

**December 2011**  
**Week One**  
**Day One**

Read: Matthew 1

For many people, December is the busiest time of the year. With all the shopping, parties, and other obligations, some people find it hard to catch their breath once Christmas time rolls around. But every now and then we're given one of those perfect days where we're able to relax, kick up our feet, and not feel guilty about it. It's on these days many people decide to get a hot cup of coffee (or tea, or cocoa) and relax with a good book.

Perhaps it's a classic novel or a new biography, people have always been attracted to the written word as a way of learning something new and engaging in a story. And when it comes to a book, the first chapter can make or break it. The first chapter sets the tone for the rest of the book and it tells the reader a lot about what to expect from the rest of the book.

The same is true of the Bible. The Bible is filled with different types of literature, including books. And each of these books has a first chapter. Over the next several weeks we're going to be looking at the first chapter of some of the most well known and important books in history, what is often known as the four Gospels, the as biographical accounts of the life of Jesus. Each of these first chapters sets the stage for the rest of the book. And while we would never skip the first chapter of a novel, we can sometimes gloss over the first chapters of these important books of the Bible.

We will be spending this week looking at the first chapter of the book of Matthew. I'd like to encourage you throughout this week to read (and reread) the first chapter of Matthew. While this exercise might seem strange and repetitive, each time we read this first chapter, I hope we'll find something new and meaningful for our lives.

**What was your first reaction to reading chapter one of the book of Matthew?**

**December 2011**  
**Week One**  
**Day Two**

Read Matthew 1 again, focusing on the genealogy of Jesus.

Matthew opens his book in a way that would undoubtedly bore any modern day reader, but that was deeply meaningful in the ancient world. Matthew opens his account of the life of Jesus by giving Jesus' genealogy. It's so easy to skip right past genealogies when we encounter them in the Bible. After all, what does it really matter if I read a list of names of people I've never heard of and I don't even know how to pronounce. It's like someone recounting stories from their vacation. It might be a little interesting, but most of the time it's just really hard to care (or even pretend to care).

Genealogies have a somewhat dubious reputation when it comes to powerful figures in the ancient world. It was not uncommon for these figures to significantly alter their own family trees, pruning away any embarrassing branches. Yet, with the genealogy of Jesus we see something different. Jesus' genealogy reveals some skeletons in the closet.

One of the first things to note is the presence of women listed in the genealogy. We might not realize it (since of course every generation consists of both male and female contributors) but it was unheard of to list women in an official genealogy. Yet, what's even more interesting is not just that women are listed but what women make the list. These aren't women known for their clean moral record.

Tamar is accused of being a prostitute, while Rahab was more than just accused of being a prostitute but actually was. Ruth was a Moabite, a foreigner who would have been looked down upon by all Jewish people. Bathsheba engaged in an adulterous relationship. Mary, Jesus' mother, was accused of being an adulteress herself and was on the verge of being shunned if not for the courage of Joseph who did not disown her.

Matthew opens his book by starting chapter one with a genealogy filled with nefarious characters that include some questionable women. Perhaps you wonder why. The genealogy itself emphasizes that Jesus came from a royal bloodline, that he had ties to the great kings of old. What it also shows is that God is perfectly willing to work through anyone to accomplish his goals. No one is disqualified from having a role in his story.

The same is true for us. We might sometimes feel as if we aren't able to be used by God because of our past or because of mistakes we've made. Matthew wants us to know with his writing of chapter one that's simply not the case.

**What is your reaction to the genealogy of Jesus?**

December 2011

Week One

Day Three

Read Matthew 1 again, focusing on the genealogy of Jesus.

We are continuing to look at chapter one of Matthew's account of Jesus' life. This part of the Bible gives us a look at Jesus' family tree. It was traditional for every Jewish male to have a very strong sense of his heritage by knowing his family tree. It was also traditional for people to edit and censor their genealogies to shine only the best light on themselves. Yet, when we look at Jesus' lineage we see some interesting characters.

We discussed yesterday the women in Jesus' genealogy, which was an abnormality in and of itself. Yet, these were not the women you'd expect to

find at a church social or being voted class president. These were women with a reputation. These were the sorts of women people would often go out of their way to distance themselves from.

But it wasn't just the women in Jesus' genealogy that were questionable. The men on the list are not a whole lot better. Many of these men were involved in marriages outside of the people of Israel. This might not seem like a big deal to us, but to them it was paramount to treason (or at the very least it would have been scandalous). In a world that divided itself by nations and races, this act of intermarriage adds an interesting touch to the heritage of Jesus.

Jesus wasn't born into a perfect family where the closets were free of skeletons. His own parentage was strongly questioned and small towns didn't play nice with kids who may or may not have been conceived questionably.

Jesus' family was filled with people who would have been shunned, considered outsiders, and possibly even arrested or killed. Why does this matter? Who cares, right? Well, what this really means is that Jesus came to earth already including those who were excluded. Jesus' own bloodline testifies to God's desire to invite everyone into his family. While we might be embarrassed by parts of our family lines, we need never be too embarrassed to come to the family of God.

**In what ways do you feel excluded from the family of God? Do you find it hopeful to read about Jesus' family tree and those included in Jesus' family? Why or why not?**

**December 2011**  
**Week One**  
**Day Four**

Read Matthew 1 again, focusing on verses 18-25.

Of all the figures we think of when we envision the nativity, the one we might gloss over the most is Joseph. Sure, he makes it into the figurine set, standing serenely behind Mary looking almost like an outsider observing the scene. Perhaps interpreting him in that stance makes sense because, to some degree, he is an outsider.

He could have walked away. He could have. Upon learning about Mary's pregnancy, a pregnancy he is sure he had no part in, would anyone have blamed him for cutting his loses and walking away? He was actually planning on walking away. Joseph was a man of integrity and character, even in the face of a very difficult situation. He was planning on leaving, but not out of spite or filled with anger. It wasn't like Joseph was going to take Mary onto the Jerry Springer Show and publicly embarrass her, his plan was to do everything very quietly as to avoid being shame upon Mary and her family. But God had different plans.

An angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and laid out the situation in a different light. Mary hadn't been unfaithful to him. Instead, she had been faithful to God and was carrying within her the very Son of God, the one who would save the people of their sins. Joseph awoke from his dream and obeyed immediately, taking Mary to be his wife.

Think of the ramifications this would have had on Joseph. People could do the math, and when Mary's pregnancy was no longer able to be hidden and she gave birth in less than nine months after getting married, people would assume some things about Joseph and Mary, none of them good. People would assume Joseph had sinned or that he was being run around on behind his back. Either way Joseph was walking into a situation where he could look very foolish. We might not bat an eye at the situation these days, but in the ancient world this was earth rattling sorts of controversy.

It is unclear how much of all of this Joseph understood. We don't know what the conversation between Mary and Joseph looked like concerning the impending birth of Jesus. We don't really know much about Joseph in general after this point in the life of Jesus. But what we do know is Joseph was willing to be obedient to God even when that obedience would cost him something. Jesus changed people's lives before he was even born.

I wonder how many times Joseph questioned that dream. Was it really from God or just the result of a bad night's sleep? I wonder how many times he was beset by jealousy and doubt about the baby stirring in Mary's womb. I wonder if, in the darkness of the night, Joseph would be awake thinking about whether it was all true. I wonder if there were times when the promise of God given to Joseph felt less real. I imagine Joseph wrestled with all these reactions, but in the face of them all he continued to be obedient to God.

**What can we learn from Joseph about what it means to be obedient to God? How does this apply to your life?**

December 2011  
Week One

## Day Five

Read Matthew 1, again focusing on verses 18-25.

Some sentences in the Bible almost jump off the page, their power and significance undeniable. I think about the amazing confession Peter gives about who Jesus is and what that means for his life (Matthew 16). I think of the psalm describing the good shepherd and how he cares for the sheep of his flock (Psalm 23). I think of the powerful and stirring words that begin the Bible and describe God's personal action in the creation of the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1).

There are other verses that almost limp off the page. They're forgettable. They slip by mostly unnoticed. Instead of ending with a roar, they give off only a whimper.

One such verse is the last sentence of the first chapter of Matthew where we read: "And he gave him the name Jesus." Jesus, one of the most famous names in all of history, the name by which people swear their loyalty and which people use as an obscenity, is mentioned almost in passing at the end of chapter one.

Joseph had been instructed in a dream (of all places) to name the child his fiancé is carrying Jesus. It was traditional to name a male child after someone in the family, such as the grandfather. To add insult to injury, Joseph picks the name Jesus for this child, almost alerting to the world the baby isn't his. We have no indication anyone in Joseph's family was named Jesus, which would only have added to the suspicions already swirling about the questionable parentage of this child.

If we've never read the Bible we might be fooled into thinking that Jesus, the Son of God, had special privileges or advantages while he spent his time on earth. We might think it was easier for Jesus than it would have been for you or me. But I think the opposite might be the case.

Jesus was born into a small town culture with questionable parentage and bearing a name which has no association to members of his family (which would be akin to a child not sharing the same last name as his or her father). Jesus doesn't start with advantages, but with disadvantages, with the deck stacked against him. Matthew is subtly setting the stage with his first chapter of what it really meant that God would condescend to becoming a human, even to the point of being accused of having illegitimate parentage.

Give him the name Jesus, the angel said and Joseph did. And the world changed forever. What a subtly powerful way to end chapter one of Matthew. The verse might not jump off the page, but the ripples of it have been felt ever since.

**Now that you've spent the week studying chapter one of Matthew, what is your reaction to it?**

**December 2011  
Week One  
Small Group Guide**

What is your favorite book or the best book you've read recently? How important was the first chapter of that book?

As you've read through chapter one in the book of Matthew, how important do you think it is?

In what ways does chapter one of Matthew set the tone for the rest of the book of Matthew? What are some of the things that lead you to this conclusion?

What is your reaction to the genealogy of Jesus?

Do you find it encouraging to encounter such dubious characters in Jesus' genealogy? Why or why not?

We are introduced to the person of Joseph in chapter one of Matthew. What is your reaction to Joseph?

In what ways can you relate to Joseph?

What can we learn from him that would apply to our own lives?

**December 2011**  
**Week Two**  
**Day One**

*Read: Mark 1:1*

The Bible, while often referred to as one book, is actually a collection of books of different types of literature. Four of these books describe the events of Jesus' life. Often known as the four Gospels, these biographical accounts of the life of Jesus are some of the most important books ever written. Yet, in our desire to engage with these vital books, I think it's possible to rush through the beginning of them, missing much of the importance of the first chapters. Over the next several weeks, we're going to be looking at the first chapter of each of these books. Each of these first chapters sets the stage for the rest. And while we would never skip the first chapter of a novel, we can sometimes gloss over the first chapters of these important books of the Bible.

Last week we spent time looking at the first chapter of Matthew. This week we will be taking a closer look at the book of Mark.

The word Gospel is used frequently to refer to the accounts of Jesus' life, namely the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Yet, only the book of Mark calls itself a Gospel. We might miss this fact because of how the opening of Mark is often translated into English, but the first thing Mark wants us to know about his book is it's a Gospel.

“The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God . . .”  
Mark 1:1

The word gospel literally means “good news” but it can also signify several other things as well. The word “Gospel” can mean a literary genre, a particular message about God, or it can refer to a set of writings used by the early church. Mark is all three. Mark is essentially a collection of writings about Jesus in the form of stories presented in order for people to know and understand the good news about God and his kingdom and it has held a place of fundamental importance in the church since it was written.

The book of Mark opens by identifying itself as a Gospel, as good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. Those simple words should guide how we understand and read the rest of the book of Mark and it should shape any interpretations we make.

**Why do you think Mark opens his book by referring to it as “good news?”  
How do you think this might change the way you read the book of Mark?**

**Week Two  
Day Two**

*Read: Mark 1: 2-8*

The book of Mark doesn't open with the birth of Jesus or even with Jesus himself. Yet, when churches observe Advent, the celebration of Jesus entering into human history, one of the primary readings used is Mark 1:1-8. This might seem odd at first. After all, Mark just introduced his writing as the Gospel of Jesus. While the opening of the book of Mark lacks shepherds, angels, wise men, and a manger, it tells of the most important piece of the Christmas story – the expectancy of the coming of God's Son.

The first person we encounter in the book of Mark is John the Baptist. John appears from out of the wilderness or desert dressed like a prophet of old (II Kings 1:8; Zechariah 13:4) and speaking the same message many of these ancient prophets told: God's imminent intervention in the world. When he arrives on the scene he is eating the food of the desert, which is probably why there are not a lot of four-star restaurants in the desert, somehow I don't think locust and wild honey are going to catch on. People came from all over to hear John teach and to be baptized by him in the Jordan River.

Yet, the emphasis of the opening of the book of Mark isn't about clothing, odd food choices, or even John himself. The opening of the book of Mark is about the one whose way John prepares, the one who is coming. From out of this harsh, uninhabited place, comes John calling people to "Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him."

John affirms two things about the one coming after him in this opening passage of Mark. First, the one who is coming is greater than John. John says he is not even worthy of performing a slave's task of removing the sandals of the coming one. Second, John tells what the coming one will do: He will baptize you in the Holy Spirit.

John prepared the way for Jesus. John baptized people with water for the forgiveness of sins. John taught with great power and helped people draw nearer to God. But John knew he was not the star of the show. John knew Jesus was greater.

There was an expectant promise that with Jesus there comes one who is greater than John and who was (and is) able to help people encounter and engage with God in ways they never dreamt of before. That is the promise still. Jesus is greater than any of our wildernesses and he is greater than any of our failures. He is mightier by far than anyone preparing the way for him and he is able to do more than any human hand can do.

**In what ways do you need Jesus to arrive into the wildernesses of your life?**

## **Week Two**

### **Day Three**

*Read: Mark 1:9-13*

John was preaching and baptizing people in the Jordan River, expectant for the promised one from God who would soon come. Then one day the person John had been waiting for finally arrived. John then baptized Jesus in the Jordan River.

Immediately after Jesus' baptism we read in Mark 1:10-11:

*Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."*

There were thousands of people who had been baptized before Jesus and millions who have been baptized since. Yet, Jesus' baptism was something different and unique. There is a cosmic significance to Jesus' baptism. God's voice comes from heaven and identifies Jesus as radically different, as something more. Jesus is not just a teacher or prophet, but is the very Son of God. With the baptism of Jesus, we get a clear picture of his identity.

When we are baptized, it establishes our identity (Galatians 3:26-29, Romans 6:3-11). In this passage, we read that Jesus is who he says he is. So we are also who God says we are and because of Jesus we can be sons and daughters of God, “in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (Galatians 3:26-27).

Why does baptism matter? It matters because we are who God says we are. We have an identity mirrored in the statement God declares of Jesus, that we might be a part of the family of God. And we can find our true identity in the life of Jesus and in his death and resurrection.

**If you’ve taken the step of baptism, what did it mean for you? If you have not taken the step of baptism, in what way do you think it might form your identity?**

## **Week Two Day Four**

*Read: Mark 1:14-20*

Even some of the staunchest opponents of Jesus acknowledge that his teaching was brilliant and deeply wise. One of the things the book of Mark makes clear is that Jesus was a teacher. If we want to understand Jesus more fully, we must learn who he was as a teacher.

I have taken a number of different classes in my life and I have experienced a variety of teachers. Some of these teachers were exceptional and had the ability to make the subject matter come alive. Others were, how should I put this nicely, dreadful. Yet, no matter how talented a teacher is, when we think about the relationship between a teacher and a student we primarily think about an exchange of information.

This is not primarily the role of a teacher during the time of Jesus. A teacher, also called rabbi in Hebrew, was not just a lecturer or dispenser of information. Rabbis were not chiefly concerned with getting all the right data into people's heads. Instead, rabbis were people whose main goal was to show others a better way to live. Rabbis taught truths to base a life on and displayed this truth in their own lives. This is the way Jesus taught. Jesus' main goal was not to have his followers know the information he knew, but to live the way he lived.

When Simon, Andrew, James and John first meet Jesus, they are all busy with their day jobs: fishing on the Sea of Galilee. But it's pretty clear they were looking for something more.

Jesus gives each of them a simple invitation: "Follow me."

It's an invitation to learn from Jesus, but not to just learn information, but how to truly live. It's an invitation to a new life. Each, in turn, drops everything they're doing, leaving family and friends behind, at the prospect of learning about new life from Jesus. The call of Jesus the teacher is a call to a new life. He still calls today.

Learning from Jesus is not simply an intellectual exercise. Learning from Jesus is a chance to live differently. It's a chance for a new beginning. It's a chance to become something more.

**What is the difference between learning information about Jesus and learning from Jesus how to live?**

**Week Two**

## Day Five

*Read: Mark 1:21-34*

Why do we listen to some people but not others? Why are we more inclined to take financial advice from someone who's an accountant than from a circus clown? Why would we take lessons from a pro sports star yet not from the team's mascot? Why are we more likely to attend a class taught by a professor with a Ph.D. than by someone with a BLT (unless, of course, it's a class on making delicious sandwiches)? What it comes down to is authority and credibility.

In the first chapter of Mark the authority of Jesus is made clear.

The synagogue was not the place to offer sacrifices, as was the temple, but was a place to read the Bible, to pray, and to worship God. The synagogue was not led by "professional clergy" but by laypeople, all under the guidance of a board of elders. It was customary for traveling rabbis to teach in the synagogue, which is why we often read about Jesus teaching in local synagogues.

One of the things we see over and over again in the Bible is people respond to the teachings of Jesus with amazement. In the first chapter of Mark we read:

"The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching—and with authority!"

Mark 1:27

Why did people respond with amazement? Because he taught as one who had authority. He didn't teach in the same way as the religious leaders of the day, who specialized in telling others what was written in the law. Instead, Jesus taught with real power. These religious leaders were said to teach *from* authority, but Jesus taught *with* authority.

In the Bible reading for today, we find Jesus once again teaching at the synagogue. As soon as he was done teaching, his authority was tested. A man

who was possessed by an evil spirit confronts Jesus. Who knows how long the demon possessed man attended the synagogue without revealing he was dealing with such a serious issue. Yet, at the presence and teaching of Jesus the demon possessed man came forward. Jesus confirms the authority and credibility of his teaching by displaying power over the demon. Jesus commands the demon to be silent and then drove the demon from the man.

I'm not sure what you think about evil spirits, but the Bible speaks of their activity. It also speaks of Jesus' authority and power over them. Jesus teaches with authority because he *has* authority.

**What do you think it means that Jesus taught with authority? Does it make a difference in how you respond to the teachings of Jesus?**

**December 2011  
Week Two  
Small Group Guide**

1. What are some famous opening lines from novels or movies? Why is the opening of a book important?
2. Mark opens his book about the life of Jesus by referring to it as a gospel or good news. Why do you think Mark opens his book by referring to it as “good news?”
3. How might the opening line of the book of Mark change the way you read the rest of it?
4. When you read or hear about Jesus, does it really sound like good news? Why or why not?

5. The good news of Jesus has always been the foundation of the church and Christian faith. If we truly believed Jesus brought “good news,” how might that become the foundation of your life? How would things change in your life if this were so?

**December 2011**  
**Week Three**  
**Day One**

Read: Luke 1:1-4

The first chapter of a book sets the tone for everything that follows. Whether it's a work of fiction or nonfiction, the first chapter is the place where the author has a chance to peak the readers interest, introduce the subject being addressed, and underscore the importance of their book. The same thing is true of the books of the Bible, particularly those books that describe the life of Jesus, often known as the Gospels. As we lead up to Christmas, we are taking time to slow down and look at the first chapter of these four books, possibly the most important first chapters in all of history.

This week we will continue by looking at the first chapter of the book of Luke.

When someone wants to learn more about a book of the Bible there are certain pieces of information worth gathering, such as who the author is, why the book was written, and who was the audience of the book. When it comes to the book of Luke we don't have to search long to find this information because Luke himself provides it in the first chapter of his book.

Luke tells us there have been many people who have attempted to record the events of Jesus' life, but something about these accounts must have struck Luke as insufficient because Luke himself undertakes the task.

While Luke's introduction doesn't give us specifics of who the author is, we can learn something from these first four verses. For example, we know the author was a part of the Christian community (he refers to the things fulfilled "among us"), we know he wasn't an eye witness of the things Jesus did (since he carefully investigated these events), and we know he is a highly educated person (the Greek used in the Gospel of Luke displays this).

The audience is also clear, since Luke addresses his book to a person, Theophilus, which literally means one who loves God or a friend of God. Luke wants to present an orderly account of Jesus' life to Theophilus. Whether this is a person's name or a general title of those he hopes will read his work, Luke aims his writing at people who are interested in learning more about the things of God, toward people who could embrace the title Theophilus for themselves.

How did Luke get all the information for this book, since he wasn't an eyewitness of the events himself? He searched for it. He used other material written down about the life of Jesus. One clear source for the book of Luke is the book of Mark. Fully one third of the book of Luke can be found in Mark. He also interviewed people who were eyewitnesses, since most of the people who experienced Jesus personal we still alive and avenues of information for Luke.

Luke's meticulous style and research have given us one of the clearest pictures of the life of Jesus. Like a good reporter, Luke presents the facts of Jesus' life to us and allows us to make up our minds of what to do with those facts.

**What are some of the difficulties in reporting a story to someone else?  
What is the importance of Luke's introduction?**

December 2011  
Week Three

## Day Two

Read: Luke 1:5-25

One of the first things we encounter in the book of Luke is the foretelling of the birth of John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin. The story begins where stories in the Bible often do, with an unlikely cast of characters. An elderly man named Zechariah, who served in the temple as a priest, was visited by an angel and given some wonderful, if not strange, news: he was going to have a baby.

Zechariah's reaction is similar to what I'd expect anyone would have if they were told they were going to have a child late in life. Zechariah says, *How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years,*" which is much more kind than saying my wife and I are as old as dirt, but we get the point.

Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth are past their childbearing years. They'd always dreamt of having a child but it just wasn't in the cards for them. That particular ship had sailed and they were resigned to the fact they were going to be childless. They had prayed for a child, but when no child came the prayers stopped.

But God entered into their story and produces a miracle, a child. God blessed Zechariah and Elizabeth with a baby boy they were to name John, the one who would prepare the way for Jesus and who would be a blessing to others.

God heard the prayers of Zechariah and Elizabeth. He knew the hopes and dreams of their hearts. He knew what they longed for in their life. Both Zechariah and Elizabeth hoped, but as time passed their hopes waned and then died all together. But God heard their prayers and, in his own timing, he gave a son to Zechariah and Elizabeth.

I think we all know what it's like to allow disappointment to overwhelm us when a dream goes unfulfilled or when it feels like our prayers go unanswered. It must have felt that way for Zechariah and Elizabeth. Yet, from the very beginning of the book of Luke we are assured God hears us and he cares for us.

We might not get the exact thing we've been praying for, but what we do get is God's loving attention. We can be assured God hears us and wants what is best for us.

**Have you ever had prayers that seemed to go unanswered or unheard? What would it mean for you to live as if God hears your prayers? How might God show up even in the face of what seems impossible in your life?**

**December 2011  
Week Three  
Day Three**

*Read: Luke 1: 26-38*

Right from the beginning of Jesus' life, he caused people to have defining moments, to come face to face with a choice. We don't often think of the Christmas story as a collection of choices, but all throughout people decide how they will respond to Jesus.

The first person to encounter Jesus and have to make a choice because of him was even before he was born. Perhaps one of the most famous teenagers in all of history is Mary, Jesus' mother.

An angel comes to a young Jewish girl who is engaged to be married. The angel tells Mary that he brings good news. The angel said that the one God promised would come, the person who would restore the nation of Israel and all the world, was on the way. The only thing is, for Mary, there's a catch.

While the news that the angel brought would have been received by almost every Jewish person as a message of great joy, for Mary it was life-altering. The

news the angel brought, the foretelling of Jesus' birth, is something that changed all of history. We still, two thousand years later, celebrate the news the angel brought.

Yet, Mary's first thought was much more mundane. The angel is spelling out what the news meant, that Jesus would be the great king from heaven that the nation of Israel had been waiting for. All the while, Mary is working out the logistics. She's supposed to become pregnant with Jesus, but Mary is a virgin.

You can almost see the angel smile. Don't worry Mary, he says, with God all things are possible.

Mary's answer is, "May it be to me as you have said."

Now, I'm not sure if anything would have been different if Mary decided not to go along with God's plan. I don't know if anything would have changed if Mary would have asked the angel to find someone else to be the mother of God's chosen one. I don't know what effect it would have had if Mary complained instead of agreeing to be Jesus' mother.

But what I do know is that Mary, without knowing all the details, allowed God to work in her life. Mary, with more questions than answers, agreed to allow God to be God, not just of the universe but also of her life. And in Mary's life, just like in our own lives, the choice to allow God to work is vital.

**Like Mary, have you ever said "may it be as you have planned" to God? What would this look like in your life?**

December 2011  
Week Three  
Day Four

Read Luke 1:39-56

Christmas time is characterized by some distinctive characteristics in our culture. There are all of the normal decorations: trees, lights, garland, fake snow . . . you know all the rest. There are holiday sales and presents to wrap. There are classic Christmas movies. And, of course, there are Christmas songs. I know for many people the Christmas season doesn't feel like it's truly begun until there is Christmas music in the air.

In the first chapter of the book of Luke there's another famous song sung by Mary, the mother of Jesus. This song is often referred to as the Magnificat, called so because of the first word as translated in Latin. In this beautiful and stirring song Mary praises God for what he's done in her life, for the ways he's blessed his lowly servant. Yet, Mary doesn't remember just what God has done (and is doing) in her life but looks forward to what God will do to help the poor, powerless, and weak of the world. Mary sings not only about what God has done in the past but also about what God is going to do in the future.

There's an interesting feature to this song which we might miss. Much of Mary's song, which was originally written in Greek, refers to things God is going to do in the future, such as establishing justice and mercy. But the Greek is written in the past tense instead of the future tense. Why? It is because Mary has complete confidence these things will take place, so much so she sings her song as if they have already happened. So sure is Mary that God will carry out these things she acts and lives and sings as if they are already accomplished facts instead of the future.

Have you ever trusted God like that? Have you ever been in a position where you were willing to rely on God so much as to treat an unknown future as if it

was already accomplished fact? God longs for us to turn to him, to trust in him, and to find our hope in him alone. God longs to give us mercy, justice, peace, compassion, and joy. Have you ever known what it was like to be in Mary's shoes, entering into the great unknown with the confidence of being with a God who controls it all and with the utter assurance of God's goodness and his desire for what is best for us?

If so we might want to sing.

**As you read Mary's wonderful song, what is your reaction? Have you ever trusted God with the level of assurance Mary displayed?**

**December 2011  
Week Three  
Day Five**

Read: Luke 2:1-20

Every elementary school that has performed a play of the Christmas story knows that there are many roles to fill. There's Mary and Joseph, the innkeeper, the three wise men. And of course the part no one wants: the shepherds. The shepherds always seemed like a mere convenience of a teacher who has more kids than parts to play, so all the kids who couldn't act their way out of a wet paper bag are given roles as shepherds, which meant they were nothing more than living scenery.

The impression of shepherds in the ancient world wasn't much better. Shepherds were seen as dirty, backward, socially inept, and religiously detested. The work was hard, dangerous, filthy, and few people wanted to be shepherds unless they didn't have any choice. Yet, God announced to a group of lowlife

shepherds the birth of Jesus and the coming of peace. Angels appear to a group of shepherds and announce:

*“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.” Luke 2:14*

Glory to God and peace to his people on earth. Peace means different things to different people. For a soldier, for a new mother, for a couple struggling in their marriage, for a teenager who can't seem to get along with their parents, to shepherds watching over their flocks, peace means something different. Peace normally means the end of something - the end of a war, the end of a baby crying, the end of interpersonal conflict, the end of sheep going astray. But none of these things last. There will be more wars, more crying, more conflict. Yet, with God's peace we have something that endures, we have something that lasts. And it all began with the birth of Jesus.

With the coming of Jesus, we have peace between God and us, peace between each other, and peace within ourselves. Jesus once told his followers and friends:

*“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” John 14:27*

With the birth of Jesus, with the coming of God's son to earth, we have peace, not as the world understands it, but peace that allows our hearts to be untroubled and unafraid.

The shepherds, after hearing the news of Jesus' birth, hurried to find the newborn child. Once they found him, they began to spread the word about Jesus and about what they'd been told by the angels. And as they went they were no longer afraid, because they had the peace of God.

They left that barn carrying good news with them in their hearts. They knew that they had seen something amazing and they seemed almost unable to contain that information. Everywhere they went they spread the word of what they'd seen, what they had been told by the angels, and what it meant. They

could have just gone back to the fields, congratulating each other for their good fortune at being in the right place at the right time. But instead, their response was to spread the word.

I wonder how we would react in the same situation? Are we more concerned with our own good fortune that God would work in our lives, or do we want other people to experience the same peace and joy themselves?

**What kind of peace does the world give? How is the peace that Jesus offers different from the peace of the world? What would it look like for you to have God's peace dwelling in you? How willing are you to talk about the way that God is working in your life?**

**December 2011  
Week Three  
Small Group Guide**

1. What do you think are some of the qualifications of a good reporter? Who are some reporters who fit these qualifications?
2. Luke sets out to give an orderly account of Jesus' life. Why do you think he decided to take on such a large project?

Read: Luke 1:39-56

3. Why do you think Mary wanted to visit Elizabeth? What do you think Mary hoped to get out of the visit?
4. In what sense is Mary blessed? In what ways might this blessing be difficult for Mary?

5. Mary believed God would accomplish what he promised. How did her actions and words demonstrate this?
6. Have you ever trusted God with the level of assurance Mary displays? What would it look like in your life if you did?

December 2011

Week 4

Day 1

Read: John 1:1-5

The book of John, the final of the four books in the Bible telling the biography of Jesus, isn't like the other three Gospels. The first three Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, are often referred to as the Synoptic Gospels because they tell many of the same stories in the same order, sometimes even with the exact same wording. What this means is that reading the book of Matthew is similar to reading the book of Mark or Luke, because the reader will encounter similar stories in each.

The book of John is different. It contains stories and events not found in the other Gospels as well as stories told from a different point of view and with different details from the other Gospels. While the first three Gospels are written in order to describe the events of the life of Jesus, the book of John is much more reflective and personal (John refers to himself throughout his book as "the one Jesus loved" or "the beloved disciple").

The book of John also makes much more use of poetry and poetic language. John is reporting facts about the life of Jesus, to be sure, but he is trying to impart something else as well. He is working to help the reader encounter not just a story about Jesus but Jesus himself.

In the very beginning of his book, John makes sure his readers know two essential things about Jesus. First, he wants people to know Jesus is the very presence and person of God's life and light. Second, we have access to that life and light through Jesus. This forms the core of everything that comes after it in the book of John. If we understand nothing else these two things can still change our lives.

If you haven't read the book of John before I want to encourage you to do so. People for generations have found it encouraging, beautiful, and inspiring.

**As you begin to read the book of John, what are your reactions or first thoughts?**

December 2011

Week 4

Day 2

Read: John 1:1-9

Language can be complicated, especially when you are translating from one language to another. This becomes even more complex when you are translating from an ancient language into a modern one. This is always the case when we are looking at the Bible, which was written primarily in Hebrew (in the Old Testament) and Greek (in the New Testament). In English, most of our words have one and only one meaning (sometimes even less; just listen to politicians sometimes, all those words and they aren't really saying anything).

The same cannot be said of Hebrew and Greek. Very often words in these languages have a myriad of meanings. Even words that seem straightforward often have multiple nuances of meaning.

In the first chapter of the book of John we see this interplay of meanings with regard to the Greek word "logos" (λόγος), which is normally translated as "Word." Yet, logos has a deeper meaning than our translations show. When we say "word" we are normally referring to a collection of letters that are brought together to make something that has a meaning. For example: everything on this page.

The Greek understanding of the word ‘logos’ is much more complex. Logos meant words written on a page or spoken aloud, but that is the most basic and rudimentary understanding of the word. What it really meant, down in the heart of things, was reason, intelligence, meaning, and wisdom. We actually use cognates of this word in English with logic and in –ology (meaning the study of, such as biology, geology, or theology).

John, in the very beginning of his book, uses the word “logos” to refer to Jesus. Part of what John is doing is pointing to Jesus as a source of reason, meaning, and wisdom. All of these things existed with God from the very beginning (see also Proverbs 8) as well as Jesus existing with God from the beginning. Jesus, the uncreated Logos, the Word, has a perfect relationship with God.

After the writing of the book of John this word logo began to take on a whole different meaning than it had before. It became widely used by Christian philosophers to express not just the idea of wisdom and intelligence, but of wisdom and intelligence as it exists in a relationship with God. If we are seeking wisdom and peace from our confusion, we should seek after the Logos, after Jesus who existed from the beginning and in whom the light and life of men resides. It is this wisdom, the wisdom that comes only from God, that is worth seeking and finding.

**In what places of your life do you want to have God’s wisdom through Jesus to cover over your own confusion and foolishness?**

December 2011

Week 4

Day 3

Read: John 1:14-18

We sing the song Amazing Grace and we can be stirred by the words and the music, but how many of us truly live as if grace is amazing? I think its possible to sing about grace and talk about grace, but to live without it.

This is the perfect time of the year to look at grace, because when Jesus came to earth, when God was born as a human baby, we were given access to grace. We read in the first chapter of John of how Jesus came to earth full of grace and full of truth. Jesus came to give us grace out of his fullness, and from Jesus we receive grace on top of grace on top of grace.

The word for grace in Greek, the language this part of the Bible was originally written in, is the word “charis,” which means to rejoice and be glad. Part of what grace means the way the Bible describes it is something worth rejoicing and being glad about. Is that what people think of when they look at the church and at followers of God, that we are so glad, we rejoice so much, and are so thankful for the grace God’s given us? When people look at Christians and at churches and at you and me, do they see people who are full of gratitude and joy because of God’s grace? We live in a world that’s starving for grace. There is a world full of people who long to rejoice, to be set free, to be filled with God’s grace.

One time there was a collection of theologians gathered together and the question was posed, “What is the thing that Christianity alone has added to the world? What is the one thing that Christianity has added to the world that didn’t exist before?” These theologians debated.

Was it the incarnation, God coming to earth as a person? No, they concluded. Other faiths tell stories where gods appear to people in the form of a human. Was it the resurrection, of Jesus being raised from the dead? Again, there were stories of people coming back from the dead in mythology. The conversation quickly escalated and became an argument.

C.S. Lewis, the famous writer and theologian, came into the room and asked what all the fuss was about. They posed the question to him, “What is the one thing Christianity alone has added to the world?” C.S. Lewis replied, “That’s easy: grace.”

That God would come to rescue us, free of charge, goes against every instinct of humanity and it's unique among all belief systems. Buddhist with the eightfold path, the Hindu doctrine of karma, the Jewish covenant, the Muslim code of law; these are all ways to earn approval, are all tasks to be completed in order to earn our way in the world and with God. Grace is something brand new. That God would come to earth in order to offer grace as a free gift is the miracle of Christmas.

Maybe as you read this today you're hungry for grace. You might not say it aloud or articulate it at all, but you might nevertheless feel an urging and a prompting for grace. People are hungry for grace. I'm hungry for grace. It's part of what it means to be human, to long for God's free gift of love and grace. This time of year may you be reminded of what Christmas truly means: the entrance of God's grace into the world.

**In what ways do you see our world hunger for grace? In what ways do you hunger for it?**

December 2011

Week 4

Day 4

Even with all of the parties and celebrations, this time of year can be the most hopeless for people. The hours of daylight grow slim and it sometimes feels like it gets dark at noon, leaving us to spend more and more of our time in darkness. Yet, there is another kind of darkness that has nothing to do with when the sun sets. It's the darkness of despair. It's the gloom of depression. Some people know what it's like to live in the shadow of hopelessness.

Christmas is a celebration of the coming of Jesus, when God was born as a baby. Jesus came to earth to be the Light of the World and to free us from hopelessness. On the day we remember the birth of Jesus Christ, we are reminded of the hope we have in him. We are not left to wallow in desperation, but instead we have a bright hope for tomorrow. We are not abandoned in hopelessness, but instead we have the great anticipation of God's promises.

With the coming of Jesus we have hope.

It's a hope born as a baby and a hope paid for on a cross. Jesus came to earth and lived a perfect life so that we might have the hope of salvation and the hope of becoming children of God. With the birth of Jesus a new hope enters the world. With the death of Jesus as a sacrifice on our behalf we have access to great hope in our lives. With the resurrection of Jesus we have the hope of new life. It's easy to lose sight during all of the bustle of the season, but the heart of Christmas is this: Jesus came to earth to bring the light of life to each of us. If we want it. If we'll accept it. And it's the reason we celebrate the birth of Jesus on Christmas.

**What would you say represent “darkness” in your life? How can the darkness of the world overshadow hope, peace, joy, and love? What do you think it means for you that Jesus is the light of the world? Where do you need the light of God in your life? In what way do you need hope?**

December 2011

Week 4

Day 5

Read John 1:1-18

There is one thing that the people of Jesus' day would have never called God: humble. The word “humble” was not a compliment during the first century. In the Greco-Roman world the greatest virtues were those tied to status and control, such as courage, justice, self-control, and wisdom. The Roman senator and philosopher Seneca expressed this ideal perfectly:

“Know, therefore, that a perfect man, full of virtues human and divine, can lose nothing ... The walls which guard the wise man are safe both from flame and assault, they provide no means of entrance---are lofty, impregnable, godlike.”

Lofty . . . impregnable . . . godlike – not exactly words you'd associate with humility. The word humility in the ancient world referred to those people so lowly they had no status, which meant they had no control in their lives. The word in Greek literally means something is on the ground and it is clear in Jesus' day there was nothing positive about the term, much less anything divine. Yet, this is exactly how Jesus is described, as humble.

In these passages from the Bible book of John, we see a view of Jesus' birth we normally don't think of when Christmas rolls around. Jesus, God's son, is called the Word of God and he existed from the very beginning of time. Jesus is called the creator, the maker of all things. He is the light of all people that shines in the darkness. The Word of God, the creator, the light of all people, becomes flesh. This is the birth of Jesus.

The Son of God, becomes the son of a scared, young girl. The creator of all everything becomes a part of creation. The perfecter of all things, the one who shares complete communion with God, the one who was before all time began and will be after all time ends, wore a diaper. And cried. And needed to be fed and burped.

The God who's very word created the world couldn't talk. The God who held the galaxies in his hand had no motor skills at all. The God who set the earth spinning on its axis couldn't even turn his own small body over.

Jesus' birth is the height of humility. Within the story of Jesus' coming to earth, we see the most extreme case of humility ever known.

**In what ways can you relate to the idea that the best virtues are associated with status and control? How does humility go counter to this idea? In what ways is the Christmas story really a story about humility and love?**

December 2011  
Week 4  
Small Group Guide

1. What are some traditions you and your family have on Christmas? Why do you think those traditions started?
2. When you think of the Christmas story, what comes to mind?

Read John 1:1-18

3. In what ways does the beginning of John differ from what we normally think of with the Christmas story? In what ways are they the same?

4. How is the story of Christmas tied together with the idea of hope?  
Humility? Grace?
5. When Jesus was born he came as the light of the world that shines in the darkness. Where do you need the light of Jesus to shine in your darkness?
6. How could you have more hope, peace, love, and grace in your life this Christmas?