

Finding Our Way  
with the  
Magi

A Daily Guide  
Through the  
Season of Advent

John Michael Helms

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Rev. Dr. Amy Butler  
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*Washington, DC*

Michael Helms' *Finding Our Way with the Magi: A Daily Guide Through the Season of Advent* is a Christ-centered GPS that will navigate your family through the Advent season with a gentleness and grace that foster the peace and hope so often absent in the daily bustle of life.

The daily reflections are memorable and personal, offering families a time to focus on the true meaning of the season. Helms' stories will cause you to pause for personal reflection and recollection, while "Advent Actions" will nudge you to put your faith into action in practical ways. In addition, the daily prayer offers guidance for a few moments of focused quietness in communicating with the Giver of the Advent season.

This Advent season, find your way with the Magi by making this volume a part of your family's daily life.

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Michael Helms provides an exceptional and straightforward guide that connects Christmas to Christ especially in our world that connects Christmas to commercialization. Helms' *Finding Our Way with the Magi* is a reflective Advent reading that points the reader to the essence of the Christmas story.

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# Dedication

**G**old: I think of my wife Tina and of the rings we exchanged in 1984 that represent our love for one another. It only grows deeper with the passing of time.

**F**rankincense: I think of my mother Lenora and her calming, restorative, warming, medicinal qualities she brings to our family.

**M**yrhh: I think of my mother-in-law Minnie. I realize this resin was used for embalming. All mother-in-law jokes aside, Minnie has encased my marriage to Tina with a sweetness that I hope our sons will one day be lucky enough to have in a mother-in-law.

# Acknowledgments

The acknowledgment page is the author's chance to mention anybody and everybody that's had something to do with the book's publication.

A lot of people skip this page, so since you are reading it, I'd like to begin by thanking you. Yes, you! Thank you for buying this book and taking this Advent journey. I commend you for this intentional step, and I pray that God will use this book to bless your Advent season and your Christian journey.

My Christian journey has taken me back to North Georgia. I now pastor First Baptist Church of Jefferson, Georgia, where our interest in missions, both local and international, is strong and our love for worship is deep. I am blessed to pastor this wonderful group of people and to do life with them.

However, this book developed mostly through my ministry in my previous pastorate at Trinity Baptist Church in Moultrie, Georgia, where I pastored for thirteen years. Through my weekly articles with the *Moultrie Observer* I found a discipline for writing. I will always be thankful to Dwain Walden for giving me that opportunity.

Andrea Savage, a member of Trinity Baptist, has been my trusted proofreader through the years. She, along with Dr. Diana Young, a member of First Baptist Church of Jefferson, has been a tremendous help on this project, as well as others I have done.

I am thankful to those who took time out of their very busy schedules to read this book and give you their recommendation. These are people I highly respect and greatly value as endorsers of my book.

I am also grateful to Dr. Jim Dant and Dr. David Cassady for partnering with me in publishing this book and its companion book to follow on Lent.

Finally, thanks to all those people in my past who have made the season of Advent: a season of wonder, a season of expectation, a season of joy, a season of memories, a season of love, and a season to pause and reflect on the miracle of the birth of the Christ Child. I could never name all of you, but you are a part of me. Whether you are named in this book or not, in some way you are a part of this book. In some way you are a part of every Advent I live.

John Michael Helms  
March 2011

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# Journeying with the Magi

## Introduction

In America, as soon as merchants take Halloween merchandise from the shelves, they begin putting up the first signs of Christmas, nearly two full months before Christmas Day. You can't fault them for getting such an early start. Sales in October, November, and December can account for as much as half of their yearly sales.

By and large, Americans have bought into the idea that Christmas is about giving and receiving gifts. Should we give credit or blame to the astrologers who followed the star to the place where Jesus was born for starting this Christmas tradition? After all, they came bearing gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh on that first Christmas.

While gift giving is a joyous practice, some have made this the central part of the holiday season. We can't find the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes because He is buried under a mountain of wrapping paper, bows, and ribbons that lie beneath hundreds of shining lights, which we hang on our trees and in our homes.

In the midst of all the gift giving, decorating, and other Christmas festivities, if we do not intentionally focus on our relationship with Jesus during the days leading up to Christmas, we will fail to allow the One whom the season is all about to cast any light on our lives. Consequently, darkness will crowd out any real joy, peace, love, and hope that we might give or receive. Most of us will hang lights to decorate during the holidays, but more importantly,

## 2 Introduction

we need a Light to shine in the darkness of our lives to help us find our way through Advent.

Unfortunately, too many people move through these days before Christmas, called Advent, to Christmas Day and beyond, and find that the season feels as artificial as the trees they place in their homes. Like clowns, many people paint on their smiles. Many go from party to party looking for an escape to numb their feelings of loneliness and emptiness. They pretend to be happy right through New Year's Day.

Finally, when the holidays are over, they peel off their fake smiles and awake to the realities of huge credit card debt, empty houses, trees they have no desire to take down, but no desire to leave up, and the beginning of what feels like depression. Some even think they hate the holidays and are grateful for one thing—that the holidays come only once a year. Isn't there something we can do to prevent such a thing from happening?

Even if the above doesn't describe you totally, many of you have experienced enough of the holiday blues to know that the season brings its own set of challenges in the midst of its promised good cheer.

We are all on a journey, just like Joseph and Mary so long ago. We all have plans, but our plans get interrupted; they can change in an instant, for good or bad. The couple didn't plan on making a trip to Bethlehem in the ninth month of Mary's pregnancy. Thanks to Caesar Augustus, Joseph had no choice but to travel back to his hometown to be counted for tax purposes. They didn't plan on there being no room in the inn. With no way to call ahead for reservations, there was no way to plan for Mary to have a comfortable place to bed, as her labor pains increased, and the intervals between labor pains shortened.

We all know what it's like for plans to suddenly change. All it takes is for one of our kids to fall down the steps and break a tooth,

and our morning is spent at the dentist's office, instead of visiting Santa at the mall. All it takes is for a college daughter to come home for the holidays without an understanding that there are still curfews at home that must be obeyed. Otherwise, the peace of a holiday evening is filled with worry and anxiety as we wait and wait, far past midnight, for her to arrive home. All it takes is for an ex-spouse to change the day he or she wants the children to visit or for the boss to change his or her mind about the time we can have off from our job.

Life is full of changes we didn't plan. The Christmas bonus is cut. The store that promised the special gift you had ordered for your child called and said it wasn't coming after all. The spouse who promised he or she wouldn't drink during the holidays is not only drinking, but is drinking more than usual. The receptionist called from the doctor's office and said the biopsy was positive, and they need to schedule you for a follow-up appointment to discuss the next step. Plans get changed, and life can be turned upside down in a heartbeat. This Advent, at some point, your plans will get changed, too. It may not be life changing, but one never knows.

Of course, plans can also change for the better. We don't tend to think a lot about these times because we absorb them into life like a hummingbird joyfully sucking sugar water from a feeder. Most of us don't stop often enough to flag these God-given times and give thanks: an unexpected Christmas bonus, friends who call and offer to keep your children so that you and your spouse can enjoy a night together, a child or grandchild who hops in your lap and shows love to you without any coercion on your part. It's those blind-sided, "I had no choice in the matter" changes that throw us off track and push us to our knees.

We are all on a journey, so we all need a light to shine in the dark places and in the shadows to illuminate our paths. Many people run their lives like a car, with no lights burning, going eighty miles per hour down a dark road. When they hit something, they say,

“I didn’t see it coming.” They act surprised.

Others live a more measured, calculated life. Yet not even these people can be prepared for every event of life.

On that first Christmas, those who were living the measured, calculated lives were the Magi. They had studied the stars, and all their indications pointed them toward the birth of a Savior, so they came looking for the Christ Child to worship Him. They came bearing gifts. They weren’t caught up in anything materialistic. Their gifts were genuine expressions of adoration. Unlike much of our gift-giving, they weren’t looking to receive anything in return other than the satisfaction of worshiping a child their signs indicated would grow to become a world ruler.

The journey was long. In the year 8 BC, Cuneiform tablets from Sippar in Babylonia revealed the foretelling of the rare conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn that would occur the next year, a phenomenon that happens only once in 794 years. To the men of antiquity, this aligning of the planets had a special meaning. The planet Jupiter represented a world ruler while Saturn was considered the star of Palestine. The astrologers saw this as a sign that a world ruler would be born the next year in Palestine. Thus, they showed up in 7 BC in Jerusalem, just down the road from Bethlehem, looking for the birth of this king.<sup>1</sup> (Scholars debate the exact date of Jesus’ birth.)

The journey likely took a month, maybe two. That meant it would have taken that long to return. Think of the sacrifices and planning that went into making the long, risky journey, just to worship, just to see this child, just to bring Him and His family gifts.

While we cannot prepare for every situation that has the potential to harm us, we can learn to stop being our own worst enemies. We can identify some of the “fast driving at night with no headlights” kind of living and eliminate those times in our lives. Secondly, we can learn to be intentional with the Light and shine Christ in the areas of our lives where we need to see the path with

more clarity.

If we are going to find our way through Advent, we need the intentionality of the astrologers, who journeyed to worship the newborn King. How do we become more like the astrologers, whom we meet in Matthew's gospel, the "Magi" as they are often called?

It's not much of a stretch to imagine that the Magi must have spent many months, perhaps even a year in prayer, planning, and preparation for a trip that would take a couple of months across various terrain in unpredictable weather. Remember, they didn't have a global positioning system. As men of faith, they probably began their trip by asking for God's guidance. If so, they had the best model G.P.S. (God's Positioning System) to help put their plans and preparation into action. We do know that God came to them in a dream, warning them not to return to Herod as they had planned.

We are also in need of God's Positioning System. Advent is filled with planning and preparation of meals, trips, purchasing and exchanging gifts, parties, socials, and visits to see Santa. With all the demands of our time, the One in the center of the manger scene gets pushed further and further out of our picture so that the birthday for Jesus is more of a Christmas mourning than a Christmas morning for Him. He mourns that we've lost Him in the midst of it all.

Advent is a season designed to change that. It is a time of preparation for Christmas Day. Advent means "coming" or "arriving." It's a countdown of sorts to the birthday of Jesus. It's an opportunity to reflect on the coming of Jesus in Bethlehem, the coming of Jesus in our everyday lives, and the promise of Jesus' Second Coming.

When I was a child, my aunt, uncle, and cousins, the Turk family, would visit from South Florida every summer and usually at Thanksgiving. I looked forward with great anticipation to their visits. They brought fruit and hand-me-down clothes. My cousin Steven is a month older than I and was always a jean size and shirt

size larger. I always enjoyed secondhand clothes, especially the jeans. I always thought they were better than the store-bought ones. Years later, the jeans stores proved me right. They started selling new jeans that looked like used jeans with the holes already in them.

The day the Turks arrived had to be the longest day of the year for me, longer than Christmas Eve. I sat on my grandparents' front porch and looked in anticipation, hoping every car that came around the curve would be theirs.

For centuries, the people of Israel had waited and longed for God to send the promised Messiah. The prophets had foretold His coming. When Jesus was born, the scripture tells us that Mary and Joseph took Him to the temple in Jerusalem on the eighth day for His circumcision and to make a sacrifice to God. The scripture says:

*There was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: 'Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel' (Luke 2:25-32).*

Simeon helps us understand the meaning of Advent. He had been waiting for the consolation of Israel. What does that mean? The word "consolation" in Greek is *paraklesis*. It comes from the root, *parakaleo*, which means to "call near, to invite, invoke." In other

words, Simeon was not just sitting around the temple as if he had an appointment with the Lord at some unknown date in the future. No. If you had gone to the temple, you would have noticed Simeon.

He was constantly praying, looking intently at every child who came into the temple. Simeon's waiting was active. Most never knew exactly what Simeon was waiting for, but he knew. God gave him a promise, so he remained on alert. He knew any child who came into the temple could be the Promised One—any child. So he waited and waited and waited. We don't know how long. Months? Years perhaps? Every day was filled with expectation, and the promises of hope, peace, joy, and love breaking into the world, in a new way that the world had never seen or known.

How much hope, peace, joy, and love can we call near, invite, or invoke into our lives? We need a little parakaleo ourselves. If we just wait passively for it all to come to us, much of it will pass us by like a ship in the night.

“Worship” is a verb. It is active. It should be no less active than the effort the Magi gave in planning their trip and making the journey to worship the Christ Child, no less active than Simeon waiting for the Christ Child to arrive in the temple.

When we think of worship, we often think of what happens inside a church or when people gather in a small group. While there is movement of one's heart, as one is confronted with sin and the need for change, combined with people moving their voices in praise to God through song and prayers, it is important to remember that this movement must then be put into practice once the worship experience has concluded.

It has been said that we gather for worship, but we scatter for service. Actually, service is part of the way we worship. This is illustrated well in a story of a group of people who had:

*...gathered to pray for a family who was going through a*

*difficult time financially. They were broke, out of work, and the prospects of finding work were slim. As one man was praying fervently, there was a knock at the door. They stopped, opened the door and there stood a sturdy boy. The man said, 'What do you want, boy?' The boy replied, 'Pa couldn't come, so I brought his prayers in the pickup. Just come and help me, please, and we'll bring them in.' Pa's 'prayers' consisted of meat, potatoes, flour, beef, vegetables, apples and jellies. The prayer meeting broke up pretty quickly after that.<sup>2</sup>*

This is not to diminish the importance of prayer. It is to emphasize the importance of putting legs to our prayers. The Magi didn't expect the newly born king to come to them. They knew if they were to have the opportunity to worship this newly born king, they had to go find Him.

Now, I realize that Jesus is all about finding us. I know Jesus' story of the lost sheep, how the Good Shepherd leaves the ninety-nine in the fold to go look for the one that is lost. However, that is not to say that we do not have a responsibility to search for Christ during this season of Advent. We should not expect Christmas to come to us. Oh, it might, and if it does, what a gift!

Advent is about calling the season near to us. More than that, it's about inviting a Savior to be near to us, to come to us, to speak to us, to guide our lives, to convict us and forgive us of sin, to show us the path of righteousness, and to bless us, not for our sakes only, but so we in turn can bless others. That may involve taking our prayers to people the way the boy delivered the prayers of his Pa.

If we do not expect Christ to come, if we do not invoke the coming of Christ, if we do not profess that Christ has come or is coming again, the chances are not good that we are going to be very

concerned about blessing others.

There is no doubt that America has begun to crumble under her own weight of greed and self-indulgence. We are a country where self-sacrifice is becoming a laughable concept, and every person for himself or herself is the norm. We are the country where the executive often gets the golden parachute while the employee who's worked for the company for twenty-six years gets the shaft. We are becoming a nation of greedy people who care only about self-preservation.

We have allowed greed to become so widespread that our financial institutions are crumbling around us to the point that the foundations of our society have been threatened. While our nation has focused military power on those countries that can attack us from without, the cancers of greed and unethical practices have been growing from within.

Consequently, companies have collapsed, driving down the stock market. Our prisons are running out of room to house inmates. Families are falling apart, and children find pleasure and attention in all the wrong places. The bar for dignity and decency has been lowered so low that we are no longer shocked; we seem to be headed for disaster.

However, there is one thing greater than all the evils of humanity; it is the hope of humanity, the hope that the greatest of evil minds and intentions of evil can be overcome by the hope and love of men and women, boys and girls, who refuse to allow circumstances of hardship and suffering to overwhelm their lives and steal all their joy. The suffering and hardship can be overcome only through the Advent of Christ.

What lies ahead for our world in the next decade? More suffering. I'm sure of it. But to the extent that we become like the Magi, there is hope. To the extent that we plan and prepare for the Advent of Jesus, we can find peace. To the extent that we begin a

journey where our paths cross His path, there will be joy. To the extent that we put into action the changes our encounter with this Holy One of God has had on our lives, love will abound, true love can be known, and the world can be changed.

I invite you now to journey through this Advent season with your heart open to receive Jesus. Use this book as a tool in your preparation for Christmas Day. It can be read in a single sitting. But as you will see, this book is best used as a daily companion as you journey with Jesus toward the day Christians set aside to celebrate the birthday of Jesus.

At the end of each day's devotion there is a section called "Advent Actions." These daily actions are provided as ideas of things you or your family can do to enhance your journey of discipleship and ministry to others, as you move toward Christmas Day. Most days have more than one "Advent Action," with the hopes you can find at least one to implement during Advent.

This book is simply a tool to help you, as you find your way through Advent. Tools are important. One reason we flail about spiritually during Advent is that we do not use any spiritual tools to help us on our journey. I'm delighted you've chosen this tool to assist you on your journey. For those of you who may be new to the concept of Advent as a spiritual discipline of preparing for Christmas Day, a historical sketch of Advent is offered in Appendix 1.

Now that you've discovered this tool, use it as a daily guide as you journey with the Magi toward Bethlehem. If you find it helpful, share it with a friend. We all need help finding our way.

Happy Advent and Merry Christmas.

# Stanley's Shining Light

## December 1

What would the Christmas story be without angels? Many years ago, a strange sounding angel was added to God's heavenly chorus. His name is Stanley. When I get to heaven, I fully expect to see Stanley Beaty singing in a heavenly chorus, and I expect to hear the same "errr" sound that he made as he praised God during his 47-year life.

I'll never forget the first time I saw Stanley. I was in the first grade eating my lunch with other members of my class. Stanley walked through the lunchroom with bird-like steps. He was an older teenager at that time. Each step he took seemed to take thought and determination. His back was arched, his eyes fixed straight ahead. He did not look at us as he passed by our table, but no doubt he heard the snickering from several of us as we laughed at his awkward crane-like steps.

Stanley was born with muscular dystrophy, a genetic disorder that involves a degenerative muscle weakness. Becker muscular dystrophy is carried on the X chromosome, which means that it affects only males. It may be transmitted by unaffected female carriers of the gene and transmitted to their sons. The sons of carriers each have a 50-50 chance of contracting the disease. The daughters of carriers each have a fifty-fifty chance of being carriers. Unbeknownst to Stanley's mother, Sybil, she was a carrier of the gene. Before Stanley was diagnosed with muscular dystrophy, she gave birth to two other

sons, Howard and Tim. The odds went against these boys, too. All three were later diagnosed with the disease.

When I began attending Louisville Baptist Church as a pre-teen, I discovered the Beaty family was among the church's most faithful members. By this time, Stanley was in his early twenties. The disease had progressively worsened in his body, as well as in his younger brothers' bodies.

Upon arriving at church, I'd watch their father, William, carry Stanley's younger brother Tim, by this time the size of a grown man, on his back from the Beatys' car across the lawn and up the steps into the church. From there Tim would use his walker to get around. To watch the effort they went through to make it to church each Sunday was humbling. Years later, all three men would succumb to wheelchairs.

Stanley was nonverbal to most people. It was years before I ever heard him speak, but he was one of the first I heard sing in the worship service. The muscles he needed to force air from his lungs over his vocal cords were apparently not strong enough to create a normal tone. The sound that came out of his mouth was a high-pitched "errr." The sound was distinctive from the harmony of the other voices. Any visitor to the service would wonder about the origin of the sound that came from the front of the church. Stanley always sat on the second row from the front.

When I joined the youth choir, I was surprised that Stanley was there, even though he was past youth age. I often sat next to him in practice, feeling uncomfortable at first. Gradually, I came to look forward to seeing him. Later we became folder partners. I came to respect him greatly. Stanley taught me that anyone can sing praises to God and that God is not hung up on what one may sound like. God desires praise and adoration from one's heart. The Psalmist wrote: "Make a joyful noise unto God, all ye lands. Sing forth the honor of his name. Make his praise glorious" (Psalm 66:1-2 KJV).

The people of Louisville Baptist church learned to hear Stanley as God did, I think. His voice was a voice of praise, as were the others. I can't imagine how anyone in that church could have had any legitimate reason not to sing praises to God with Stanley there singing every week. Sometimes we forget to look at the heart, and we lose our way.

Stanley participated in our youth choir musical, "Lightshine," in the summer of 1975. As usual, no one in our church complained that Stanley's sound didn't harmonize with the rest of the choir. However, when we were invited to share the musical with another church, the choir director told Stanley she did not want him to sing. She was afraid his distinctive sound would be too much of a distraction for a church not acclimated to his voice.

Stanley didn't tell his family that he wasn't allowed to sing, so they showed up with Stanley. As the choir prepared to enter the guest church's sanctuary, Stanley stood in defiance at the front of the sanctuary facing the congregation, hoping to sing with the choir. His presence delayed the beginning of the service. He just stood there, back arched from his disease, face long with sadness, until his father came and led him away. We were singing a musical called "Lightshine," a musical about God's hope to the world, but Stanley was told that night he had to hide his light. His spirit was crushed. For a while, Stanley stopped attending church.

Over the years we watched helplessly as the disease overtook Stanley's body as well as his brothers. They each fought muscular dystrophy with a determination that would rival that of an Olympic athlete seeking to will his or her body to finish a marathon, especially Stanley. He was the last of the brothers to be confined to a wheelchair. He was the last of his brothers to die.

Once on my way back from college, I stopped by to see the Beatys. I had been by their home on other occasions to play dominoes, Stanley's favorite game. My purpose was to tell Stanley how

much his presence at church and his singing had meant to me as a teenager. As a teenager, I was self-conscious about my small size, the need at that time to wear glasses, and the birthmark I had just above my hairline, which I kept covered up with my longer hairline in front. Then I'd sit beside Stanley at choir practice, and I'd feel ashamed that I ever complained about anything. I wanted Stanley to know that he ministered to me through those years, and that his life was a shining light to me.

His determination was surpassed only by that of his parents. For decades they cared for all three sons. For 47 years they cared for Stanley. Whenever I saw the parents arrive at church, and the van door opened, and each of their sons exited in his own wheelchair, I was reminded that despite the difficult circumstances they faced, they remained people of hope, people determined to serve God and worship God.

Whenever I hear people give reasons why they do not attend Bible study or worship services, I usually dismiss most of them as excuses. If anyone had reason to stay away from God's house, it was this family. If anyone had reason not to sing, it was Stanley. This family helped shape my faith. They helped me see it is not what's given to you that counts as much as it is what you make of what is given to you. This family made the most of what they were given. They gave the most of what they had.

As the choirs of heaven sing praises to God, I picture Stanley there singing. I don't think God has given him a perfect voice in heaven. I think the voice Stanley used here on earth is as distinctive in heaven as it was here. In fact, I have a feeling that from time to time, the angels may all stop singing and give Stanley a solo part. That "errr" sound comes from Stanley's heart. If we sing from our hearts, that's when worship occurs, and that's when God is praised. Otherwise, it's just music. As we find our way through this season of Advent, regardless of the difficulties life may present us, we can all

find reasons to sing praises to God and reasons to let our light shine.  
Stanley taught me that.

# Advent Actions

1. Light a candle in honor of someone significant whose light has helped push away some of the darkness in your life. If you choose, make this a family gathering and give each family member an opportunity to light a candle and share.
2. Make a list of times when people have made an impression on you by their actions instead of their words.
3. If you are prone to stay away from church and not worship with a community of believers, think about the excuses you typically use and compare them to the commitment of the Beaty family. How do you feel now about your excuses when compared to their commitment?
4. Sing or hum your favorite Christmas carol as your own private expression of worship to God.
5. Be intentional this Advent, and go to someone and tell the person what his or her example meant to you personally. Your words of affirmation may be one of the best gifts he or she receives this holiday season.

# Prayer

God of Light,

The Apostle Paul wrote that You “chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise...what is weak in the world to shame the strong... what is low and despised in the world... so that no human being might boast in the presence of God” (1 Corinthians 1:27-29 ESV).

God of Light, we are humbled by Stanley’s life and by the commitment of his family to live their lives committed and dedicated to You, despite their daily hardships. Forgive those of us who are able bodied for making excuses, instead of being first in line to worship You in corporate worship and to serve You by serving others.

May others not have to wonder whether our light is shining. May they see it shining before they ever hear us speaking. May we embody the kind of gospel that Stanley embodied, the kind that was proposed by St. Francis of Assisi, who said: “Preach the gospel every day—sometimes use words.” Amen.