

## Obeying in Obscurity

**“[Mary] will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21).**

**Scripture:** Matthew 1:18-25

**Song:** “A Strange Way to Save the World”

In my younger years, I played center on a football team. I loved blocking for my teammates despite the relative obscurity of the position. The linemen on our team used to laugh because the newspaper reports always called the quarterback and running backs by name but referred to us generically as “The O Line.”

An angel told Joseph that Mary would give birth to a Son who would save His people from their sins. In other words, Jesus would be the Savior of the world. That meant Joseph would not be the central figure in his family. His role was to be obedient to God and faithfully care for Mary and Jesus, God’s Son. Joseph responded by doing what the angel had told him to do.

Joseph’s humility and faithfulness are a great witness to us. He did not get up from his angelic dream and question, doubt, or complain. He simply did what God directed him to do. As a result of his quiet obedience, Joseph had the honor of serving as Jesus’ earthy father.

**Father,** we want to follow Joseph’s example of humility and obedience as we seek to carry out Your calling in our own lives. In Jesus’ name, amen.

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December 19–25. **Troy D. Stuart** is married and has three sons. He has worked at a university in the US and a Christian school in Thailand.

## Sin Uprooted

**“I will uproot from among you your Asherah poles when I demolish your cities”** (Micah 5:14).

**Scripture:** Micah 5:1-15

**Song:** “The King of Love My Shepherd Is”

Standing 50 to 80 feet tall and weighing in at several thousand pounds, the water oak is a magnificent tree species. It offers beauty to observers and much-needed shade to those seeking reprieve from the sun on hot summer days. However, water oaks can be destructive during storms. Because their roots go only inches into the soil, these behemoths are easily toppled by heavy winds. The entire root systems of felled water oaks can often be seen lying aboveground after a windstorm.

God’s message sent through the prophet Micah was clear: God was going to destroy idol worship and pagan practices taking place among the people. Like a mighty storm that wreaks havoc in nature, God was going to destroy the carved images and uproot the Asherah poles in the cities. However, God also gave a word of grace. After the destruction, He would send a ruler to shepherd the people and lead them into peace and security.

Many of us experience temptations that seem impossible to overcome. While today’s passage provides a warning, it also offers hope. God is ready and able to uproot everything in our lives that stands between us and Him. He is mighty and can clear the path for us to follow Him into a life of peace.

**Father**, we pray for You to remove sin from our lives with the same ferocity with which You destroyed idols from among Israel. In Jesus’ name, amen.

## Jesus' Government

**To us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace** (Isaiah 9:6).

**Scripture:** Isaiah 9:1-7

**Song:** "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day"

Throughout history, many people have devised schemes about how to rule nations. Among the more notorious writings on the topic are Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince*, Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, and Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. The citizens of many nations have experienced immense suffering when government leaders have implemented ideas reflected in works such as these.

Centuries before any of these ideas were put into writing, the prophet Isaiah told us about the Ruler God would send to humanity. Isaiah calls Him "Prince of Peace" (9:6). The word translated *peace* in this passage is the rich Hebrew word *shalom*. This word has in mind the ultimate wholeness and flourishing of the individual and the community. Quite literally, Isaiah calls the coming Messiah "Prince of *Shalom*."

We live in a world that feels chaotic. Anxiety, anger, and depression are apt descriptions of what many people experience on a daily basis. However, Jesus' government is fundamentally different. He offers peace, justice, and righteousness. And these qualities of His kingdom can be experienced by all who will respond to His lifegiving message of repentance and restoration: that "the kingdom of God has come near" (Mark 1:15).

**Father**, thank You for Jesus, our Prince of *Shalom*, and for the peace You offer us as people of Your kingdom. Make us facilitators of Your peace today. In Jesus' name, amen.

## Global Good News

**In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his resting place will be glorious** (Isaiah 11:10).

**Scripture:** Isaiah 11:1-10

**Song:** “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing”

One of the personal blessings I receive from working in an international setting is getting to interact with Christians from around the world. I regularly get to worship God with people from every continent except Antarctica. I have experienced few things as inspiring as praising God alongside Christians from Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, North America, and South America.

The gospel is good news for people from every nation, tribe, and language group. Today’s passage describes the hallmarks of the kingdom administered by the Root of Jesse: righteousness, justice, and the end of enmity between all. The glory of Christ’s kingdom is a rallying call for people around the world.

God’s Word is a soothing balm in a world that often stands divided. The reign of Jesus is a reign of unity in which believers of every nationality, race, and social status become one. Becoming aware of the growth and work of God’s church around the globe can give all of us much-needed inspiration regarding the oneness that is available to God’s people today.

**Father,** we are humbled that You allow us to be part of Your church. Today we pray for the unity of all true believers who profess faith in Your Son. May the love, joy, and authentic unity of our fellowship in You draw others who have yet to place their trust in You. In Jesus’ name, amen.

## Birth Certificate

**In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary (Luke 1:26-27).**

**Scripture:** Luke 1:26-38

**Song:** “What Child Is This?”

There is something fundamental to our identity in knowing the concrete details of when, where, and to whom we were born. The moment we are born, the government stands ready to issue a certificate noting our name, the date, and the place of our birth. And many of us like to dig deeper and learn about our ancestors further back.

The announcement of Jesus’ incarnation is not an abstract theological tale. It is an announcement about concrete times, places, and people—Nazareth, Mary, Joseph, Elizabeth. God’s saving work takes place in a historical moment with historical people in a historical place. The coming of Jesus is the incarnation of God into our world. God in the flesh is the story of humanity’s salvation.

Conversations about God can easily turn into heady philosophical and theological discussions. Today’s passage reminds us that our God is neither a remote God nor a set of concepts derived from human thinkers. Our God is a personal God, a real God who interacts with His creation and who has entered our realm personally—born in the land of Israel, as the person Jesus, through the woman Mary.

**Father**, we are astounded that You choose to draw near to us! Thank You for acting in our world on our behalf through Your Son. In Jesus’ name, amen.

## Jump for Joy

**When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!"** (Luke 1:41-42).

**Scripture:** Luke 1:39-45

**Song:** "Joy to the World"

Players jump into the air, run around, rip off their jerseys, and slide on the ground . . . all while super-zealous commentators scream, "Goal!" Ecstatic displays such as this are common in world-class soccer matches. In fact, in modern society, athletic competitions are one of the few public venues that regularly elicit visceral human emotions from both participants and spectators.

After the angel Gabriel told Mary that she would be mother to God's Son, she went to visit her relative Elizabeth. When Mary arrived at Elizabeth's house, Elizabeth's unborn son, John, literally jumped in her womb. Pure joy was John's response to his first encounter with the yet-to-be-born Christ child.

The story of Jesus' birth, life, death, burial, and resurrection is good news! In fact, the news is so exciting, so phenomenal, that jumping for joy is a natural and appropriate response. Today is an opportunity to hear the good news of Jesus' incarnation and to celebrate it with even greater intensity than when a goal is scored or our favorite team wins the big game.

**Father**, the very idea of Your dwelling among us fills us with awe and delight. We pray that we can experience afresh the joy of this good news with the kind of enthusiasm Elizabeth and John displayed. May our joy overflow to inspire others to rejoice. In Jesus' name, amen.

## The Musical

**Mary said: “My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior” (Luke 1:46-47).**

**Scripture:** Luke 1:46-55

**Song:** “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”

The long-term success of musicals on Broadway, as well as operas at venues such as Milan’s Teatro alla Scala, would seem to give testimony to the notion that music is often the best mode for conveying a story. In New York City alone, patrons spend over \$1 billion per year to attend musical productions.

Traditionally, many Christian scholars have held that Mary sang the words in today’s Scripture. Some experiences are uniquely suited to be expressed in song. Mary’s response to the news that she was pregnant with the Son of God was to lift her voice in praise to God. Her words are centered on the majesty of God, and they honor Him for what He has done and is going to do. He is holy, merciful, mighty, powerful; He is mindful of the needy and scatters the proud; and He is faithful in keeping His promises.

God created us with the ability to make music and sing. Some of the most powerful retellings of the gospel story are found in the lyrics of great Christian songs. Worshipping God through the act of singing is also a way in which we experience the joy of offering thanks to Him who is worthy of all of our praise.

**Father,** thank You for creating us with the ability to make music and sing. Today we worship You, offering our praise and thanks for the love You demonstrated by sending Jesus to redeem us from our sins. In Jesus’ name, amen.