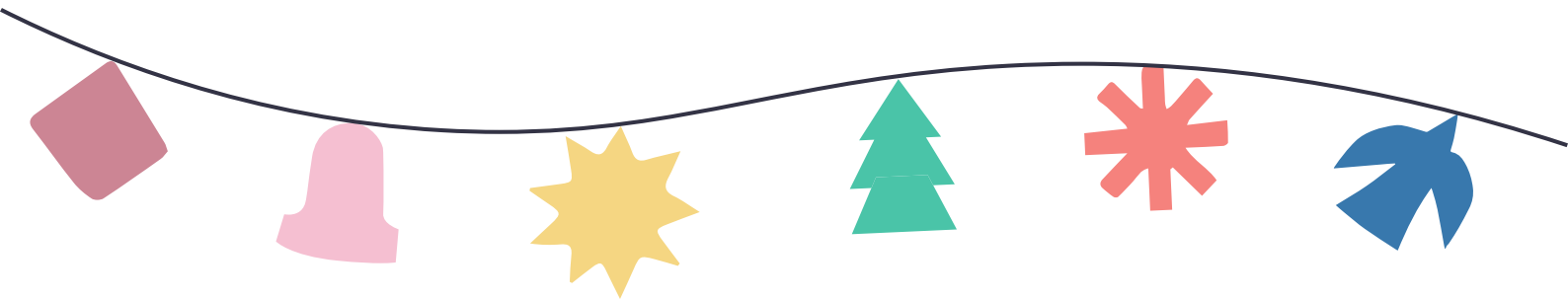




Advent Devotional 2023

Advent Devotional

Welcome to the Youthworks 2023 Advent Devotional.
You will find 25 daily devotionals, filled with encouraging personal reflections from Youthworks staff on the meaning of Christmas.



The Beginning

Genesis 1:26-2:1

Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."²⁷ So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.²⁸ God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."²⁹ Then God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food."³⁰ And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food." And it was so.³¹ God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day.

² Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array.

Let's start at the very beginning, a very good place to start (thanks The Sound of Music) because that's where our celebration of Christmas begins!

I love creation. I'm frequently admiring a view from a walk, the colours in a sunset, or the animals I can pat. But I love people even more, and we see in the creation story that God does too. He has created humans in His image, and he has made us all to be diverse in looks, skills, and abilities, and to have value, purpose, and dignity no matter who we are. Christmas is a special time for God's people to be gathered together as we praise God for who He is and thank Him for what He's done.

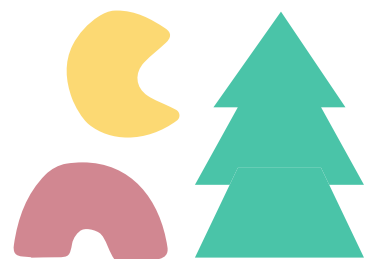
Question for everyone:

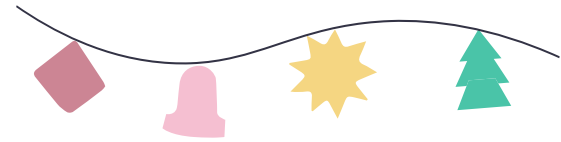
What are some ways during this Christmas season we can celebrate our differences and the value of every person?

Question for families:

What did God think of all the things he had created? What is your favourite thing in God's creation? Tell each person in your family something that you love about them. Pray together and thank God for his amazing creation – thank God for your favourite animal - and for the people in your family!

Rev. Bec Baines | Accessibility Ministry Advisor





The Fall-Part 1

Genesis 3:1-13

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'"² The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden,³ but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'"⁴ "You will not certainly die," the serpent said to the woman.⁵ "For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."⁶ When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.⁷ Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realised they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.⁸ Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden.⁹ But the Lord God called to the man, "Where are you?"¹⁰ He answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."¹¹ And he said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?"¹² The man said, "The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it."¹³ Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate."

As we look around our world and our lives it is abundantly clear that they do not live up to the potential that we know they have. No matter how much time, money, or energy we invest, our experience is that conflicts, frustrations, fears, tragedies, injustices, sickness, pain, and death all continue. These are all present realities in our world because of sin.

The nature of sin is that it entices and deceives. In Genesis 3 we see that Adam and Eve begin to doubt God's words and his good intentions. They are led to believe that God has been holding back something great from his people, and so they discard God's way of living and instead follow a path of choosing for themselves what will be good and bad for them.

We too are tempted to distance ourselves from God and choose what we think is right and wrong. Thankfully, God's salvation plan in Jesus deals with our desire to wander from God's good promises.

Question for everyone:

Thinking about the story of Adam and Eve in the garden, what do you think it teaches us about the consequences of making our own choices and not following God's guidance in our lives?

Questions for families:

Why do you think God wanted Adam & Eve to listen to him and do things his way? Why do you think we should listen to God and do things his way?

Chris Jones | Northern Region | Youth Ministry & High School SRE Advisor

The Fall–Part 2

Genesis 3:14-19

So the Lord God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this, “Cursed are you above all livestock and all wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life. ¹⁵ And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.” ¹⁶ To the woman he said, “I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labour you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.” ¹⁷ To Adam he said, “Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat from it,’ “Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. ¹⁸ It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. ¹⁹ By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.”

Adam and Eve’s rebellion against God causes their delight in each other’s presence and their very good relationship with God to give way to guilt and shame. Their sin has consequences that damage their relationships.

For the serpent – we are told that there will be hostility between him and humanity. For the woman – her once-great relationship with her husband will face challenges. For the man – life will be a struggle until death comes. This is the nature of sin. Life in a broken world is characterised by damaged relationships between people and God; between each other; and even with the world around us.

Yet sin does not have the final say. In Genesis 3:15 there is the promise that one day the serpent’s head will be crushed by Eve’s offspring. A promise that is fulfilled in Jesus Christ at the cross, as he defeated sin and death. What great joy it is to know that God is more powerful than sin!

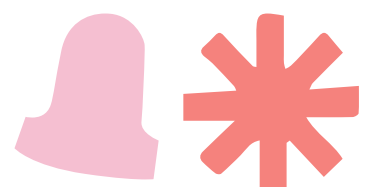
Questions for everyone:

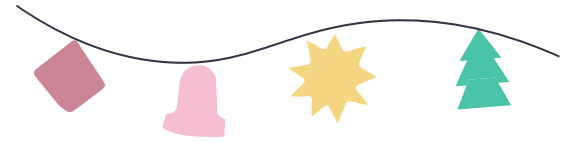
Considering the consequences of Adam and Eve’s rebellion, how can we see the impact of sin on our own relationships with each other, with God, and with the world? And how does the promise of Jesus defeating sin and death give us hope in the face of these challenges?

Questions for families:

What was the promise that God made to Eve? What do you think the promise tells us about God?

Chris Jones | Northern Region | Youth Ministry & High School SRE Advisor





God's Initiative in Salvation

Genesis 12:1-3

The Lord had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. ² I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

Genesis 12 is where the story of salvation really gets moving. Up until this point, we have seen why the world needs saving. Now we see how this salvation will occur. What stands out in this salvation plan is that all the initiative comes from God. God chooses Abram, God will grow Abram's descendants into a great nation, and God will bring blessing to the whole world through them.

The fact that God alone is responsible for our salvation is something that is hard for our prideful hearts to accept. As human beings, we love fixing our own problems and we are always looking for self-improvement. But in the Bible, we learn that without God we are without hope. It is only because of his initiative in promising salvation to Abram that there is any hope for humankind. And it is only because God, by his own initiative, stepped into our world at Christmas time that his salvation has come to us.

Question for everyone:

Considering God's initiative in the salvation plan outlined in Genesis 12, how does this story remind us of our dependence on God for hope and salvation in our own lives?

Questions for families:

What are the big promises that God made to Abraham? The good news is that God is a promise-keeping God - you'll see more about how God keeps his promises in the coming devotions. What do you think it means for us that God keeps his promises?

Andrew Spalding | Academic Dean Youthworks College

The God Who Gives and Gives

2 Samuel 7:10-16

And I will provide a place for my people Israel and will plant them so that they can have a home of their own and no longer be disturbed. Wicked people will not oppress them anymore, as they did at the beginning¹¹ and have done ever since the time I appointed leaders over my people Israel. I will also give you rest from all your enemies. "The Lord declares to you that the Lord himself will establish a house for you:¹² When your days are over and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom.¹³ He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.¹⁴ I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with a rod wielded by men, with floggings inflicted by human hands.¹⁵ But my love will never be taken away from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you.¹⁶ Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever."

King David (1,000BC) owed everything he had to God. God had taken David from a shepherd boy to a great and powerful king. Though he was the youngest and smallest of his brothers, God had chosen him to lead his people. Through David, God had brought many of the blessings he had promised Abraham long ago. But God was only just getting started. In this monumental passage, God promises David even more—an eternal dynasty. Somehow, someday a king will rule on David's throne forever.

The Old Testament tells us the tragic history of David's descendants. The kings that follow in David's line continually disappoint. But despite their sin, God delivers what he promised. God gives us his Son, Jesus Christ, to be our perfect king. He is the gift we don't deserve but so desperately need.

Question for everyone:

Considering the promises made to David in 2 Samuel 7 and the ultimate fulfillment of these promises through Jesus Christ, how does David's story remind us of the unmerited gift of Jesus as our perfect king and the hope he brings to our lives?

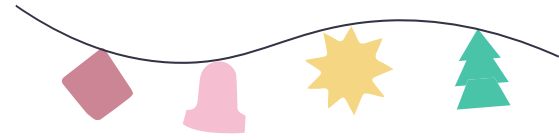
Question for families:

Another big promise from the promise-keeping God! What was the big promise that God made to David?

Andrew Spalding | Academic Dean Youthworks College



December 6



The Genealogy of Jesus the Messiah

Matthew 1:1-6

This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham: ² Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, ³ Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar, Perez the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram, ⁴ Ram the father of Amminadab, Amminadab the father of Nahshon, Nahshon the father of Salmon, ⁵ Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab, Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth, Obed the father of Jesse, ⁶ and Jesse the father of King David. David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah's wife...

It may be a somewhat humorous and cynical thing to say, "You can choose your friends, but not your relatives", but it's true! And as we look at the relatives of Jesus in this section of his family tree there are two really important observations to note.

Firstly, the mention of Abraham and David links the family line of Jesus with the extraordinary promises of God to "bless the whole world" through Abraham's family (Genesis 12:1-3), and to establish an eternal kingdom with an eternal king in the line of David (2 Samuel 7). Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life that is a blessing to the whole world, and he is the eternal king of God's kingdom.

Secondly, there is a select mention of four particular women in the family line of Jesus – Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Uriah's wife – who were either women of a disreputable background or were embroiled in some form of scandal. And yet they are here, notable mentions in the family line of God's Messiah! And this reminds us of another extraordinary facet of God's character: he chooses the foolish things of this world to shame the wise, and chooses the weak things of the world to shame the strong.

Rejoice that God's Messiah is not only the royal Son of promise, but also the one born lowly and in a manger.

Question for everyone:

Family is important. Why is it important that Jesus is in Abraham's & David's family?

Question for families:

Can you see any names in Jesus family tree that you know? On a piece of paper draw Jesus' family tree starting with Jesus at the top and Abraham at the bottom. Add in the names that you know. Can you add in the big promises that God made to some of these people (Hint: think back to Abraham and David)

Mike Dicker | Principal Youthworks College

The Trustworthy Account

Luke 1:1-4

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us,² just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word.³ With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus,⁴ so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

Albert Einstein famously said, "Question everything."

These are helpful words urging us down the path of continual learning. But too often these words are interpreted as "trust no one." But in life, the reality is that there comes a point where we have to trust others. Otherwise, we will live a lonely, frustrated existence of suspicion.

In his account of Jesus' life, Luke invites us to trust him. To trust that the gospel he proclaims is true. His invitation to us isn't baseless— there are two factors that Luke points to in these verses which give us confidence to trust his account when we follow Einstein's advice:

1) It is based on the testimony of credible eyewitnesses (v2)— many of whom were still alive at the time he wrote, and so could verify his story; and

2) Luke's 'careful investigation' (v3) of the facts was as an historian, whose aim is to confirm what has already been attested to by others.

Our faith is not based on hearsay and baseless assertions. It has a rigorous foundation of tangible evidence which gives us confidence to trust in the Lord.

Questions for everyone:

Who do you trust? Why can you trust what we read in Luke's gospel?

Questions for families:

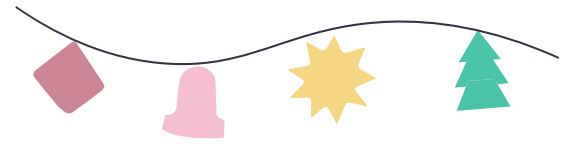
How do you feel when you have to trust someone or something? Is it easy or difficult for you? Why? What can we do to build trust with others?

Rev Matt Bartlett | Wollongong and South Western Regions | Youth Ministry & High School SRE Advisor



Is God good?

Luke 1:5-25



In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. ⁶ Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly. ⁷ But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years. ⁸ Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, ⁹ he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰ And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside. ¹¹ Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. ¹³ But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. ¹⁴ He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. ¹⁶ Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." ¹⁸ Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." ¹⁹ The angel answered, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. ²⁰ And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time." ²¹ Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. ²² When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realised he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak. ²³ When his time of service was completed, he returned home. ²⁴ After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. ²⁵ "The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."

'In the time of Herod king of Judea...' we know Herod reigned in the region of Israel from 40BC to 4BC. Most Jews of Jesus' day believed the Holy Spirit had not been active for 400 years since the last of the Old Testament prophets, Malachi. But is God ever silent? We meet Mary's cousin, Elizabeth, and her husband, Zechariah 'both of them upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments...but they had no children.' Their childlessness was not the result of any sin or fault on their part (we also know they had been praying that God would grant them a child, v 13) but was part of God's good plan.

The angel Gabriel (v19, a heavenly messenger sent from God) brought Zechariah wonderful news from God of a son, but he failed to meet that word from God with belief. As a result, he was famously struck dumb for the duration of his wife's pregnancy.

Questions for everyone:

When do you struggle to know God's goodness? Can you think of any promises God has made to us in the Bible, and who can you share those promises with (and encourage them to meet those promises with belief)?

Question for families:

What was the special job given to Elizabeth and Zechariah's son?

The Birth of Jesus Foretold

Luke 1:26-28

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee,²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary.²⁸ The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you."

Mary was pledged to Joseph, and Joseph was a descendant of David. This interesting detail is much more than Joseph's bragging rights at his next Nazareth barbeque. It hints at a breathtaking promise which God made Joseph's ancestor a thousand years earlier. In 2 Samuel 7 (see December 5), King David intended to build God a house - a temple – a place where God's people could go to meet with God. However, God had other ideas. David would not build God a house; instead, God would build David a house. And nothing so small as a mere building; God would build David an eternal dynasty:

'When your days are over ... I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, and ... I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his Father, and he shall be my son.' 2 Samuel 7:12-14

Mary was indeed highly favoured, because she, of all women, was chosen to be mother to the long-awaited, Kingdom-ruling, Son of David. And through Christ we too are highly favoured. We do not have to go to a temple to meet with God, for he has kept his breathtaking promise. He has come to us.

Question for everyone:

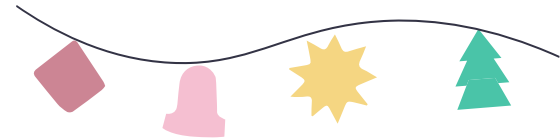
How does the realisation that God's promise to King David in 2 Samuel 7 was fulfilled through Mary, the mother of Jesus, impact your understanding of the significance of Christ's birth and the closeness of God's presence in your life today?

Question for families:

Joseph is part of King David's family. King David was his great, great, great (lots of greats) grandfather. Why do you think Luke tells us this? (Hint: Have a look back at your family tree drawing and the promises God made to Abraham & David.)

Rev Adam Jolliffe | Northern Region | Children's Ministry & Primary SRE Advisor





The Birth of Jesus Foretold

Luke 1:29-38

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰ But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favour with God. ³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end." ³⁴ "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" ³⁵ The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. ³⁶ Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. ³⁷ For no word from God will ever fail." ³⁸ "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

When met by the angel Gabriel, Mary was troubled and afraid. But the comforting words of the angel, -"Don't be afraid, Mary", and hearing the promises from God, Mary's fear gave way to disbelief. "How will this be?" Mary asks. How often do we feel a similar way when it comes to trusting in the promises of God? "How will this be?" But Mary does not stop there. Upon hearing that she will bear a son by the power of the Holy Spirit, Mary is left simply to say, "I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled." Mary's fear before Gabriel and disbelief at what God promises to do, is turned to trust and obedience to the plans of God.

This Christmas may you move from marvelling at the lavish love that God has shown to us in his Son to a renewed trust in and obedience to the plans and purposes of God.

Question for everyone:

Reflecting on Mary's journey from fear and disbelief to trust and obedience in response to God's promise, how can we learn to trust and obey God's plans in our own lives, even when they seem challenging or beyond our understanding?

Questions for families:

Mary is going to be the mother of a very special baby. What does the angel tell Mary about the baby that God is sending? Whose name does the angel speak of when he's telling Mary about the baby? (Hint: This is very exciting, promise-keeping news!)

God is keeping his promises! What do you think that means for trusting God in our lives? How might that change the way we live?

Rev Cam Harte | South Sydney Region | Children's Ministry & Primary SRE Advisor

Mary visits Elizabeth

Luke 1:39-45

At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, ⁴⁰ where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴² In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! ⁴³ But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

How do we respond to Jesus? Is it only through words said out loud, or are there other ways? In today's reading the Saviour had not been born, and yet John, in the womb of Elizabeth, leaped for joy. It's fascinating and humbling to know that we have a Saviour who will receive our response to him - whether it's vocalised with words, hummed along to music, expressed creatively, or done quietly in our hearts and minds. As John shows us, one is never too young or unable to know Jesus and respond to him. What a comfort for us that Jesus hears and knows all people in their very depths of who they are. At Christmas, we can joyfully respond in faith to Jesus, the one who came to save, in whatever capacity our bodies give.

Question for everyone:

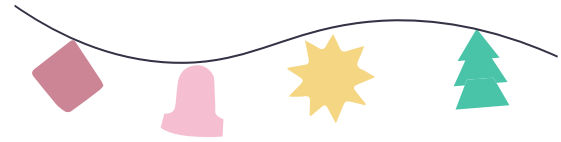
Reflecting on how even an unborn baby, John, responded to Jesus with joy in the womb, how does this encourage us to express our own responses to Jesus, whether through words, music, creativity, or quiet reflection, this Christmas season and beyond?

Questions for families:

What are some ways you can respond to Jesus? Can you think of any actions or feelings that show your response to him?

Rev. Bec Baines | Accessibility Ministry Advisor





Mary's Song

Luke 1:46-56

And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord ⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, ⁴⁸ for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, ⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me— holy is his name. ⁵⁰ His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. ⁵¹ He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. ⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. ⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. ⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful ⁵⁵ to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors."

What do you sing about during the Christmas season?

With overflowing joy, Mary's song praises God for the great things he is doing. She sees God's goodness in his upside-down blessings; bringing down the proud and lifting up the humble (v 52). God is keeping his promises (vv 54-55) but by unexpected means. While nobody is looking, God is blessing this unmarried young woman with a unique role in his salvation plan. It didn't seem as if anything was happening on a national level, but Israel's Saviour was on his way.

It can seem like God isn't doing anything as we look around at a world seemingly lacking the peace Mary's baby was to bring. But perhaps we are looking in the wrong places. God is at work and his plans have not been thwarted. Ask the Holy Spirit to open your eyes to see how God is working in unexpected places. And join Mary in songs of praise.

Question for everyone:

As you reflect on Mary's joyful song of praise during the Christmas season, where can you see God at work? What prompts you to sing praise to God?

Questions for families:

What do we know about God that makes us want to praise and thank him like Mary did?

Annemarie Rivers | South and Western Region | Children's Ministry & Primary SRE Advisor

The Birth of John the Baptist

Luke 1:57-66

When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son.⁵⁸ Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.⁵⁹ On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah,⁶⁰ but his mother spoke up and said, "No! He is to be called John."⁶¹ They said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who has that name."⁶² Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child.⁶³ He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, "His name is John."⁶⁴ Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God.⁶⁵ All the neighbors were filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things.⁶⁶ Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, "What then is this child going to be?" For the Lord's hand was with him.

When my wife smiles and says, "Guess what?", it's either because someone's engaged or someone's had a baby. The birth of any child brings joy. But for Elizabeth's relatives, the joy was greater. She had prayed for children, but had never been blessed with children, and was now old. So, when she bore a son in her old age, those who loved her were filled with joy and praised God for his great mercy to her.

Her husband, Zechariah, was also shown great mercy. He was mute (see December 8) because he had not believed the angel's word that his wife would bear a son. Now, his determination that the child should be called John indicated that he had repented and humbly accepted the angel's words. God, in his mercy, restored his speech. His neighbours, already joyful, were now filled with awe and wondered, "What then is this child going to be?"

Clearly God was doing great things amongst his people. But John's birth was not the greatest. Elizabeth was old and became pregnant, but Mary was a virgin and became pregnant! God would do great things through John. What then, would God do through Jesus?

Question for everyone:

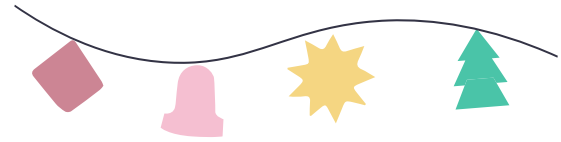
Reflecting on the joy and wonder surrounding the birth of John the Baptist, and the signs of God's mercy and restoration, what feelings and expectations might people have had for the child Jesus, given that his birth was even more extraordinary?

Question for families:

Why do you think people were filled with awe and wondered about what kind of child John would become when his father Zechariah named him as instructed by the angel?

Rev Adam Jolliffe | Northern Region | Children's Ministry & Primary SRE Advisor





Zechariah's Song

Luke 1:67-75

His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied: ⁶⁸ "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them. ⁶⁹ He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David ⁷⁰ (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), ⁷¹ salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us— ⁷² to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant, ⁷³ the oath he swore to our father Abraham: ⁷⁴ to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

What is Zechariah singing about?

Zechariah is singing about the faithfulness of God to his people. He has seen God at work through the birth of his son, John the Baptist, and is filled with the Spirit. Zechariah prophesies (and sings) praise to the Lord who is sending a messiah who will fulfil God's promises. Promises to God's people that they will receive redemption, salvation, and mercy. Zechariah remembers the covenant that was made to Abraham (Genesis 22:15-18) for descendants, a city, and blessing to all the nations.

We are the children of Abraham (Romans 4:16-17) and we receive these same promises if we have faith in Jesus our Messiah, who came to save us. Let's thank God that we too can be saved through Jesus, the promised one. That we will sing joyfully like Zechariah and serve the Lord because of his faithfulness to us.

Question for everyone:

Reflecting on Zechariah's song of praise and the promises of redemption and salvation, how does the faithfulness of God and the fulfillment of his promises through Jesus bring joy and a sense of purpose to your life, enabling you to serve the Lord with thanksgiving and trust?

Questions for families:

What promises do you think Zechariah is so excited about in his song? How do these promises make you feel about God?

Dr Ruth Lukabyo | Dean of Women Youthworks College

God's Faithfulness

Romans 3:23-26

"...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,²⁴ and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.²⁵ God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—²⁶ he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus."

"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). These are strong words that resonate so clearly in our time, particularly in light of the ongoing conflict in Israel and Gaza. Human beings, created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27), are meant to reflect God's glory – the magnificence of his goodness, benevolence and creativity. And yet, we fall so short of our created purpose. We treat each other with indifference and cruelty. We curse rather than bless, destroy rather than protect, and invent evil rather than create God-glorifying beauty. Only God can redeem our fallenness (Romans 3:24). He gifted us with Jesus to bring about his justice. By dying for us, Jesus took the punishment we deserved. This way, God maintains his justice in punishing sins and makes us righteous as we put our faith in Jesus (Romans 3:25-26). Praise God!

Question for everyone:

How can we show more kindness and love to each other, reflecting God's goodness and benevolence in our daily interactions?

Questions for families:

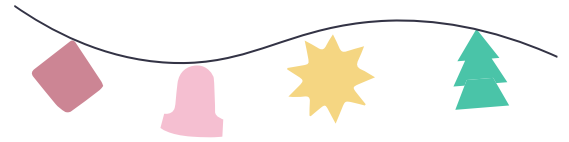
Why do you think it's important to remember that 'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God'? How does Jesus help us when we make mistakes or do wrong things?

Viv Cheung | Lecturer Youthworks College



December 16

The Request of James and John



Mark 10:43-45

Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,⁴⁴ and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Our view of leadership, success and greatness is often skewed by the world's images and criteria. You must be rich, powerful, well spoken, super smart, have big muscles, good looking, the best at sport, always a winner, be the best...

The problem with these things is that they are self-focussed. Why do we believe the lie that any of these things make someone great? Because sometimes it seems like the world tells us that life is one big popularity contest or school sport carnival or maths test...

Jesus turns the popular world view on its head! His view of greatness is completely selfless, focussed on others, seeking to be last rather than first, to serve not to be served... It is no surprise that Jesus' view is more meaningful for the Kingdom of God, far deeper and rich in love as it reflects true sacrifice for the benefit of others.

This is why Jesus came into the world, to model to humanity what true greatness is, not to be served but to serve, to provide the ultimate act of love by giving his life for the sins and eternal sake of many.

Questions for everyone:

What does Jesus say true greatness looks like?

Why did Jesus say he came into the world?

Questions for families:

What are some ways that you can show love to your family by serving them? How could you serve at church to show love to your church family? Talk about this together and write down a few ideas. Pray together and thank Jesus for his ultimate act of loving service in dying on the cross for us.

Andy Stevenson | Head of Ministry Support and the SRE Office

Jesus Predicts His Death

John 12:23-27

Jesus replied, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. ²⁵Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me. ²⁷Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour."

I appreciate when Jesus gives us moments of clarity during his ministry. Sometimes we see the bible accounts of Jesus through slightly opaque glass from our historical distance, but here we see with crystal clear clarity why Jesus came into the world. As Jesus prepares his disciples and himself for his imminent execution, he asks them should he say, "Father, save me from this hour?" And immediately answers, "No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour." There are few moments clearer than Jesus' words here. As Jesus prepares to be that kernel that falls to the ground and dies so that much seed would be produced, we see the mission of Jesus front and centre. As we remember the birth of Jesus this Christmas, we remember that Jesus came that he may die so that all those who follow him would find life and honour from the Father.

Question for everyone:

Reflecting on Jesus' clear statement about his purpose in coming into the world, how does this deep understanding of his mission and sacrifice impact your appreciation of the Christmas season and the significance of his birth in the broader context of his life and ministry?

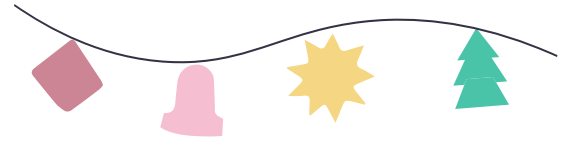
Question for families:

Why do you think Jesus said he came to the world for this hour, even though he knew it would be a difficult and challenging time for him?

Rev Cam Harte | Children's Ministry & Primary SRE Advisor



Jesus Taken Up Into Heaven



Acts 1:1-11

In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach² until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen.³ After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.⁴ On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about.⁵ For John baptised with water, but in a few days you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit.”⁶ Then they gathered around him and asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”⁷ He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”⁹ After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.¹⁰ They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them.¹¹ “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”

On December 7 we saw that Luke’s account of Jesus’ life and death was based on the testimony of credible witnesses. Here in the sequel to Luke’s gospel, our historian continues to attest to the trustworthiness of his account by attesting to the ‘many convincing proofs that [Jesus] was alive’ (Acts 1:3, cf. Luke 24).

Luke picks up the story in Acts 1 with an astounding account of Jesus’ final words before ascending into heaven to sit at the Father’s side— his promise of the Holy Spirit coming to them, and his directive to be his witnesses to spread the gospel to “the ends of the earth” (v8).

As we approach Christmas, we reflect on what Christ coming into the world as a ‘helpless’ baby means for our eternal wellbeing. But as the men in white encourage us to remember, there is a time coming when the Lord will return! And this time, Jesus’ power and authority will be undeniable.

As both Christmas and the second coming draw ever closer, we would do well to ask ourselves— will I be found “staring at the sky” witlessly? Or am I taking up Jesus’ directive to be his Spirit-empowered witness of the gospel to those in my community, nation and world?

Question for everyone:

Look back to Day 7. Acts is the second volume to follow Luke’s gospel. How does it feel to know that Jesus’ return will be real – really physical and really personal?

Question for families:

Why do you think the men in white told the disciples not to stand there staring at the sky and instead to be Jesus’ witnesses? What does it mean to be a witness for Jesus?

Believers Who Have Died

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. ¹⁴ For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. ¹⁵ According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words.

What immediately comes to mind when you think of the word Advent? Perhaps what first comes to your mind is the arrival of the Lord in the incarnation of the word made flesh, the Lord Jesus. And therefore, you think of Christmas time because this is usually what we call the season of Advent. However, the word advent actually has a double meaning. Yes, it means the coming of the Lord Jesus in the incarnation, but Advent also refers to the second coming of the Lord Jesus, at the end of the age. The Advent of the Lord is both the looking back to the incarnation, and the looking forward to the, '...Lord himself coming down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God'. When the dead in Christ will rise, and those who are still alive will be, 'caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever'.

The Advent of the Lord is about hope. Not the fanciful-day-dreaming-wishy-washy kind of 'hope' that lacks any certainty or assurance, but the kind of hope that is based on the undeniable fact of Christ's death and resurrection, and ascension to God's right hand, 'For we believe that Jesus died and rose again; and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who are falling asleep in him according to the Lord's word'. This Advent, therefore, 'encourage one another with these words'.

Questions for everyone:

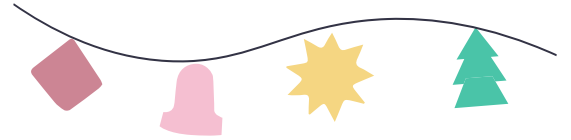
What does the word "Advent" mean to you, and why is it a time of hope? How can we encourage each other with the hope of Christ's coming?

Question for families:

The second coming of Jesus filled the first Christians with hope. What in this passage fills you with hope?

Mike Dicker | Principal Youthworks College





Getting ready!

Matthew 25:1-13

"At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten bridesmaids who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. ² Five of them were foolish and five were wise. ³ The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. ⁴ The wise, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. ⁵ The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep. ⁶ At midnight the cry rang out: 'Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!' ⁷ Then all the bridesmaids woke up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸ The foolish ones said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.' ⁹ 'No,' they replied, 'there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.' ¹⁰ But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The bridesmaids who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut. ¹¹ Later the others also came. 'Sir! Sir!' they said. 'Open the door for us!' ¹² But he replied, 'I tell you the truth, I don't know you.' ¹³ "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour."

Weddings have a bit in common with Christmas. Family gathered around, lots of expectations – and lots of preparations! I remember when our son got married there were so many decisions. What to wear, what flowers to get, what food to eat, how many cars needed to be where and when and for whom. I expect that today you've got a list of preparations you need to make for Christmas – presents to wrap (or maybe buy!), menus to cater, bon bons to fill, grass to mow, tables to set...Jesus' parable of the 10 bridesmaids should recalibrate our hearts and fill us with expectant joy.

We read yesterday that this Christian season of Advent reminds us to look in two directions each Christmas – backwards to Jesus' first coming as a babe in a manger, and forwards to his glorious second coming. When he returns it will be like a bridegroom coming to his wedding. And we, the church, will be his bride! In Jesus' parable, five bridesmaids didn't properly prepare for the groom's arrival. Sure, they went out to meet him, they knew he was the groom and that he was coming. But after waiting so long that they all fell asleep those five realised they didn't have enough oil to keep their oil lamps burning.

How terrible it was for those who Jesus calls foolish, that they ended up being shut out of the wedding banquet of the groom. "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour"

Questions for everyone:

How can you get your heart ready for Jesus' return, that could come at any hour?

Questions for families:

What excites you most about Jesus' promised return?

Canon Craig Roberts | Youthworks CEO

The Day of The Lord

2 Peter 3:8-10

But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.⁹ The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.¹⁰ But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare.

Have you got through your Christmas to-do list yet? There is so much to remember. The Apostle Peter writes of one thing we must not forget; that God's perspective on time is not like ours. Jesus is coming back, suddenly and unexpectedly. Peter lifts our eyes above the daily tasks and troubles to remind us, this roaring end is inevitable. He doesn't explain at length what it will be like, but points to what it shows of God's character; his enduring patience.

You might be longing for Jesus' return, when all will be set right and we will finally see his face. You may be distracted with the daily challenges of obedience in a difficult world. You might be praying for further delay while those you love come to faith. Whatever you're facing, look up and remember God's kindness and patience in wanting everyone to come to repentance that they might join us in looking forward to the new heaven and new earth, where righteousness dwells.

Question for everyone:

Reflecting on Peter's reminder about God's patience and the return of Jesus, how does this perspective on God's timing influence your daily life and your interactions with others during the Christmas season and beyond?

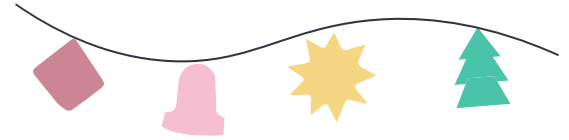
Question for families:

What are three things we learn about God in these verses?

Annemarie Rivers | South and Western Region | Children's Ministry & Primary SRE Advisor



Eden Restored



Revelation 22:1-7

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb² down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.³ No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him.⁴ They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.⁵ There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.⁶ The angel said to me, "These words are trustworthy and true. The Lord, the God who inspires the prophets, sent his angel to show his servants the things that must soon take place.⁷ Look, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy written in this scroll."

"It usually happens to people a little older than you." These were the deflating words of the optometrist doing his best to let me down gently. My eyes were fading before their time! These were the words that brought to the fore the surprising reality hiding in plain sight – I'm actually getting older! Not to be overdramatic, life is ebbing away from me; death's tide is slowly coming in.

This is every person's reality, the reality of a world that is 'subject to frustration' and in 'bondage to decay' (Romans 8) even if we try to hide from it. But Jesus says, "Look, I am coming soon". And when he does, he will reverse the curse that currently enslaves all of creation. One word will characterise the new creation brought about by his coming:

Life

Life that flows from God and the Lamb

Life that brings healing to the nations

Life that fulfills our hope in the risen and returning Lord.

Come Lord Jesus!

Question for everyone:

Reflecting on the promise of Jesus' return and the transformation of the world, how does this hope of a new creation and everlasting life impact the way you view the passage of time, aging, and the limitations of the present world, especially during the Christmas season when many celebrate the birth of Jesus?

Question for families:

How does the idea of new life make you feel, especially in the context of Jesus coming back?

Rev Al James | Youth Ministry Advisor

The Birth of Jesus – Part I

Luke 2:1-7

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ² (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³ And everyone went to their own town to register. ⁴ So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. ⁵ He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷ and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

The birth of the majestic and glorious Son of the Most High and Ever Living God, ruler of the heavens and the earth! The most significant event in the entire history of the world!

But did Luke miss the memo? His account of the birth is only seven sentences long. It recalls politics, registration in a town, and even the accommodation situation!

But the description of the birth itself consists of these words:

‘.. and she gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger.’

What’s most striking is how mundane it is.

The birth of the Son of the Most High was normal, mundane, unobtrusive; human.

The Most High God entered into humanity, in all its mundanity.

He really was human – properly human – like all of us.

Thank God that he was ‘fully human in every way... that he might make atonement for the sins of the people’ (Hebrews 2:17)!

Question for everyone:

Consider the idea that Jesus became “fully human in every way.” What significance does this have for your understanding of the nature of Jesus and his ability to relate to your human experiences and struggles?

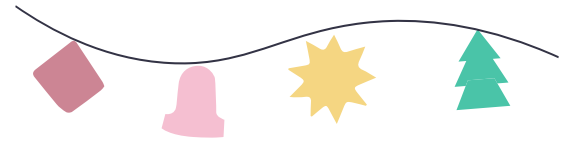
Question for families:

Can you think of a time when something ordinary or simple turned out to be very special or important? How might this relate to Jesus’ birth in a manger?

Rev Al James | Youth Ministry Advisor



The Birth of Jesus – Part 2



Luke 2:8-12

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign to you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

What a momentous evening. For the shepherds in the field, they were not expecting anything unusual about this evening. Just another night, just like last night, and the night before, and the months before, and the years before that.

For the angels, the anticipation of the Saviour’s birth, and the joy of being the heralds of the fulfilment of God’s plan of salvation, burst forth, scaring the unwashed socks off the unprepared shepherds.

The birth of Jesus is momentous news. World shattering. History remaking. Cosmic in scope.

Does the anticipation of celebrating Jesus’ birth burst forth from you in the joy of being able to share in the heralding of this news? Are you anticipating wonder to transform you, your family, and your church this Christmas?

Or are you feeling today more like the shepherds? Just another Christmas, just another year, just like all the years before.

Father God give us fresh joy and wonder at the possibilities of what you may do this Christmas.

Questions for everyone:

As you reflect on the moment when the shepherds heard the angel’s announcement of Jesus’ birth, consider how you anticipate and will celebrate Christmas. Are you filled with joy and wonder at the significance of this season and the birth of Jesus, or does it sometimes feel like just another holiday? How can you recapture the sense of wonder and anticipation for the true meaning of Christmas in your celebrations?

Question for families:

The angel brought “good news that will cause great joy for all the people.” What do you think makes this news so joyful? How does the birth of Jesus bring joy to you?

Rev Tim Beilharz | Wollongong Region | Childrens Ministry & Primary SRE Advisor

The Birth of Jesus – Part 3

Luke 2:13-20

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ¹⁴“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.” ¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.” ¹⁶ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

Hark the herald angels sing. They have announced their message and now they glorify the newborn king. Now the wonder of the birth announcement has ignited the shepherds’ hearts and minds. They will not rest until they have shared in this joy for themselves. They don’t want second-hand knowledge. They want to grasp the reality of the Saviour’s birth for themselves.

And then once they have shared in that nativity scene, the shepherds are so captivated by all that has happened that evening, that they cannot but spread the word to others.

This is what good news does. It captures our imagination, it enlivens our spirit, it generates a restlessness that cannot be quenched and overflows into the need to share it with others.

Lord Jesus, as we share today in the celebration of your birth, may the goodness of this news capture our hearts and minds anew, and help us to spread this word, concerning what we have been told.

Questions for everyone:

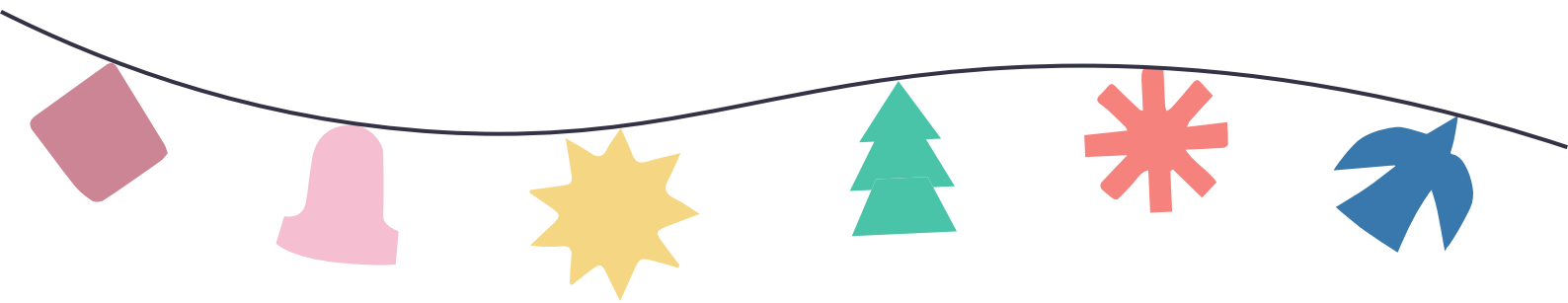
Reflect on the shepherds’ response to the angel’s message and the birth of Jesus. How does their enthusiasm and desire to see the newborn Saviour and share the good news inspire you in your own faith journey? How can you carry the message of Jesus’ birth with the same joy and urgency in your own life, just as the shepherds did?

Questions for families:

Imagine you were one of the shepherds. How do you think you would have felt when the angels appeared in the sky, praising God and telling you about the birth of Jesus?

**Rev Tim Beilharz | Wollongong Region | Childrens Ministry & Primary
SRE Advisor**





Isaiah 9:6

'For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.'