

CHRISTMAS WITH
THE CHOSEN
“HOLY NIGHT”



A CHRISTMAS DEVOTIONAL BASED ON
THE SHEPHERD + THE MESSENGERS

DON'T BE AFRAID (Part 1)

A WORD FOR YOU AS YOU FEEL UNEASY

Does it ever rub you the wrong way when you gather for worship and the gal or the guy at the front of the room pleads with you to “leave your worries at the door”? First of all, it’s impossible to do so. But even more so, **should you?** There’s simply no better context for confronting your worries and fears than in worship. Don’t leave them at the door; lay them out when you enter in to get a better look at them. And do so not only in corporate worship, but also in personal. Which means this very devotional moment that’s unfolding right now is the perfect context to lay out some of those worries and fears that have had you staring up at the ceiling at night when you’d rather be sleeping. So, why not do it? Like, **now**. And hey — please don’t rush this. Because finding a way through your worries and fears just so happens to be what this devotional is all about.

What is it that’s troubling you? What fears have a hold of you these days?

All right. Good. Even if that was a little uncomfortable for you, it makes for the perfect moment for us to revisit what you’ve watched from *The Chosen*, either in watching Holy Night or the two separate Christmas specials (*The Shepherd* and *The Messengers*). *(And please know that this devotional is for you, however you’ve been able to watch the Christmas specials. For this particular devotional, we’re going to focus on just the Messengers side of things. We’ll come back to The Shepherd in the next devotional.)*

Do you remember when you first saw that horse-drawn wagon come into view — the one with the swaying paper lantern and the (seemingly) lone traveler? Were you like us and even right then, you got a pretty marked sense of foreboding? It only worsened, didn’t it, when the traveler approached a village, spied the Roman soldiers from afar, and was immediately slick with sweat? And it certainly didn’t help that the whole scene itself began with a timestamp of “48 A.D”. You don’t have to be much of a church historian at all to wonder if that places things smack dab in the middle of deep persecution of the church. And it isn’t long before you learn that it does. The traveler is actually smuggling in Mary Magdalene to visit Mother Mary — who’s in hiding herself — so that she can offer this chilling report from the frontlines: **“It’s getting more difficult. It’s clear they want us all dead.”** But did you keep your eyes on Mother Mary while Mary Magdalene’s terrifying words filled the room? There was worry at the edges of her eyes and fear at the corners of her lips, but she was startlingly stoic, wasn’t she? **How?**

We'll get to that. We will. But for now, let's talk *you*. You've laid out your own worries, your own fears — as uncomfortable as it was. These next few questions might be even more uncomfortable to think on and to answer, but we're going to ask them just the same. And please don't rush this part either.

How are you responding to the things that are most troubling you right now — those fears that have taken hold of you? (Be relentlessly honest — and be specific.) Have you been able to foster the faith and faithfulness you see in Mother Mary? How?

You know, it's a pretty wonderful creative decision by the makers of *The Chosen* — to weave the story of Mother Mary in 48 A.D. with her story several years before at the birth of Jesus. It's also pretty helpful for purposes of this devotional, because it gives us an answer to our question about how on earth she shows such steadiness in such unsteady times. Which means, of course, that *we have an answer as to how we can do the same*.

Chances are, you probably didn't have a sense of foreboding when you first saw Joseph walking a dusty path alongside Mary, who was atop a lowly donkey. But you should have. *There was nothing safe about their plight:* pressing on as a couple in the wake of a gossip-stirring pregnancy; traveling a great distance to Bethlehem in the unforgiving terrain of the ancient world; trusting there would surely be *somewhere* to give birth once they arrived; having to trust all the more when the only place to give birth was a dung-littered stable; bearing a child who was a direct threat to the power of not only Roman emperors but all powers of the world. At one point Joseph says what any one of us would say: *"This all seems impossible."* But did you keep your eyes on Mother Mary? There was worry at the edges of her eyes and fear at the corners of her lips, but she was startlingly stoic, wasn't she? *Again — how?* Well, do you remember the poem she wrote — the one she was so eager to have Mary Magdalene carry along to Luke to assure it would be included in his gospel account? It'd be good to pause for a moment and read Mother Mary's poem in full.

**Take a moment to read Mother Mary's poem
as it's recorded in Luke 1:45-56.**

Beautiful, isn't it? And hey — it's no small thing that the poem written by Mother Mary to speak to her present circumstances spends half its time revisiting the past movements of God. Did you notice that? Read it again, if you need to — especially from verse 50 to the end. She's clearly looking back on the stories passed along from generation to generation — *stories in which God was faithful again and again (and again)* to bring mercy and pronounced provision to Israel, while also bringing low the powers that set themselves against God and his people. And Mary places her precarious story alongside these stories. She knows she needs to, because her story has only a beginning and a middle, while the ones of old each possess a beginning, a middle, and an **ending**. She doesn't leave her story's worries and fears at the door; in worship she lays them out to have a good look at them and — this is key — to look at them only in light of the stories that have been written in full long before hers. And in doing so, a stoicism settles in and she and Joseph head to Bethlehem. And when all is said and done, lo and behold, *their* story becomes another story with a beginning, a middle, and ending — a story to be passed along when needed, like, say, in 48 A.D. when the early church's story has only a beginning and a middle. *(There's so much more going on, isn't there, when in the midst of telling her own old story, Mother Mary looks Mary Magdalene in the eyes and says, "This is not the end"?)*

Take a moment to re-read Luke 1:50-56. What stories of old do you think are coming to mind for Mother Mary? It's clear that the story of Abraham is coming to mind for her. Why would this story in particular be so precious to Mother Mary and Joseph?

Okay. Let's wrap things up. One of the more winsome moments in *The Messengers* (or *Holy Night*, depending on how you saw *The Chosen* Christmas specials) is when Mary and Joseph compare the messages they received from their respective messengers. They joke about a notable difference, but also make note of a vital similarity: *both messengers told them, "Don't be afraid."*

We're certainly not the first ones to point this out, so perhaps you've heard it before: the most repeated commandment in the Scriptures is *"don't be afraid."* But here's the rub: when we're knee-deep in justified worries and fears, it can be incredibly frustrating for someone to tell us, *"Don't be afraid."* Merely telling us, *"Don't be afraid,"* isn't enough; clearly tell us how *not* to be. And both the story of Mother Mary and her poem itself tell us just that. Actually, to be fair, it's *God* who tells us how not to be afraid; Mother Mary simply listens better than we do and then tries to tell us what she's heard. While the most repeated commandment in the Scriptures is *"don't be afraid,"* another oft-repeated imperative is *"remember."* Remember God. Remember what he has done. Remember the stories of old with their beginnings and middles and endings. *Remember.*

When we're deeply uneasy—wrecked by worries and fears—can it really be that easy?

To simply *remember?* To bring along with us our half-written stories to listen to the stories of old, including Mother Mary's? Can it make trembling knees grow still and bent backs straighten? Well, it did for Mother Mary. *So, one final assignment:*

**What are the stories, both Scriptural and personal,
that you need to remember?**



DON'T BE AFRAID (Part 2)

A WORD FOR YOU AS YOU FEEL UNWORTHY

You know they're gonna have you sing "O Come, All Ye Faithful" at the Christmas Eve service this year. Because they do every year. And why shouldn't they? It's truly one of the greats. But have you ever stopped to think about that old song for a moment? It's an invitation, right? "**O Come.**" But look who's being invited: the *Faithful*. Let's be honest: it would take an *awfully* brave soul to be the first one to step forward in the wake of that invite. And remember: whoever that brave soul is has to come forward all *"joyful and triumphant."* So — what say ye? *You* want to be the first to go forward? (Yeah. Us neither.)

Now, we know why we feel a tad unworthy to approach the one who's in that manger. But we can't speak for you — and we won't. But it strikes us as wise to create some space for you to think on this a bit. In the first devotional, we wanted to talk to you about those moments in which you feel uneasy — the moments when you're wrecked by *worry and fear*. For this second devotional, we want to talk about the moments you feel unworthy — the moments when you're wrecked by *guilt and shame*.

What is it that makes you feel as though you couldn't possibly draw near to Jesus? Something from your past? Something from the present? (And as we've encouraged you before — be relentlessly honest and be specific.)

And we thought we'd asked you to think on some uncomfortable things in the first devotional. The good news is, while we aren't going to entirely move on from what you just spent some time thinking through, *we also aren't going to have you sit and stew on it all*. Because it's time to revisit what you've watched from *The Chosen*, either in streaming the two separate Christmas specials (*The Shepherd* and *The Messengers*) or having watched them together in *Holy Night* in theaters. If you remember, in the first devotional we focused on the *Messengers* side of things. It won't surprise you that for this particular devotional, we want to camp out with *The Shepherd*.

It's a bit heavy when you first catch sight of the young shepherd limping along, because you probably know just enough about the ancient world to know that those marked by any sort of debilitating condition were lapped many times over by the wider world, both physically (*"How can someone with a relatively lifeless limb be of much help?" — so the line of thinking would go*) and spiritually (*"Surely he's done something to deserve such a curse from God" — so a deeper line of thinking would go*). Imagine just how deep his sense of unworthiness ran with regard to the attention and care of anyone, let alone the attention and care of the one — **the Messiah** — who God would send to rescue his people. But then, even without his physical condition, he was already in dire straits because of his profession. At that time shepherds as a whole weren't exactly the first folks you would think of when drawing up party invitations. There's no small amount of scholarly debate about just where shepherds landed on the social ladder, but they all agree the position was low. Shepherds were poor. They were unkempt. Their work often left them unclean, physically **and** spiritually. It's why in the Christmas special from *The Chosen* you saw the women slink away from the well as soon as the shepherds arrived. It's why there was such pronounced side-eyeing from the crowd in the marketplace. And did you hear what the religious leader spit out at the young man and — really — all of his fellow shepherds? ***"People like you are keeping the Messiah away with your stains."***

Of course, it's that sneering word of judgment from the religious leader that makes all that unfolds so enjoyable. It's what makes all that unfolds so **encouraging**.

We know you've already watched it all transpire in the Chosen Christmas special, but take a moment to read the scripture that inspired it all: [Luke 2:1-20](#).

"People like you are keeping the Messiah away with your stains." Oh? Then why were the shepherds the first to be told when he arrived? Such action offers a clear first word from the Messiah via the angels: ***"You didn't keep me away; you drew me closer and closer, and now I'm here because of you."*** Even now we're remembering something else from *The Chosen* Christmas special that you might well recall, too. Remember when the religious leader rejected the young shepherd's lamb with a terse word: ***"This lamb is for righteous men!"*** It appears the lamb is for the **unrighteous**. It's the sort of twist you've come to expect in the story of Jesus: the shepherds' unworthiness — and their humble recognition of their desperate position — ***is what makes them somehow worthy.***

You know, this seems like a good time to bring up a song you probably won't sing at your Christmas Eve service — but maybe should: ***"Come, All Ye Shepherds."*** Hardly anyone knows the old hymn anymore. If it's ever sung, it's usually as a chorale piece. (*And to be fair, it's got a lot of ye's and yon's in it.*) But it's a bonafide Christmas song written for the church. Look it up. ***"Come, all ye shepherds, ye children of earth. Come ye, bring greetings to yon heavenly birth. For Christ the Lord to all men is given, to be our Savior sent down from heaven."***

"To all men is given." Even shepherds. What a reordering of things, right?

Though you spent time with Mary's poem in the first devotional, take some time to revisit Luke 1:45-56, because it really is the centerpiece to both Christmas specials. How does her song — and even her story as a whole — speak to God's love for the seemingly unworthy?

Okay. The time's come to wrap things up. And while this devotional has focused on the *Shepherd* side of things, we want to point back to something from the *Messengers* side of things — something we set apart in the first devotional: ***that winsome moment when Mary and Joseph compare the messages they received from their respective messengers.*** Even as they acknowledge the messages' differences, they acknowledge the word they both were given: ***"Don't be afraid."*** But here's the thing: this message isn't unique to Joseph and Mary. ***The shepherds receive it, too.*** Go on. Look again. Luke 2:10. (*It's why this is actually the entire first verse of "Come, All Ye Shepherds":* ***"Come, all ye shepherds, ye children of earth. Come ye, bring greetings to yon heavenly birth. For Christ the Lord to all men is given, to be our Savior sent down from heaven. Fear ye him not!"***) Yes, yes — the shepherds had to be told to settle down because it's a tad out of the ordinary for a choir of angels to take up residence in the sky. But don't you think they had to be told this for an even greater reason? They were clearly in the presence of God, and it had to feel a tad out of the ordinary — it had to feel ***terrifying*** — for shepherds, of all people, to suddenly be drawn near him. ***But there he was and there they were.***

And now to you. We're clearly identifying ourselves — *and you* — with those shepherds. And this means, among other things, that a particular message ultimately isn't unique to Joseph, Mary, and the shepherds. *You* receive the word, too, even as you weigh your worthiness: ***"Don't be afraid."*** Can we say it again to you? ***"Don't be afraid."*** It's funny: every year a good number of believers draw up battle lines when they're told they shouldn't say ***"Merry Christmas."*** And we get the frustration. But it sure seems like what the world most needs to hear is the deeper Christmas message: ***"Don't be afraid."*** More particularly, ***"Don't be afraid of him."*** This truth is the only reason a Christmas can have much merry-ness at all.

But do you remember what we said in the first devotional? Merely being told, ***"Don't be afraid,"*** isn't enough. In this case, we must clearly be told ***why*** we shouldn't be. Because it's one thing for a shepherd — for us — to be worthy of coming to Jesus once. Are we worthy of welcome after we've found our way back into the sorts of things that seem to make us unworthy all over again? Why shouldn't we ***then*** be afraid? Well, in the first devotional, we spoke of the power of remembering. For this devotional? ***Look ahead.*** When you're done making your way through this reading, maybe take a little extra time to poke around in the gospel accounts and — hey — ***make note of who's welcomed again and again (and again).*** Pay particular attention to the ***disciples.*** Because those fishermen, zealots, and tax collectors really are nothing other than shepherds. And they're welcomed once, only to stumble. A second time — followed by another round of stumbling. A third time before another stumble. ***Countless times.***

"Don't be afraid." We're worthy — you're worthy — of him.

