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# WHAT'S IN YOUR TEACHING GUIDE

This Teaching Guide has three purposes:

- to give the teacher tools for focusing on the content of the session in the Study Guide.
- to give the teacher additional Bible background information.
- to give the teacher variety and choice in preparation.

The Teaching Guide includes two major components: Teacher Helps and Teacher Options.

## Teacher Helps

### Bible Background

The Study Guide is your main source of Bible study material.

This section helps you more fully understand and interpret the Scripture text.



### Teaching Outline

provides you with an outline of the main themes in the Study Guide.

## Teacher Options

The next three sections provide a beginning, middle, and end for the session, with focus paragraphs in between.

### Focus Paragraphs

are printed in italics at the top of the page because they are the most important part of the Teaching Guide. These paragraphs will help you move your class from “what the text meant” to “what the text means.”

## You Can Choose!

There is more material in each session than you can use, so choose the options from each section to tailor the session to the needs of your group.

### Prepare Before the Session

Read the session for today in the Study Guide. Then read the options in this Teaching Guide, placing checkmarks beside the activities you plan to include. After you have decided which options to use, gather the appropriate materials.

# UNTIL THE SON OF GOD APPEARS

*Jeremiah 33:14-16*

## Bible Background



### Historical Context

The prophet Jeremiah is described as “the most sensitive and in many ways the most appealing of Israel’s prophetic spokesmen” (Harrelson, 253). He began his prophetic ministry in the thirteenth year of the reign of Josiah (Jer 1:1-3), who served as king from 640–609 BC. His career lasted beyond the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC.

Josiah is known for bringing religious reform to the people, particularly following the discovery around 622 BC of a lost “book of the law” when the temple was being restored. Josiah became king at the age of eight and reigned for thirty-one years. After his death in battle against Pharaoh Necho II of Egypt, his son Jehoahaz came to the throne.

Jehoahaz only reigned for three months, however. Necho overpowered Judah and deported Jehoahaz to Egypt. The pharaoh then placed Jehoiakim, another of Josiah’s sons, on the throne in Jerusalem. He reigned from 608–598 BC. Jehoiakin did not follow in his father’s virtuous footsteps. His response to Necho’s demands was to impose heavy taxes on the Judeans and further exploit the resources by building a new palace for himself. Furthermore, he allowed idolatry to flourish, undoing much of his father’s reforms. The spiritual infidelity that

marked his reign brought about condemnation from Jeremiah. This led the king to persecute the prophet.

During Jehoiakim’s reign, Prince Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon took control of Judah in 605 BC. After initially submitting to the Babylonian prince, Jehoiakim later rebelled. This rebellion led to Nebuchadrezzar’s invasion of Jerusalem in 598 BC. Jehoiachin succeeded his father Jehoiakim, who died before the city was captured. But Jehoiachin served only a few months. Babylon destroyed Jerusalem in 597 and began the deportation of the Jews. Zedekiah, another of Josiah’s sons, was placed on the throne. Zedekiah was an ineffective and indecisive leader who “sought the sane counsel of Jeremiah but lacked the ability to implement it” (West, 357).

### The Weeping Prophet

Jeremiah’s career spanned a wide array of leadership in Judah and a tumultuous time in the life of the nation, both politically and religiously. These circumstances, “the trying times in which he lived, his sensitive and uncompromising character, the divine compulsion to speak out, and his almost total rejection by his people,” gave shape to his career, producing what might have been the most “tragic figure among the Hebrew prophets” (West, 372). Called the “weeping prophet,” Jeremiah “reflects both the mood of despair that accompanied Judah’s end and the painful first efforts to plot a course for the

covenant people's future" (West, 359). His was a difficult mission of exposing those who refused to face the coming disaster and gave false promise to the people. God also called him to follow the disastrous end with a message intended to arouse "hope for a new era in the covenant history" (West, 359).

Jeremiah is as formidable a spokesperson for God's righteous demands from the covenant people as was the prophet Amos before him. He demonstrates "strength and courage in the face of enormous temptations...[yet] portrays the tormenting doubts that plagued him throughout his career" (Harrelson, 253). Through all of these circumstances, Jeremiah remained faithful to his calling and to delivering God's message to the people. Not only did he bring to his hearers the words of God that he received, he also brought "his personal response and reaction to these words" (Harrelson, 253).

There are three types of material in the book of Jeremiah. First, there are oracles, the prophetic words uttered by the prophet himself and written in poetic form in the first person. Second, there are stories *about* Jeremiah, written by a narrator, presumably Jeremiah's secretary, Baruch. Scholars describe the third type of material as "additional materials from the Jeremiah school of tradition" (Harrelson, 256).

As was previously mentioned, Jeremiah delivered messages of warning and critique as well as words of hope for the coming restoration. Most of the hopeful words are found in the four chapters, 30–33, called "The Book of Consolation." These chapters "consist of oracles, discourses, and narratives, representing both early and late phases of the prophet's career" (West, 372). It is within this Book of Consolation and the biographical material that our text, verses 14–16, is taken.

### The Book of Consolation

Jeremiah 32–33 contains "three complexes of sayings" (Bright, 297). Chapter 32

# Outline

## FOR TEACHING

- I. Jeremiah: A Formidable Spokesperson for God
  - A. Ministered 627–587 BC.
  - B. Is sometimes called "the weeping prophet."
  - C. Jeremiah brought to the people both God's word and his personal response.
  - D. He was almost totally rejected by his people.
- II. The Book of Jeremiah
  - A. Three Types of Material
    1. Oracles
    2. Stories about Jeremiah
    3. Additional Materials
  - B. The Book of Consolation: Jeremiah 30–33
- III. The Context of Jeremiah 33
  - A. These words are set in the time of Jeremiah's imprisonment.
  - B. God gives Jeremiah a message that the king and others in power consider traitorous.
  - C. Jeremiah's current situation parallels that of Judah's.
  - D. Words of restoration come during a time of confinement.
- IV. Hope for a New Creation
  - A. Change first comes from the heart, from within.
  - B. The whole people of God are still responsible to keep the covenant.
  - C. The gift of new life, though a promise, is to be an earthly reality.
- V. Jeremiah's Message to Us
  - A. In what do we place our hope?
  - B. Where is the focus of our preparations?
  - C. Our inward preparations determine our actions.

contains the description of Jeremiah's purchase of land, a symbolic action

intended to show the sincerity of God's "promise that normal life would one day be resumed in the land" (Bright, 297).

The second sayings-complex, in Jeremiah 33:1-13, continues the themes of the previous chapter but is explicitly noted to be a second word that came to Jeremiah while he was in prison. A final section, beginning with verse 14, proclaims that a branch, a descendent of David, is coming. This branch represents not only an individual but also the continuation of the just and righteous dynasty of King David (Bright, 298). Chapter 33 is to be linked with chapters 30-32, which precede it and which speak in even more detail about the coming restoration of the people in their homeland. God is going to raise up a righteous branch for David, Jeremiah declares (see also Jer 23:5). This branch will rule unlike the previous kings of Israel and Judah, for this king, raised up by God, will perfectly execute justice and righteousness.

In addition to these words of hope proclaimed in the midst of restrictions, sadness, loss, and uncertainty, these oracles proclaim that God still honors the covenants made with Israel's royal and priestly leadership. These covenants were made long before, and God will adhere to them for all time (Fretheim, 477).

## A Way to Begin

*Jeremiah's prophecy emphasizes the importance of inward preparation and change instead of relying on outward circumstances and structures to do the work of redirecting our lives. Christmas preparations begin in our surrounding world and culture long before the season of Advent even starts. **How can we better emphasize and encourage an inward preparation during the Advent season in order to receive the promises of God at Christmas?***

### ○ **Seeking God's Presence for Our Time**

The hymn text for "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" contains four different requests in each of the verses:

- (1) to be delivered from restrictive circumstances
- (2) for joy to come to deliver us from our darkness and despair
- (3) to receive knowledge and wisdom for living
- (4) to know peace and an end to divisive conflicts

Divide the class into four groups, one for each of the four petitions. Have each group brainstorm descriptions and examples of the sorts of circumstances that would call forth this sort of prayer. List these on the board. Invite participants to compose a prayer of petition asking God to transform one or more of these situations.

### ○ **Is It Christmas Already?**

Play a recording of the song "It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas."

#### **Questions**

- What is your earliest memory of hearing Christmas songs? Where were you?
- What was your first response to hearing these songs at that time?

After participants have shared, discuss how they prepare for Christmas. You may want to explore traditions of when they put up their decorations, listen to Christmas music on the radio, bake Christmas cookies, etc.

# B A Way to Explore Scripture

*Jeremiah was in tune with how God was at work within his own life's circumstances. He used his personal experience as a model for how God would engage the people of Judah. By acknowledging their current situation and being honest about their responsibility in creating it, the people could ready themselves for the hope that comes from God.*

## ○ **Outward versus Inward Preparation**

Read Jeremiah 33:14-16. Using information from the "Bible Background" section and the study guide, discuss the circumstances of Jeremiah's life in the time when this passage is set. What type of change has Jeremiah given the people as they prepared for the restoration of Judah?

Note that Jeremiah's emphasis for the changes that needed to occur is focused on inward change rather than upon Josiah's previously failed attempts at external changes.

### **Questions**

- How much do people rely on the outward signs of the season to get motivated and to "get into the spirit" of Christmas?
- How would you describe the message and character of our cultural trappings of Christmas?
- What about these messages corresponds with the spiritual focus of the season?
- What about the messages is contrary to, or even a hindrance to, our spiritual preparations for Christmas?

## ○ **The "War on Christmas"?**

In *Hope for the Thinking Christian: Seeking a Path of Faith through Everyday Life*, Stephen Reese speaks about the debate that tends to arise during the Christmas season that is sometimes called the "War on Christmas." It is the notion that the Christian faith has come under attack because store clerks, among others, do not wish their customers "Merry

Christmas," but instead offer some sort of nonsectarian holiday greeting.

Invite the learners to explore both their experiences and personal views regarding this debated position of what clerks and businesses should or should not say.

Read Jeremiah 33:14-16. Explore Jeremiah's vision of national and personal renewal as expressed in these verses. Remind the class that Josiah's efforts at outward reform had already failed by this time in Jeremiah's ministry. Discuss the difference between inner transformation and external conformity to a cultural norm.

### **Questions**

- Where does the responsibility lie for deepening our spirituality in this season?
- What parts of the Christmas message are countercultural, particularly with regard to all the emphasis on buying and spending?
- Do we expect the commercial and retail world to promote our Christmas message and story?

Share this comment from Stephen Reese: "I hope my spirituality doesn't depend on my ability to hear Christmas carols at Wal-Mart." Invite responses from participants.

# C A Way to End

Though Jeremiah speaks to the whole of the congregation, the activity of inward change begins personally. **How shall we embody the type of changes today's passage describes? As Christians, we can find ourselves in both positions, either of reflecting and embracing change or of calling for and encouraging change in others.**

## ○ **New "Christian-Year" Resolutions**

Distribute copies of "New 'Christian-Year' Resolutions" (p. 28). Usually, resolutions and changes are associated with January 1, but Advent marks the beginning of the new Christian year. Jeremiah emphasized the importance of inward change, including a change of heart.

Have participants complete the worksheet. If appropriate, invite volunteers to share some of what they wrote.

Based on what they have written, how would participants complete the following hymn line: "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel and..."

Remember, it is with God's presence that we are able to know new beginnings. Trust in this Advent promise.

## ○ **Encouraging Change in Others**

Distribute paper and pens or pencils to each participant. Jeremiah provided a voice of hope for the people. As a way of encouraging people to be an example of hope and encouragement to others, have participants write their answers to the following questions.

## **Questions**

- Who do you know that needs to hear God's promise that restoration will come?
- Without using words, how can you be a presence and example of this claim of faith to others?

Challenge participants to consider the opportunity they may have to be a voice of hope to others. How might we serve as Jeremiahs to someone else?

## **References**

John Bright, *Jeremiah*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1965).

Terence E. Fretheim, *Jeremiah*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2002).

Walter Harrelson, *Interpreting the Old Testament* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964).

Stephen Reese, *Hope for the Thinking Christian: Seeking a Path of Faith through Everyday Life* (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2010).

James King West, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1981).

# 2

## HAIL THE INCARNATE DEITY

*Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:22-23; Luke 1:26-28; John 1:14a*

### *Bible Background*



#### **The Meaning of Jesus' Miraculous Birth**

“All this took place to fulfill...” is a phrase that appears, sometimes with slightly different wording, at least four times in the birth narratives of the Gospel of Matthew. Fulfillment, significance, meaning, revelation, restoration, and redemption are themes that all four Gospel writers explored as they set the good news of Jesus to writing.

We all bring numerous questions to Scripture. Some of these have to do with historical details. Others are focused on how we should understand these texts theologically. Many questions of both types surround the Gospel stories of Jesus' birth. Matthew and Luke both regarded the virginal conception of Jesus as a fact of history (Brown, 517). But far more important than the fact of this miracle was the Gospel writers' sense of the meaning of this event. For both Matthew and Luke, the ultimate importance of this unique birth was theological and, more specifically, christological (Brown, 517).

Matthew and Luke thought it important to relate the events surrounding Jesus' birth. It was equally important for them to say something about Jesus' identity as the Son of God, a descendant of David, and the savior of the world.

### **Both History and Theology**

Some effects of the previous century's modernist-fundamentalist controversies remain with us. One of these effects is that many people, both Christians and non-Christians, think that Scripture is to be read and believed merely from a literal and factual point of view. For example, with the passage in Matthew, many “seem agreed that the intent of these passages is to assert a factual claim, a biological/historical claim about the parentage of Jesus” (Wood, 94). Such choices squeeze out the opportunities for the investigation of theological meaning and the implications for our life as the church in the world.

Our world is oriented toward scientific proof, often relying upon evidence such as DNA and other forms of chemical analysis for conclusions. This orientation is reflected in the many crime-drama shows involving forensic examiners and investigations used to discover the truth. Just think how much of the significance of the identity of Jesus would be missed if we attempted to use DNA or other forensic testing to discover the nature of his humanity and divinity!

As the church continued to take shape in the early centuries, its doctrinal understandings developed as well. The miracle of Jesus' birth and its meanings as revealed through Scripture received much formative dialogue and debate.

# Outline

## FOR TEACHING

The Council of Chalcedon in AD 451 dealt with the question of the nature and identity of Jesus. The council stated that Jesus had two natures, divine and human, in one person. The assembled theologians and church leaders explained and defined Jesus' "divine and human origins, but not in a way that raises questions about his DNA" (Wood, 94). Wood goes on to say that questions about the historicity of this miracle are

best construed as a pointer to a more central and truly indispensable affirmation, namely, that in Jesus God has assumed our humanity. That is the gracious mystery conveyed in our text and in the event for which Advent has us so expectantly waiting. (96)

### The Incarnation

Though not typically considered a birth narrative, the prologue of John's Gospel is a narrative about the beginnings of Jesus. John 1:14, the statement that the Word becomes flesh, dwelling among us, is in some ways the climax of John's Gospel, and "one might even dare to say of the whole New Testament" (Hare, 143). It is unique, certainly, but uncharacteristically definitive for the person of Jesus and the nature of God. This verse and its concept are "the chief foundation stone of the doctrine of the Trinity" (Hare, 143).

John's statement that the Word became flesh raises questions about how—and how much—Jesus was divine and human. It perplexes our modern scientific minds, with their desire for facts and explanation, to understand how this can be, to understand what a divine-human person would be like. But to be clear, this verse "does not teach us that Jesus was part God and part human" (Hare, 145). It is important "that we recognize that the divinity of Jesus, however we understand it, did not compromise his humanity" (Hare, 145).

Listen to the language taken from the letter of Pope Leo to Bishop Flavian of

- I. The Birth Narratives as Fulfillment
  - A. Interpretation of Isaiah's Prophecy
  - B. Reporting the Historical Event of Christ's Birth
  - C. Understanding the Event Theologically
- II. Theological Implications of the Gospel Birth Narratives
  - A. God Comes to Earth, Taking Human Form
  - B. The Incarnation as the Foundation for the Gospels
  - C. A Basis for the Doctrine of the Trinity
- III. Anticipating the Emmanuel in Our Time of Advent
  - A. God's promise to come is real for our lives.
  - B. God's promised coming identifies the gap between what the world is and what it ought to be.
  - C. Our expectation of God's coming acknowledges our ongoing need for redemption and restoration.

### Constantinople after the Council of Chalcedon:

There is nothing unreal about this oneness, since both the lowliness of the man and the grandeur of the divinity are in mutual relation. As God is not changed by showing mercy, neither is humanity devoured by the dignity received. ("The Letter of Pope Leo")

John was concerned with "what God accomplished through the unique relationship of Father and Son" (Hare, 145). Pope Leo explains what the incarnation accomplished by affirming, "Lowliness was taken up by majesty, weakness by strength, mortality by eternity."

Emmanuel: God is with us. So concludes Matthew as he helps us to see not only the connection to what God said through the prophet Isaiah, but the fulfillment of God's promise that has been delivered throughout all of Scripture. This promise of divine presence comes in five words, "I will be with you." This is the promise Luke records the angel Gabriel saying to Mary, "The Lord is with you."

And with us, God will be. God will be with us not only as the holy and eternal one showing us mercy and forgiveness, but also as the Word made flesh, near us in all of life's sufferings.

## A Way to Begin

*Believers celebrated the resurrection long before Christmas was added to the Christian calendar. As Advent and Christmas developed, so did the traditions of affirming the significance of these seasons not only by telling the biblical stories but also through singing hymns and carols. Drawing out the theological meaning of Christmas is crucial to our Advent preparations.*

### ○ A Change of Tune

Because "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing" was written long before it was associated with the tune "Mendelssohn," other tunes were used to sing this text in the past. One tune that was popularly used was "Easter Hymn," to which we sing "Christ the Lord is Risen Today."

Have participants sing this Christmas carol to the tune "Easter Hymn." For example, "Hark the herald angels sing, alleluia, glory to the newborn king, alleluia."

#### **Questions**

- How does hearing this Christmas hymn sung to what we think of as Easter music influence your understanding of the message of Jesus' birth?
- Does blending the Christmas message with the message of Easter cause you to see either message in a new light? Explain.

### ○ Seeing God in the Everyday

Ask participants to recall a recent experience in which they saw evidence of God present and active in everyday life. Ask the following questions.

#### **Questions**

- What Scripture story or biblical character does this experience bring to mind?
- What characteristics of God are evident through this experience or observation?
- What did this reveal to you about God?
- How are these experiences—and the ways we think about them—consistent with how God is described in Scripture?
- How do such experiences shape your understanding of God?

# **B** A Way to Explore Scripture

*Today's Scripture passages draw our attention to what Jesus and his birth mean theologically. Moving beyond the sentimentality of the Nativity to the theological underpinnings of that event encourages us to embrace the spiritual power contained in Jesus' birth.*

## ○ **Reading for Understanding**

Distribute copies of "Scripture Comparison Chart" (p. 29). Invite volunteers to read each passage in each of the provided translations (for example, read all four translations of Isa 7:14, then all four of Mt 1:22-23, etc.). After each set of translations, ask participants to note any differences they heard.

### **Questions**

- By hearing different versions, what different nuances in the passage do you hear?
- Does this affect your understanding of the passage? If so, how?

## ○ **Singing Our Theology**

Read Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:22-23; Luke 1:26-28; and John 1:14. Provide copies of the lyrics of "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing." Compare the assigned passages with the second verse of the carol:

Christ, by highest heav'n adored,  
Christ, the everlasting Lord:  
Late in time, behold Him come,  
Offspring of a virgin's womb.  
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see,  
hail the incarnate Deity!  
Pleased as man with men to dwell,  
Jesus our Immanuel.  
Hark! the herald angels sing,  
"Glory to the newborn King!"

### **Questions**

- What elements from Scripture do you identify in the second verse of this carol?
- What theological message is contained in this carol? Is this message consistent with the witness of Scripture?
- How important is it that our hymns reflect theology that is consistent with Scripture?

## ○ **Deepening Our Understanding**

Divide the board into two columns. Label the left-hand column "What I Understood as a Child." Label the right-hand column "What I Understand Now."

Share the following statement from the study guide: "Culpepper points out that the opening of John's gospel 'declares not what the first disciples saw and heard, but what they later come to understand.'"

Ask participants to recall their impressions and understandings of the story of Jesus' birth when they were children. What do they remember being emphasized? What Old and New Testament passages were cited? Record their comments in the left-hand column.

Now ask participants to discuss how their understanding of the Christmas message has developed as they have matured. How has their understanding deepened and been enriched? Record their comments in the right-hand column.

# C A Way to End

God's promise to be present with us is not limited to the promise of the incarnation.

Receiving this promise as a personal reality in our lives, however, may be challenging for some. Christmas returns each year to remind us of two important messages from God: "Do not be afraid," and "I will be with you."

## ○ For Personal Reflection

Provide paper and pens or pencils for each participant. Have them write their answers to the following questions.

### Questions

- Where in your life do you most need and desire God to be present?
- In what way would you know that God is present with you?

Close with prayer for deeper awareness of God's constant, loving presence.

## ○ God's Promise

Matthew 1:22-23 reveals a prophecy that fulfills the promise which God claims over and over throughout all of Scripture, "I will be with you." Ask participants to recall other biblical passages where this message has been given to God's people.

## Questions

- Who in the Bible do you recall having received God's message, "I will be with you"?
- How might this statement have brought comfort to these people?
- If God were to speak this message to our congregation right now, what might these words of assurance and empowerment enable your church to accomplish?
- How might this motivate us as a church to step forward into God's mission in the world?

## Resources

Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*, rev. ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1993).

Douglas R. A. Hare, "Matthew 1:18-25," *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville KY: Westminster/John Knox, 2010).

"The Letter of Pope Leo to Flavian, Bishop of Constantinople, about Eutyches,"  
<<http://www.piar.hu/councils/ecum04.htm>>.

Charles Wood, "Matthew 1:18-25," *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville KY: Westminster/John Knox, 2010).

# OF THE FATHER'S LOVE BEGOTTEN

*Isaiah 12:2-6*

## Bible Background



### Historical Context

The book of Isaiah contains some of Israel's best literature and "presents Israelite faith in its most profound expression" (Harrelson, 224). Yet Isaiah's words can be among some of the most difficult to interpret. There are multiple literary forms in the book, and its material covers a span of 250 years of Israel's history, from 740 BC to around 515 BC. This represents the time from the death of King Uzziah of Judah, through the fall of Jerusalem and Babylonian exile, to the reestablishment of the temple.

The three chief historical periods included in the book are: Isaiah's ministry (c. 740–700 BC); the time before and after the Persian king Cyrus's conquest of Babylonia in 539 BC; and the period following the return of the exiles to Judah, roughly 538–515 BC.

Isaiah 1–12 comes from the period of *circa* 732–721 BC. During this time (c. 723 BC), the Assyrian empire overwhelmed the northern kingdom of Israel. After this, the people who remained in the northern kingdom "seem to have been animated by no profound conviction of sin, no recognition that the judgment upon the land was well deserved" (Harrelson, 239).

### A Recurring Drama

The book of Isaiah begins with the image of rebellious children in a desolate state. Tull comments, "Isaiah 2–10 developed accusations of arrogant injustice that led to divine judgment in the form of Assyria's onslaught" (245). "By the time we reach Isaiah 12," Hooke says, "the people of God have been through the wringer: severely punished, defeated, brought low—and then miraculously promised restoration, a new beginning, a new leader who will bring about a reign of peace" (296).

Isaiah 1–12 presents a recurring story of "failure, alienation, restoration, and bliss that will cycle through the book again more than once" (Tull, 247). This devastating cycle repeats in the southern kingdom of Judah, where it eventually leads to the loss of their land, temple, and leadership, and ultimately to "the restoration of all these, though in changed forms, by the time the story is complete" (Tull, 247). Isaiah 12 proclaims a future celebration and is meant to instill confidence and praise within the people.

Even though these verses anticipate the future, the descriptions are not metaphorical. As Schneider points out, the link of faithfulness and accountability must be taken in a real sense.

[Judah's] suffering and dying under godless powers are not metaphoric.

Their collusion in oppression and injustice is not metaphoric. The fact that the suffering, dying, and collusion are still going on is not metaphoric. (298)

### **A Song of Thanksgiving**

Isaiah 12:1-6 records a song of thanksgiving and praise in response to all that God has promised. Judah does not offer praise because of God's constant mercy, as in many psalms of praise, "but rather as in songs of thanksgiving, because God's anger has subsided" (Tull, 247). These verses do not praise God for what is, but rather for what will be in the future (Olson, 299).

In Isaiah 6:3 the seraphs announce that "the whole earth is full of [God's] glory." Now in chapter 12, these words are to be "echoed not only by the prophet and his hearers, but his hearer's hearers as well, until the whole world is indeed filled with God's glory" (Tull, 248).

The whole of Isaiah 12 echoes words and phrases from the psalms. Verse 2 is also found in Psalm 118:14. The theme of God being one's salvation is repeated in Psalm 68:19. Isaiah 12:4 commands, "Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations." These are also the opening words of Psalm 105, a psalm that also recalls the exodus story. Isaiah 12:5 also echoes themes and words from Psalm 105:2, 5, and 7.

### **Living Into a New Future**

What can we learn from this song of thanksgiving? As this passage points back to the exodus and forward to the restoration, we can first learn that "the promises of salvation point forward to our own lives" (Hooke, 298). Second, we can reflect on where and when we might have fallen out of relationship with God, "especially in our treatment of the poor, and how we may be under God's judgment because of this" (Hooke, 300). Third, this text challenges us to offer our thanks "for this judgment itself, because it wakes us up

# Outline

## FOR TEACHING

- I. Overview of the Book of Isaiah
  - A. Isaiah covers a 250-year span in Israel's history.
  - B. Three Primary Periods
    1. Isaiah's Lifetime
    2. The Reign of King Cyrus of Persia
    3. The Return of the Exiles from Babylonia
  - C. The Context of Isaiah 12:2-6
    1. A Prophecy from the Lifetime of Isaiah
    2. Words of Promised Restoration
- II. A Hopeful Psalm of Thanksgiving
  - A. The people give thanks not for what has been, but for what will be in the future.
  - B. The promise of hope demands our witness of God's good deeds.
  - C. God's limitless salvation calls for our full praise to God.
  - D. Remembering God's deliverance in the exodus leads to hope for the present.
- III. The Applicability of Scripture and its Message
  - A. Understanding the past story of Scripture lets us apply it to our present situation.
  - B. Bible promises of salvation point us forward with hope.
  - C. Reflection allows us to acknowledge where and how we have fallen out of relationship with God.
  - D. We can be thankful for having been awakened to our misdeeds.
  - E. We are reminded of the importance of choosing to trust in God.
  - F. We are given the opportunity to discover the depth of God's love.
  - G. Our testimony and praise becomes a witness to our children.

to the wrongness of our way of living, and hence makes a new life possible" (Hooke, 300). Fourth, we are reminded of the

primary choice that is constantly before us, a choice that King Ahaz faced as well, “to trust God or to fall back into fear” (Hooke, 300). Finally, this passage helps us “explore the tender tangle between love and anger” (Olson, 299). Because, as Olson claims, “this is the place where we can discover God’s willingness to love and comfort us in spite of all that we have done to anger God” (299).

Isaiah’s words offer us a model of learning from the past, with an eye toward our present circumstances, so that we may live into a new future. They also offer an excellent opportunity for congregations worshiping during painful seasons of life “to pray with anticipation for the day when spontaneous and heartfelt joy returns, the day of salvation” (Tull, 251). Drawing from Israel’s past experience with the God of salvation, Isaiah’s words become for us a sign that points to the one whom God has sent, the Alpha and the Omega, the source of “the things that are, that have been and that the future years shall see.” In his name we give praise, thanksgiving, and witness to God for God’s great love, displayed for us in the sending of God’s Son, which endures “evermore and evermore!”

## A Way to Begin

*Listening to the past, including mistakes and successes, can be a powerful tool for gaining insight into our present circumstances and situations. **Begin the session by exploring how the past can guide us in the present.***

### ○ **From the Heart**

As described in the *Learner Study Guide*, the Latin word translated “love” in the “Of the Father’s Love Begotten” is more literally “heart.” Explain this to the class. Recite the line aloud using the word “heart” instead of “love.”

#### **Questions**

- How does this translation deepen your understanding of the gracious and enduring gift that comes from God?
- What images come to mind as you hear the word “heart” in this line?
- What message is conveyed by considering that Jesus comes to us from God’s heart?

### ○ **Reflecting on Life’s Challenges**

Isaiah 12 encourages reflection and remembrance. Invite participants to reflect on the past year by considering common elements or themes experienced in your congregation, community, or nation. What were some of the challenging and difficult events that occurred last year? Record these on the board.

#### **Questions**

- What challenges have we faced this year in our congregation?
- What challenges have people faced in our community?
- What challenges have people faced in our country?

Discuss whether there are any common themes in these challenges.

#### **Questions**

- What expectations do we have this Advent season for God to address our situation?
- Do we consider that God’s coming into the world in Jesus makes a difference? If so, how?
- How might we express our hope for God’s presence in the midst of these challenges?

# **B** A Way to Explore Scripture

*Isaiah asked the people to remember those who lived before them, those who gave meaning, inspiration, and shape to their understanding of life and faith.*

*God asks the same of us. When we thank God for deliverance, a fruitful first step is to recall the examples and support that others have given us.*

## ○ **Remembering God's Deliverance**

Isaiah calls the people to remember the exodus. Taking this example of remembering God's past faithfulness, invite participants to recall the details of the exodus story. Reflect on Israel's experience of enslavement, then ask the following questions.

### **Questions**

- How did God respond to the cries of the people?
- How did God deliver them?
- What other circumstances do you remember about the exodus story?
- What did the Israelites learn about God through this experience?
- What did subsequent generations learn about those who experienced the exodus?
- How did the exodus story shape future generations?

Read Isaiah 12:1-6. Invite participants to note similarities between the exodus story and Isaiah's call to worship. Discuss the difference God's presence can make even in difficult circumstances.

### **Questions**

- How does Jesus exemplify God's love?
- Why is Christ worthy of our praise and worship?
- How can we share about him so that he may "be known in all the earth" (v. 5)?

## ○ **Remembering Those Who Inspired Us**

Discuss how people pass their faith on to younger generations. Comment on how the actions of our congregations testify to what we actually believe even more powerfully than what we say we believe. By recalling the testimony of past generations, we can envision our role in inspiring the generations that will follow.

### **Questions**

- When you were a teenager, who inspired you as a Christian?
- How did this witness and model give you confidence in your younger years?
- What is our responsibility to inspire those who are younger than we are?
- What does it take for us to see ourselves as role models?
- What does it mean for us to be people of inspiration and faithfulness?

Read Isaiah 12:1-6. Discuss the role of the first singers of this song in inspiring future generations.

### **Questions**

- What in the Christmas story is most worth passing on to future generations? Why?

## C A Way to End

The ancient Israelites couldn't see God's future saving acts, and yet they hoped for things unseen. Speaking, or singing, our thanks for what God has promised to do in the future can strengthen our faith. **Encourage participants to trust in God's saving presence on the basis of the saving work of God that began in the little town of Bethlehem.**

### ○ A Poem of Thanksgiving

Isaiah 12:1-6 is a thanksgiving psalm that thanks God not for what God has already done, but for what God will do in the future. This is a description of Advent faith.

Invite participants to imagine they are writing a poem or song to God, thanking God for future blessings or deliverance. For what hopeful outcomes can you see yourself thanking God?

Provide paper and pens or pencils for each participant. Have them silently write a poem, prayer, or other expression of thanksgiving for what God will do in the future. Encourage them to keep this paper with them through the remainder of Advent.

### ○ God's Everlasting Love and Presence

Isaiah gives us a way to learn from our past while embracing our present and living into a hopeful future. This is possible because of the steadfast love of God. This everlasting love is reflected in "Of the Father's Love Begotten" in the line, "Of the things that are, that have been and that the future years will see." The hymn speaks of the God who is with us in all things: past, present, and future. God's love is always present.

Distribute copies of "God's Everlasting Love and Presence" (p. 30). Invite participants to reflect on notable events and moments of their lives from the perspective of these three periods: (1) their current circumstances, (2) the past year, and (3) what lies ahead.

### Question

- How might the steadfast love of God transform your life this Advent and Christmas?

### Resources

R. E. Clements, *Isaiah 1-39*, The New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1980).

Walter Harrelson, *Interpreting the Old Testament* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964).

Ruthanna Hooke, "Isaiah 12," *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 4*, eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville KY: Westminster/John Knox, 2010).

Susan K. Olson, "Isaiah 12," *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 4*, eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville KY: Westminster/John Knox, 2010).

Laurel C. Schneider, "Isaiah 12," *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 4*, eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville KY: Westminster/John Knox, 2010).

Patricia Tull, "Isaiah 12," *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 4*, eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville KY: Westminster/John Knox, 2010).

## 4

WITH THE ANGLES  
LET US SING*Luke 2:8-20***Bible Background****Christmas Traditions**

Celebrating Jesus' birth at Christmas—and preparing to celebrate during Advent—are major emphases in the church. Nevertheless, the church doesn't seem to have celebrated Christ's birth until the fourth century. Nativity pageants, which flourish in our time, began during the Middle Ages.

Furthermore, difficult as it may be for us to imagine Christmas celebrations and worship without carols, these traditional melodies originally had nothing to do with Christmas or Christianity. Carols are simply festive songs that may or may not be religious in nature. They often have a dance-like or popular character. (The word is derived from an Old French term for a "circle dance.") The period from 1400–1550 was the heyday of the English Christmas carol, but these songs were suppressed following the Protestant Reformation. It was not until the mid-nineteenth century that they were brought into the mainstream of Anglican worship. What has become an ageless way to celebrate the story of Christ's birth did not begin that way.

**Christ and Augustus**

Luke did not write his narrative of Christ's birth to be an ageless story. It was not a Nativity scene meant to fit in any

home at any time, but rather intended "as a drama taking place within an emphatically political environment" (Vinson, 58). This type of drama would have been evident to Luke's readers. Luke tells how the birth of Jesus occurred at a time when a famous Roman emperor, Augustus, the self-proclaimed inaugurator of the *Pax Romana*, was ruling. Augustus was hailed as a savior, and even a god, in many Greek inscriptions. Luke suggests, however, that "the real bearer of peace and salvation to the whole world is the one whose birth occurred in the town of David and was known by angels of heaven" (Fitzmyer, 394). Furthermore, Luke recounts Jesus' birth in terms of lowly circumstances. He is born alone with the animals, laid in a manger, and shepherds receive the first announcement of his birth. This is in strong contrast "with the majesty and renown of him whom the rest of the Roman world regarded as its savior" (Fitzmyer, 394). It also stands in contrast to the Davidic Messiah the Jews expected to come to restore the kingdom of Israel, both politically and militarily.

By relating Jesus' birth with a worldwide census, "Luke hints at the worldwide significance of that birth" (Fitzmyer, 394). Historically there are questions surrounding this census at the time of Jesus' birth. There is no evidence of a census under Augustus that covered the entire Empire at this time, "nor of a census requirement that people be registered in their ancestral

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cities” (Brown, 413). Mention of Quirinius complicates matters, since “the one and only census conducted while Quirinius was legate in Syria affected only Judea, not Galilee, and took place in A.D. 6-7, a good ten years after the death of Herod the Great” (Brown, 413).

Instead of claiming that Luke was merely inaccurate, Vinson suggests the possibility of Luke being sarcastic, as if he were saying, “Typical, is it not, of the stupid Romans to move people around for no good reason—and ironic—convenient, is it not, for the stupid Romans to make a rule that sends the Messiah’s mother in to the city predicted for his birth” (Vinson, 58). No doubt Luke depicts the mightiest figure in the world, the Roman emperor, as “serving God’s plan by issuing an edict for the census of the whole world...providing the appropriate setting for the birth of Jesus, the savior of all those people who are being enrolled” (Brown, 415).

### The Birth of Jesus

Luke 2:8-20 is Luke’s announcement of the birth of Jesus. In chapter 1, Luke has two other announcement stories: one with Zachariah (1:8-20) and one with Mary (1:26-38). There are patterns in these announcement stories, which contain five distinct elements. However, in Luke 2:8-20, only four of the five are present. These four are: (1) the appearance of an angel; (2) fear on the part of the recipient(s) of the message; (3) the heavenly message itself; and (4) the giving of a sign or reassurance (Fitzmyer, 396).

What is missing is the fifth element from the prior announcement stories: the objection on the part of the one receiving the message (see Lk 1:18, 34). When the angels announce Jesus’ birth to the shepherds, they show no objection. On the contrary, they go with haste to see the newborn Savior. One other variance with the story of Jesus’ birth is the appearance of more than one angel. A heavenly host—literally an “army”—joins in declaring the

- I. The Development of Our Christmas Traditions
  - A. The Date
  - B. Christmas Pageants
  - C. Christmas Carols
- II. The Christmas Story according to Luke (Lk 2:1-20)
  - A. Political and Cultural Environment
  - B. The Location (vv. 1-5)
  - C. The Birth (vv. 6-7)
  - D. The Announcement (vv. 8-20)
- III. Announcement Stories in Luke’s Gospel
  - A. Comparisons with the Announcements to Zechariah and Mary
  - B. The Distinctiveness of the Announcement to the Shepherds
  - C. Comparison with the Visit of the Magi (Mt 2:1-12)
- IV. Reactions to the Birth Announcement
  - A. Reactions of the Shepherds
  - B. Reactions of Those to Whom Shepherds Told the News
  - C. Mary’s Reactions
- V. Responding to the Good News We Have Heard

glory of God and peace to God’s people on earth.

Brown observes that the real parallel for the annunciation to the shepherds is not the annunciations before Jesus’ birth in Luke 1:26-38 and Matthew 1:18-25, but the visit of the Wise Men in Matthew 2:1-12. In both Matthew and Luke, the infancy narratives are preceded by stories about one of the parents being informed of the forthcoming birth. Each of these narratives has a similar sequence of events.

[Each has] a brief mention of birth at Bethlehem; the revelation of that

birth to a group who were not present (Magi, shepherds); the coming of that group to Bethlehem under the guidance of the revelation; their finding of the child with Mary (and Joseph); an acknowledgement on their part of what God has done; and their returning to whence they came. (Brown, 412)

In retelling this story today, we mustn't shatter the beauty and warmth of our traditional Christmas rituals and celebrations. Rather, by peeling away the layers of the centuries, we have the opportunity to hear afresh the amazing good news about the child that is born. Let us strive to hear this story in ways that will cause us to continue to reflect on its meaning well beyond December 25.

Hear the good news, share the good news, and cherish the good news in your heart. And by all means, remain with this new baby as he grows into a man, the Son of God, savior of the world.

## A Way to Begin

*The shepherds were the first recipients of the news of Jesus' birth. They shared their experiences—and the good news they found—with others. Those who heard the shepherds' report were amazed. Though we are probably not hearing this news for the first time, we still should seek new meanings and insights from the familiar story. We dare not take for granted what we think we know.*

### ○ **Rediscovering the Familiar**

Based on information provided in the study guide, relate the story of the origin of the carol "Silent Night." Share both the traditional story of mice chewing the bellows of the church organ as well as the more factual account of how this carol came to be written and first performed. Note that, along with many other Austrian folk carols, "Silent Night" was almost lost.

#### **Questions**

- Can you imagine Christmas without this carol?
- What parts of our Christmas story or Christmas traditions do we take for granted? What would Christmas be like without these elements?
- Why is it important for us to tell the whole of the Christmas story each year?

### ○ **Heard Anything New Lately?**

Traditions are important in this season. Observe that it might be difficult to hear and experience something new as we enter the familiar surroundings and hear the same stories and music.

Invite participants to share something new they have encountered that has given them a fresh perspective on Christmas. This might be a new hymn or song, a new biblical insight, or anything else that has helped them see Christmas in a new light.

#### **Questions**

- What is the value of the traditional and familiar at Christmastime?
- What is the value of what is new?

As we study this familiar Bible story, let's keep our ears open for anything new or different.

# **B** *A Way to Explore Scripture*

*Two Gospels give us narratives that include events surrounding and including the birth of Jesus. Taking a close look at these narratives can lead us to realize the significance of this birth for all people.*

## ○ **Quest for Discovery**

Read Luke 2:8-20. Note that there are three persons or groups in this story whose reactions to the birth of Christ are recorded: the shepherds, those who heard the shepherds' report, and Mary.

Invite participants to reread the text to find how each of these people reacted. If desired, divide the class into small groups, with each group responsible for only one of the three reactions. Discuss what participants discover. Point out both the similarities and the differences in the three reactions. Ask the following questions.

### **Questions**

- How many shepherds do you imagine being in the group that traveled to the manger?
- Who do you think the "all who heard it" in verse 18 were? Might there have been others at the stable with Mary and Joseph? Might this refer to others the shepherds told as they returned to their sheep?
- Mary had earlier received a visit and message from Gabriel (Lk 1:26-38). How might this experience have influenced her reaction to the visit of the shepherds?

## ○ **Varied Responses**

Explore the varied reactions to the announcement of Jesus' birth with the parable of the sower in Luke 8:5-15, as discussed in the study guide.

## ○ **Shepherds**

Point out that shepherds had a mixed reputation in Jewish society. On the one hand, kings were often compared to shepherds in a metaphor of leadership. At the same time, however, common shepherds inhabited the lowest rungs of society and were often thought of as untrustworthy, or at least irreligious. What might Luke have had in mind by including shepherds in his Nativity story?

## ○ **Compare and Contrast**

Distribute copies of "Compare and Contrast" (p. 31). Divide the class into two groups. Have one group read the story of the shepherds in Luke 2:8-20. Have the other read the story of the Wise Men in Matthew 2:1-12. Compare and contrast the details, using the resource page as a guide.

### **Questions**

- How are these stories similar?
- What details are unique to each story?
- How much have we blended aspects of these separate stories in our remembrance of "The Christmas story"? Is this a good thing or a bad thing? Explain.

# C A Way to End

Before we proceed with our final Christmas preparations, we should take time to consider the essence of the message brought by angels and told by shepherds. What message, familiar or new, should we hear? What are we to do with this message?

## ○ Listening to the Hymn

Play a recording of “Silent Night.” Invite participants to sit still and listen to the music and the words. Instruct them to reflect on all the images the song brings to mind.

After the carol, let the silence of the moment continue for approximately a minute. (If you time the minute, it will surprise you how long this actually seems.)

Invite responses to any of the following questions:

### Questions

- What new insight or meaning has this familiar carol evoked for you?
- What feelings do you experience when hearing this carol?
- What images came to mind as you listened to this carol?

## ○ Responding to the News

Both Luke 2 and “Silent Night” invite our response. The Scripture text tells of three different responses to the news, and the carol invites us, “With the angels let us sing, Alleluia to our King.”

### Question

- What kind of response does this Scripture text and this carol ask of us today?
- How can we apply the “true meaning of Christmas” in our lives?

### Resources

Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*, rev. ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1993).

Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1981).

Ray Summers, *Commentary on Luke* (Waco TX: Word, 1972).

Richard B. Vinson, *Luke*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2008).

## 5

BEARING GIFTS  
WE TRAVERSE AFAR*Matthew 2:1-12**Bible Background***Visitors of the Christ Child**

Last week we compared this passage with the Christmas story in Luke 2. There is a similar sequence in both stories: (1) mention of Bethlehem, (2) revelation of Jesus' birth to those who were not present, (3) visitors coming to Bethlehem to see the child, (4) finding Jesus with Mary and Joseph, (5) acknowledgement of what God has done, and (6) returning to the place from whence they came.

Matthew is the only Gospel to recount the visit of the magi. These exotic travelers serve as “representatives of the Gentile world that recognize who Jesus is and properly worship him” (Witherington, 57).

The magi arrived at Herod's palace because they observed the newborn King's star (Mt 2:2). But the astronomical evidence was not enough to confirm their discovery. They went to Herod's palace seeking additional information they could not acquire through astronomy. They needed guidance from the writings of the Old Testament prophets (Witherington, 63). Therefore, they sought out Herod and the religious teachers at his court.

Understandably, Herod becomes disturbed—as does all of Jerusalem with him. The appearance of the magi and their words indicated that political change was on the horizon. Such change

rarely came smoothly, and all of Jerusalem would have anticipated some kind of unpleasant upheaval. A new king would not be welcome to the current elite, “who were indebted to and partially dependent on the current regime for their own power and wealth” (Witherington, 64). Contrast this response to that of the magi, who experienced great joy upon finding the place where the child was residing.

Their gifts were gold, frankincense, and myrrh (v. 11). Frankincense and myrrh are expensive gifts imported from Africa or Arabia. While these gifts might reflect the wealth of the magi, “they certainly are intended to reflect the worth of the Christ child” (Witherington, 67).

**The Stories of Christmas**

Borg and Crossan point out that we hear the biblical stories of Christmas through various filters that blend the differences, making us less aware of their conflicting aspects. Four filters influence us: the harmonization filter, the filter of later tradition, the filter of our songs, and the filter of dramas, plays, and movies. These filters are not all bad. For example, there is nothing wrong with harmonizing the birth stories. Neither should we condemn Christmas pageants for not following only one particular Gospel. Even so, there is “great value in recognizing their differences and reading them as separate stories” (Borg and Crossan, 23). Such

recognition can enrich the stories and add to their power so that their meaning “grows larger, not smaller” (Borg and Crossan, 23).

Some, however, may find it challenging to explore these texts in isolation because of their preconceptions about what they expect to find. Some of the details in these stories (the date of the census under Quirinius, for example) might lead those of a skeptical bent to discount them completely. Is it possible to embrace these stories as “gospel truth,” even if we can’t claim airtight solutions to the historical conundrums they pose?

Concern for historical factuality has risen in prominence in our world view since the Enlightenment (c. 1650–1800). Only what can be verified by objective, scientific means is deemed true. Everything else is dismissed as superstition or fable. Ironically, both skeptics and religious fundamentalists take the same approach: if the biblical stories are not *factual*—if they cannot be empirically verified—then they are not true, and if they are not true, then the Bible is not true.

Christians should not fear examining these stories even more closely. By doing so, we might identify the distinctive elements of Matthew or Luke and grapple with the apparent discrepancies with integrity. But we need not discredit these stories nor be forced to choose one version as more accurate than the other. Each opens a window into the whole gospel message the writer unfolds. As Borg and Crossan explain,

When, therefore, Matthew 1-2 and Luke 1-2 are combined into a single Christmas story—for instance, in standard Christian imagination or the traditional Christian crèche—that story is the entire Christian gospel in miniature. Get it, and you get everything; miss it and you miss all. (53)

### **The Heavens Declare...**

And yet, post-Enlightenment science has been at work in the investigation of the

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- I. “Our” Christmas Story Compared with Matthew’s Christmas Story
  - A. The Sequence of Events in Matthew 2
  - B. The Filters through Which We Experience the Christmas Story
  - C. Benefits of the Blended Story We Have Come to Know
  - D. Benefits of Identifying the Differences and Reading the Stories Separately
- II. Examining Matthew 2:1-12
  - A. Comparison with the Carol “We Three Kings”
  - B. Magi as Wise Stargazers Who See Evidence of a Kingly Birth
  - C. The Star’s Appearance Combined with Scriptural Revelation
  - D. Unsettling News for Herod
- III. Welcoming the Newborn King
  - A. The Gifts Presented
  - B. The Gifts as Symbols
- IV. The Magi: “Outsiders” to the Jewish World
  - A. Even though they were outside the faith community, they recognized Jesus as “king of the Jews.”
  - B. They are depicted as disciplined observers, continually seeking new truth.
  - C. They return by a different route, presumably changed by their experience.
- V. What the Magi Can Teach Us
  - A. Taking Stock of the Gifts We Have to Offer
  - B. Remaining Open and Seeking God’s Revelation
  - C. Permitting the Coming of Jesus to Change our World Views and Actions

stars and heavens. There have been attempts to link Halley's Comet with the star the Wise Men saw. Other astronomical events have also been proposed to explain the star of Bethlehem. Some have conjectured the possibility of an extraordinary conjunction of planets. Johannes Kepler believed it was a supernova, the birth of a new star. This would have captured the attention of the magi, "and such an event was visible in this region in 5/4 BC, fitting the general time frame for both the birth of Jesus and the demise of Herod" (Witherington, 58-59). Such a phenomenon would certainly have captured Herod's attention and made him concerned, because this sort of sign was believed to point to the birth of new kings. Ironically, "when so much of the nativity story proves to be rather flimsy when it is chipped away by academics, it is reassuring to find that modern science has attempted to come to the aid of 'the star of wonder' that features so prominently in this carol" and in the Christmas story (*The Penguin Book of Carols*, 378).

Perhaps what emerges is the challenge for us to move beyond simple, or even complicated, attempts to "prove" the Christmas story and search more deeply for the meaning of these events, not only for the first century but also for our own time. Looking for the whole of the gospel story in these verses leads us to see the significance of Jesus' birth. It also guides us beyond arguments about factual claims to see the handiwork of God entering the world in ways that bring salvation and hope to a troubled, hungry, and wanting world.

## A Way to Begin

*Unlike Luke, Matthew's Gospel does not recount the actual birth of Jesus.*

*Instead, it focuses on the visit of the Magi perhaps as long as two years later.*

*We are accustomed to blending this story with Luke's account of Jesus' birth, but in this lesson we'll attempt to let the story speak for itself. **What might we discover in a closer reading of the story of the Magi?***

### ○ **What Gift Would You Bring?**

The Magi bring gifts that are symbolic and reflective of the value they associate with Jesus. A pound of frankincense would have cost about one week's salary. A pound of myrrh would cost about two month's salary. Based on a \$48,000 annual salary, a pound of frankincense would have been worth about \$1,000 and a pound of myrrh about \$8,000 today.

Brainstorm possible gifts of comparable value the Magi might have given if this story were set in modern times.

### ○ **The Magi's Announcement**

Upon hearing the news about a newborn king of the Jews, King Herod was frightened or troubled, and all of Jerusalem with him. The Magi observed that change

was coming—and this was a change with political and personal implications for Herod.

### **Questions**

- Why was the news of the Magi so troubling to Herod?
- Might this news have been troubling to Emperor Augustus? Why or why not?
- Do we often think about the political implications of Jesus coming into the world? Explain.
- Why do these types of organizational and political change cause so much unrest?
- What other kinds of change or upheaval does Jesus bring when he comes?

# **B** A Way to Explore Scripture

*Discovery is a major theme in this passage. In the course of their regular astronomical observations, the Magi made an important discovery. The star they saw led them to investigate further in order to discern its meaning. Eventually, they undertook a lengthy journey to find the one born king of the Jews. As we explore the story of the magi, what discoveries might be waiting for us?*

## ○ **Memory and Tradition**

Before reading the text, ask participants to recall the story of the visit of the Wise Men (or Magi). Have them list as many details as they can remember. Record these on the board.

Next, invite a volunteer to read Matthew 2:1-12.

Compare and contrast the “remembered” story with the actual story as told by Matthew. What was accurate in our remembrance? What was inaccurate? Where did the inaccurate details come from?

Discuss how carols, pageants, and other holiday traditions influence the way we remember the Christmas stories. Discuss whether it is a good thing or a bad thing to have these traditional elements creeping into our Christmas stories.

## ○ **The Meaning of the Magi**

Read Matthew 2:1-12. Ask the following questions.

### **Questions**

- What does it mean that pagan astrologers were among the first to greet the newborn Jesus? How does this detail shed light on the purpose of Jesus’ birth?
- The Magi saw the star, but they still sought guidance from the religious leaders in Jerusalem. What does this detail say about seeking God today?

“We Three Kings” reflects one common interpretation of the symbolism behind the gifts: gold representing kingship, frankincense representing deity, and myrrh representing death.

### **Questions**

- In what other ways might we understand the gifts of the magi?
- Do you think the Magi understood the possible symbolic associations of their gifts?
- Is it possible that our actions have significance beyond what we intend or can imagine? Explain.

## ○ **Science and Faith**

Using information in the “Bible Background” section, discuss possible scientific explanations for the star of Bethlehem. Discuss the benefits and limitations of scientific inquiry in helping us understand Scripture. How has the Enlightenment’s emphasis on verifiability shaped our faith—for good or ill.

# C A Way to End

The magi left Joseph, Mary, and Jesus and returned home a different way. Taken literally, this refers to how the Wise Men took pains not to reveal the baby's location to King Herod. Metaphorically, however, perhaps we are supposed to imagine that the Magi were changed by their visit. They left "different" from the way they came because of what they experienced.

## ○ Adult Religion

Read the following comment from Richard Rohr:

The celebration of Christmas is not a sentimental waiting for a baby to be born, but much more an asking for history to be born! (See Romans 8:20-23.) We do the Gospel no favor when we make Jesus, the Eternal Christ, into a perpetual baby, a baby able to ask little or no adult response from us. One even wonders what the mind is that would keep Jesus a baby. Maybe it was "baby Christianity."

We might cuddle or coo with a baby, but any spirituality that makes too much of the baby Jesus is perhaps not yet ready for prime-time life. God clearly wants friends, partners and images, if we are to believe the biblical texts. God, it seems, wants adult religion and a mature, free response from us. (9)

## Questions

- By keeping Jesus a baby, what about this birth and its message do we avoid?
- What might a spirituality that is ready for "prime-time life" look like?
- What type of adult attitude is required to return home by another path?

## ○ Christ Has Come

Distribute copies of "Christ Has Come" (p. 32). Have participants reflect silently on the questions provided.

As appropriate, invite volunteers to share what they have written.

## Resources

Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The First Christmas: What the Gospels Really Teach about Jesus' Birth* (New York: HarperOne, 2007).

*The Penguin Book of Carols*, ed. Ian Bradley (London: Penguin, 1999).

Richard Rohr, *Preparing for Christmas with Richard Rohr: Daily Meditations for Advent* (Cincinnati OH: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2008).

Ben Witherington III, *Matthew*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2006).











# CHRIST HAS COME

Below are some questions for silent and written reflection. Consider these questions as they relate to your life and experience this Advent and Christmas season.

In the past year, how have you experienced the coming of Christ?

Where has the spirit of Christmas gone now that Christmas day has passed?

Now that Advent and Christmas have passed, where is Jesus in your life?

How might you follow a different path next year because of your encounter(s) with Christ in 2012?

