentiles (Acts 10:44-48).

**1:9-11:** Jesus, who is living in the northern region of Galilee when John begins his work, heads south so that John might baptize Him also. Jesus does not need baptism for the forgiveness of any sins. He seeks baptism by John to identify Himself with the New Age that His Father is about to introduce through Him. After all, He is the new Son of God. As the old son of God, Israel, passed through the waters of the Red Sea and the River Jordan, so the new Son of God must pass through water—the water of John's baptism. Jesus will lead His people into the inheritance of an eternal relationship with the Father.

When Jesus comes out of the water after His baptism, He sees the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on Him (1:10). Centuries before, the prophet had cried out, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down" (Isaiah 64:1). At Jesus' baptism, the heavens are indeed torn open, and the Spirit comes down in a form that resembles a dove and hovers over the head of Jesus. The rabbis (teachers) spoke of the dove as a symbol of the nation of Israel; see also Hosea 7:11; 9:11, and 11:11. At Jesus' baptism, the Spirit in the form of a dove hovers over the head of the new Son of God, the true Israel. Jesus will lead a life directed entirely by the Holy Spirit.

At His baptism, Jesus is anointed into the office defined by the voice from heaven: "You are My Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (1:11). The first part of this statement reflects Psalm 2:7—a Psalm used in ancient Israel at the coronation of a king from the line of David. (The name David literally means "beloved.") Its use at Jesus' baptism declares that God has kept His promise; the line of David will not die out. Jesus is, indeed, the long-awaited descendant of David, the long-expected Messianic King, who has come to rule God's people and empower them to carry out God's mission to the world.

The direction that the life of this Messianic King will take will be different from what many are expecting. "With you I am well pleased" is a quotation from the first of Isaiah's Servant Songs (42:1-4; note v. 1). As Messianic King, Jesus will be The Servant. He will be despised, rejected, and His people will do their very worst to Him. They will finally crucify Him! However, through His death He will lavish on them the offer of a complete, perfect, and eternal pardon, drawing them into a relationship with Himself, in which they will find true life, now and forever.