

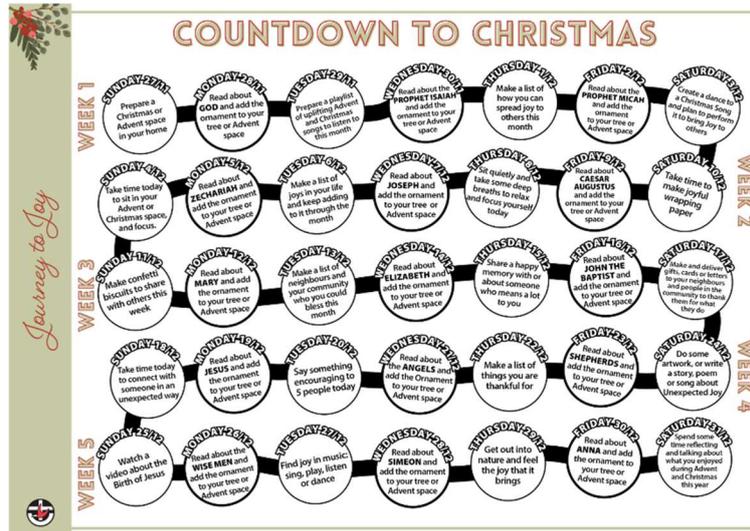


Advent and Christmas Reflections

If you could go on a journey to anywhere in the world, where would you go?

This week, we are starting a journey. A journey towards Christmas - a Journey to Joy, and we'd love for you to join us.

Lots of people prepare for Christmas in lots of different ways. Some put up a Christmas tree, lights, and decorations. Some call the 4 weeks leading up to Christmas, Advent and decorate a space in their home or church with candles and a nativity scene, and make time to think about things like Love, Hope, Peace and Joy.



How does your family usually prepare for Christmas?

Do you set up and decorate a Christmas Tree? Put up lights? Buy some presents? Or maybe put up a nativity scene?

We have prepared this **Journey to Joy – Advent and Christmas Reflections** pack to help you prepare for and countdown to Christmas. There is a map and countdown calendar to help you along the way, with daily challenges, reflections, and things to do to help you think about and prepare for the season.

Advent is a time of waiting, a time of anticipation and preparation for the coming of Jesus. Advent starts on the 4th Sunday before Christmas Day, this year on Sunday 27 November 2022.

There are many ways to get ready and count down the days to Christmas. This year, we invite you to Journey to Joy with us as we reflect on 15 Characters of the very first Christmas, and the ways they experienced Joy. Over five weeks, we will explore the themes: Prepared with Love, Focus on Peace, Sharing in Hope, Unexpected Joy and finally, Unwrap and Embrace Jesus.

Whatever it looks like to prepare for Christmas at your place, and however you use this pack, we pray that you will find hope, peace, and love, as you join us on a Journey to Joy this year.

Who is this for?

Everyone young and old!

Families, singles, couples, groups, schools, and churches are encouraged to use the material through Advent. Each week there are discussion questions on the weekly theme, 3 different character reflections, Character images to colour, and additional resources including videos, songs, and challenges to help young and old to engage and go further in their own discipleship journey.

Digging deeper

Using the material for small groups... If each group member takes one day of the week and does the reading and reflection, then they can share back to their explore group for that week. If you can try and get a sense of the way the stories connect, and what they tell you about God each week. For those who would like to dig a little deeper, find out more about the character for the day.

We pray that these Advent resources, reflections, and decorations for your home, will help you prepare your hearts and homes for Jesus. There are lots of things here, and we do not want you to feel like you must use them all but pick what might work for your family or yourself at home and do just that. They are intended to be ideas and suggestions for how you can connect as a family, reflect on scripture and what is God is saying to you as you await and prepare for Christmas this year.

If you have any questions or need any additional materials, please feel free to contact your local church leaders, or the Mission Engagement Team in the Qld Synod office via communications@ucaqld.com.au

Thank you

Our deepest thanks to everyone who across the Queensland Synod has joined us on this Journey to Joy. We feel the blessing of this collaboration and we couldn't have done it without you and your contributions.

Special thanks to: Kate Irwin (Bells Faith Community), Wayne McHugh (Northside UC, Mackay & Seaforth), Linda Hanson, Brenda Lohe and team (Uniting Care Queensland), Richard Moors (Southside UC), Kath Ruhle, Shirley Sergeant, Silvia Lopez, and Hannah Staines (The Gap UC), Rev Heather den Houting (General Secretary), Rev Andrew Gunton (Moderator), Rebecca Bell, Jessica Pinkerton, Paul Wetzig, Sharon Wetzig, Steve Drinkall, Rev Kath Behan, Rebecca Riggs, Michael Mann, Peter Rekers and Andrew McKaysmith.

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WEEK 1 PREPARED WITH LOVE

LOTS OF PEOPLE LIKE TO PREPARE THEIR HOUSE FOR CHRISTMAS BY PUTTING UP A CHRISTMAS TREE, LIGHTS, DECORATIONS OR AN ADVENT CALENDAR.

Find a space in your house that you can decorate and make your Christmas/Advent space this year. You could make it on a wall, a small table, or a whole room in your home. You might like to include candles, a nativity scene, signs, or something joyful to remind you of the season. You might like to put the countdown map in this space and colour it and the nativity characters included here each day, as you countdown to Christmas.

WAYS TO SPREAD JOY

Think about some of the things that bring you joy and might bring others joy too. Make a big list of what you could do, and then plan how and when you could do some of these things this month.

Here are some ideas to get you started:

- Make special meals to give to others.
- Write cards for all your neighbours.
- Smile and say 'Hi' to everyone you walk past in the shops.
- Say thank you every time someone does something for you.
- Put up lights or decorations outside your house for people to see.
- Write a song, a poem, or a story.
- Donate food, gifts or money to a charity or organisation that collects for others (e.g., Uniting World, Uniting Care, etc.).
- Create a dance, learn to sing or play a joyful song that you could perform for others.

TALK ABOUT

- What have you done in the past to prepare for Christmas?
- What are your favourite traditions?
- Would you like to try something new this year?

MUSIC

Check out Jess' Advent & Christmas playlist on Spotify for some playlist inspiration

You could create a **DANCE** to one of these

- ? Joy - For King and Country
- ? The Best Present Ever - Yancey
- ? Jump for Joy - Promiseland

Learn to **SING** or **PLAY** one of these Christmas songs

- ? Joy to the World
- ? Feliz Navidad



Find these songs using this QR code



God

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was with God in the beginning. ³ Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴ In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.



John 1:1-5

Reflection

It's that time of the year again and we find ourselves preparing for the advent season leading up to Christmas day when we celebrate the birth of Jesus. This year we want to invite you and your family to join us as we prepare ourselves by following the journeys of 15 of the characters at the heart of the Christmas story. We will be reflecting on the real-life experiences of Elizabeth, Simeon, Mary, Joseph, the shepherds and even the angels before finally we get to Jesus himself. But as with all great stories we must start at the beginning, so let's start with the initiator of the whole story – God.

We first encounter God in the creation stories of Genesis, where we find him brooding over the dark waters and literally speaking words that bring everything we know into being, and that breathes life into every living thing.

'Let there be Light'

'Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water'

'Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear'

'Let the land produce vegetation'

'Let the water teem with living creatures and let birds fly across the sky'...

... and eventually, 'Let us create mankind in our own image'

God is introduced to us as the all-powerful creator who out of his light, power and love, brought everything into being and placed humankind at the centre of the world and at the centre of his affections. The rest of history was meant to be an ever outworking of this world and its people in close relationship with God, and yet we know that that is not how things turned out.

God left the door slightly ajar by giving us the choice to willingly choose to stay in this perfection or to willingly choose to opt out. Unfortunately for all of us, we chose to go our own way.

The next 39 books of the Old Testament tell a sorry tale of selfishness, pain, greed, war, abuse, idolatry, suffering and almost every conceivable ill that people has subjected itself to, and yet the whole time God seems to be working on a comeback plan.

All through the Old Testament we get hints that God is working on a way out. He is revealing himself and his plans. He is calling out a nation to be his treasured people. He is sending prophets and priests and Kings to foretell of a mighty day, one day, when God will do



something amazing and unprecedented that will shake the world and reset the order of things and give the whole creation a chance to be put back right with God.

The story is building

the crescendo is lifting

the anticipation is rising

the tension is tightening

Strange stars appear in the sky

Wise men start travelling toward Bethlehem

Teen pregnancies go unexplained

Holy Men become mute

Angels flash across the sky

What will God do????

Questions

- Have you ever made something really amazing that you were proud of?
- How did it make you feel to create this thing?
- Have you ever had your creations messed up by someone else?
- What did you do to repair it? Who did you get to help you?
- Would you be willing to invite some unexpected people to help you with something?

Challenges

Begin colouring the Journey to Joy map

If you have guests at your place through the Advent period, invite them to contribute to the project

Is there an “unexpected” person that you could invite to be a part of your Advent story this Christmas? How can you invite them to join in?

Additional resources





Isaiah



Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.

Isaiah 7:14

Reflection

Have you ever had a dream that things could be better? That things could be different?

Have you hoped in the midst of things going wrong and with a world in chaos that there might be a sign of hope and peace that emerges?

Roughly 800 years before the birth of Jesus, there lived a man named Isaiah, one of God's people.

God's people had been called by God to follow in Abraham's footsteps and be a nation blessed by God to be a blessing to the world. A nation who would help the world see and experience God's love and provision for the world.

But as Isaiah looked around, he saw a world that seemed very far from God's blessing.

A world where there was great suffering and little hope.

A world where people put their own interests above those of others.

A world filled with darkness, in desperate need of light.

And Isaiah was deeply troubled by all that he saw.

However, Isaiah was not just a man who knew about God's blessing as something that happened in the past. Isaiah was a man who trusted in God's reality and concern for the present, and had faith in God's vision for the future. In this way, Isaiah was open to God's work in the world despite everything that he saw around him.

And so, God gave Isaiah glimpses of the future. Words and pictures of hope and life to encourage weary hearts and inspire tired minds. Visions of what the world could look like as God's blessing was restored. A vision that began in an unexpected place - with light coming into the world through the birth of a child to a virgin. A child who would be called "God with us" - Immanuel.

So, Isaiah was faithful to share this glimpse of the new blessing of God with the people around him. To share hope with the people lost in darkness and struggling in their broken world.

To invite them to believe that they were on a journey that ultimately led to joy.

Questions

- What's going wrong in your world right now?
- What would a sign of hope look like for you in this situation?
- Where might that sign come from?
- What would help you keep a record of these signs this Advent, an Advent Journey Diary? A journal, Pinterest board, insta-journal, tiktok? Pull together something that you can use to keep a journal of your advent Journey this year.
- How might you be a sign of hope to someone else in the midst of their darkness this Advent?

Challenges

Take a moment to create a picture of hope for the future. You might like to draw, write, film, or build something.

Add this to your Advent Christmas Space - or put it in Your Advent Journey Diary.

Maybe you could share it with us on the UCAQ Discipleship Resources Facebook Page.

Think about how you might be a sign of hope to someone else. It might be through donating to Uniting Care Christmas Appeal to help families less fortunate this Christmas.

Links and resources





Micah



*“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
though you are small among the clans of Judah,
out of you will come for me
one who will be ruler over Israel,
whose origins are from of old,
from ancient times.”*

Micah 5:2

Reflection

This little verse pushes me into the transcendence of the Advent season. Can you see it too?
From little things, big things grow.

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God.

The prophetic words of Micah sing through the universe. It is not from the mighty that the mighty shall come, but rather that the transcendent, the things from above, are experienced in the everyday. The community from where the saviour was to emerge was small, a “little clan”. But the prophet locates this small clan in the grand sweep of the story of the people of God. The origin of all that was to come is from the ancient of days.

How does that resonate with you as you imagine each moment of your own existence being influenced by the life, death and resurrection of Christ? How do you reflect on your own part of the story when you understand that you too participate in this grand sweep of creation from the ancient of days?

When we anticipate the coming of Christ in the Advent story, we hold ourselves in the theological tension of what was, what is, and is yet to come. How does that make you feel? Apprehensive, comforted, awestruck, centred?

How wonderful it is to encounter this journey again through the religious seasons and the Advent period. To anticipate, to hope, to realise that even in the smallest and meanest of moments, the divine is present with us. Every moment is a Holy moment even if it does not look promising at the time. Instead, the story reveals to us again our own humble place in the world which is caught in this season of joy and revelation. Come sing a song of joy, in the car, at home, in the supermarket, doing the washing, picking up the kids from sport, at the beach, in the cathedral, in the bush, looking at Christmas cards and looking at the images from the James Webb telescope.

Peel back those layers of ordinariness now and glimpse again the promise of the ancient of days. You are loved, you are caught in this story of anticipation and wonder, you are redeemed by the one who rules and reigns with us. Praise to you Lord Jesus Christ.

Questions

- Have you ever felt 'small', insignificant or the least important before?
- How did that make you behave?
- How does it make you feel to know that God knows you and cares about you?
- How does it make you feel to know that God is with you, wherever you go and whatever you do?
- How might this change the way that you think and act?

Challenges

In your Advent Journey Diary share how it makes you feel to know that God knows and cares about you.

Think about one small thing that you might do differently knowing that God loves you and is with you and have a go at it!

Share with someone your discovery that God loves and is with us in all that we do.

Additional resources





WEEK 2

FOCUS ON PEACE

CHRISTMAS IS A BUSY TIME, WITH SO MANY THINGS TO DO, PEOPLE TO SEE, PRESENTS TO BUY AND PARTIES AND EVENTS TO ATTEND. SOMETIMES, WE CAN GET SO BUSY IN THE LEAD UP TO CHRISTMAS THAT WE LOSE OUR FOCUS ON THE IMPORTANT THINGS.

This week, take some time to spend relaxing and focusing. You might find a quiet space in your home, maybe your Advent Christmas space to just relax, be quiet, be still and focus.

WAYS TO RELAX AND FOCUS

- Light a candle and watch it flicker.
- Close your eyes and imagine a calm sea, or water trickling through a rainforest.
- Do some deep breathing – breathe in, hold; breathe out, hold.
- Go for a gentle walk or stroll in nature and listen to the sound of the trees, birds, and animals.
- Watch the clouds move in the sky.



MAKE YOUR OWN WRAPPING PAPER

Making your own wrapping paper out of recycled or new materials is a great way to personalise gifts. Why not try one of these ideas, or use one of your own:

- Using coloured pens, write messages or draw pictures or shapes onto plain brown, white, or coloured paper.
- Paint or stamp pictures onto newspaper.
- Make your own paper.

TALK ABOUT

- What makes you busy at Christmas?
- What can you do to stay focused on the joy of Christmas?
- How do you relax and focus?

THINGS TO BE JOYFUL OR THANKFUL FOR

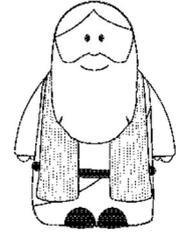
- ? School
- ? Family
- ? Friends
- ? Food
- ? House
- ? What else?



Find week 2 resources using this QR code



Zechariah



¹¹ Then an angel of the Lord appeared to Zechariah. The angel was standing at the right side of the incense altar. ¹² When Zechariah saw him, he was amazed and terrified. ¹³ But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will have a child. It will be a boy, and you must call him John.

¹⁹ The angel said to him, “I am Gabriel. I serve God. I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. ²⁰ And now you will have to be silent. You will not be able to speak until after John is born. That’s because you did not believe my words. They will come true at the time God has chosen.”

Luke 1:11-13, 18-20

Reflection

Zechariah was a godly priest, and with his wife Elizabeth, were righteous people and both faithfully served God all their lives. Yet this didn't protect them from having to suffer the cruelty of barrenness, which in their culture was a terrible disgrace. The angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah in the temple and assured him that God has heard their prayers, and that despite their old age, God would cause Elizabeth's barrenness to end. She would bear a son who would be called John, and that God would use this child to lead people back to God and that he would be the one who would prepare the way for the Messiah to come. Zechariah's response to this pronouncement is quite understandably shock and confusion.

You see the people of God had been 'on alert', waiting to hear from God for the past 400 years. At the end of the Old Testament, the last words we hear from the prophet Malachi is a promise that God would send another Elijah to 'turn the hearts of parents to their children, and children to their parents, so that God would not come and strike the land with a curse.' And yet after this pronouncement there is a dead silence from God for over 5 generations. There were no fresh words or revelations from God, and no prophets calling the people to remember their identity as God's people. Throughout this time, it was the priests who were charged with keeping the story of God alive. But that's a long wait, even for those of the priestly line. Even though Zechariah and Elizabeth would have prayed and longed and cried out to God for this answer so many times over so many years, still hearing the words by this time in their lives was not expected. Having become so used to the perceived silence from God, is it any wonder that Zechariah wavered for just a moment, and didn't immediately recognize God's voice through the angels' proclamation to him?

And so now then was Zechariah's turn to be silenced. Was this a punishment for his lack of faith? Or was this an example of a capricious God acting in a malevolent way, reminding the Hebrew people of God's sovereign power? In the absence of explanations, human beings tend to distract ourselves by filling in the silences with a limited view of God's ways, assuming that either we have done wrong, or that God has forgotten us. It's a way of trying to make sense of what we can't make sense of.

In the silence, Zechariah had a choice – resist and struggle and end up frustrated and bitter, or sit with the silence, and settle there more deeply. Often in the silence, we come face to



face with the source of all life and we see ourselves as part of something much greater. This doesn't mean that we are brought into times of silence because God doesn't want to hear our cries - but rather in our silence, God is able to reveal to us more about the complexity and beauty of life. As more is revealed, we realize how much more we don't understand, yet also how much we are held by God regardless.

Why do we think in times of barrenness or silence, when we can't understand where God is or what God is doing, when we feel like we've lost everything and have nothing left - that this means we have failed, or that God isn't present? Why do we have difficulty understanding these times within the broader story of God's redeeming work? Times of barrenness and silence are an opportunity for us to remember that we are part of God's work in the world; that silence gives others a chance to speak, to teach us something, and to voice shared hopes and longings; and that silence reminds us that the activity of the church is God's, not ours?

After 9 long months of silence, Zechariah responds with gratitude. Not because he was glad he could speak again, otherwise his first words might have been, 'finally I can speak!' Instead, Zechariah's first words are 'blessed be the lord God of Israel, for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them!' Zechariah had spent 9 months being reminded day in, day out, of the sovereignty of God, of his absolute need of God, and of God's faithfulness in fulfilling God's promises. For 9 months, Zechariah's focus was shifted to what was happening right in front of him, and he recognized in this that he stood within the ongoing story of God that had been told long before Zechariah's time and would continue long after his life was over. He had his part to play. If he hadn't been forced into a time of silence, he may have missed that opportunity; he may have forgotten to remember that the story he belonged to was a story of hope from despair, of freedom from slavery, and of new life from barrenness, A story that had been handed to him from many generations before him, who had on many occasions experienced the same grief, fear, uncertainty, loss and barrenness that Zechariah and Elizabeth had.

This doesn't mean of course that God chooses for us to endure hardship to teach us a lesson - but rather, that times of hardship can in fact be more life-giving than times of plenty. Hardship, barrenness, wilderness, and silence show us what plenty and fullness can't. That unless we learn how to hold our lives lightly and trust all our hopes and dreams into God's hands, we will never understand or appreciate fully the joy that comes with blessings out of the dust and the darkness. The problem is that we can usually only see this a long way down the track. Zechariah reminds us to look back at the path we've travelled, not just in our individual lives, but also in our corporate life together. Not to wish for better days, or too long to go back, but so that we are able to see the path that we've taken and where it has led us to right now. When we can embrace our place in God's story, when we can celebrate who we are now because of where we have come from, we are then free to look ahead to prepare for where God might take us into the future, even if it's into the unknown.

Questions

- How do you hear God in your life?
- Have you ever experienced a time of silence with God?
- Do you think that there have been times when things have happened that have made you quiet by taking away the distractions that keep you from being with God?
- What did you learn from the silence? Did you resist it or embrace it?
- If Advent is a time of preparation and waiting, a time of unknowing, a time of learning to be ready but not certain of what for, a time of naming that the world isn't as it should be, then what does Zechariah's life story say to you in this season?

Challenges

Silent prayer is not usually the kind of prayer that most people are drawn to. Silent prayer requires a letting go in us, and a trusting that the very silence will ironically 'speak' to us in a way that almost doesn't make sense. Spend some time choosing to pray in silence, practicing the art of deep listening and deep presence with God. It might help to put on some music link in the link below.

Take a moment to reflect in your Advent Journey Diary on what you're waiting for this Advent and what you think you might be hearing God say.

Additional resources





Joseph



²⁰ But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' ²² All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³ 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel', which means, 'God is with us.'

²⁴ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife,

Matthew 1:20-24

Reflection

Have you ever had a really big decision to make, and you just wished that God would put a big sign in the sky telling you what to do? Perhaps you have had to make a decision, and just as you make up your mind something happens to send you off in a different direction.

Poor Joseph had been torn apart. He was engaged to a wonderful young lady that he loved so much. He was looking forward to life together with her but received news that she was pregnant. She said it is a child from God, but that didn't make sense. Mary must have been with another man. Joseph thought long and hard, and finally decides to end the relationship, in a way that will keep Mary safe, because he really does love her.

But then Joseph was visited by an angel in a dream. The angel reassured him that what Mary told him was true, that this is a special child from God, and he should take Mary as his wife. Joseph woke up and did just that.

When we read it now, it seems so easy. This amazing angel with wings turns up in the middle of a dream and tells Joseph what he must do, and he jumps up and does it. But stop and think for a minute. It's sometimes too easy for us to treat the Christmas story as a fairy tale with amazing things happening. It almost makes it like the story is set apart from us.

Think about your dreams, I know that I have some strange dreams. My mind works over various things and sometimes deals with the issues I am thinking through during the day. So it would not be unusual that Joseph has a dream about this situation. Also, the Hebrew and the Greek words for angel also means just a messenger. When we think of angels we think of big winged beings. But the Bible never actually says that angels have wings. So we can't be sure what the angel looked like in the dream. Perhaps it was a big winged angel with a mighty sword giving Joseph instructions. Or maybe it was just a messenger from God, in the middle of a strange dream that talked to him.

Joseph had to be brave to follow these instructions. He had to believe that what he heard was indeed a message from God. He had to trust that he was making the right choice for this situation. Joseph sometimes gets lost in the Biblical story. He is just sort of tagging along. But Joseph makes a brave decision to follow the message of God and to stick with Mary.

In our lives we need to be open to listen to those messages from God, so that we can be sure of our path. As someone in ministry, I know that my call, felt when I was in year 12 at school, is so important. When I am not sure of what I am doing, or if I am the right person to be doing it, I remember back to that message which God gave me and remind myself this wasn't just my choice. It helps me to step forward.

I hope that you will remember the ways that God has talked to you. Write them down, keep a record so that they can give you confidence in the days and years ahead. God is talking with you, God is guiding you, he is just hoping that you will be listening.

Questions:

- What are some big decisions you have had to make?
- Have you ever had to change your plans?
- Have you ever felt God give you a message?
- Have you ever had someone say something to you which just seemed to give you the answer to your problem?
- Who are the people that you could listen more to that might help you know God's will?
- Who are the people you can talk with when you are making big decisions?
- How can you keep a record of the messages which God gives you along the way?

Challenges

Share your stories within your family/household about when you have felt God guide you. If you can't think of any times, then find someone who can share their stories.

As a family work out how you will record God's guidance. You can buy a book, decorate the cover and make it something you want to use.

Additional Resources





Caesar Augustus



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.

Luke 2:1-5

Reflection

Joseph 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. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.

Imagine that! In the middle of your busy life, the person 'in charge' suddenly decides everyone must be counted; not where they are, but in their ancestral hometown. So, heaps of people have to go on a long dangerous trip - just to be counted and then return home. Thanks Caesar!

Have you ever experienced a bully who made it their business to dominate everyone? Perhaps they dominated you. There are a few of them in the story of Jesus' birth, Augustus Caesar was one of them (can you think of any others?). He made it his business to try and dominate the whole world.

Caesar was Roman Emperor in the days when Rome ruled over a very large area, including almost all the places we hear about in the Christmas story - Nazareth, Bethlehem, and Jerusalem. His rule was simple - do what I tell you, or I'll send my people to hurt you!

The Jewish people - Jesus' people - were greatly concerned about getting rid of Roman control. They wanted Caesar and all his people to go away. They even thought that God's promised Messiah was going to come and do that for them.

While all the world was messing around being counted, God's real Messiah was born in the little town of Bethlehem. Mighty Caesar declared himself a son of the gods, but Jesus turned out to be the real Son of God.

It's easy to pay attention to all the big, important powerful people around us. But Jesus remains far more important than any of them. Don't allow yourself to be distracted from Jesus.

Questions

- What's the worst distraction that you've ever experienced?
- Are you someone who is easily distracted or are you really good at focusing on the important things to do?
- What things could or do distract you from Jesus? Why do they distract you?
- What could life be like if you pushed away the distractions and allowed Jesus to be at the centre of your life?
- What could help you do this?
- Who could help you be less distracted?

Challenges

Take a moment to record in your Advent journal what you're going to try to help you focus a little bit more on Jesus.

Find someone you trust who you could talk to who could help you pray and practice being less distracted.

Additional resources



JESUS OR CAESAR

J B J E B A I N T E R R U P T
C O I U S U N S I S F O M O R
Y H L R F E R G E I O M M P C
O L R O T E R L E L C A T D O
Y A R I G H B N R L U N T I U
T C E N S U S H I A S K M S N
E J A D O T N A P U C G E T T
J D O R E U M S M A T U H R G
S U T S U G U A E M S D E A S
C D D A E E A S S A S E L C R
A R A E D P A G V R J I H T E
U T B V A R H C N Y L R T I D
Y S U B I D E C R E E R E O R
B I B L E D N J E L N A B N O
R E T S I G E R K D C M R G O

Angels
Augustus
Bethlehem
Bible
Birth
Bully
Busy
Caesar
Census
Christmas
Count

Danger
David
Decree
Distraction
Empire
Engaged
Focus
Force
Galilee
Interrupt

Joseph
Joy
Judea
Luke
Married
Mary
Orders
Register
Roman
Trouble

This puzzle is a word search puzzle that has a hidden message in it.

First find all the words in the list. Words can go in any direction and share letters as well as cross over each other.

Once you find all the words. Use the unused letters starting in the top left corner to reveal the hidden message.





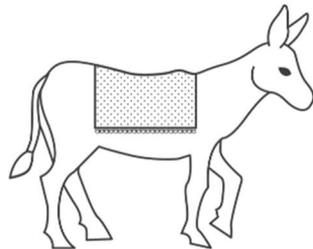
WEEK 3 SHARING IN HOPE

AS WE PREPARE FOR CHRISTMAS, LET'S THINK ABOUT THE SPECIAL PEOPLE IN OUR LIVES WHO LOVE US, SUPPORT US, AND MAKE A POSITIVE DIFFERENCE TO OUR DAILY LIVES.

This week, spend some time making and delivering gifts, cards or letters to your neighbours and people in the community to thank them for what they do, or have done for you.

PEOPLE TO THANK AND BLESS...

- Family
- School, kindy, music teacher
- Shopkeepers
- Couriers/delivery people
- Dentist, doctor, nurse
- Sports coach/manager
- Who else?



Find out how to make these gifts by using this QR code

TALK ABOUT

- Who has made you feel loved or special this Christmas?
- Who are people in your community who support and help you (e.g., family, teachers, shopkeepers, doctor, coach, etc.)?
- Who have you shown love to this Christmas?
- Is there anyone that you'd like to care for, thank, or bless this Christmas?

GIFT IDEAS

- ? Confetti Cookies
- ? Ornament tic tac toe
- ? Slice and Bake shortbread
- ? Cookies
- ? Christmas Tea Trees
- ? Tea Cup Candles





Mary



²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you." ²⁹ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. ³¹ And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴ Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" ³⁵ The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶ And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸ Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

Luke 1:26-38

Reflection

Mary was a scared and frightened teenage girl. She had just found out she was pregnant - from an angel, nevertheless. How would her family take the news? How would her fiancé react?

The angel sharing the news was aware of all of this and left her with this promise, "The Lord is with you." God knew how vulnerable Mary was, and how anxious this news could leave her, so God sent the angel to leave her with this promise - God is with you, a reminder that she would not be alone. Fitting words - the Lord is with you, as we come to celebrate Emmanuel - God is with us!

Mary was a Jew. She knew who God was, but she didn't have a personal relationship with God. Having a personal relationship with God - that only came with Jesus. The God of Mary was omnipotent, had unlimited power, and would have felt distant. Many people had met God over the years - people like Moses, Abraham, David. But now a teenage girl was meeting with this all-powerful God. She really was "highly favoured." Mary would have known of the promise that God would send his son - as revealed by the prophets, but there was no way Mary would have had inkling that she would be part of this story.

And yet she was - a teenage girl, the mother of Jesus. Through her, God was going to be revealed in flesh.

Where are you in God's story? We might not have an angel come to us and say we are "highly favoured", and yet we are. Jesus came so God would no longer be distant - but Emmanuel, God with us. The same promise given to Mary, is given to us.

There are times when we feel vulnerable and left feeling anxious, and Jesus sends us the same message - I am with you - you are not alone.



As we unwrap the joy this Christmas, we too can take the angel's words of comfort with us. Whatever the season we are journeying in, just as God was with this teenage girl, Mary, God is with us.

May the God of hope fill you with joy.

Romans 15: 13

Questions

- Think about a time when you have been anxious, did you talk to God about it?
- Did talking to God, make you feel less anxious?
- What does the phrase, "The Lord is with you," mean to you?
- Have you asked for God's "peace that surpasses all understanding" to be with you?
- Just as God promised to Mary, God is there and wants to help. In what areas of your life do you need God's help right now?

Challenges

Take the time in prayer to tell God your concerns and invite God to journey with you.

Find someone who is older than you and ask them about their experiences of the peace God provides along the journey OR if you are older, find a younger person and ask them how God has supported them on the journey of faith.

Take a moment to add some thoughts to your Advent Journey diary

Additional resources





Elizabeth



³⁹ In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰ where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.

⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴² and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³ And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴ For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

Luke 1:39-45

Reflection

Recently, I journeyed to Thailand with my family. With all the complications of a COVID world, there were added fears for the trip. Would I get COVID at the last minute and have to cancel? Would I get COVID while we were in Thailand, and have to extend my stay? Would my suitcase transit safely through a brief stopover and get to our destination with me? The airline had booked us to transit through Singapore with only 50 minutes allowed to make the second flight - would we make it OK? Fortunately, all these fears were laid at rest, and my family was there, travelling with me and supporting me.

This week our theme is: Who is on the journey with you? As we prepare for Christmas, we are going to take the time to think about who is journeying with us.

I've written the story of Mary visiting Elizabeth in my own words. I tried to see it through Elizabeth's eyes, as though Elizabeth is telling me:

"I've been staying in the quiet seclusion of our home in the Judean hills ever since I knew I was pregnant. I can't face the gossiping tongues here, especially with Zechariah so suddenly struck dumb after his temple service-time. After many years of frustrated longing, my heart was so thankful to the Lord as I thought of the child growing within me. The Lord has taken away my lifelong disgrace, I am no longer a shamed woman - and fancy this amazing gift at my age. And what a tremendous surprise when my cousin, Mary, knocked on the door, travel-stained and out of breath in her excitement. An even bigger surprise - my son leapt with joy in my womb when Mary came into the house. And suddenly I knew, just as though the Lord was telling me, powerfully and with certainty, with great inner joy, that Mary too had been blessed, yet even more amazingly than I had. For she carries in her womb God's son. God's son! How incredibly blessed we are!"

This is the God who journeys with us, for Jesus has promised, "I am with you always."

Questions

- How have people journeyed with you during your life? How have they supported you? How have you supported them?
- Why is it important to journey with others?
- How does your body communicate in ways words cannot?

Challenges

Walk a labyrinth (there is one in St John's Cathedral, Brisbane). If you don't have one nearby, simply follow a walking path. Start at home, walk toward your destination (the "centre" of the labyrinth), and then return home by the same path.

While walking toward the "centre", contemplate your journey toward God. Once you reach your destination, pause for a while in the presence of the Divine. As you return home, ponder how you will integrate your sacred encounter into your everyday life.

I invite you to pray this well-known prayer with Thomas Merton:

*My Lord God,
I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
Nor do I really know myself,
and the fact that I think that I am following your will
does not mean that I am actually doing so.
But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.
And to know that if I do this, you will lead me by the right road
though I may know nothing about it.
Therefore will I trust you always
though I may seem lost in the shadow of death.
I will not fear, for you are ever with me,
and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.*

Additional resources





John the Baptist



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 call him 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 before he is born. ¹⁶ He will bring back many of the people of Israel 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 parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous - to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Luke 1:13-17

²⁹ The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! ³⁰ This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'

John 1:29-30

Reflection

Have you got a best friend?

Someone you've known, or it feels like you've known for your whole life?

Someone you can just be yourself with?

How good are those kinds of friends?

How much better do they make life, when despite how good or bad things are going their presence brings a spark of deep joy to your heart and soul?

I wonder if this is the kind of friendship that Jesus and John had?

With the closeness of the bond between their mothers, Mary and Elizabeth, and the shockingly unexpected nature of their births, I imagine that they would have had a unique bond.

And that's without acknowledging that one was "filled with the Holy Spirit" and the other was named "Saviour" and had been described by Isaiah as "God with us"!

There was surely a unique relationship that they shared from their very conception.

I'd like to think that this bond was one of the things that nourished and sustained them on the short journey of their lives of joyfully serving God.

As they travelled and taught, living unconventional lives in a world governed by both social and religious order and structure, I'm sure that their very presence in the world served as an encouragement to continue the journey that they were on.

As I reflect on my own life, I can find these 'John's' too.

People who through their lives, and presence in my life, have been an incredible encouragement to keep going.

I can think of a few families who, when my wife and I went through a really traumatic time at our youngest daughter's birth, were like John for us. They shared in our tears and moments of joy, praying for and with us, loving us through meals and babysitting for our older kids, they joined us on the journey of wrestling with where God was in the midst of 'life' and in many ways creating a deep joy in us through their very presence.

As we celebrate this journey to joy together this Advent, I wonder who the people are who've been the 'John' in your life?

The people who you've shared a unique bond with through your life.

Those who have nurtured, encouraged, and sustained you on your journey to joy in loving God.

And I wonder what it might look like for you to be a 'John' in the life of someone in your world right now?

Questions

- Can you think of a person who's been part of your life who's helped you better understand and follow God?
- What was it about their presence that was so meaningful?
- How could you thank them this Advent for their contribution to your life?
- Is there someone in your world that you could be a "John" to right now?
- How could you nurture, encourage or sustain them on their journey?

Challenges

Send a Christmas card, make a picture, write a note to thank the person who's had a big effect on your life following God.

Even though this time of year can be crazy busy, make a moment to give your precious time as a gift to support, love, encourage someone who's finding life challenging.

Additional resources





WEEK 4 UNEXPECTED JOY

SOMETIMES, AS WE PREPARE FOR CHRISTMAS, WE ARE SURPRISED BY JOY IN THE MOST UNEXPECTED WAYS. WE MIGHT RECEIVE A SPECIAL GIFT OR CARD. WE MIGHT SEE A JOYOUS CHRISTMAS SHOW/PARADE. WE MIGHT TRY A DELICIOUS, NEW CHRISTMAS FOOD. LET'S TAKE SOME TIME TO THINK ABOUT THE UNEXPECTED WAYS THAT JOY HAS SURPRISED US, AND THE WAYS THAT WE COULD SURPRISE OTHERS.

Take time today, or this week, to connect with someone in an unexpected way who you may not have spoken to or seen in a while.

WAYS TO CONNECT

-  Make a video to send.
-  Write a letter and put it in the post (add glitter or confetti to the envelope for an extra special surprise).
-  Take a funny photo to put in a card.
-  Make a phone call.
-  Write a message in Morse code.



WHO TO CONNECT WITH?

-  Grandparents
-  Aunts, uncles, cousins
-  Past school/kindy/university friends
-  Someone who you'd like to know better



Find these songs using this QR code



TALK ABOUT

- What's made you feel full of JOY this Christmas?
- Have you had any lovely surprises this Christmas?
- Who could you surprise with JOY this Christmas?

SHARE JOY WITH OTHERS

BE AN ENCOURAGER - say something encouraging to five people today.

SMILE at everyone you see today.

SURPRISE someone by doing something kind for them.

GET ARTY - do some artwork, or write a story, poem or song.

GET MUSICAL - play some music, sing a song, or do a dance.



Jesus



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.

Luke 2:6-7

¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

John 3:16-17

Reflection

Any family who has ever been expecting a baby knows that there is a lot to think about, plan and prepare for. Family and friends tell you about their experiences, you make lists of all the new things you need to get, and you try to plan for the birth. Yet it doesn't matter how prepared you are, there are always some unexpected things that happen.

I'm not sure what kinds of things Mary would have done when she was expecting to give birth to Jesus - I don't think 'What to expect when you're expecting' was out then! But I do think she would have had some expectations and made some plans about what would happen. Whether a long journey to Bethlehem while heavily pregnant and using an animal feeding trough for her baby's bed were part of her expectations or not, we will never know. But you get a sense, at least from the biblical accounts of Jesus' birth, that Mary took it all in her stride.

The idea of a messiah - one who saves - was a long-standing hope of the Jewish people. They expected that God would send someone to save them from the situation they were in. Many thought the Messiah would be a warrior king who would fight against the Roman occupiers and set them free to live their best lives. It's probably fair to say that a baby, born in a crowded house, wrapped in rags, and sleeping in a manger was not what they were expecting.

Jesus' humble birth and early years are not how many of us think about how God connects with us. We might think of God as separate, distant, unreachable. We might think about God as judgmental or scary. The very idea that God would be *incarnate* (in the body or flesh of a person) is something that is unexpected. And yet, it is the only way that God could save the world that He loves so much.

From the very moment Jesus started to grow inside Mary's body, his work of redeeming humanity began. The very essence of God - love - was poured into one man, so that he could lead humanity back to their role of participating in the mysterious flow of love that is an eternal circle of pouring out and receiving. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus took the brokenness and selfishness of humanity and transformed it back into Love. And in doing this, he showed us the way back, inviting us to follow him - to choose others first, to love without measure or limit, to embrace the world's pain and transform it all back into love. Are any of us ready to handle this unexpected way of love?

Questions

- Think about something that you are expecting - what is it you're hoping for, what might it be like if you don't get what you're hoping for?
- What do you think it might have been like for Mary to have a baby away from home and in a very strange place?
- Talk about someone who you love. What kinds of things do you do to help them know that you love them?
- Have you ever thought about the idea that the things you do to love others is part of the circle of God's eternal love? Do you think your life would be any different if you thought about this more in your day-to-day activities?

Challenges

Do you know anyone who has a baby or who is expecting one soon? Do something special to help them handle the unexpected. You could make them some food, help clean their house, entertain, or cuddle the baby so they can take a break.

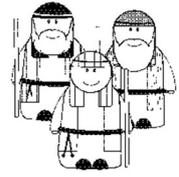
When you have a choice over the next few days, make it your mission to choose the way of love over anything else.

Additional resources





Shepherds



⁸ And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Luke 2:8-12

When I am afraid, I will trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I will not be afraid.

Psalm 56:3

Reflection

Have you ever found yourself going about your daily life only to have someone jump out and scream boo!!!? Personally, I love hiding behind doors to scare my kids and watching them jump and they, in turn, love trying to sneak up on me. These times often result in great joy as laughter can be heard throughout the house if we embrace the joy and fun as opposed to getting mad at the person who leapt out of nowhere!

These fun games we play, pale into insignificance when compared with the fright the shepherds must have had that night so many years ago when the angel popped out of nowhere and lit up the sky. At that point the shepherd had a choice to make. Should they embrace the experience and seek the manger, or stay with the safety of their sheep?

In a time long before electricity, when the night was dark, lit only by stars in the sky and possibly a fire to keep warm, the Shepherds would have been startled into full attention and fear with the sudden appearance of the angel and the glory of God. To them, it was a normal night, the same as every other night, watching the sheep, keeping an eye out for thieves, be they human or animal coming to take a sheep. They were not expecting anything other than the usual.

Understandably, the Shepherds reacted in fear, but the angel told them not to be afraid. The Angels proceeded to share some amazing news with them, as if they weren't already amazed! Shepherds of that time were very poor, considered some of the lowest class people of their society and yet God chose them. He chose them to be first. First to hear of the birth of Jesus. The first visitors so see this new Messiah. Because of their job they were considered unclean and couldn't take part in religious ceremonies and yet God chose them. What joy they experienced.

When the Shepherds heard the news, they made a choice. What would you have done? Are you brave and bold, and follow when God surprises you? Would you be willing to leave it all and seek after Jesus, the joy for all people? Are you willing to lean in and explore God and see how life could change as a result?

Questions

- What is the biggest fright you have ever had?
- Do you like surprises? Why or why not?
- How do you act when you get a surprise?
- Have you been surprised by joy? Tell someone about it.
- How would you have responded? Would you have gone to find the baby or stayed with the sheep?
- Why did God call the shepherds first? Not so important in society but for God each of us is important.
- How has God surprised you in your life?
- Do you embrace the unexpected or run from it? What might you be missing if you fail to embrace the unexpected things God brings to your life?

Challenges

How can you surprise someone with joy this week? Go and do it!

*Watch **The Best Christmas Pageant Ever***

Do you think the rest of world at the time looked at the shepherds like the Herdman children?

Look how these children surprised everyone in the audience.

Would you have embraced this 'unexpected' turn of events?

Additional resources





Angels



¹³ 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."*

¹⁵ When 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."

Luke 2:13-15

Reflection

There are so many messages flooding our lives and our brains these days. Sometimes it's hard to know what to listen to and what to do, how to handle all the unexpected changes that seem to come at us thick and fast.

Angel literally means messenger - and what messages the angels brought at the first Christmas! An angel announced the coming of Christ to Mary, an angel told Joseph that the child Mary carried was the child of God, and a 'multitude' of angels filled the sky to announce the birth of Jesus to the shepherds. They brought news that was totally unexpected, probably even a total shock, and their presence was obviously really challenging - they always had to say, "Do not be afraid!"

Neuroscience teaches us that it is very hard to shift our long held assumptions - what we reckon that life is all about - even with clear evidence. We need to change our hearts before we can change our minds. And that's what the angels ask... In each of these cases the angels brought news that there was cause for joy and for praise. The situation was different to what Mary or Joseph, or the shepherds might have thought ... it was much, much better!

And somehow Mary, Joseph, and these wonderful shepherds got past the fear and the shock and said yes to the message. They didn't turn away from the surprise, or say it wasn't meant for them. I love that when this extraordinary heavenly host had disappeared again, the shepherds just said let's go! They had heard the good news and they were totally up for acting on it.

God wants us to rejoice, even when the situation is surprising or difficult to understand. He wants us to notice and celebrate all the wonderful gifts around us.

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵ Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 4: 4-7



He also wants us to sing out in praise and wonder - ***Glory be to God!***

And he asks us to act - to trust that the surprising, unexpected, and wonderful, good news is for us and to head off on the journey to learn more.

Questions

- What is making you happiest this Christmas season?
- What new message might God be giving us?
- What could help you if you feel overwhelmed, confused, unsettled or afraid by what God is asking you to do?
- How can we find out more about it?
- Who can you share your happiness with and maybe the journey towards this new thing God is asking?

Challenges

Find a favourite version of a joyous carol and sing loud and dance around your living room. Feel free to laugh.

Thinking about the new message God might be giving you, what do you need to do to respond to this message?

Share the next step that you're going to take in this journey with someone you trust.

Additional resources





WEEK 5

UNWRAP JOY, EMBRACE JESUS

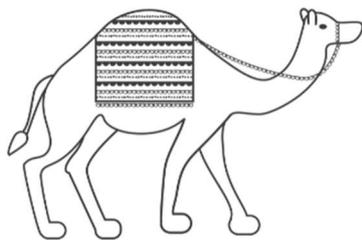
IT'S CHRISTMAS! WE'VE PREPARED. WE'VE FOCUSED. WE'VE SPENT TIME WITH OTHER PEOPLE. WE'VE DISCOVERED JOY IN UNEXPECTED WAYS. NOW, WE GET TO CELEBRATE!

Spend some time this week celebrating and experiencing all the JOY that Christmas brings. As part of your celebrations, you might like to watch a fun video of "Christmas according to Kids" using the QR code below.

REFLECT

Spend some time reflecting and talking about what you enjoyed during Advent and Christmas this year.

- What was your favourite activity?
- What did you learn?
- What was the most joyful part for you?
- How did focusing on Joy change things for you this Christmas?



Find week 5 resources using this QR code

TALK ABOUT

- What is your favourite way to celebrate Christmas? What activities, food or drinks do you like to have?
- How have you experienced JOY this season? How have you shared JOY with others this season?
- Are there any other Christmas activities you want to try this season (or maybe next year)?

MUSIC

Put on your Christmas Playlist and sing, dance and embrace the JOY of music.

If you need inspiration check out our Spotify playlist using the QR code.

Or these videos...

- 🎵 God's Big Love - Dan Warlow
- 🎵 The Very First Christmas - Colin Buchanan
- 🎵 Away in a manger - Yancey



Wise Men



¹In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.'

¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Matthew 2:1-2 & 10-11

Reflection

Have you ever received a gift that you thought was going to be one thing and found out that it was something completely different? How did you react? Was it a complete disappointment or were you able to make the best of the situation? Maybe it turned out to be the greatest gift of all.

The wise men had just this kind of shock as they followed the signs in the heavens alerting them to the birth of a new king, a messiah whose birth was literally written in the stars! Being wise men, they went straight to where they thought this new king would be found and that was in the palace of the current king Herod.

Upon arriving imagine their surprise to not find the much-heralded messiah, but instead an old king who was totally unaware and frightened of what their news might mean for him. The wisemen seemed to be quite savvy when they agreed to continue on their journey to find this new messiah for Herod but as we know they did not go back to him after they found the child, instead going home another way.

The wise men remind us that we all need to be able to make course corrections on our journey through life. Personally, I made a major change in my life when I was called out of a science career that I had spent four years getting my qualifications for and 5 years of industry experience only to hear God call me into ministry and having to go back and retrain in order to fulfill this call on my life.

Being able to accept these changes from often carefully thought-out plans is a common theme throughout the bible. As followers of Christ, we will be called into all sorts of challenging positions and directions that we may not otherwise have wanted to go.

The Joy of Christmas is that our promise from God is that this love of God will continue to follow you in all the course corrections of life and will be an ongoing source of all our inspirations as we continue to be faithful to our God who calls us to follow him.

Questions

- When have you received an unexpected gift?
- How did you respond?
- When have you had to make a major change in your direction in life?
- What was the outcome?
- What helped you embrace this change?
- How does your faith help you to take on unexpected challenges?
- Are there any unexpected gifts that you are “unwrapping” at the moment?
- What and who might help you on this part of your journey?

Challenges

Think of someone who wouldn't expect you to give them a gift this Christmas and given them something small, but meaningful it could even be some colouring or art you've done or some cooking.

Add to your Advent Journey Diary any unexpected gifts that you've received over the last few weeks of this Advent Journey.

Additional resources





Anna



³⁶ There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, ³⁷ and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. ³⁸ Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

Luke 2:36-38

Reflection

Have you ever wanted something but had to wait for it? And wait for it... and wait for it some more... How did it feel? Did you wait patiently or impatiently? Did your excitement build as you waited? How did you feel when it finally arrived? What did you do?

Anna is the story of someone who waited and waited. Anna is the story of someone who learned to wait well. Three short verses filled with so much information. Can you see her? An old lady, a widow for many, many years. She could have fallen to bitterness. She had known sorrow and hard times. She could have given up but instead Anna chooses to worship. Anna practically lived in the Women's Court of the Temple, day, and night.

She was a prophet. She listened and shared God's word. She waited a long, long time to see the promise of God fulfilled. She has learned that God is trustworthy, and He would fulfil His promises. Anna prayed for people; she shared her God with people and all the while she waited for the fulfilment of His promise. Anna learned to wait well.

Anna's story is a beautiful reminder of patience, trust, and joy in Jesus. How did Anna respond to the fulfilment of this promise? She gave thanks. She had such a grateful heart, filled with joy to the extent that it overflowed. It overflowed in thanks, and it overflowed to others. Anna spoke and shared her joy and the truth of Jesus to all those around her.

How do you respond to joy? Do you offer thanks to God and others? Do you share your joy, or do you hold it tightly to yourself?

Sometimes we have to wait - God is worth the wait; joy is worth the wait.

Weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning.

Psalm 30:5

There may be moments of happiness, but deep joy often comes after the hours of darkness as it did for Anna. We must learn to wait well, to use our time well, to pray, to trust, to share, to wait expectantly. Oh, but when it comes, the deep overwhelming joy is such a gift, rippling through us, pouring over us, bubbling up within us. Joy is to be shared, unwrap it with thanksgiving share it freely and abundantly.

Questions

- Can you think of something you really wanted but had to wait a long time to see, do or receive?
 - How did you feel once the time finally arrived, and you could have or do what you were waiting for?
 - Did you wait well?
 - What promises of God are you still waiting for?
 - How can you wait well?
 - Waiting is often hard to do on your own. Who could you invite to wait with you who could also share your joy?
 - How do you respond to joy? Who can you share your joy with?
-

Challenges

Find someone who is older than you and ask them about their experiences of joy and waiting for joy to come. If you are older, can you find a younger person and ask them about waiting for something they really want?

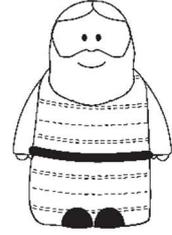
Thank God for the people around you who are great examples of faith and service. Then find them and thank them too.

Additional resources





Simeon



²⁵ Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him.²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah.²⁷ Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required,²⁸ Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

²⁹ "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you may now dismiss your servant in peace.

³⁰ For my eyes have seen your salvation,

³¹ which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:

³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and the glory of your people Israel."

³³ The child's father and mother marvelled at what was said about him.³⁴ Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against,³⁵ so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

Luke 2:25-35

Reflection

How exciting is it to discover a faithful person? How amazing is it to come across someone who has faithfully given their lives to keep something running and thriving? Even more incredible is when, after all their sacrifice they are still open to, and embracing of new ways of thinking and exploring how things could be done? Simeon is one of those people.

He had faithfully been waiting for God to restore (console) Israel to the plan that God had given Abraham, the plan that God's people would be blessed to be a blessing to the world. There had been lots of people who'd come along during Simeon's years who'd claimed to be the one who would do this. Many had begun violent revolutions that would "make Israel great again", only to be comprehensively defeated. Many had declared themselves to be God's Saviour only to disappear into obscurity. And the world that he lived in was oppressively bleak. But Simeon had faithfully watched and waited. He had shaped his life to listen to God with curiosity and wonder, to ponder if this was the one promised as Messiah - God's Saviour.

And so one day Simeon felt a stirring in his heart that today was the day. Today in the temple, you'll find the answer that you've been waiting your whole life for. You'll finally see the fulfillment of God's plan.

If this were me, I'd be turning up at the Temple looking for the biggest show that there was. The person with the most followers, or maybe the wisest words and deepest thoughts. They'd definitely be outstanding community members, from a good family and the right suburb!

But Simeon's life is attuned to a different voice. The voice of the unexpected. The voice of creation. The voice that shaped ultimate goodness. That voice draws him to a couple and their newborn son bringing a poor family's offering to God.

This is the one. This is the beginning. This is the birth of the hope that has fuelled your life. This is the beginning of a new future for all humanity. Can you imagine how Simeon must have felt?

In this broken and bleak world filled with darkness, Simeon had clung to the hope of joy returning. His hope had driven him to faithfully turn up at the temple week after week, year after year. His hope had compelled him to live a life that pleased God, a righteous life.

His hope had opened his life to the presence of the Spirit of God. His hope had shaped within him the capacity for curiosity. His hope had given him a heart to believe and eyes to see. This hope was a new life, resting in his arms. This hope was now made real in the wonder of a life of possibility. This hope was giving birth to incomprehensible joy and wonder at what might be.

As we celebrate this Advent season, may we be found sharing in Simeon's obedient curiosity and faithful hope.

Questions

- How curious are you in life?
- What does curiosity mean to you?
- What do you think helps grow curiosity?
- When it comes to being on a journey with God do you find yourself tending more towards embracing curiosity or tradition?
- What helps you listen to and look for God in the world around you?
- Who do you know who listens well to God?

Challenges

Make some time this week to be curious with someone you know listens well to God to discover how they have grown in this ability.

Think of one question that you can ask this week that is more curious and ask it in a conversation.

Additional resources

