***New beginnings***

*"Now Mary arose in those days and went into the hill country with haste, to a city of Judah, and entered the house of Zacharias and greeted Elizabeth. And it happened when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, that the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. Then she spoke out with a loud voice and said, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.” -*Luke 1:39-42

 How many of us can remember the excitement of that first day of school in the fall? We loved summer vacation, but the thrill of shopping for new school supplies and possibly a new school outfit, was invigorating. We looked forward to seeing our school friends again and meeting our new teacher. It’s interesting that for many of us, still brings excitement and even a latent desire to sign up for a class, pursue a new hobby or call an old friend.

When we are children, Bethlehem and Christmas seem afar off. The time span to Christmas seems shorter as the years pass and towards the end of our life, those months are but a flash. However, the resolve and excitement of a fresh start are still present. We are refreshed from the slower pace of summer and anxious to get back into a routine. Our minds are clear. The air is brisk. Autumn, the time of brilliant colors and fresh air is a great time for a fresh start!

 As we begin our Walk to Bethlehem, we can think of how Mary felt while she was carrying Jesus. Shortly after Mary was told she would bear the Son of God, she went quickly to the hill country to visit her cousin Elizabeth. The Scripture states that when Elizabeth was 6 months pregnant, Mary visited her and the babe leaped in Elizabeth’s womb when Mary greeted Elizabeth. Mary’s life would change radically after Jesus was born.

Our lives also change radically with the birth of the Savior. When we are reborn in Jesus, life is never the same. We begin the walk of faith for a lifetime. Just as we are transformed spiritually in our life of faith, The Walk to Bethlehem can also bring change and transformation into our lives. We can determine to take better care of the body God has given us. By beginning a physical walk with stated and measurable goals, we will find that we have more energy to accomplish those things that God has for us to do. Our physical, spiritual and emotional life will change positively and we will          affect our world and those in our world in a positive way. As we begin our journey to Bethlehem, let’s begin by examining those things that help and hinder our transformation.

**Questions to ponder:**

* What hinders me from living a disciplined life?
* Are there areas in my life that are disciplined? Are they physical disciplines or spiritual disciplines?
* Are there areas in my life that are not disciplined? Are they physical or spiritual?
* Is there something in my life - spiritual, physical or emotional that needs change and transformation?

***The Ripple Maker***

***Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the Kingdom and healing every disease and sickness.”*- Matthew 9:35**

What does it take to change a community? What does it take to change a lifestyle? What does it take to change the world? The Pike Street Market in Seattle is a wonderful myriad of tastes, smells, sights and sounds. Musicians frequently gather to entertain shoppers and the curious. A similar scene is acted out everyday in cities across the world. People stand and listen respectfully, and then from the crowd, a brave soul breaks the silence and walks to the open violin case, depositing a gift of appreciation. Soon others break the silence and step up in a spirit of bashful thankfulness. The air is somewhat tense, but the music becomes sweeter.

Jesus was perhaps the greatest ripple maker who ever lived on this earth. Everywhere He went He influenced behavior for the good. His small band of disciples became ripple makers and today we who believe in Jesus Christ are examples of the influence and courage of those early believers.

We all have the capability to be ripple makers in this world. We can begin by influencing our immediate group of friends, family and co-workers. A kind word, encouragement to make healthy lifestyle choices, to join a study group, to attend a worship service or to take a walk, are all positive ripples. Can we change the world? Yes! As we walk to Bethlehem and study about people of different countries and cultures, we can also pray for the people in those countries. As we walk to Bethlehem we can invite friends and neighbors to walk along with us. As we walk, we can speak words of hope and peace to them. That’s what the ripple effect is all about: Influencing our world (personal, local and global) in a positive way.... one person at a time. It worked for Jesus, the greatest ripple maker of all time. It can work for us!

**Questions to ponder:**

* Who are the people in my sphere of influence?
* Am I a positive or negative ripple maker?
* How can I influence my friends, family and neighbors for good?
* Is there someone I can ask to walk alongside me?

***Preparing the Feet:***

*“Then Mary took a pound of very costly oil of spikenard, anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil.” -*John 12:3

The last time I walked a beach with the sand swirling around my toes, I thought about the Walk to Bethlehem. When Jesus was about to be born, Joseph walked through the desert sand to Bethlehem with his very pregnant wife riding on a donkey. As an adult, Jesus was constantly on the move. Except for an occasional boat ride, he walked from one dusty town to the next. What a relief it must have been for Jesus to have his tired feet anointed by Mary.

In the Detroit area, there is a rotating homeless shelter that moves from church to church throughout the year. A church hosts the guests for a week and then they are on their way to the next church. In addition to a warm meal, warm shelter and hot showers, many of the churches provide services such as free haircuts, homework help and counseling. When the shelter came to our church one year, one of the women suggested that we offer to wash the guests’ feet. This was an unusual service to offer and one that was out of our comfort zone. Most of us have no problem serving in the kitchen, but washing feet? Jesus gave us an example by washing the disciples’ feet. Why not wash the feet of the homeless? Like Jesus, except for an occasional bus ride, the homeless guests walk to their destinations. Their feet must ache from ill-fitting shoes, dirty socks and sweaty feet.

As we unwrapped the feet of our guests, I thought of Mary anointing Jesus’ feet and I thought of Mother Teresa’s statement from a 1974 interview,” I see God in every human being. When I wash the lepers wounds I feel I am nursing the Lord himself. Is it not a beautiful experience?” These simple acts of mercy and serving are the acts that bring Kingdom results. This is when God is glorified and we grow. The homeless guests were surprised by the foot washing, but those who washed their feet were blessed by the privilege of honoring them in a world where they most often find rejection.

**Questions to ponder:**

* Have you ever had your feet washed by someone? How did you feel?
* Have you ever washed someone’s feet? How did you feel?
* How can I bless someone today with my serving acts and attitude?

***Beautiful Feet:***

*“How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, “Your God reigns.” -*Isaiah 52:7

Good News! The house is sold! I landed the job! I aced an exam! The tumor is benign! I got a raise! My baby’s healthy! I won the election! I’m pregnant! I’m accepted to medical school! My team won! I hit a home run! I’m getting married!

There is nothing like the feeling of exhilaration when we receive good news. It lifts our spirits, puts joy in our step and sends immune enhancing endorphins into our blood stream. Nothing seems impossible when we receive good news!

Monumental news in the New Testament was frequently announced by the appearance of an angel. An angel came to Mary and announced the coming birth of the Savior. (Luke 1:28) Two angels announced to the women who raced to the tomb on that first Easter morning that the Savior had risen. (Luke 24:4-8) The women ran to tell the disciples the good news. Their feet were beautiful! “How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news” (Isaiah 52:7) Two thousand years later we are the proclaimers of that good news of the Gospel here on the earth. We can still tell the good news that God came to earth in the form of a babe and that His message of redemption, forgiveness, peace and love is as relevant today as it was two thousand years ago!

**Questions to ponder:**

* Have you received good news lately?
* Have you given good news to anyone lately?
* Have I neglected telling good news to someone recently because of my busyness or preoccupation with the stuff in my life?
* Can one become desensitized to good news?

***Labor:***

*“While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.”
-*Luke 2:6-7

If you ever want to generate a lively, animated and lengthy discussion, simply ask a group of mothers about their childbirth experience. My three children hear their birth story every year on their birthday. I tell them about the weather on that special day, what I was doing prior to the start of labor, what the nurses and doctors said about them and most importantly, what a very special day that was when they breathed their first breath!

Luke, the physician, does mention the actual birth of Jesus, but what was it like for Mary to birth the Son of God? Every birth experience fills the parents with awe and wonder. This birth of the Son of God was awesome in its simplicity and magnificent in its impact. How can our minds even comprehend the significance of God Himself coming to earth as a defenseless, vulnerable baby, dependent on a very young woman and man for his physical well-being?

I wonder if Mary retold the story of Jesus’ birth to him every year on His birthday! What a story she would have to tell! The days leading up to His birth were spent traveling on a donkey to Bethlehem. Joseph had to search for a place for the baby to be born and ended up in a stable. It was a beautiful night the night Jesus was born. There were stars in the sky. There were shepherds in the fields. There were angels in the sky and there were visitors from the East on their way to see the one who was born king of the Jews. (Matthew 2:2) The story is the best story ever told. It is one that we need to treasure in our hearts and never dismiss as routine. “Mary treasured these things and pondered them in her heart.” (Luke 2:19) May we also treasure these things in our heart and never grow tired of retelling the story of the Savior’s birth!

**Questions to ponder:**

* What are some things I can do this Christmas season to allow time to treasure these things in my heart and ponder the significance of the birth of Jesus?
* How can I help my family understand the significance of the birth of Jesus Christ?

**Ohana**

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise. ~Galatians 3:26-29

Who is in your Ohana? The Hawaiians have a wonderful word in their vocabulary that means family. The word means so much more than family. Ohana is the extended family of relationships that we have with each other. You do not have to be Hawaiian to be a part of the Ohana in Hawaii. It is simply understood that family and friends are bound together and members of the Ohana cooperate and honor each other.

When the angel of the Lord told Mary that she was to birth the son of God and that her relative Elizabeth was to have a child, she “got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea where she entered Zechariah’s home and greeted Elizabeth.” ~Luke 2:39-40

Mary hurried to see her blood relative Elizabeth for the support of her Ohana. As Jesus’ ministry developed, we see that He formed a new family known as brothers and sisters in Christ. Bloodlines and family trees are no longer required to be part of the family of God. Those who know Christ are part of the Ohana of God. When we become part of the family of God, we are bound by a most amazing blood relationship.

**Questions to Ponder:**

* Are your friendships superficial or deep?
* What makes a friendship deep and lasting? Do you have a friend you share personal struggles and joys with?
* Do you share personal struggles and joys with Jesus, the wonderful counselor?
* If not, how can you cultivate this friendship with God?