



# Small Group Study Guide for December 20, 2020

*Our Savior Lutheran Church and School*

**Theme:** This weekend we come together to celebrate the last Sunday of Advent. Accordingly, we light the fourth candle on the Advent wreath, the love candle. The sermon text is the assigned Gospel reading from Matthew 1:18-25, the angel of the Lord's announcement to St. Joseph, the earthly father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Particularly emphasized in this sermon is the inability for Joseph (and ourselves) to know, understand, and believe the works of God by human reason or strength.

## **Getting Started:**

1. As Advent draws to a close and Christmas continues to approach, how are you doing during these busy yet unusual seasons?
2. The sermon emphasized the limits of human knowledge. Of course, there are also great benefits and blessings that come with our intellect and reasoning. What are some of the blessings God has given to us through this gift, and what are some challenges/temptations that we should be aware of?

## **In the Word: Matthew 1:18-25. Please read through this section of the text.**

3. St. Matthew does not include the account of the archangel Gabriel coming to Mary, instead, he begins with the account from Joseph's perspective. Mary was found to be pregnant—presumably by Joseph himself. Put yourself into his place for just a moment, what experiences must Joseph have had?
4. At this point, Mary and Joseph were not yet married. However, they were betrothed to one another (meaning that they were pledged to be married). The ancient Israelite took betrothal so seriously that it could legitimately and legally only be broken by divorce. Check out Deuteronomy 22:13-19 to see what the appropriate legal punishment should have been for Mary's presumed sin of adultery. What does this tell us about Joseph?
5. Matthew 1:18-25 immediately follow's Matthew's account of the genealogy of Jesus Christ. How does the angel's first words connect this text to the proceeding context? Read God's promise to King David in 2 Samuel 7:12-16 and then note how Matthew starts his Gospel account in Matthew 1:1. In the original context, Matthew is writing to a Jewish audience; what do you think he is trying to firmly emphasize here?

## Putting it Together

6. In Joseph's well-meaning incomprehension of Mary's pregnancy we have the first glimpse of a powerfully important theme that runs throughout Matthew's Gospel, as well as the entirety of Scripture: in order for human beings to know the ways of God, *especially* His work through Christ, those ways must be *revealed* to us. What are some other times we see this occurring in the narrative of Holy Scripture?
7. The sermon particularly emphasized the explanation to the Third Article of the Creed from the Small Catechism. Below you will find, first, the words to the Third Article (please speak these together), and second, the explanation (speak the explanation together as well). After having done so, discuss how this confession puts us in a humble position.

**Third Article:** I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

**Explanation:** I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.

8. In the Third Article of the Creed, what we are confessing is essentially, "I believe that *I cannot believe!*" In a society that is filled with pride—that desires to live as if God does not exist, as if we live as completely autonomous beings independent of our Creator—how does this confession conflict with the world's view of the human being?
9. Apart from God's gracious revelation through His Word, we are left in the dark, unable to believe in Jesus Christ, or come to Him. We rejoice in the love of God, that He has had mercy upon us and revealed His Word to us; and we know that the Spirit is *always* at work through the Word of God. In Lutheran theology we talk about the ways God reveals and delivers His grace as, "The Means of Grace." 1) the spoken Word; that is, the preaching of the forgiveness of sins; 2) Holy Baptism; 3) Lord's Supper; 4) mutual conversation and consolation of Christians. How do you see God at work, revealing His grace and truth through these means?
10. Following all of your conversation on this topic—especially in regard to the Third Article—how do we Scripturally answer this popular modern question: "Do people believe in Jesus because they decide to follow Him of their own free will?" Read John 15:16 and 1 Corinthians 12:3 for assistance.

**Prayer:** This prayer is the traditional prayer that has been prayed by the Church during the third week of Advent (Gaudete) for generations:

"Lord Jesus Christ, we implore You to hear our prayers and to lighten the darkness of our hearts by Your gracious visitation; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever."