Welcome:

Good evening, ladies! Welcome to our second annual Advent by Candlelight here at Trinity. We are so delighted that you have taken time out of your busy schedules to be here tonight. From the comments I’ve already heard I know the loveliness of the décor has already soothed and refreshed your spirits. Now for the good part!—We have the opportunity during the next hour to stop being Marthas and to be Marys instead. Please join me in prayer as we ask Jesus’ blessing on our time here tonight, sitting at his feet!

Opening Prayer:

Dessert served by the hostesses.

Introduction:

Isn’t it fascinating how the Lord created our brains to make instant associations when our senses take in something that has a strong tie to a childhood memory? Back in the 1980's when I helped my sister move to the little town of Wonewoc as she started her teaching ministry there, we both looked at each other simultaneously upon entering a little dry goods store in town and said to each other “Blanch’s”! The Wonewoc dry goods store had exactly the same smell as a store called “Blanch’s” across the street from our grandmother’s house in Neenah where she would send us as children for five cent popsicles. Those of us here tonight who attended one of our Lutheran Elementary Schools are going to simultaneously make the same kind of mental association when I say the next four words: “What does this mean?” Did the Memory Work Book, Luther’s Catechism, and confirmation class immediately pop into your mind? Tonight we’re going to use Luther’s little phrase “What does this mean?” as we contemplate the wonderful story of our Savior’s birth, not only to visit once again the glorious events of Jesus’ nativity, but also to remember its significance in our lives all these years later—in 2014 and beyond.
Part 1: Dear, Dear Mary:
Matthew 1:18. “Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.”

Sadly, Mary’s role in the story of salvation is often viewed incorrectly. She is mistakenly either venerated with a kind of mysticism, or is dismissed as a mere “instrument” of God. What Scripture does tell us is that she was a young virgin girl, engaged to Joseph, who was familiar with much of the Old Testament, as indicated by her references to it in her song of praise, the Magnificat. Martin Luther thinks she was probably going about her normal housework when God interrupted her life by sending the angel Gabriel to her, announcing her to be the mother of the coming Savior. Though it may not have made sense, Mary knew it was God’s plan, and she accepted it. Her question of “How will this be?” was not a statement of deep doubt reflecting the thought that “This cannot be!”, but rather a simple query from a humble servant. The author Madeleine L’Engle wrote: Had Mary been filled with reason, there’d have been no room for the child.

What does this mean?
• Mary exhibited the characteristics of willingness, humility, and deep faith as she responded to the angel. Make it your prayer that her example of love and obedience is one that becomes yours, as well.
• Though we may be tempted to doubt God’s plan for our lives, the Holy Spirit will empower us to echo Mary’s words: “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said.”

~~Father, thank you for the example of trust and obedience we have in Mary. Help me to accept your perfect plan for my life and simply believe your words to me, no strings attached. Amen.

Part 2: God Engineers a Census:
Luke 2: 1-3. In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register.

It was not a fluke. Joseph and Mary were in Bethlehem for Jesus’ birth because God had decreed it. The ancient prophets had foretold it, and God used a bureaucratic announcement made by a secular authority to guide Joseph and Mary to exactly where he wanted them to be, at exactly the right time. Everyone
was required to return to their ancestral home so that Augustus could conduct a census. For Joseph and Mary, that meant Bethlehem. Imagine...

- Being nine months pregnant and taking an extended trip. Nowhere in the Bible does it say that Mary even rode a donkey—she may have walked the whole way.
- Being on the verge of starting labor for the first time, with no medical help.
- Being alone, with no supportive friends or family nearby. Who would show Mary what to do?

What does this mean?

- Just as God engineered Jesus’ birth exactly according to His plan, so you too can rest in the confidence that you also were born at the right time, in the right circumstances and the right location. God wasn’t surprised by your birth....He spoke you into your mother’s womb and knows you by name.
- That moves us from the mentality of “Why me, God?” to “How will God use me to further his glory and kingdom this time?” Romans 8:28. We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”
- We’re “free to see”! Knowing that God is at work in your circumstances you are free to take your eyes off them, and to look around and look above. Peter walked on water when he looked above his circumstances. When he looked at his circumstances, he began to sink.

~~Father, thank you for your words of promise to be in our every circumstance. Help us daily to put our confidence in you, our gracious God with a perfect track record. Amen

Part 3: The Time Came for her Baby:
Luke 2:6. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born.

Time has almost become a four-letter word in our day and age. We manage time; we waste time; we spend time; we save time; we wish the time would come; we wish the time would pass; we see time fly and we feel time drag. We watch clocks and carry day-planners and calendars, creating the illusion that we somehow control time, yet all the while the moments flow forward like a mighty river that cannot be stopped, harnessed or re-routed.

God controls time. He created time and we, his creatures, are fenced or hedged by his time, directed and guided by his holy and loving hand. Just as Jesus was born
at just the right time in the world’s history, God is working in your life, during your time of grace to accomplish his good and perfect will.

What does this mean?
- God is always on time at just the right time. When the timing seems wrong to you, be patient. We often don’t see the provision of God when we work to control our lives according to our own timetables.
- We believe with confidence that God is here right now and working through our circumstances to provide all we need. This is the essence of faith. And remember Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today, and forever. (Hebrews 13:8)
- Time will never diminish Christ’s love for you or his power to work within your life. He is there in the past; he is here in the now; and he is there in your future. He’s working to bring you into an eternity with him, not just to get you through the week. Praise God for his grace!

~~Father, thank you for the time of grace you’ve given us here on earth. Help us to say with the psalmist “My times are in your hands”, and then live with the peace that comes from knowing you are bringing all the many strands of our lives to a glorious end, for time and eternity! Amen.

Part 4: Do Not Be Afraid:
Luke 2:10. Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.

Jesus came to save us not to scare us. That statement seems a little obvious to us Christians...hello!...but many times we live our lives as though just the opposite were true. Have you ever found yourself thinking of God as someone looking down from heaven, ready to yell, “Gotcha!” anytime you mess up? If so, remember these words of the angel, “Do not be afraid.” It will quickly remind you that God sent his Son into the world because he loves you: he is with you (Emmanuel) and God is for you. Jesus himself said, “God did not send his Son into the world to condemn it, but to save the world through him.” Or loosely translated, “I didn’t come to scold you, I came to save you.” And if God is for us, who can be against us?

What does this mean?
- Replace your fear with faith: There are 365 messages from God in the Bible that begin with a phrase like, “Fear not!” Wow. Every single day of the year you
can read a message from God that says, in effect, “You don’t need to be afraid. I am for you; I am with you; I love you. I have saved you from your sins and reconciled you to myself through Jesus’ redeeming work.

- We can rest securely in a joy that isn’t based on a fleeting emotion or something we have to conjure up out of nothing. Neither is it an ostrich-like denial of your circumstances, or a warm fuzzy feeling that arises when you get what you want.
- Chase God, not perfection: We don’t have to continually beat ourselves up with the mentality, “Try harder! You should be doing better!” The Good News of Great Joy is that you don’t have to be good enough. You don’t have to be good enough because Jesus was good enough.
- Our deep, deep joy comes from God. The Good News is what fills us with joy, peace and assurance, regardless of the pain, conflict or distress we are experiencing.

~~Father, How can we thank you enough that through Jesus you have removed all fear from our lives? Through him you have made known to us the path of life; You fill us with joy in your presence. We love you, Lord! Amen.

**Part 5: What Do You Mean, God?**

Luke 2:12, 16. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger....So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.

This interaction between the angel and the shepherds in Luke 2 shows a simple, yet significant sequence: The angel says: “You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger,” and when the shepherds got to Bethlehem there was the baby, lying in a manger.

How differently we would live each day if we followed this sequence: When God says it, we know it is true, and when we follow what we are told, we see that God’s promise was true.

What does this mean?
- Do what God wants you to do. No, he may not post a sign telling you which job to take, but here’s the thing: There are lots of things God wants us to do that are very clearly explained in the Bible. Like staying in a prayer conversation with him or touching the people around you with a sacrificial love. Start doing those and watch as God tells you the rest.
- Look for what God provides. It took faith for the shepherds to go to Bethlehem. They could have debated whether that’s what God really meant. “You know, maybe he really meant the hotel. It just isn’t logical that the baby would be out with the livestock.”
- Trust God is working it out. Think you made a mistake? Think you messed his direction or that you were distracted in your decision making? Trust God that he is working it all out and will still use you for his purposes.

~~ Father, you are an awesome God! You have made your will for our lives so clear in your Word. Help us to live in the confidence that gives us each and every day. Give us trusting and obedient hearts, so that just like the shepherds we listen and obey. Amen.

**Part 6: It’s not the How It’s the WOW!**:
Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.” Luke 2:13-14.

There was once a teacher who worked painstakingly to teach a young man how to play guitar. Every week he’d climb up and down musical stairs crafted from the pentatonic, hexatonic, heptatonic, and octatonic scales. This emphasis on technique frustrated him and he grew to hate it so much that he abandoned the guitar—until playing it again became a positive part of his mid-life crisis. Yes, he would have been better guitar player as an adult if he’d practiced what his teacher had taught him in his youth. But somehow he became so buried in the technique of making music that he lost the exhilarating pleasure of the music and its power to make one’s heart soar toward the grace-filled face of God. You might say the *how* of guitar-ianity muted the *wow* of the music. Let’s not let the *how* of Christianity allow us to lose sight of the *wow*—that God’s Holy Spirit lives within us, he is always with us until the very end of time.

What does this mean?
- Set your heart on the WOW. Be deliberate in staying focused on the Wow! “Set your heart on things above, not on earthly things.” Colossians 3:2.
- The Good News—Wow! –We proclaim without shame that the Wow! is in our hearts.
No commandment was harmed in the making of this devotional. Staying intimately focused on the Wow! Does not suggest the how is unimportant or that the Wow! compromises Biblical truth.

~~Father, when we hear message of the multitudes of angels praising your name in the heavens above Bethlehem, remind us that the Good News of our Savior’s birth is awesome! Keep our eyes on the big picture: We’re saved for eternity because of your love and the salvation we have through your son, Jesus. Wow! Amen.

Part 7: Mundane:
The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. Luke 2:20.

Ladies, our evening of devotion and song is now coming to a close. In a few minutes we will return to the routine of life. Tomorrow we’ll be back in the office, back at school, back to whatever we normally do.

Notice, however, that the shepherds did the same thing. God sent them a message through his heavenly host, and they found the baby Jesus in a manager, just as the angel said they would. They marveled at the privilege that they’d been blessed to see the Messiah’s arrival.

But they also returned to their fields and flocks. They returned with an energized faith, glorifying and praising God. But they still returned to their fields and flocks. That’s because God uses the ordinary more often than the extraordinary to transform us into reflections of Jesus. Yes, he takes us to the mountaintop; he shows us great miracles and wonders, but he doesn’t leave us there because he knows the strength of our faith grows in the day-to-day, mundane work required in the fields and among the flocks we tend.

Here in the fields of our workplace and among the flocks of our family and friends, we learn to love one another. It is where we die to self and where the Holy Spirit empowers us to live as little-Christ. “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.” Galatians 2:20.

The things we truly believe emerge in the day-to-day of our lives. It’s the conflicts over who makes the coffee, who cleans up the mess, who gets to go home early, or who gets the biggest piece of pie that test whether it is Christ who lives in us, or if we’re still saying, “It is I who live.”

What Now?
• See God in your day. Think of it this way: When you leave the manger, you don’t leave God behind. He’s with you right now; Christ lives in you. Ask God to guide you as you die to self and let Christ live through you.
• Thank God for the routine of your life. Just as the shepherds returned to their fields and flocks glorifying and praising God, praise God in your circumstances. Reflect upon the many times God has answered your prayers, or blessed you by telling you where to find the answer. Tell other people about the things God is doing in your life.
• Wait upon the Lord. Are you feeling stuck in your circumstances? When the Jewish people were held captive in Babylon, God didn’t send immediate relief: rather he told them to get on with their lives, living with the faith that he had their best interest in mind.

~~Father, Go with us now as we return to our fields and flocks. Uplift our spirits daily, no matter how mundane our lives may seem to casual observers. Remind us that we have significance and are vessels through which you work. Help us to be a blessing to others as we reflect you to them. Amen.

Based on the devotionals written by Jon Walker, 2007.
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