

# PARTNERSHIP

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## BTS Lectures 2021

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RICH TOWARD GOD, FREELY FOR HIM

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## *Candles of Advent*

This issue of Partnership is a special Christmas bulletin with Advent meditations written by Christian leaders warmly associated with BTS. The contributors are three past BTS presidents, three senior pastors of Baptist churches, and our incumbent president, Rev Peter Lin. We hope that their thoughts will illumine your minds and encourage your hearts as you read each meditation, perhaps one a day, in the week leading up to Christmas.

The tradition of putting up an Advent wreath (or Advent crown) in church four weeks preceding Christmas has been practised by mainstream western churches for more than three centuries. By the nineteenth century, the Advent wreath had taken on regular characteristics. The circular wreath, placed horizontally, was made of leaves from evergreen trees and it symbolised the eternity of God and the eternal life promised to us through Christ. The wreath is usually decorated with four candles of different colours representing the four weeks of Advent. In one popular version of the tradition, the candles also represent four virtues or points of reflection - hope, peace, joy and love.

Our theme for this bulletin is "Candles of Advent." We pray that each meditation in this issue may serve as a 'candle,' lighting your quiet journey little by little this season to the manger where the Saviour of the world lay.

Fong Choon Sam

# A Purposeful Covid-Christmas Journey

Philippians 2:5-8, Hebrews 12:1-2

*Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Phil 2:5-8, ESV)*

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. (Heb 12:1-2, ESV)*

Since Christmas falls within the school holidays, Singaporeans typically travel for different reasons during this holiday. Some go to places they have not been before to experience new sights and sounds or to learn new things. Some return to their place of origin to rediscover their roots. Some go to 'quiet' places to regain vitality and rest. Some go to about anywhere so long as they can bond and rebuild family ties on the way. Since most of us are not travelling this year, let me invite you to travel back to the Bible. We read that the first Christmas was also a season of "purposeful" travels. We see :

Mary travelling from her home to Elizabeth's home to seek comfort (Luke 1).  
the angels traversing the space between heaven and earth to deliver "good news" (Luke 2).

the shepherds trekking from the fields to the inn to satisfy their curiosity (Luke 2).

the Magi journeying from the East to Palestine in search of the king worthy of worship (Matthew 2).

the holy family fleeing Bethlehem to seek safety in Egypt (Matthew 2).

The most significant journey, however, is the journey of Jesus described in Philippians 2 :

He left heaven to be born as a human baby and was placed in an earthly manger ('he emptied himself,' v.7).

He gave up omnipresence (being everywhere) to be bound by the human form ('being born in likeness of man,' v.7).

He went from being a king to taking 'the form a servant' (v. 7).

He surrendered his immortality to face death, 'even death on a cross'(v. 8).

We all know that journey well. Jesus did it out of obedience, but perhaps the most surprising part of that journey was his attitude. Hebrews in 12:2 calls us to consider Jesus, " who for the *joy* that was set before him endured the cross" (Italics mine). Jesus did not make this sacrificial journey grudgingly (why me?). Neither did he make it with resigned contentment (this is my lot). He made it with JOY.

In this Covid-Christmas season when we are locked in and uncertain about the future, what is our attitude? Are we grumbling, contented, anxious or fearful? The Christ of Christmas teaches us how to face this season with JOY. This is not the fleeting happiness of the secular Christmas season but a steadfast joy that remains in the face of adversity.

The Christmas story gives us a key to joy – availability. Mary surrendered herself to be a vessel for God's purposes. Joseph yielded his reputation to God. The Magi availed themselves to make the long and perilous journey. The shepherds became willing bearers of good news. And of course, Jesus gave himself so that we can come back to Him.

As we make ourselves available to God, we will be able to see others and how we can be of help to them. And we will be able to start a purposeful and joyful journey in the middle of a travel-banned Covid-Christmas.

Peter Lin

## To Reflect On

Since I cannot physically travel, what other journeys can I enjoy with Christ this Covid-Christmas season?



joy

# Why Does Advent Matter?

John 1:1-18

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it... The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. (Jn1:1-5, 9-13, ESV)*

Anyone who reads the Gospel of John would readily agree that this book is thoroughly Jewish, with references to three Passovers, two Sabbaths, the Tabernacle, Hanukkah, and of course many Jewish terms and rituals. Reading about them, one might wonder, "What are these to me? Why should this Gospel concern me at all?" It is like telling friends from the western world stories about the Mid-Autumn Festival, the Dragon Boat Festival, and so forth. Why should a person born two thousand years ago matter to us?

I think this is why the Prologue (John 1:1-18) is so important. It tells us how to read and listen to this Gospel. It is important because it challenges our understanding of the world with a story that is written for us and not just for the Jewish people. That is why the story begins the way it does. It begins not with a people or a place in time but before time even began! Its message touches every culture and, indeed, everything in creation.

People of different cultures have tried to make sense of it. Jewish Christians viewed the Prologue from the lens of the creation story in Genesis or 'wisdom' in the Book of Proverbs. The Greeks understood the Word as the 'Logos'. Likewise, a Chinese person might think of 'Dao' upon reading this passage.

To many of us, Logos, Wisdom, or Dao are all too philosophical and abstract. People today may be more concerned with things of a more personal nature – their future hopes, the economic crises, or unfulfilled dreams. They are more concerned with personal things like living in an ordered society, seeing beauty in our surroundings, and owning a condominium, rather than with the cosmic struggle between light and darkness. However, it is into such personal concerns that the light of the Gospel of John shines.

I recently reread Helen Keller's autobiography. Keller lost her sight, speech, and hearing due to an illness when she was one and a half years old. Living in darkness, she could not connect with others and not even with herself. She desperately needed a light amid the darkness. Because of her teacher's love, patience, and inspiration, Keller was able to feel and see the warm glow of the 'word' of life. She described that exodus experience out of the darkness as her coming to the light of Mount Sinai. Keller later became an educator and an inspiration to many. She was a light witnessing to the true Light of Christ.

We may not be like Helen Keller who lived in literal darkness, but John's Prologue shows us that ordinary people live in a virtual night filled with hurts and evil, and like Helen, they can still experience the Light.

At Advent, we traditionally light the Christmas candles to symbolise God's light shining into the darkness. This Christmas as we light the candles of Advent again, let us pray, "May His Light shine in this world. May we shine as little candles and become witnesses to the True Light."

Sun Poling  
light

## **To Reflect On**

If the light of God has come into the world, is it shining in me to reveal what was previously in the dark? And am I living in that light?

# *The Prince of Peace*

Micah 5:2-5

*But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,  
who are too little to be among the clans of Judah,  
from you shall come forth for me  
one who is to be ruler in Israel,  
whose coming forth is from of old,  
from ancient days.  
Therefore he shall give them up until the time  
when she who is in labor has given birth;  
then the rest of his brothers shall return  
to the people of Israel.  
And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord,  
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.  
And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great  
to the ends of the earth.  
And he shall be their peace. (ESV)*

Micah 5:2-5a is well-known Messianic prophecy. Like Isaiah, Micah was the prophet of the southern kingdom of Judah in the eighth century BC. From outward appearances Judah seemed prosperous and stable, but just under the surface it seethed with numerous crises. King Hezekiah's religious reform did not completely turn back the chaos in the southern kingdom. The tide of paganism continued to rise just as before, ruining the relationship between Judah and the LORD. Full of anxiety and discord, relationships among the people were breaking down due to the disparity of wealth between rich and poor and an overall lack of righteousness.

Under these conditions, Micah not only announced the coming both of the end and of a new kingdom, but also predicted that the king of this new kingdom would come from Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). Reading verse 4 carefully, we see that the kingdom Micah predicted would have several characteristics. First, in this kingdom the king is both ruler and shepherd; he "stands" and "shepherds" (Micah 5:2, 4). In other words, in this kingdom the king has the responsibility of shepherding, such that people "dwell secure." Here, people can dwell secure not just because of strong leadership, but also because they are shepherded and watched over. Later the prophet tells us that this will be a peaceful kingdom that reveres the Messiah and stretches "to the ends of the earth."

# peace

Micah predicted the coming of Jesus Christ. In Jesus we see all the characteristics of the Messiah declared by Micah. Jesus is our great shepherd (John 10:11). He sent his disciples to be his witnesses "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). After Jesus ascended to heaven, the Holy Spirit established a new community, a community that reveres Jesus Christ and will bravely bear witness to Christ to the ends of the earth. Therefore, as we remember the birth of Jesus, let the words of the prophet remind us anew that Jesus Christ whom we follow is "our peace" (Micah 5:5, 9:6). Let us also remember that the church is composed of those who are willing for Jesus to shepherd them, those who revere Jesus Christ. The mission of the church is to spread the gospel of peace to the ends of the earth.

Lim Teck Peng

Translated by Scott Callaham

## ***To Reflect On***

In an age full of anxiety and discord, how can the church more clearly and consistently bear witness to the world that Jesus Christ is the true king and shepherd of peace?

# Christmas: A Time of Waiting

Matthew 1:1-17, Galatians 4:4

*So all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations, and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ fourteen generations. (Mt 1:17, ESV)*

*But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law... (Gal 4:4, ESV)*

Waiting seems to be the all-consuming challenge for each child during the Christmas season. Christmas Eve is the longest night of the year. Yet Christmas reminds Christians that all humanity eagerly awaited centuries for the arrival of the Messiah. The one passage that captures the extent and intent of waiting for the coming of the Messiah is the genealogy of Jesus clearly depicted in Matthew 1:1-17. Matthew began his genealogy with this simple statement, "The record of the genealogy of Jesus, the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham." Matthew's target audience were Jewish Christians, who readily connected the royal Messiah with King David and the Messianic blessings to the nations with Abraham. Matthew divided his genealogy into three equal periods of waiting.

The first waiting period is the "Period of Faith" which began with Abraham and concluded with David. All fourteen persons included in this section of the genealogy had some connection with faith, eagerly anticipating the coming of Christ. Abraham's faith in God to deliver the promised child of Isaac established the spiritual template of faith for the next thirteen generations. Just as Abraham had to wait twenty-five years for his son to arrive, Jacob had to wait and work a total of fourteen years for his wife, Rachel. Finally, King David could not ascend to the throne without a prolonged period of testing and trials but faithfully waited for God's timing.

The second period of waiting is the "Period of Kingship" which started with King David and concluded with Jeconiah. During David's rule, God explicitly provided the Messianic promise that the Davidic Kingdom would be established forever. During his kingship, Israel reached its peak in both power and influence, but also plummeted to its lowest point with the destruction of Jerusalem.

The final period is the "Period of Captivity" which began with Shealtiel and concluded with Joseph. This was the darkest of all days, both a time of deportation and destruction. Israel sank into obscurity under foreign rule, having no temple nor sacrifice. Yet the one beam of light that shone the brightest in this overwhelming darkness was the birth of the Light of the World.

Paul reminds us that "in the fullness of times, God sent forth His Son, born of a virgin" (Gal. 4:4). Each stage represented a different expression of waiting. The first stage of faith needed an object of faith. The second stage of kingship needed an eternal King. The final stage of captivity needed a Deliverer. With the perfect timing of the arrival of the Messiah, humanity received all three and more. What are you waiting for this Christmas?

Rodney Woo

## **To Reflect On**

The Messiah has come. How does this speak to my deepest spiritual longing in this season of my life?

# waiting



# The Gift of Bethlehem

Luke 2:1-5

*Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. And everyone was on his way to register for the census, each to his own city. Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, in order to register along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child. (NASB)*

Bethlehem (House of Bread), what a quiet little town, located a few kilometres away from the bustling city of Jerusalem, yet a census brought the holy family to Bethlehem so that the Saviour may be born there. In the Bible, Bethlehem began to take on significance in the book of Ruth. The book begins with Bethlehem, the house of bread, having no bread. This is a literary device signalling that something was amiss in the city. Yet when the book ends, there is a promise of restoration and a sense of hope. Ruth, a Moabitess, is revealed as the great grandmother of King David of Bethlehem.

In Micah 5:2, Bethlehem takes on an even greater significance, a prophetic one. A king and liberator would come from her: "But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days" (NASB). No one would have imagined how unspectacular its fulfilment would be, as described in Luke 2. But we can now see that the Bread of Life had been born to the House of Bread.

As we read Luke's account during the season of Advent, we realise it is not a throw-away story. God moved heaven and earth to fulfil the prophecy of Bethlehem. It is a story which began with a lowly and despised Moabitess, and ended with a lowly and despised Saviour who came to save the lowly and despised. Whoever you are, however undeserving you feel, whatever the hunger in your soul, the gift of Christmas is for you! You can come to the Bread of Life, Jesus Christ, who will satisfy your deepest hunger and give you life that is truly life. Blessed Christmas!

Isaac Teng

## **To Reflect On**

Is there bread in my house? How hungry am I for life that is truly life?

hunger

for

God



# Joseph Remembers (A Monologue)

Matthew 1:18-25, Luke 2:41-52

*Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream...  
(Mt 1:18-20, ESV)*

*And when the feast was ended, as they were returning, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents did not know it, but supposing him to be in the group they went a day's journey, but then they began to search for him among their relatives and acquaintances, and when they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem, searching for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. (Lk 2:43-47, ESV)*

thankfulness

Mary and I have been married for 12 years now. My oldest son—I mean, God's son—Jesus, is almost twelve years old. As I think back, my memories are still vivid and unforgettable to this day.

Around thirteen years ago, I heard from a neighbour that my fiancée Mary had become pregnant! I couldn't believe my ears. All my impressions of her purity and goodness faded away. She and I had not yet come together. How could this be? How shameful! I thought I would quietly cancel our engagement to avoid causing her even more suffering.

Yet that night, an angel told me the whole truth, and it turned out that everything was according to God's plan. My beautiful fiancée was willing to cooperate with God's plan and endure people's disapproving looks. How moving! How admirable! So I immediately and unhesitatingly married her, so that the child could bear the identity "Son of David" and bring the fulfilment God promised for the Davidic covenant.

Everything has gone smoothly and Jesus has grown up. One of my deepest impressions was from that year when we went to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. I had observed before that young Jesus's spiritual maturity was unmatched among his peers. Then as we were on the road home, we discovered that Jesus was not with us, so we immediately went back to look for him. After three days, we found him in the Temple discussing Scripture with the rabbis.

My anxious wife immediately pulled Jesus to the side and rebuked him: "Why didn't you say anything? We need to go home!" Unexpectedly Jesus answered, "Didn't you know that I had to be in my father's house?" Even though we did not understand his meaning at the time, I knew how much Jesus thought about our Heavenly Father! (John 2:16-17)

Tomorrow we will celebrate Jesus's twelfth birthday. The age of twelve is when he can bear responsibility under the law. Yet I know that the responsibility Jesus bears is not this alone, for I remember what the angel said to me. He will save his people from their sin.

So now, late at night, as I watch Jesus sleeping soundly, I know that God's plan will soon come to fruition. I offer my heartfelt thanks. What an ordinary family, but yet what extraordinary grace and salvation has come to us! Time for sleep. Good night!

Daniel Wu

Translated by Scott Callaham

## **To Reflect On**

How long have I been living with the Chosen One of God who changed the course of the world and my own life? In what ways can I express my thankfulness?

# The Coming Calm

Isaiah 2:2-5

*It shall come to pass in the latter days  
that the mountain of the house of the LORD  
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,  
and shall be lifted up above the hills;  
and all the nations shall flow to it,  
and many peoples shall come, and say:  
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,  
to the house of the God of Jacob,  
that he may teach us his ways  
and that we may walk in his paths."  
For out of Zion shall go forth the law,  
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.  
He shall judge between the nations,  
and shall decide disputes for many peoples;  
and they shall beat their swords into plowshares,  
and their spears into pruning hooks;  
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,  
neither shall they learn war anymore.  
O house of Jacob, come, let us walk  
in the light of the LORD. (ESV)*

In recent months I've found the ever-encroaching brokenness of our world unavoidable. I can't watch the news or scroll through social media posts without exposing my heart to conflict, injustice and the inconsolable grief that is too common in our current human condition. Nations are fighting other nations, genocide and injustice are endemic, and well over a million people have died in a pandemic that continues to confound medical experts and crush global economies. In the middle of this present darkness, only one thing seems obvious: Things are not as they ought to be!

In this challenging year, the season of Advent breaks into our fallen world, bringing fresh hope of a better, coming reality. It reorients our hearts to the biblical reality that our current condition has already been healed by the completed work of Christ and one coming day, this work will be fully realised. This Advent hope can turn our hearts from dark despair to a calm and expectant hope!

Nine centuries ago, the Prophet Isaiah proclaimed this hope to Israel, and like him, we too can look forward to the day when God Himself settles all disputes, heals all division and when all the horrific instruments of war are recycled. In that day, the Light of life will dispose of all darkness and the nations of the world will bow before the Prince of Peace.

Several years ago, I was waiting to board a flight at the Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport in Atlanta, Georgia, which in the days before COVID-19, was the busiest airport in the world. The boarding area was chaotic. People were talking loudly to be heard over the din. In addition to constant boarding and security announcements, there was construction going on. And sitting directly opposite to me was a young mother with her small child. There was a sudden crash from a piece of falling scaffolding, startling the child who then immediately burst into tears. The mother quickly scooped up her child and held him close. Within minutes that child was fast asleep, softly breathing to the rhythm of his mother's heartbeat. Nothing else had changed in that chaotic hall, except the position of that child. He was secure in the calm embrace of his mother.

In the day when Advent calm is fully realised, all nations will know how to walk in the light of life and will find deep rest in Him. But today—even amidst the ever-encroaching darkness—believers are called to bear testimony of our confidence in the coming calm by walking each day secure in the embrace of our loving Father. Let us all, as we wait for the coming calm, respond to the call of Isaiah and "walk in the light of the LORD!"

Ian Buntain

## **To Reflect On**

Is there someone I know, who may be struggling with the encroaching brokenness of life? What are some ways that I could point them to the hopeful calm of Advent this week?

hope



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*Coming up.....*

**BTS Lectures 2021**

# **From Being to Serving:** *Growing Spiritually through the Pandemic*



*Spiritual Renewal in a Storm*

**Rev Dr Tan Siang Yang**

Senior Pastor

*1st Evangelical Church Glendale*

Professor of Psychology

*Fuller Theological Seminary*

*Spiritual Impact in a Storm*

**Dr Christopher Hall**

Distinguished Professor Emeritus

*Eastern University*

President of Renovaré

*Founded by Richard Foster*



**Date: 6 March 2021, Saturday**

**Time: 9am-11.15am**

**The lecture details will be announced at a later date.**

**For enquiries, please email Irene Chia at [btscomms@bts.org.sg](mailto:btscomms@bts.org.sg)**