

1.

BEGINNING WITH THE END

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” When he [Jesus] had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

Not a Silent Night

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers. (Acts 1:8-14)

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Christmas comes on December 25, but for many Americans it starts before that: on Black Friday, the day after Thanksgiving. The newspaper announces glad tidings of great joy with five pounds of advertisements. Big-screen TVs for several hundred dollars—can you believe it? Blu-ray players for next to nothing. The entire stock of men’s clothing at 50 percent off. Unbelievable deals. And the stores

open their doors at three, four, five o'clock in the morning. I mean, that's good news!

Several years ago the good news turned to tragedy for a Walmart employee on Long Island, New York.² You may remember the story. Jdimytai Damour was a part-time seasonal worker at Walmart who had just started working there. His job was to stock the shelves in the morning. He arrived early that Friday and was assigned to stand by the door at 4:55 a.m. There were two thousand people standing outside in the cold, eager to get a great buy on a TV or a jacket or some other sale item.

The door looked like it was going to open, then it closed again. The people were frustrated and agitated. They were cold and ready to go inside. Some of them pounded on the glass doors. Others pushed on the doors, and as they did they noticed there was some give in them. The crowd surged forward. They pressed into the glass, the glass shattered, and the frame landed on top of

Jdimytai Damour. The people rushed in to get their bargains, like a herd of cattle. They saw Jdimytai lying there. Some stepped over him, and some stepped on him. Even knowing he was hurt, people went on with their shopping, buying Christmas presents, making sure they got what they had waited for.

Before the morning was over, in spite of attempts to administer CPR, Jdimytai Damour was pronounced dead. It's a story of Christmas run amok, and it's symbolic of something bigger—a kind of amnesia, illustrating how ordinary people forget the real meaning of Christmas.

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Advent is the church's response to this amnesia. Advent is a four-week period when Christians pause and say, "Let's remember what this is all about."

Let's remember who the child is, born in Bethlehem two thousand years ago. Let's remember the hope and promise that come from him. Let's remember who he called us to be and what he called us to do. Let's remember the mission he gave us as we seek to live as Christ-followers." Advent is a time when we prepare ourselves spiritually to celebrate the birth of the Savior. The word *advent* comes from a Latin word that means "coming." During that four-week period we not only prepare to commemorate Christ's first advent, his birth in Bethlehem; we also prepare for the day when Christ will return, in glory, to usher in a new heaven and earth.

It is customary during Advent for churches to focus on the prophets, or John the Baptist, or the stories surrounding Jesus' birth. In this book we'll take a different approach. We'll explore Advent and the meaning of Christmas by focusing on Mary's perspective of her son. No one was closer to Jesus than Mary. No one shaped his life more than she

did. No one knew him better, nor loved him more. And no other human being paid a greater price than she did for his birth, life, and death. Mary's own life was not blissful, peaceful, and blessed. It was challenging, painful, and at times filled with sorrow. Yet despite this, Mary "magnifies the Lord" and "rejoices in God," as she tells us in her joyful song, the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55).

But it is not just exploring the meaning of Christ's birth through the eyes of Mary that makes this little book unique. Others have done the same, looking at the events in Mary's life leading up to the birth of Jesus. Rather, in this book we'll start not before the birth of Jesus but decades after. We'll begin at the end of Mary's life, years after Jesus' death and resurrection. Each week we'll journey back in time to key events in the life of Jesus as seen through Mary's eyes, until finally we arrive at the night he was born.

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Mary's Final Years

Let's begin at the end of Mary's life, with what we know about Mary's final years and her death. It's a challenge to discuss Mary's last years, because there's not much known about them. Here the Bible is virtually silent. There's only one verse that mentions Mary by name after the resurrection of Christ. We're told in Acts 1:14 that, following Jesus' ascension and before the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, the disciples and "certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers" constantly devoted themselves to prayer.

With little information about the rest of Mary's life found in Scripture, our only sources of information are the traditions that developed in the church

during the centuries following her death. Some details are undoubtedly legendary; others may point us toward facts. In Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, these stories are an important part of the church's liturgical year, while Protestants are not likely to be as familiar with them.

Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christians commemorate Mary's death on August 15 each year. Roman Catholics celebrate this as the Feast of the Assumption and Orthodox Christians as the Feast of the Dormition. The two different names point to similar ideas held by Catholic and Orthodox Christians concerning what happened at Mary's death.

Roman Catholics believe that Mary was taken up bodily to heaven shortly after her burial (though some suggest she did not actually die, the consensus is that she died) as a special way in which Mary was honored by God as God had done with Enoch and Elijah in the Old Testament. Enoch and Elijah were

righteous people who were “taken up” or assumed into heaven without experiencing death. In Genesis 5:24 we read, “Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him.” In Second Kings we read that Elijah was taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire (2:11).

Orthodox Christians believe that Mary died—the euphemism they use is that she “fell asleep”—and on the third day after dying, her body was taken up to heaven. The Latin word for “sleep” is *dormitio*, thus the Feast of the Dormition recalls Mary’s death and subsequent bodily assumption to heaven.

While we have no scriptural evidence for Mary’s assumption, throughout most of church history starting at least in the fifth century, if not before, Christians believed Mary was taken up to heaven shortly after her death.

One version of the story tells that three days before her death, Mary was visited by the angel Gabriel, the same angel who came to her when she was a girl of