What If…? — An Advent Series
Week 1: "What if it Happened Now?"
Luke 1:26–38; John 1:1–14

Opening Prayer: Gracious God, as we gather together, open our hearts and minds to Your Word. Help us set aside our expectations and distractions so we might recognize Your presence in unexpected places. Give us the courage of Mary to trust You, even when we cannot see what lies ahead. Guide our conversation and help us grow together in faith. Amen.

Theme: What if Jesus had been born in 2026 instead of two thousand years ago? Would we recognize Him, or would we be too distracted by our expectations to notice? The first Advent reminds us that God entered the world in a way few people anticipated. Mary was an ordinary young woman, Nazareth was an unlikely place, and the Messiah arrived without the recognition the world might have expected. Advent invites us to move beyond simply remembering Christ's birth and begin recognizing God's presence in our everyday lives. Sometimes God is working in the very people, places, and circumstances we tend to overlook.

Central Question: Would we recognize God if God showed up somewhere we weren't looking?

Secular Quote: *"The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes."*

— Marcel Proust, In Search of Lost Time (commonly quoted English rendering)

Sometimes the greatest discoveries happen not because something around us changes, but because we begin seeing what has been there all along.

Starter Question: Have you ever experienced something or met someone who turned out to be completely different from what you expected? How did that experience change the way you looked at that person or situation?

Digging Deeper:

1. **An Unexpected Encounter:** Mary was going about her ordinary life when Gabriel appeared. Why do you think God chose someone like Mary, rather than a person of wealth, influence, or religious authority?

2. **Faith Without Knowing the Ending:** Mary asked, "How can this be?" What does her response teach us about the relationship between faith, uncertainty, and asking questions?

3. **When God Interrupts Our Plans:** Imagine Mary receiving Gabriel's message in today's world. What pressures, fears, or judgments might she face? How might those challenges resemble the struggles people experience today?

Read John 1:1–14

4. **God Moves Into the Neighborhood:** John tells us that the Word became flesh and lived among us. Why is it significant that God chose to enter human life rather than remain distant from human suffering and struggles?

5. **Missing What Is Right in Front of Us:** John 1:10–11 describes a world that did not recognize or receive Christ. What expectations or distractions might prevent Christians today from recognizing God's work?

6. **Looking Beyond the Familiar:** We often expect to encounter God in worship, prayer, or Scripture. Where else might God be working in our communities? How can we become more attentive to those opportunities?

7. **The Challenge of Advent:** If Jesus were born today, what kinds of people or places might our society overlook? What does the original Christmas story teach us about the way God values people?

Bringing It Home — Personal Reflection

Our expectations can sometimes become barriers to recognizing what God is doing. We may expect answers to prayer to arrive in a particular way or believe that God works only through certain people or circumstances.

Consider these questions together:

- Is there an area of your life where you may be so focused on what you want God to do that you're overlooking what God might already be doing?
- Who in your community might be overlooked, unheard, or forgotten?
- What would change in your daily life if you approached each day expecting to encounter opportunities to experience and share God's love?

Actionable —

"Open Your Eyes to the Unexpected"

This week, make a conscious effort to notice God's work in the ordinary moments of life.

Each morning, begin with this simple prayer:

“Lord, open my eyes to see where You are working today, especially in places I might not think to look.”

Then choose one intentional action during the week. Reach out to someone you haven't spoken to in a while, offer kindness to a stranger, listen to someone whose experiences differ from your own, or help someone without expecting recognition.

At the end of each day, take a moment to reflect: Where did I notice love, grace, hope, or an opportunity to serve today? Did anything surprise me?

If possible, come prepared to share one experience with the group next week.

Closing Prayer: Loving God, thank You for reminding us that Your presence is not limited to the places we expect. As we begin this Advent journey, help us see the world through eyes of faith, recognize the needs of those around us, and respond with compassion and love. Give us the courage to follow You into unexpected places, trusting that Your light continues to shine in our world. In Jesus' name, Amen.

