

## Devotions for Dec. 19 – 25, 2011

### **Monday, December 19, 2011: *Unlikely* Daily reading: Psalm 89:1-4**

Psalms is divided into five “books,” and this is the last psalm of the third book. It’s a “royal psalm” about God’s graciousness toward the Judean kings. These verses praise God’s steadfast love, revealed in covenant relationship with David. The words “steadfast love” (Hebrew *hesed*) and “covenant” (*berit*) form, in the words of Rolf Jacobson, “one of the most powerful theological tag-teams in the Psalter, because both words have to do with God’s character” ([www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org)). God chooses David to be king despite David’s standing as a mere shepherd boy, the youngest in his family. David seeks to build God a house (temple), but God instead promises to build David a house (dynasty). David fails morally, yet God keeps his promise to David, and it becomes a foundation of the Jewish Messianic hope. David seems like an improbable choice for this role. Ask God to be the promise in your impossibilities.

### **Tuesday, December 20, 2011: *Parallels* Daily reading: Luke 1:26-38**

Luke connects the birth announcement stories of John the Baptist with Jesus by putting one right after the other. The parallels are striking. An angel announces the birth. The child will be a boy. His name is given. The Holy Spirit will play an important role in his life and work. The conception is improbable. God has a plan. A bit of doubt is expressed. But there are significant differences between the stories. Mary and Joseph are betrothed, not married. This means they’ve been promised to one another, probably by parental arrangement, quite early in their lives. This announcement is made to a peasant girl, not an important priest, which reinforces one of Luke’s favorite themes of God working through the underdog. Ask God to help you see the Christmas story with new eyes.

### **Wednesday, December 21, 2011: *Virgin* Daily reading: Matthew 1:18-25**

Luke doesn’t go into the social complications of an unmarried woman conceiving a child, but he emphasizes Mary’s virginity. Matthew explains Mary’s circumstances: “She was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit.” Mark says nothing about it. But by the time Luke’s Gospel is written, it’s certainly a part of Jesus’ story. By the writing of the Apostle’s Creed, no later than 390, it’s part of the central teaching of the church. Scholars have raised significant questions about the virgin birth, reporting that “virgin birth” is an ancient figure of speech denoting an extraordinary individual. Alexander the Great and Caesar Augustus are said to be virgin born. A whole theology explaining Jesus as both fully human and fully divine has been built on the virgin birth, but Paul never mentions it. In the first century, Jesus’ death and resurrection appear to be far more important than the circumstances of his birth. Ask God for a deeper understanding of Jesus’ birth, life, death, and resurrection.

### **Thursday, December 22, 2011: *Impossibilities* Daily reading: Luke 1:26-38 again**

Mary, unlike Zechariah, surrenders to the will of God, no matter how improbable. Luke shows us how a priest is upstaged by a simple peasant girl when it comes to faith! Gabriel tells Mary that her cousin, Elizabeth, is six-months into a pregnancy. Without e-mail or cell phones, Mary has no way of knowing this good news, yet this news is the transition point for the next section: Mary’s visit to Elizabeth. The key verse is 37: “For nothing will be impossible with God.” Monday’s reading and today’s text are steeped in the impossibilities that God overcomes, including God’s steadfast love and faithfulness to David, Mary’s pregnancy, and the gift of the Messiah to us, as well. What impossible situations do you face? Can Jesus be God’s promise in your impossibilities?

### **Friday, December 23, 2011: *Balance* Daily reading: John 1:14-18**

With the gift of this child in the world, we are left to wonder what possibilities God brings into our own challenges. No matter what our circumstances, we will, like Mary, be challenged to balance our hope in God’s promise with an attitude of submission to God in the midst of our challenging realities. We are not called to simply throw our hands in the air and give up. We are also not called to blindly walk into any situation, hoping that the promise of God will sustain us. We are called to live in balance between hope and submission. We can learn much from David and Mary, who live in hope, not knowing how God’s plan will unfold, but still trusting that God will guide and lead them. Where is your life out of balance? Ask God for balance between hope and submission.

### **Saturday, December 24, 2011: *Birth* Daily reading: Luke 2:1-21**

This is the story of incarnation; God becoming flesh in human form. God comes in the humblest of ways, the simplest of circumstances. John’s birth is announced at the temple, but Jesus arrives in rural anonymity. John is the son of a temple priest, but Jesus is the son of an average Jew. Yet angels appear. The heavens are paying attention. Shepherds are the first to know, yet they’d be the least likely to carry kingly news. This is a cosmic, and very human, event at the same time. This is Christmas Eve. Ask God to help you understand this incredible story in a new way.

### **Sunday, December 25, 2011: *Details* Daily reading: Matthew 1:18-25**

A regional census leads Joseph and his betrothed, Mary, to the city of David, the town we know as Bethlehem. This decree comes from Caesar Augustus, or Octavian, ruling from 27 B.C. to 14 A.D. This census is probably used to establish a taxation registration. It’s necessary for people to travel to their places of origin to register their families, which makes this process much more culturally acceptable. Caesar probably recognizes the importance of both the trip and the tax as a painful reminder of who’s in power. It’s about 90 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem, and the journey takes them at least three days. These details set the context for Mary and Joseph. They’re forced to make an unwanted trip at the worst possible time. Yet the Savior is born in this unlikely place. This is Christmas Day! Ask God to help you comprehend this radical love in a deeper way.