

2024 SHELBY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH DEVOTIONAL

CREATED BY AND FOR
SHELBY PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH MEMBERS

25 NAMES FROM THE
GOSPEL ACCOUNTS OF
JESUS'S BIRTH

A CLOSER LOOK AT
BIBLICAL NAMES FROM
ABRAHAM TO JESUS

WHAT'S IN A NAME?



ADVENT 2024: DECEMBER 1 THROUGH DECEMBER 25

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WHAT IS ADVENT?

Advent is the beginning of the church year, a season in which we look forward to the coming of Jesus. It is always set around the four Sundays before Christmas, at which we celebrate the Eternal Son of God sharing in our humanity, coming first as a vulnerable baby.

By looking forward to the celebration of Christmas, we look ahead as well to the return of Jesus and anticipate when he will complete the new creation that began in his life, death, resurrection and ascension. Therefore, in preparing our homes and hearts for his birth, we prepare our homes and our hearts for his return as well.

This is a season of hope, peace, joy, and love, but it is also a time of preparation, when we search our hearts and make room through repentance. Christian repentance is about a changed mind and turning away from sin, both of which turn us toward God's love.

ABOUT THIS ADVENT DEVOTIONAL

This devotional is written entirely by the members, staff, and pastors of Shelby Presbyterian Church. Because the church is the assembly of people called by God to be a community under the reign of Christ our King, it is especially meaningful when we can produce these devotionals and in doing so, make our personal devotional time a part of our community life.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

The theme of this devotional is a continuation of the theme at our church retreat at Montreat where the theme was, "Called by Name." At the retreat, we talked about our calling to love God and neighbor while getting to know one another better through the meaning of each person's name. For this devotional, the intent is that we all get to know the players in the story of Jesus's birth a little better through their names, as we grow in faith together.

What's in a Name? A 2024 Advent Devotional

Published in house by Shelby Presbyterian Church, 226 E. Graham St., Shelby, NC 28150

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Cover design and image from Canva.com pro account.

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Devotional Breakdown

- ❖ Abraham (Dec. 1)
 - Initial mention - Genesis 11
 - father of **Isaac** (Matt. 1:2 - Matthew chapter 1 provides an easy-to-follow lineage of Jesus)
- ❖ Isaac (Dec. 2)
 - Initial mention - Gen. 17
 - Father of **Jacob** (Matt. 1:2)
- ❖ Jacob (Dec. 3)
 - Initial mention - Gen. 25
 - Father of the 12 sons who became the 12 tribes of Israel (Gen. 49)
 - Father of Joseph, who was sold into slavery by his brothers (Gen. 37)
 - Father of **Judah** (Matt. 1:2)
- ❖ Judah (Dec. 4)
 - Fourth son of Leah
 - Initial mention - Gen. 29
 - Suggested selling Joseph into slavery instead of just killing him (Gen. 37)
 - Father-in-law of **Tamar**
 - Offers to help his youngest brother Benjamin (Gen. 44)
 - Father of **Perez** (Matt. 1:3)
- ❖ Tamar (Dec. 5)
 - Initial mention - Gen. 38
 - Widow of Judah's eldest two sons
 - Tricked by Judah into remaining a widow
 - Conceive twins, Zerah and Perez, with Judah
 - Mother of **Perez** (Matt. 1:3)
- ❖ Rahab (Dec. 6)
 - Initial mention - Joshua 2
 - Protected Israelite spies
 - Mother of **Boaz** (Matt. 1:5)
- ❖ Boaz (Dec. 7)
 - Initial mention - Ruth 2
 - Son of **Rahab** and Salmon, a descendent of **Perez**
 - Father of **Obed** (Matt 1:5)
 - Husband of **Ruth**
- ❖ Ruth (Dec. 8)
 - Initial mention - Ruth 1
 - Mother of **Obed** (Matt. 1:5)
- ❖ David (Dec. 9)
 - Initial mention - 1 Samuel 16
 - Descendent of **Obed** (Matt 1:6)
 - Husband of **Bathsheba**
 - Father of **Solomon** (Matt. 1:6)
- ❖ Bathsheba (Dec. 10)
 - Initial mention - 2 Samuel 11
 - Mother of **Solomon** (Matt. 1:6)
- ❖ Solomon (Dec. 11)
 - Initial mention - 2 Samuel 12
 - Father of **Rehoboam** (Matt. 1:7) whose actions divide Israel
- ❖ Zechariah (Dec. 12)
 - Name of John the Baptist's father and biblical prophet
 - Initial mention - Ezra 5
 - Prophesied that the Messiah (**Jesus**) would come as a humble king riding on a donkey (Zech. 9)
- ❖ Elizabeth (Dec. 13)
 - Initial mention - Luke 1
 - "Descendant of Aaron" (Luke 1:5) which means she was a descendant of **Abraham** (Ex. 6)
 - Mother of **John** the Baptist
 - Relative of **Mary**
- ❖ Gabriel (Dec. 14)
 - Initial Mention - Daniel 8
 - Angel who delivers messages from God in Luke 1 about the births of **John** the Baptist and **Jesus**
- ❖ Mary (Dec. 15)
 - Initial mention - Matt. 1

- Wife of **Joseph**, a descendant of **Rehoboam** (Matt. 1:7-16)
- Mother of **Jesus**
- ❖ Joseph (Dec. 16)
 - Initial mention - Matt. 1
 - Adoptive father of **Jesus**
- ❖ John [the Baptist] (Dec. 17)
 - Initial mention by name - Matt. 3
 - Relative and baptizer of **Jesus**
 - A common name in the bible, including of a disciple of **Jesus**.
- ❖ Augustus (Dec. 18)
 - Initial mention - Luke 2
 - Ruler who ordered the census which led to **Joseph** and **Mary** traveling to Bethlehem where **Jesus** was born
- ❖ Quirinius (Dec. 19)
 - Initial mention - Luke 2
 - Leader near the time of the census/taxing/registration associated with the birth of **Jesus**
- ❖ Shepherds (Dec. 20)
 - Initial mention of shepherds associated with the birth of **Jesus** - Luke 2
- ❖ Simeon (Dec. 21)
 - Initial mention - Luke 2
 - Meets **Jesus** as a baby in Jerusalem and understood **Jesus** was the Messiah
- ❖ Anna (Dec. 22)
 - Initial mention - Luke 2
 - Meets **Jesus** as a baby in Jerusalem and understood **Jesus** was the Messiah
- ❖ Herod (Dec. 23)
 - Initial mention - Matt. 2
 - Felt threatened by the birth of **Jesus**
- ❖ Magi (Dec. 24)
 - Initial mention - Matt. 2
 - Wanted to find **Jesus**
- ❖ Jesus (Dec. 25)
 - Initial mention by name - Matt. 2
 - The Messiah

The names studied in this devotional were drawn from the accounts of Jesus's birth in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. The above devotional breakdown, compiled by Claire Mangione, provides references to where the names appeared and some connections to the larger biblical story.

It is important to remember that the word "Christ" means "anointed" and refers to an anointed king. This is why the title for Jesus and his proclamation of the "Kingdom of God" and the "Kingdom of Heaven" are key to understanding the whole of Scripture as revealing God as King, over and above any other authority. Though humanity has from the beginning tried to usurp God's role, the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus inaugurate the Kingdom of God in the church and in the renewal of all things yet to come.

The First Week of Advent

Sunday, December 1

Drew Mangione

Abraham (Exalted Father)

What's in a name? A lot, if you're Abraham. God even changed his name from Abram to Abraham. In Hebrew, '*abram*' means father. Yet, that was exactly what Abram was not. He and his wife had no children. So, God came to the man named 'father' who had no children and promised him children in his old age. Abram believed, but then he doubted. He and his wife took matters into their own hands, and he fathered a child with her slave. After this, God doubles down on the promise. The Lord renamed Abram, who was then just the father of one son, calling him Abraham, the exalted father, as he was destined to be the father of many nations.

Do you struggle to believe God's promises? In the story of Abram/Abraham, we see God not only being faithful when we are not, but doing more than expected at every turn. Right there, in Jesus's family tree is one of many sinners. Despite the flaws of Abraham and many of his descendants, God remains faithful to Abraham to make his descendants a "blessing for all the nations."

Jesus is the truest fulfillment of this promise, but we – as children of Abraham by faith and siblings of Jesus by grace – are also called to be a blessing to others. In this holiday season, pray about how God might use you to be a blessing, especially to those who do not yet know God's love for them?

Monday, December 2

Carol Ann Hoard

Isaac (Laughter)

My mom's laughter was a gift that brightened every room she entered. She had a remarkable ability to find joy and humor in almost any situation. I think of the stories I heard when she found out she was pregnant with me. She was an older woman, well past the years when most women expect to be having children. Her friends couldn't help but laugh, especially since she kept denying it for so long. But that laughter wasn't to mock her. Rather, it was pure surprise and delight.

Like Sarah in the Bible, who laughed when she heard she would bear a son at an old age, my mom laughed too. Her laughter came from a place of awe and joy. I imagine she never could have predicted how much joy I would bring into her life.

As I reflect on her life and the laughter she shared with so many, I see that her joy was more than just a response to funny moments—it was a deep expression of her trust in God, even in the unexpected. I can only imagine how much her heart overflowed when she realized that she was about to experience a miracle, just as Isaac's parents did. Her laughter, like Isaac's birth, was a testimony to the unexpected gifts God gives us, and the way God fills our lives with moments of joy.

This Advent season, we can remember that God delights in surprising us with moments of joy, no matter our age or circumstances. Just as Isaac's birth was a cause for celebration and laughter, the birth of Jesus, the long-awaited Savior, brings us even greater joy. I think of my mom's laughter as a reminder that God still delights in surprising us with joy, bringing light into our lives in the most unexpected ways.

Tuesday, December 3

Drew Mangione

Jacob (One who Takes by the Heel or Supplanter)

As the story goes, when Isaac's wife Rebecca was pregnant with twins – Jacob and Esau – they moved quite a bit in her womb. The Lord told her this was because two nations were jostling in her womb and prophesied to her that the older would serve the younger. When they were born, Esau was first, but Jacob got his name because he came out holding his brother's heel. In his life, Jacob lived into this name, striving to make God's promise come true by his own effort. He first tricked his brother into giving away his inheritance for some stew. Then he tricked his father by pretending to be Esau to get his blessing.

What's interesting is that because he runs to save his life, Jacob never gets the inheritance he tried to steal. The blessing he "stole" from Isaac, was really just a repeat of the promise the Lord had already made to Rebecca. The fruit of this blessing comes only after Jacob himself is tricked and humbled. Being tricked provided him a family and more, while being humbled by God gave him a second name: "Israel," meaning "one who strives with God."

The names of Jacob describe the people of God. Like Jacob, we struggle to live as if we truly find God to be trustworthy. We supplant God by putting ourselves in charge or giving ourselves over to something we desire. Like Israel, we wrestle with God when things are not going our way and only in humility can we accept God's love and blessing.

Jacob confused his material inheritance with the promised blessing of God. In this season, which has become so commercialized, let us not confuse earthly wealth and fortune, with the blessing of God that allows us to participate in God's story. That story of God revealed in Jesus, calls us to be ministers of reconciliation. This means we humble ourselves to love God and love one another, just as the eternal Son of God humbly became a human born in a manger so that we might be called "children of God."

Judah (Praise)

His name is Judah his name means praise. Judah was one of the twelve sons of Jacob and Leah he had a very important role in his family. When his brother Joseph was in trouble Judah stepped up and showed great courage. He even offered to take the place of his younger brother Benjamin to protect him. This is the best gift we can give is giving God a big hug with our words. This story lets us now to love and praise God & worship him.

His name is Judah. His name means "praise." Judah was one of the twelve sons of Jacob, and he was born of Leah. He had a very important role in his family. When his brother Joseph was in trouble, Judah stepped up and showed great courage. He even offered to take the place of his younger brother Benjamin to protect him. This is the best gift we can give. Praise is giving God a big hug with our words. This story let's us know to love and praise God and how to worship him.

Thursday, December 5

Drew Mangione

Tamar (Date Palm Tree)

The Date Palm Tree is a symbol of survival and of justice. It survives storms and it survives drought. It is resilient and it nourishes. Tamar is a survivor who holds Judah, the son of Leah and Jacob, accountable for his mistreatment of her. As a result, she is specifically named by Matthew in the family tree of Jesus.

In a time before there were scriptures, before the law, and before the temple, Judah struggled with doing what was right, and perhaps Tamar is the one who set him straight. After selling his brother Joseph into slavery, Judah's eldest son married Tamar, but he was wicked, and God killed him. Judah asked his second son to produce an heir for his brother, but this second son prevents pregnancy and is killed as well. Judah then tricks her into remaining unmarried and waiting for his third son, whom he will not send her way. So, she tricks Judah, and with her, he becomes the father of twin boys, of which Perez is an ancestor of David and Jesus. (Read Genesis 38 for the salacious details)

Tamar's actions preserve her own life and her role in God's story. At the same time, they also seem to play a role in changing Judah. The man who sold his brother into slavery and initially refused what he owed Tamar, later realizes he had done wrong. In a later story, Judah will even offer to sacrifice himself for the good of his father and youngest brother. True justice will not only lift up the oppressed but set the oppressor free to live free of sin and guilt and make better choices going forward.

In this season, consider how you might help a Tamar in our community to find justice? How might you be more open to recognizing where you have been like Judah in holding others back, be it intentionally or accidentally? This is the challenge Tamar presents for us in the genealogy of Jesus.

Friday, December 6

Doug Bryan

Rahab (Spacious)

You may be familiar with the expression, "Look what the cat drug in!" This sentiment may be an honest reaction to discovering the name Rahab among the genealogy of Jesus. In the ancient world, genealogy was everything. Why is her name included? Would most families simply overlook or hide such a name? After all, she was an outsider to the Children of Abraham, a Canaanite in a land wanted by the invading Hebrews, and a practitioner of an unfavored occupation. Identified as a harlot, Rahab would hardly be a first choice among purists for an ancestor.

Her name means "spacious." How can this name find a meaningful home in the time of Advent? Her actions may provide a clue. Her response to the two spies at Jericho demonstrated that this woman found space in her heart to God's revelation and the plight of the endangered spies. Later Rahab would "pitch her tent" with this wandering group, the Children of Abraham. This spacious Gentile's act of compassion would be recognized in the lineage of Jesus.

We are in Advent, a time of preparation for celebrating the birth of Jesus the Christ, which ends with the Savior's birth celebrated as Christmas. In the birth narrative, no space could be found for the young couple. The innkeeper offered an ignoble space for the couple. After all, it was a busy time to be bothered with the needs of unplanned guests.

Our present-day December activities are also filled. Our own "inns" are filled already with familiar guests, anticipations, activities, shopping, feasts, and worship. When we find no space for anything or anyone more, we should recall the name of Rahab and her courageous act of welcoming and protecting the enemy, the stranger.

Read and meditate on Joshua 2:1-24 and Matthew 1:5. If God's Providence can include each of us, can we not find spaciousness to let God work in unexpected ways? Can we include the outsider in the filled spaces of our private Christmas? Advent and Christmas are open invitations of welcome to all. Can we find safe and open spaces in our heads, hearts, and hands? Wow, indeed, "Look what the cat graciously drug in."

Saturday, December 7

Drew Mangione

Boaz (Swift/Strength)

Boaz is a cool dude. In Bethlehem some 3,100 years ago, he's a "hayil gibbor." In Hebrew, "hayil" is a strength that includes valor, or bravery, while "gibbor" is a term for heroes and the mighty warriors. Sadly, most translations reduce this to a man of wealth or social standing, but this combination is title for the warriors of Israel.

The meaning of Boaz is uncertain, but traditionally it has been associated with swiftness, though it is also the name for a pillar of a temple, so it is associated with strength. Boaz is both swift and strong – swift to recognize the opportunity to extend "chesed" or God's love, and strong enough to both take counsel from Ruth and put himself on the line on her behalf.

Like Christ, Boaz is a model of secure strength, quick to act on behalf of those less fortunate. How might we be more like Boaz in this season, praying for God to give us confidence to be secure in the strength of God's love, so that we might be quick to share that love?

The Second Week of Advent

Sunday, December 8

Mary Conner

Ruth (Friend)

For those who do not know the story of Ruth, she was a Moabite woman who married a man from Judah after her husband and his family, including her mother-in-law Naomi, had traveled to Moab because of famine in Judah and Israel. Over time, Naomi's husband died, as did Ruth's husband and her brother-in-law. Naomi, Ruth and Ruth's sister-in-law were now widows. They had nothing and no one to take care of them. Because of this, Naomi decided to go home to Judah where at least she had family. Ruth and her sister-in-law offered to go with Naomi, but Naomi insisted they return to their families. Ultimately, only Ruth goes to Bethlehem with Naomi, and she becomes the great grandmother of King David.

So, how does Ruth connect to Jesus who was born in a manger? To me, Ruth displays the characteristics that we are called to have as followers of Christ. She showed faithfulness in her loyal friendship to Naomi by following her to Judah, a country where she would be a foreigner. She did this not just because she loved Naomi, but also because she believed in Naomi's God. Ruth was also hard working, and she was obedient. Once they were in Bethlehem, Naomi had plans about how the two women would be able to feed themselves. Ruth followed those plans without questioning them. This took bravery. Ruth was also resilient. She was tough and probably realized that she would need to do much of the work that would keep both Naomi and her alive.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could be more like Ruth as we follow Jesus as we try to walk with him?

Monday, December 9

Drew Mangione

David (Beloved)

Following their entrance into the promised land, the people of Israel had the law, and they had a choice – to live under and trust the Lord, or to become like the Canaanites. Sadly, they became like the Canaanites. The Lord raised leaders called judges to save them, but those leaders grew progressively worse, until civil war erupted. The Israelites engaged in the same human sacrifice and idol worship of the people they conquered. They had no king, and everyone did what was right in their own eyes. This is a refrain in the book of Judges.

The people refused to recognize the Lord their God as their King. So, they asked the prophet Samuel for a king like the nations around them have. Through Samuel, the Lord warns them that earthly kings take advantage of their subjects. They insist and Saul is anointed. He looks the part – He's tall and powerful, and a solid leader by earthly standards. However, his faith is in his own abilities, not the Lord who is the true King. This is where David comes in. He was the youngest of eight sons, and did not look like a King. He was small and ruddy, only a shepherd boy when God called him.

Yet, David slew giants, achieved great military feats, and was fearless. His confidence came from knowing that he could trust the Lord in his battles. In this, he was not like Saul. Yet, David was by no means perfect. Among other sins, in one instance, he took a woman, conceived a child with her, and then had her husband killed. However, when the prophet Nathan confronted him, David repented. He did not discard the woman, but took her as a wife, and together, they grieved their first child's death. A later son with Bathsheba, Solomon, would be his successor.

The story of David and the reverence we have for him as "a man after God's own heart" must not be used as an endorsement of his sins. It is a recognition of his repentance and his submission to the Lord as King. Unlike his own son and the successors after them, David never turned from the Lord to worship other gods. He sinned, but he repented – letting his mind be changed, admitting his faults, and turning his heart back to the Lord. This is why he lives into his name. This is why he is "beloved."

In Matthew's genealogy, he starts by highlighting Jesus as son of David, and son of Abraham. The Lord promised that Abraham's descendants would bless the nations, then promised that David's descendants would reign forever. Jesus fulfills these promises, and now we are called to be children of Abraham by faith, and subjects of the true King over every nation – Jesus.

As we prepare to celebrate Jesus's birth, what sin in our own life, in our family, in our community, and even in our nation, might we repent? How can we, like David, trust that we are beloved? How can we let this love change our minds? How might we let this love turn our hearts away from self-centered sin and toward the self-giving love of God in Jesus the anointed King?

Tuesday, December 10

Drew Mangione

Bathsheba (Daughter of an Oath)

When David wanted to build the temple, as a house for the Lord, the Lord said, "No, thank you." Instead, the Lord promised to make a royal house of David's descendants. At the time, David already had six wives, but their children would not inherit the kingdom.

As King, David took the beautiful but lowly Bathsheba, the wife of a mercenary soldier in his army, and he conceived a child with her. The prophet Nathan told David a story in which a rich man with many sheep used the lone sheep of a poor man when he desired a meal. This outraged David, and Nathan said David was the rich man. From this analogy, we see that this relationship did not start as a love affair but stemmed from the lust of a powerful man against a married woman.

Bathsheba literally means, "daughter of the seven." This number represents completeness, and so the number "seven" was also a shorthand for an oath because you committed to completing what you promised. Bathsheba had much to grieve. She was taken advantage of and made a widow. Her first child with David died. Nathan's admonition prompted David to repent, the King relented to Bathsheba, and

she became his seventh wife, the one through whom the next king came, and the one from whom eventually came Jesus.

Bathsheba is not mentioned by name in Matthew's genealogy, but only as "the wife of Uriah the Hittite." It seems that by including the Canaanite Rahab, the Moabite Ruth, and the Hittite's wife, Matthew is emphasizing that Gentiles are in lineage of David and Solomon and therefore anyone with the claim to be the Messiah, son of David. Matthew, who is traditionally believed to have written to a primarily Judean audience, points out the flaw in ethnic purity concerns regarding the Messiah, or anyone who wants to restrict worship of the One True God.

The promise of a redeemer King came through Bathsheba, the daughter of the oath, who may well have not been an Israelite, just as others in Jesus's lineage lacked the ethnic status. In this season, Bathsheba is a reminder that the promises of God do not always come as we expect them. God promises to be near to us, especially in times of trouble, but we struggle to feel that. Bathsheba may have had no idea that the God who made all things was by her side, but the Lord was with her in her grief and established through her the redemption of the whole world.

In this season, let us lay down our expectations of how God should act, and trust that God is faithful to keep the promises of Jesus and bring all things to completion.

Wednesday, December 11

Laura Lampley

Solomon (Wholeness, Peace)

It is easy to know what is right and still not do it.

When Solomon became the third king of Israel, he was quite young, possibly only 15 years old! Not long after he was appointed as ruler, he had a dream in which God told him that he could ask for anything he wanted God to give him. Because Solomon was so young and concerned about carrying out his duties properly, he asked God for wisdom – "a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong" (1 Kings 3:9).

Wow. Just wow. What one thing would I have asked God for if I could have anything? And at fifteen?? Probably, it would not have been wisdom.

But, still, I have always wanted to be smart and discerning in matters of right and wrong. Of all the spiritual gifts, I mostly wished I had the gift of discernment. I wanted to be able to know what was "the right thing" to do and then do it. I wanted to see through people and their motives so I could avoid doing the wrong thing and paying the unfortunate consequences. Truthfully, I wanted to be so wise that I could look at a situation and understand it so well and so completely that I could avoid any mistakes in my life. I thought that if I could avoid "the big nosedive," my life would be peaceful. I would be content and safe.

According to biblical scholars, Solomon wrote at least some of the Proverbs and some of the Psalms, as well as all of Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon. He must have been smart. He must have been wise. And

still, even with the God-given gift of discernment, he still made mistakes. Big ones. Lots of them. He married pagan women and let them affect his loyalty to God. He also was not the fairest of rulers to his people. What happened to his gift of wisdom?

Interestingly, the name Solomon does not mean “wisdom.” It means “peacefulness” and “wholeness.” Throughout his life, Solomon was anything but peaceful. He spent his life searching for power and passion and learned only at the end of his life that those things are “madness and folly.” (Ecclesiastes 1:17). Everything is “Meaningless! Meaningless! ... Utterly meaningless!” (Ecclesiastes 1:2) cried Solomon.

Sometimes I feel that way, too. But like Solomon, as I age, I am learning that my sense of peacefulness and wholeness does not come from being knowledgeable or smart. It doesn't even necessarily come from being discerning. The correct choice for me in any situation is to “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight” (Proverbs 3:5-6). My peace comes from my faith in God. Only with Him am I safe and content. Only with Him am I whole.

It is easy to know what is right and still not do it. Luckily, God forgives us.

- Read Ecclesiastes to understand what Solomon learned was the most important thing at the end of his life. (It's not too long.)

Thursday, December 12

Judy Black

Zechariah (The Lord Remembers)

The father of John the Baptist, Zechariah was unable to speak after he doubted the Angel Gabriel. At John's naming, he recovers his speech and proclaims the coming Messiah and John's role. He shares the name of an Old Testament prophet, whose message was that your King is coming, and he will reign forever. I find this theme in Zechariah comforting. God knows and controls the future.

He will come to rescue people from sin and to reign as king. There was opposition to God's plan in Zechariah's day and he prophesied future times of trouble, but God's word endures. God **remembers** the agreements he makes with his people. He cares for his people and will deliver them from all the world powers that oppress them.

The Lord **Remembers!** Though we still have evil in the present, God's infinite love and personal care has been demonstrated through the centuries. Zechariah's people could not look back at Christ's ministry and mission. If you study Zechariah's prophecy you will see details of Christ's life that were written 500 years before the fulfillment. Although our bodies may be destroyed, we need never fear our ultimate destiny if we always love and obey him. God keeps his promises (**remembers**).

Yet, how can we be sure today? We can keep *calling* on him and listen. We can *honor him* by thanking our Lord. We *give thanks* to him for being with us, being *pleased* when he blesses our family. We can *look for signs* both of what God is doing in the world around us, and what the Lord wants us to do.

Advent means coming, and can mean the start, commencement, beginning, and onset. So, as we are leading up to the celebration of Christmas, may we remember the celebration of the arrival of Jesus on his day. May we also reflect on the unexpected nature of Jesus' humble birth and join in the anticipation of when our King will come again to reunite Heaven and Earth once and for all.

Friday, December 13

Sherry Thomas

Elizabeth (God is My Oath)

Elizabeth is a "daughter of Aaron" ...I find this description interesting since in the Old Testament especially, we only hear about the male offspring. The fact that she is descended from Aaron places her in the family of the Levites, those who were set apart to take care of the temple, helping to lead worship through music and assisting the priests. Obviously, she did not take part in these activities because of her gender but perhaps was aware of the particulars of the responsibilities because of her upbringing and because of her marriage to Zechariah the priest, also a descendant of Aaron. (I like to think their marriage was close enough that they discussed some of the activities he carried out as a priest.) Luke 1:6 says, "And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord." I appreciate that Luke felt it important to share this about the wife as well as the husband.

Luke 7 says, "they had no child as Elizabeth was barren, and they were both advanced in years." Doesn't that sound familiar? God seems to do His work in the situations where humans think nothing can be done. Anyway, Zechariah is visited by Gabriel in the temple, he says that Elizabeth will have a baby boy who will be a joy and delight and great in the Lord's eyes. "He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before his birth." (Luke 1: 15)

Zechariah questions this news and becomes mute until after the baby is born. This means he came back from his time in the temple and couldn't speak. In The Message translation of Luke 1:23-25 it says: "he went back home. It wasn't long before his wife, Elizabeth, conceived. She went off by herself for five months, relishing her pregnancy. 'So, this is how God acts to remedy my unfortunate condition!'"

She immediately realizes this is the work of God and they must raise this child in the ways of the Lord as "He will bring many Israelites back to the Lord their God." (Luke 1: 16)

As Elizabeth is in her sixth month of pregnancy, the angel Gabriel goes to Nazareth to share with Mary about her own pregnancy to come (a story for another day). Mary "immediately" "hurries" to see Elizabeth, her cousin who is also pregnant. As Elizabeth greets Mary, the child in her womb (John the Baptist) leaps as he is already filled with the Holy Spirit, and instantly Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit as well. (A woman documented as being filled with the Holy Spirit!) She blurts out a blessing on Mary and wonders why she has been given this honor, that "the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (Luke 1:43)

Each of these details speak to the meaning of Elizabeth's name: "God is my Oath." God made sure that in the Old Testament, besides the prophecies about the birth of a Savior, that there was also a prophecy about, "A voice crying out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'" (Isaiah 40:3) This is John the Baptist who came to prepare the way of the Lord and who also baptized with water, and in fact, baptized Jesus in the Jordan River. God has chosen to tell us about John's parents, especially his mother, who was looked down on because she was barren but who was also righteous in the eyes of the LORD. Her life points to the oath that God had made before the beginning of the world: to send a messenger and then to send a Savior. He planned that John would have parents who would raise him in the knowledge of the Lord. Our Father is a God of details and oaths kept.

Prayer: Father God, we thank You for paying attention to the details and needs of Your creatures...women and men, yesterday, today, and forever. Thank You for the messenger, and thank You especially for our Savior, Jesus the Christ. May we look forward to celebrating His coming as a helpless baby and His future return as King. May we live righteously, trusting and being open to Your Holy Spirit, moving in our lives. In the precious name of Jesus. Amen

Saturday, December 14

Holly Petrilli

Gabriel (Mighty One of God)

What do you think Gabriel, the Mighty One of God, looked like? The Gospel of Luke doesn't provide a description, but it does tell us the reactions of Zechariah and later, Mary, when they each encountered the angel separately. When Gabriel appeared to Zechariah in the temple, the Bible says, "he was startled and was gripped with fear." After Gabriel greeted Mary, Luke's Gospel says she "was greatly troubled at his words." Gabriel's first command to Zechariah and also Mary was "Do not be afraid."

So, we know Zechariah and Mary were frightened, but why? Was there something terrifying about Gabriel's appearance, or was it simply because he appeared out of thin air? Gabriel reacts strongly after Zechariah expresses doubt about the angel's message that his elderly wife, Elizabeth, will give birth to a son. "The angel said to him, 'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.'" An angel who can silence a voice with just a word is definitely fearsome.

Mary also has questions after hearing Gabriel's news that she will conceive a son, but she doesn't doubt the message, she simply wants to know how it will happen. Gabriel's answer details the power and might of God. "The angel answered, 'The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So, the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth, your relative, is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail.'"

From these verses in Luke, we know that Gabriel stands “in the presence of God” and that “no word from God will ever fail.” How does Gabriel feel when he stands before such a mighty God? Perhaps, the indescribable angel has more in common with Zechariah and Mary than we realize. Is Gabriel’s “Do not be afraid” a command or an expression of empathy?

It is interesting that despite evoking terror, Gabriel is actually the messenger of exciting and amazing news: the elderly Zechariah and Elizabeth will soon welcome the birth of John the Baptist, and Joseph and Mary will be blessed with the birth of God’s Son, Jesus. A description of Gabriel is not needed because the message itself is mighty and stands on its own. “You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.”

This Advent season, let’s rejoice in God’s mighty message of Salvation through his Son Jesus Christ. (Excerpts From NIV New Testament with Psalms and Proverbs)

The Third Week of Advent

Sunday, December 15

June Hobbs

Mary (Bitter, Beloved)

I have always had a sentimental attachment to “Mary” because it was my mother’s name. It was not exotic or unusual, just a classic, reliable name. In 1947, when my parents married, “Mary” was the most common name for women in the United States, and “Robert” (my father’s name) was the most common name for men. As George M. Cohen said of “Mary” in a popular song from their era, “It’s a grand old name.”

Etymologically, however, “Mary” has two opposite meanings, at least for Biblical women, because it means both beloved and bitter. I did not understand the complexity of the name or of its connections to the experience of Jesus’ mother until I became a mother myself. When my first child, Kevin, was born in 1972, what I felt the moment he was born was so profound I cannot fully describe it. The closest I can come is to say I felt I had been given a glimpse into eternity, caught up just for a moment into another realm where I could see things from God’s point of view. I had given birth to an immortal soul! I had been chosen to be the mother of this wonderful little boy! I was beloved! That night when the nurse brought me a sleeping pill, I palmed it. I was not willing to sleep as long as I could revel in that feeling.

Several days after we went home from the hospital, though, I had an equally intense bitter moment. As I was rocking my baby one night, it suddenly came to me that he had been born—but he would also die one day. Close on the heels of that thought was the awareness that someone could hurt or kill my precious baby! My husband was at work that evening, and I was alone in the house, which probably enhanced my anxiety. But it was a real feeling, and I had this thought at the same moment, “I will kill anyone who lays a hand on this child.” I was shaken by that thought.

Advent stories tend to focus only on the exciting moment when a baby is born and ignore the bittersweet fact that Jesus will die. Yet the anticipation of Christ’s coming is miraculous beyond the ordinary miracle of a child’s birth because we know how He will die and that death is not the end of the story. Perhaps that understanding is why so many of my favorite Christmas carols are in minor keys: “What Child Is This?,” “Coventry Carol,” “We Three Kings.” Advent for me—and perhaps for Mary—always has a dark, bitter undercurrent. If we were not mortal, and if He had not chosen to be mortal, we would not know how precious life is and how beloved we are.

For meditation: Read Luke 2: 41-52, which describes a moment from Jesus’ life when Mary must have felt bittersweet emotions. Thank God for sending Mary’s son into the world to share in all parts of the human experience.

Monday, December 16

Emily Monroe

Joseph (The Lord Increases)

As we journey through the Advent season, reflecting on the life of Joseph, we see a man whose very name, "The Lord Increases," is a testament to God's providence and faithfulness. Joseph, a humble carpenter, was chosen to be the earthly father of Jesus Christ. His life exemplifies trust in God's plan, even in the face of uncertainty. When he learned of Mary's divine pregnancy, Joseph chose to obey the angel's message, demonstrating remarkable faith and righteousness. His willingness to embrace God's will, despite the challenges, reminds us that God's increase often comes through our obedience and trust in His greater plan.

In this season of preparation and anticipation, Joseph's story encourages us to consider how "The Lord Increases" in our own lives. Just as Joseph's faithfulness allowed him to play a crucial role in the divine plan, our openness to God's guidance can lead to unforeseen blessings and growth. As we reflect on Joseph's journey, we are called to be receptive to God's increase, recognizing that His blessings may come in unexpected ways. This Advent, let us strive to be like Joseph, steadfast in faith and ready to embrace God's will, trusting that His plans for us are always for our good and His glory.

Tuesday, December 17

Michelle Moser

John (The Lord is Gracious)

John means "The Lord is gracious." This is a reminder of God's boundless love and mercy. Throughout the Bible, those named John are often connected to special moments of God's grace. John the Baptist prepared the way for Christ, calling people to repentance and pointing them toward the ultimate expression of God's grace—Jesus Himself. This Advent season invites us to marvel at the grace poured out. God stepped into our world, not because we earned it, but because His love compels Him to restore and redeem.

Sometimes, life can feel like we need to earn everything—good grades, a good job, approval from friends, or even feeling like we're good enough for God. But Advent reminds us that God's grace doesn't work like that. It's a gift we just have to accept. So, as you go through this season, think about how God's grace has shown up in your life. Are there places where you need to let go and trust Him more? Let this be a time to breathe, knowing that God's got you, and His grace is always enough. Let this season be a time to rest in the truth that the Lord is gracious. As you light the Advent candles, may their glow remind you of the grace that leads us out of darkness and into His marvelous light.

Wednesday, December 18

Bruce Moser

Augustus (The Majestic)

The first emperor of Rome had many names. He went by Octavian in his early years, but when the will of his assassinated great-uncle appointed him as heir, he followed Roman customs and took on the name of his adopted family line: Julius Caesar. Twenty tumultuous years later or so, he changed his name again, adding the honorific title of Augustus (“great,” “majestic,” “illustrious”) when he became Rome’s first emperor. It is by that name that we encounter him in Luke 2, and it is that title that all future emperors would use.

Titles seem to be everywhere, don’t they? At my day job, there are different titles for different levels of schooling, levels of professor, types of student, types of administrator ... everybody has a title, and there’s a title for everything. Too often we become engrossed in those titles, working diligently for that next title, that next promotion. Just when we think we’ve finally arrived, there’s always that next title that’s a little bit greater, more majestic, more illustrious.

When Jesus was asked about “greatness,” his answer was plain: the greatest are the most humble, the most lowly, the powerless. They are the last, the servants, the ones who are dependent. Our great titles on earth don’t seem to line up very well with his understanding; indeed, our earthly titles so seldom reward greatness in the Lord’s eyes. This Advent season, may we all try to set aside our quests for earthly “greatness” and instead work towards true greatness, earning our Augustus titles in the Kingdom of God.

Thursday, December 19

Drew Mangione

Quirinius (One of the Citizenry or Lord)

This name reminds us that context and history matter when we read scripture, and how we apply scripture to our lives. Quirinius is rarely mentioned, except for how hard it is to pronounce and by those who try to disprove the history of the gospel. This is because the King James Version rendered the sentence, “And this taxing (census) was first made when [Quirinius] was governor of Syria.” Since he was not governor until 6 AD, it makes Matthew’s account of Jesus being born during the reign of Herod the Great impossible, since Herod died in 4 BC. Surely one must be wrong. However, it could have also been translated, “And this taxing was before Quirinius was governor of Syria.” The word “protos” can mean “first” or “before.”

This is where the meaning of Quirinius matters. In Latin, it means “one of the citizenry,” but in Greek, it would likely mean “lord.” Because of our worldview, we see these as very different meanings. After all, a Lord is someone in power, while a citizen is anyone. However, this ignores the fact that Roman citizens were a select population and had power. Citizens had an inherent status which afforded them legal privileges, including the exploitation of noncitizens. These meanings are similar.

Reading the bible, or any historical document, is best done with an understanding of the time in which it was written (as Mallory Brown will discuss further in her entry on Simeon for December 21). We need to leave our world view as best we can to understand it, and then apply what we've learned to our current context. We might wonder why Luke mentions an event 10 or more years after, but that census under Quirinius marked the beginning of an increased Roman presence in Judea and Samaria. This is the census that would have been on everyone's mind, so mentioning one during Herod's reign would have needed to be differentiated.

Too often we read scripture by putting the story in our time, rather than putting ourselves in the time of the story. We bring our own preconceived notions to the text, rather than letting the text challenge our pre-existing ideas. The ambivalent name of Quirinius should remind us that even if we are not "lords" over others, we do have power and privileges, which could be used to exploit, or could be better used to help. After all, Jesus did not "exploit" the power he had as God, when he humbled himself, being born a human being on that first Christmas.

Friday, December 20

Emily Monroe

Shepherds (One Who Watches)

In the Advent season, as we anticipate the birth of Christ, we reflect on the humble shepherds, "One Who Watches," who played a pivotal role in the Nativity story. The shepherds, often overlooked in society, were chosen by God to receive the angelic announcement of Jesus' birth. Their name, "One Who Watches," speaks volumes about their diligence and faithfulness. They vigilantly protected their flocks by night, embodying the qualities of patience and guardianship. This serves as a reminder that God values the faithful watchfulness and humble service of individuals, no matter their social standing.

As we prepare our hearts for Christmas, let us be inspired by the shepherds' response to the angel's message. They acted with haste, leaving their flocks, to find the newborn Savior. This act of faith and obedience invites us to seek Christ with the same eagerness and devotion. The shepherds' story encourages us to remain watchful in our own spiritual lives, attentive to God's messages and ready to respond with open hearts. In this Advent season, may we embrace our roles as "watchers," remaining vigilant in our faith and eager to witness the miracles God has in store.

Simeon (One Who Hears)

Luke 2:25-35, NRSV

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon] took him in his arms and praised God, saying, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul, too."

One of the most important things I learned during divinity school was the German phrase "*Sitz im Leben*." It roughly translates as "setting in life" and is imperative to biblical criticism. Many who read the Bible during this current setting in life need to learn this phrase themselves. I often find myself whispering "*Sitz im Leben*" over and over when I hear folks say certain ideas or ways are biblical or unbiblical.

When considering the biblical text, we must regard the context of the story at hand, remembering that, not surprisingly, the way things were done over 2,000 years ago in a different part of the world was much different than how we live in the Western world in the year 2024. We must take into account the social, ethnic, and cultural setting of the time and place of each story and text from the Bible, much like one does with any sort of reading material.

So, as you read the text from Luke's gospel today, remember the setting in life. It's always helpful to set yourself in the time and place when reading anything.

When Mary and Joseph took Jesus to the temple and offered a sacrifice, as was customary for the time and place, they encountered Simeon. Simeon's name means "he who listens."

Simeon was a "righteous and devout" Jew and knew the prophecy from the scriptures about the imminent Messiah. Here he was seeing this prophecy realized before his very eyes.

Simeon was overjoyed. Imagine your elation if you had been Simeon!

He says, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." Simeon, upon meeting Jesus, felt that his life was fulfilled. He knew that Jesus would bring the good news of great joy the angels declared.

He also knew that Jesus would challenge the powerful and bring down the mighty. He knew Jesus was not here for comfort and solace alone. He says, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of

many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul, too.”

Now, imagine you were Mary or Joseph, hearing this weighty news declared about your weeks-old baby. How bizarre! How terrifying! How confusing! How unsettling!

Simeon, he who listens, is surely full of wisdom. We often regard the Christmas story and recall the words of the angels who declared, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors! Simeon knew this to be true but he knew there was more to the story for this Christ child and what he would do to transform the world.

Yet, isn't transformation hard and painful work?

Simeon knew not everything that occurred with the coming of Jesus would be joyful and comforting.

As Jesus lived his life, he sought to challenge the status quo. He touched the untouchable. He healed the sick. He went into the cracks of society and lived on the margins. He was rejected. He was killed.

Many of us like to say we are Christ-followers.

But, do we understand the gravity of those words?

- Do we show love to those who suffer in this world?
- Do we show unabashed compassion to those who live on the margins?
- Do we seek justice and equity for EVERYONE?
- Are we patient with others?
- How is our level of self-control?
- Are we living lives of faithfulness to God?
- Are we gentle with others and ourselves?
- Where do we find our joy?
- Are we seeking peace?

Simeon knew what Jesus's birth meant for the world and it was not all easy to hear. It was transformative and transformation is often painful but leads to something quite beautiful in the end. We are living in that beauty today, even though there are so many rough and ragged edges all around us. We must act with love, compassion, justice, patience, self-control, faithfulness, gentleness, joy, and peace.

Put yourself into the story of Jesus. See Jesus through the eyes of Simeon. Consider how Mary felt. See Jesus how those who opposed him saw him. Regard him and his ways and think of how you would have felt about him in that time and place. Seek to live like Jesus.

Remember, *“Sitz im leben.”*

The Fourth Sunday of Advent

Sunday, December 22

Susan Bell

Anna (Grace)

Dr. Luke is succinct in his description of Anna: a prophetess from the tribe of Jacob, who was married 7 years, widowed, and yet lived to greet the Christ Child when she was 84. She worshipped and served God in the temple daily which prepared her to immediately recognize Jesus as the Redemption of Israel. She reminds me of the elderly women I saw in Russian and Greek Orthodox churches. And as I too age, she reminds me that I still have a calling and a purpose.

Anna means “grace” and indeed, God is gracious and merciful. That is what she proclaimed: Jesus is our Redeemer, our Rescuer. He saves us by giving His own life on the cross for our redemption. Anna was a widow but some of us live alone because of divorce or never marrying. Anna teaches us to continually worship and praise God and not let our sorrow, age or loneliness keep us from recognizing His presence. Anna also teaches us about serving, waiting, hoping—even for decades. Let's ask ourselves, “What are we waiting for or hoping for this Christmastide?” May we learn from Anna to live daily in His presence so we too will know Him better, giving thanks for His mercy and grace, and make Him known to others.

Monday, December 23

Drew Mangione

Herod (Hero)

As Christians, the thought of Herod as a “hero” seems repulsive. Yet to some in his day, he was a hero. He was an Edomite, or Idumean, though his ancestors had converted to Judean worship. His father, Antipater the Idumean, had made deals with Julius Caesar and Herod started his career as a type of tax collector in Galilee, rose to tetrarch, and was named King by the Roman Senate. He married a woman of Judean descent for legitimacy and banished his previous wife and child. He cozied up to Mark Antony, and later to Octavian who defeated Antony to become Caesar Augustus. He shows up in the story of Jesus when the Magi come to him wondering where the king was born, and afterward, Herod orders the killing of all children under 2 years old in and around Bethlehem.

Yet, many did consider him a hero. He rebuilt the temple and spent lavishly on many major building projects that helped cement Judean identity even under Roman rule. As a strong client king of Rome, imperial troops did not have to be present as much as they might have been in areas with no loyal local ruler. Herod brought economic and cultural success to many under his rule. Life was good if you didn't cross him and better still, if you were outwardly loyal to him. Herod was not a Davidic King, nor was he even descended from the later Hasmonean dynasty that ruled before him. He also lacked piety, ruled violently, and served Rome's interests. He was unpopular but kept his power because of the material and cultural benefits.

Like the Judeans then, Christians today feel threatened. More and more our faith is doubted in the public square. Many are tempted to make heroes out of those who fight back, seeking power and influence to maintain material and cultural benefits for our faith. However, we must not compromise our beliefs and values to gain power. As we look forward to the birth of the King that Herod tried to kill, let us remember that this baby did not win his throne by waging cultural and military wars. No, he took his throne through self-giving love, first coming as a baby in our flesh and limits, then dying for us on the cross, rising for us, and ascending for us.

Tuesday, December 24

Jim McConnell

Magi (Persian Priest)

In Matthew's gospel, some *Magi* are led to the infant Jesus's side by "his star at its rising" (2:2). We don't know how many *Magi* there were; tradition tells us there were three (think, "We Three Kings") because they brought three gifts to the newborn baby. That they were led to Jesus by the star is no surprise; a *Magus* was a Persian wise man and priest, an expert in astrology and interpreting dreams and signs in nature.

A priest, in Jesus's day and now, is one who mediates between people and a deity, directing people's attention to the divine, that which might not be readily apparent to those who are under their spiritual care. The *Magi* within Matthew's narrative serve as priests for us moderns in multiple ways. First, they were able to interpret the sign of the star and know that God was up to something new. They recognized the importance of this star they had seen in the sky and acted on their spiritual instincts. Second, they understood that this newborn baby was to be "king of the Jews." Despite Jesus's humble birth, the *Magi* knew that this was not any normal child. Third, the *Magi* came "to pay him homage." They serve as an example for us, the first ones to worship Jesus, even though they were not Jews. Fourth, the *Magi* brought expensive gifts to the baby Jesus, discerning that this child deserved to receive gifts of great value.

This Advent, let us allow the *Magi* to be our priests, pointing us to the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. May we follow their example by recognizing that this one whose birth we celebrate at Advent is the true, promised, merciful King, the one worthy of our worship and any gifts we can bring him. May we bring Jesus the most valuable gift of all, the gift of our selves. As Jesus would later tell his disciples, "Those who lose their life for my sake will find it." This Advent, I pray that we will all recognize Jesus as the true source of abundant life, the one worthy of our worship and service.

Wednesday, December 25

Zion Roberts

Jesus (The Lord Saves)

Jesus... That's a name that you call on for any and everything

No matter if you are in prayer or slamming on your breaks, trying not to crash

We may not be having the best day or week or even year,

but for all the good reasons we know his name

Just his name alone saves us from hurt or harm

He saves our lives everyday

When you need something, you call on his name

When you are depressed or anxious you call on his name

When you have a screaming child or an emotional teenager, you call on his name

When dementia isn't being nice and your mother doesn't remember your name,

you call on his name.

He is everything and will forever save us when we need him most

J-E-S-U-S – five simple letters make the name that we forever depend on,

remember those letters and you will forever be saved.