

Advent Theme for Week Four: JOY, Awareness of Immanuel

Three levels of positive “feelings” are available to us humans:

- ❏ *pleasurable experiences*, like singing a Christmas carol or eating Christmas chocolates... pleasant but fleeting moments
- ❏ *enjoyable activities*, like playing a game with friends or family, helping other people, caroling at the hospital or prison, or being with those we love... great but lasting only for a while
- ❏ *joyful states*, like trusting the Savior, introducing him to others or affirming his loving presence... enduring delight, even under hostile circumstances

Joy, the deepest level, is the most satisfying because in our heart of hearts we especially long for our Creator. We each have a God-shaped vacuum inside of each of us that only the Creator can fill. As Augustine wisely stated in a prayer at the beginning of his famous *Confessions*: “Our hearts are restless until they find rest in you, O Lord.”

The Divine presence not only gives us Joy, but also transforms everything. For example, the Lord Jesus is present in us and in his creation, and so he takes seriously how we treat his work. If we say we love God and desire his presence, but trash his creation, we are behaving very foolishly. How can we experience deep Joy in the Lord Jesus, and thrill at the celebration of his birth, and still ignore the needs of the world he created? The Lord Jesus is present in his creation, and he takes personally how we respect and care for it.

This is the point of the name “*Immanuel*,” which literally means “God with us.” God the Father transcends above us, God the Spirit seeks to fill us with his wisdom and power, and God the Son is Immanuel, God with us in the flesh and in his creation. Christmas is the celebration of the fullest historic expression of Immanuel, the Divine presence in Jesus. *Joy to the world, the Lord has come!*

In these concluding eight meditations, we will explore different aspects of Joy and the interdependence of that Joy and our Creator-Awareness—the vibrant consciousness of Immanuel, who is the Creator’s presence in us and within his creation.

- ❏ Psalm 139 = The Presence Before Christmas
- ❏ Isaiah 7:1-14 = Miracle Immanuel
- ❏ Luke 2:1-20 = ‘Stable’ Thinking
- ❏ Matthew 2:1-11 = Marvelous Magi
- ❏ John 1:1-14 = Word Becomes Flesh
- ❏ John 14:1-10 = The New Life = the Life
- ❏ I Corinthians 6:12-20 = The Body-Temple
- ❏ Colossians 1:11-20 = Celebrating the Cosmic Glue

Creator-awareness in Word, wonder and work

Meditation #23: The Presence Before Christmas

What does it say?

STUDY: Psalm 139

GOLDEN TEXT: Psalm 139:13 and 14 = *It was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.*

What does it mean?

Even before the first Christmas, the Lord knew “a thing or two” about the joy in birthing. Psalm 139 is an especially powerful statement of the Creator’s wonderful works and constant presence with us—in birth, life and in death. The utterly complex, splendid formation of each of us in our mothers’ wombs is certainly a prime example of the marvel of creation—and the powerful presence of the Creator. His presence is also an objective and firm motivation for loving and caring for other people of any age—and altering any behavior that may make their surroundings unhealthy and dangerous. The joy of the Lord’s presence guides us do helpful and healthful things that benefit other people’s environments.

1. In this Psalm, does the presence of the Creator everywhere motivate us to engage his living presence? How can we become more attuned to the *wonder* of the Creator and his world?
2. Does the Lord’s presence throughout the creation motivate us to do what is right? Does the Creator’s presence empower us to “improve and protect” his world?
3. Why is our individual development as human beings a special focus of the psalmist’s divine marvel? How can we best express our sincere wonder at God’s work?
4. Please read the prayer in the last two verses of Psalm 139. Will God search us, whether we ask him to or not? What is the “way everlasting”? Does that start now or only after death? Does that “way everlasting” value all that the Creator made?

What are we going to do about it?

5. “Only God can make a tree,” the poet Kilmer once wrote, when he wished he could write a poem “as lovely as a tree.” How does our awe and wonder at the Creator’s splendid “works of natural art” motivate action for protecting babies, other people, as well as trees and other living things?
6. Are you awed at the marvel of your own spirit, mind, soul and body? Do you extend that awe to the spirits, minds, souls, and bodies of other people? Does this awe lead you to have respect for your health and the good health and environments of other people?
7. Read Psalm 139 aloud the next time you go to the park or take a walk in the woods or along the shore. Does reading Psalm 139 heighten your senses? Do you see the created things with more love? Does taking someone with you deepen the experience?

Truth To Celebrate: “God-is-with-us,” *Immanuel*, is a relentless truth—an absolute universal constant—that we can celebrate especially at Christmas.

Advent-Action: Recycle plastics, metal and paper—as well as used clothing, computers, cars, eyeglasses and cell-phones for those in need. Be creative, and you yourself will be energized.

Meditation #24: Miracle Immanuel

What does it say? –

STUDY: Isaiah 7:1-14

GOLDEN TEXT: Isaiah 7:13 and 14 = *Then Isaiah said, "Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of men? Will you try the patience of my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.*

What does it mean?

For numerous reasons, a Godly leader's patience—and God's patience—could certainly be tried hourly by the failures of billions of people all over the earth. What Isaiah claimed in his day (verse 13) still applies today. How does the Creator respond? He gives us a miracle "sign" that he is with us, pouring out his life, grace and personal presence for us. That sign was something that happened only once, starting nine months before Christmas: *The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.* Angels speaking individually with Mary and with Joseph made direct connections between Isaiah 7:14 and the special birth of Jesus. (See Luke 1:26-38 and Matthew 1:20-25.) The Creator is able to create new life, giving us a fresh start.

1. Do we ever try God's patience? How? Do we ever honor and please him? How? Does he care how we treat his creation? How much does it matter to him?
2. Why did the Creator choose a *very fresh start* with the virgin birth for the Infant of Christmas? Was it important that no man was involved? (See also John 1:12 and 13)
3. Can the Creator create new life when he chooses? Can he design and create an embryo inside Mary without a human father?
4. Is naming the special Child "*Immanuel*" (God with us) a powerful affirmation of the Creator's choice to be present in his creation? When is the Creator with us?

What are we going to do about it?

5. Should we say that God "was the Creator" or that he "*is the Creator*"? Are we, his images, ever also his co-creators? What is his ongoing work for the creation? What is ours?
6. Is the Creator "*Immanuel*" still with us? How is his presence felt or affirmed in your life? If he can design and create a new humanity inside Mary, can he give us fresh starts? Can he add the true Christmas joy of knowing his wonderful presence?
7. Is the repeated use of Isaiah 7:14 by the Christmas angels a way of giving an especially strong emphasis to the message? Is "*God with us*" this Green Advent?

Truth To Celebrate: Already centuries before the first Christmas, the Creator revealed to his prophet Isaiah his unique sign: a miracle creating new life, a new humanity within a young virgin.

Advent-Action: Make house-cleaning even more special this Christmas. Use all-natural and safe cleaning products for a healthier environment in the home and everywhere else—as our actions affect people at home and even thousands of miles away.

Meditation #25: ‘Stable’ Thinking

What does it say? –

STUDY: Luke 2:1-20

GOLDEN TEXT: Luke 2:11 and 12 = *To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.*

What does it mean?

For the first Christmas, Jesus began his earthly life housed in a stable with a few animals, as well as Mary and Joseph. The Almighty Lord of the universe could have selected any place, and it was not mere coincidence that there was no room at the inn. *The Creator does advance-planning.*

1. Do you think that the stable owner cleaned things up especially for Mary, Joseph and Jesus? What was the stable like? How did it look, smell, feel, sound?
2. Why was it an extraordinary sign that the Christmas Infant was born in a stable? How does Jesus’ ministry improve the lives of animals as well as people?
3. Would the humble shepherds have been more comfortable visiting the stable to greet the Infant than if he were born in a fancy inn? Could Jesus have been born in a place where poor shepherds—and animals—were not welcomed?
4. Did other people overhear the angel of the Lord speaking to the shepherds? Did others hear the multitude of angles praising God? Was the message of God-with-the-goats—the-Lord-with-the-lambs—just too weird to be believed? How did the shepherds believe?

What are we going to do about it?

5. Does the Lord see the stable animals as mere economic units, or does he recognize them as his splendid creations? Should we respect animals, not just as pets or food?
6. When does care for the animals matter to God? What would you say to someone whose behavior unnecessarily endangered some of these splendid creations?
7. Why did two of the most effective leaders of all time—Moses and David—spend years as unnoticed shepherds? What did they learn from the sheep, the rest of creation and the Creator those days and nights in the pastures? Are we non-shepherds missing something?

Truth To Celebrate: The first Christmas was celebrated in very humble circumstances where creation was well represented: people and animals greeted the Infant Savior.

Advent-Action: Creation-care is for humans first, and then for the animals. Do the birds or other animals in your neighborhood need some creation-care at this time of year? Some birds will even sing for food. Consider also volunteering your time at a pet shelter.

Meditation #26: Marvelous MAGI

What does it say? –

STUDY Matthew 2:1-11.

GOLDEN TEXT: Matthew 2:1 and 2 = *After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."*

What does it mean?

We do not know how much Bible knowledge these wise Magi had that first Christmas. Nevertheless, they set a stunning example in their ability to respect, understand, and respond to what they “read” from a revealing part of the “book of nature”—the other book that the Lord gave to all of us. *It is with Divine irony* that to these highly *literate* leaders, God chose to announce the birth of the Lord Jesus through his non-verbal creation, a special star, while to the *earthy* shepherds the angels spoke in clear words (Luke 2).

1. Why does the Lord draw us beyond our “comfort zone”? Could we as readers benefit by “reading” non-verbal creation more attentively—as the Magi did?
2. Have you ever been “moved”—moved to new ideas, emotions, actions, or even an extended pilgrimage—because of some marvel in nature? What phenomena of the creation have already affected your behavior?
3. How much did the Magi need to know to interpret the astral marvel they saw? Did they understand that the infinite Creator became “God with us” as an infant?
4. Thousands of other people must have looked up at the stars during that time of the Lord Jesus’ birth. How many even noticed the special star? Does the Lord want us to pay better attention to his creation?

What are we going to do about it?

5. Does the Creator speak in the “ordinary” events and phenomena—such as the myriads of stars, flowers, sunsets, birds singing, squirrels playing, and such like? What does he say? How can we read his messages better?
6. Have you heard from the Lord in an extraordinary moment? An answered prayer? An amazing “coincidence”? A significant dream? A distinctive feeling? What did you learn?
7. Should we pay better attention to the “ordinary” and “extraordinary” events in our experiences? Why not keep a journal of such events? *Like the famous Magi who came to worship the Baby Jesus, the more we pay attention, the more we may notice.*

Truth To Celebrate: Whenever we pay great and humble attention to God’s creation, we will experience his awesome presence more fully.

Advent-Action: Loosely store food in the refrigerator, so that the cool air can circulate around the food and keep the food longer and fresher. Treat all good food for what it is: a gift from the Creator. “Waste not,” and you and others will more likely “want not,” as the old saying goes.

Meditation #27: WORD Becomes Flesh

What does it say?

STUDY: John 1:1-14

GOLDEN TEXT: John 1:14 = *And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.*

What does it mean?

Other than at Christmas, no religious teaching crosses this line—the broad line between the natural and the supernatural. The Hindu “avatars” are claimed as brief appearances of the divine, but not real human flesh. Islam directly denies that anyone can be both God and human. Taoism focuses on nature, but denies the supernatural altogether. Buddhism, Confucianism and secular humanism generally avoid the Creator. *Only through the Bible* do we learn of the One who was all human and all divine—fully natural and fully supernatural—at the same time. Although to us this may seem contradictory, from the Biblical point of view this momentous event is not impossible. On the one hand, nature itself is not a denial of the supernatural, because nature thoroughly depends on the Creator, and is full of his power and presence. On the other hand, the supernatural does not deny nature; instead the Creator designs, creates, and uses all of nature for his purposes and glory. A God this big can engage nature in ways no one else could even consider.

1. When the Creator chooses to be born and “live among us,” how does that transform the “neighborhood”? How should we honor his continuing presence on earth?
2. Of all the names for the Creator, why call him “the Word”? Is Jesus the “first Word” about life? Is he the “last Word,” too? Does the Word make things happen?
3. The verb “*became*” is a very strong word. Why did the Creator suspend standard religious and rational expectations? What would our lives be like if the Word had not become flesh?
4. What is the extra benefit of the Creator living, teaching, suffering, overcoming and communicating in human flesh for a whole life, his thirty-three years? Could any other divine communication be so “full of grace and truth”? Does the Christmas event teach the value of a human life?

What are we going to do about it?

5. Since the Word became flesh as a fertilized human egg developing in Mary, could there be any barriers to his coming into our lives? Do our bodies or behavior provide any limits to his presence, purpose and power? Are we eager to welcome him? (See Luke 1:38.)
6. Does the Word still live “among us”? Does the Word live as one of us? Will he stand with us in facing all our issues, including the ecological issues—and helping resolve them?
7. In the Gospel records, what happened when Jesus showed up at places of need or crisis? What if we brought Jesus along to our environmental discussions? Could he help us get perspective? Create solutions? Commit to action?

Truth To Celebrate: *In the greatest and truest story ever told, the Creator loves his creation so much that he chooses to dwell in it himself.*

Advent-Action: *Use free natural light by opening the window blinds at or after sunrise—more on the sunny side of your building on cool days, and more on the shady side on hot days. Honor the Creator by increasing use of his free direct energy for light and temperature control.*

Meditation #28: The New Life = the Life

What does it say?

STUDY: John 14:1-10

GOLDEN TEXT: John 14:6 = *Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."*

What does it mean?

Years after the first Christmas, Jesus is alerting his followers to his imminent departure. He puts it in terms of preparing the eternal place, and he engages their minds and curiosity by saying that they "know the way." When Thomas—already a doubting Thomas—questions whether they really know the way, Jesus responds that he, Jesus himself, is the way—as well as "the truth and the life." The birth we celebrate at Christmas is "the life" himself.

1. In what ways is the Christmas Infant "the life"? How many ways can you list—and share with others? How can we remember this "fact of life" at Christmas time?
2. One of the reasons he is the *only way* to "come to the Father" is that, as he already claimed, "I am in the Father and the Father is in me" (John 10:38). What does this mean? Do we divide the Son and the Father too much?
3. Being "the life," how is Jesus related to the life of the creation? What do we learn about the creation by watching Jesus' birth and life? What do we learn about Jesus by watching birth and life in the creation?
4. What do we learn from Jesus becoming "the way" and "the truth" along with "the life"? Is Creator-awareness part of our "way" of life? Is Creator-awareness part of the "truth" in our lives? How else are the way, the truth, and the life interrelated?

What are we going to do about it?

5. Does "the life" include your life? From whom did your life come? Where is your life going? Does your life respect other life? Including other people's lives? Including animals' lives? Plant lives? Including what helps sustain these—water, air, soil?
6. If it is "the life" himself (alias: "the Lord Jesus") we are truly attending to in "Creator-awareness," should we do it better? If we were more attentive to "the life" of the creation, would we love Jesus more?
7. The Lord's presence as *life himself* is a consistent teaching of Scripture. For example, he is the "breath of life" in Genesis 2:7, the I AM of Exodus 3:14 and John 8:58, and the "bread of life" of John 6:48-51. Could these truths be taught better? How could we help develop a culture committed to Creator-awareness?

Truth To Celebrate: *It always matters that we do things that protect human life—whether that life is close by or on another continent. Any life we benefit and protect also belongs to another image of God and to our Creator-Savior.*

Advent-Action: *Use timers on indoor and outdoor lighting to help reduce the minutes of electricity use according to your needs—and to protect creation for others and yourself.*

Meditation #29: The Body-Temple

What does it say?

STUDY: I Corinthians 6:12-20

GOLDEN TEXT: I Corinthians 6:19 and 20 = *Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.*

What does it mean?

Nine months before the first Christmas, the Holy Spirit miraculously conceived Jesus' embryo and attached him inside Mary's womb. In the context of I Corinthians 6, the Apostle Paul reminds us that all of our bodies are temples of the same Holy Spirit. He is concerned about moral pollution and the need for sexual holiness and wholeness. The general truth is two-fold: *First*, the Holy Spirit lives within us, and as good hosts we should make his dwelling clean and healthful. *Second*, none of us operates in a bubble, so that all our relationships and environments impact the "place" where the Spirit dwells. In short, decisions and environments matter to the Holy Spirit—and therefore should matter deeply to us. Some people refer to the entire creation as "God's Temple," and so it is. Individually, each of our bodies is his temple, too.

1. Does it matter that we take good care of the creation and our bodies—places where the Holy Spirit dwells? Who is affected?
2. Why did the Holy Spirit start the new humanity in Mary's womb? Why not start completely fresh? Why does he dwell in our bodies? What does he seek to accomplish?
3. How does the health of the rest of the creation impact the health of our bodies, the Spirit's temples? Can you mention five or more ways? Do these ways matter to the Holy Spirit, alive within his body-temples?
4. Is the Spirit within us the same as the Spirit that moved in the beginning, prior to the original steps of creation (Genesis 1:2)? Is he the same Holy Spirit who initiated the new life in the womb of Mary? What are the purposes of the Spirit's presence?

What are we going to do about it?

5. How should we honor the Holy Spirit, the source of Jesus' life, this Christmas? Is the way we treat our bodies—and the creation around us—the way we treat the Holy Spirit who lives in our body-temples? Can you mention four ways we can treat the Holy Spirit better?
6. Should there be worship where the Spirit is present? Do you say a prayer every time you eat? Do you sing a hymn or spiritual song as you walk down the street? Are there CDs or tapes of Bible-readings and praise songs in your car? What else honors the Spirit in our body-temples?
7. Where do you sense the Spirit's presence and power the most—at home, on a busy street, in a park, at church, with friends at a restaurant? Or all these places? Will you take time this week in one of those places to renew your commitments to the Holy Spirit?

Truth To Celebrate: The same Holy Spirit that worked a timeless miracle inside Mary's body, starting nine months before the first Christmas, desires to dwell in our bodies as well.

Advent-Action: Keep the Spirit's body-temple in good shape—and save energy and reduce CO2 at the same time—by walking or biking more to get to Church, school, visiting friends or family, work, shopping, and such like. Give the car a rest... and give the environment a break.

Meditation #30: Celebrating the Cosmic Glue

What does it say? –

STUDY: Colossians 1:11-20

GOLDEN TEXT: Colossians 1:16-17 = *For in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers; all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.*

What does it mean?

For too long, contemporary culture, and scientific/technological pursuits, have denatured nature, treating animals and plants—and the Lord’s earth itself—as simply *things, objects*, mere measurable *commodities*. Tragically, otherwise Godly people, who should know better, have adopted this *secularizing* perspective. However, earth is our home, plants and animals are fellow creatures of God, and the Lord Jesus Christ is the *Cosmic Glue* that holds it all together—and gives creation its meaning and purpose. We have heard of the “unified field theory.” In a deeper sense there is a “*unified person theory*.” The way we treat his world is how we are treating Jesus, because he is the *Cosmic Glue*. What we do in his creation definitely matters to him, because he is always there holding it all together. Christmas is the special day we celebrate his birth on earth, while his cosmic work was initiated long before, from the earliest moment of creation.

1. As you meditate on the Lord Jesus Christ as the *Cosmic Glue* who holds it all together, look outside. Do things look different now? Can you hold that awareness together?
2. Now look around you in the place you are in. Do things look different? Can you hold that awareness in your mind? In your imagination let it all fall apart. What happens?
3. All things were created through and for Jesus Christ. Does the creation know that fact in some way? Do we have a responsibility to make that truth known and felt?
4. If we do not submit to Jesus our behavior in our spheres of influence, who is to blame? What will be the results in environmental pollution and depletion of resources?

What are we going to do about it?

5. The word “Christian” was first introduced in Antioch (Acts 11:26), and means “little Christ.” Since Christ holds the whole world together, what opportunities do you have to participate with him—within your ability, within your spheres of influence?
6. When the creation that he is holding together is being polluted and depleted by irresponsible behavior, how does Jesus feel? How should we feel? What should we do?
7. Can non-believers see Jesus as the *Cosmic Glue* of creation? What should be done to make their recognition of Jesus far more likely?

Truth To Celebrate: *The Infant of Christmas is also the ultimate “Cosmic Glue” of all the creation, so there could not be a greater birthday to celebrate. Celebrate the divine, personal, Cosmic Glue today.*

Advent-Action: *A positive relationship with the Lord Jesus, the Infant of Christmas, must lead to positive responsibility for the creation that he “holds together.” How does that responsibility now show in your behavior? Make a list of the behavioral changes you have made within this Advent season to reflect your commitment to honor and please him. What additional changes are still needed? What is your plan to progress on those changes in the coming months?*

