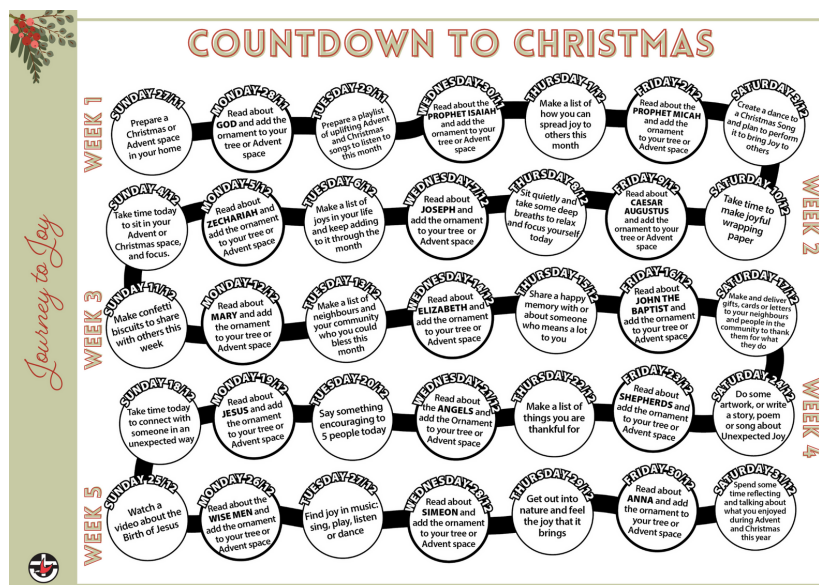




COUNTDOWN TO CHRISTMAS



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 four 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 – Countdown to Christmas 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.

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.

Our deepest thanks to those who have contributed to this from across the Queensland Synod. We couldn't have done it without you. Special thanks to: Kath Ruhle, Shirley Sergeant and Silvia Lopez (The Gap UC), Rebecca Bell, Brenda Lohe and team, Jessica Pinkerton, Paul Wetzig, Rebecca Riggs, and Michael Mann. An extra special thanks to Hannah Staines (The Gap UC) for the beautiful graphic design.



WEEK 1

PREPARING FOR CHRISTMAS

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



WEEK 2

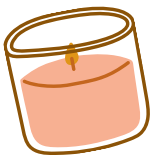
TAKING TIME TO FOCUS

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



WEEK 3

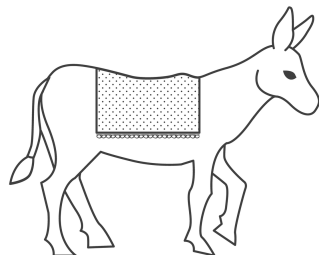
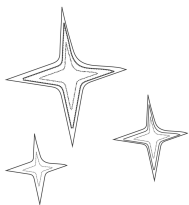
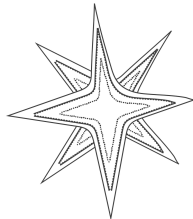
SHARING AND CARING FOR OTHERS

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





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.

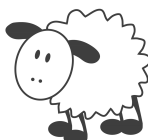


WHO TO CONNECT WITH?

- ? 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.



WEEK 5

CELEBRATING CHRISTMAS

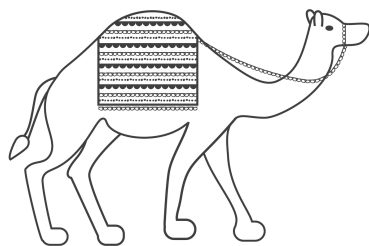
IT'S CHRISTMAS! WE'VE PREPARED. WE'VE FOCUSED. WE'VE SPENT TIME WITH OTHER PEOPLE. WE'VE DISCOVERED JOY IN UNEXPECTED WAYS. NOW, WE GET TO CELEBRATE!

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.

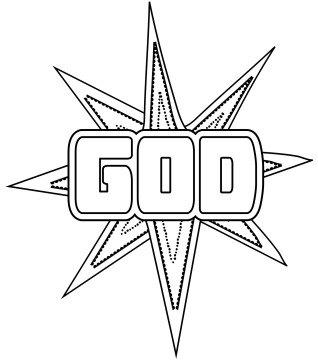
Or these videos...

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



WEEK 1

GOD

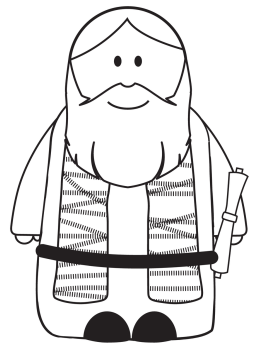


In the beginning, God created the Heavens and the Earth. He created all the stars in the sky, the plants in the ground, all the birds and animals and people. He created the world perfect, but it didn't stay that way for long. People made bad choices, going against what God asked them to do and that brought sadness and pain into the world. This isn't how God wanted the world to be, and even though we continue to make bad choices, God loves us and prepared a way to help heal our broken world and make it perfect again.

A long, long time ago, God revealed his plan to leaders and prophets. Only some people understood what was coming, but that didn't stop the plan that God had prepared with love. Do you know what the plan was? It was to bring Jesus into the world. Jesus, God's own perfect son, who was with God from the very beginning, and would bring light and life to a dark and broken world (John 1:1-5).

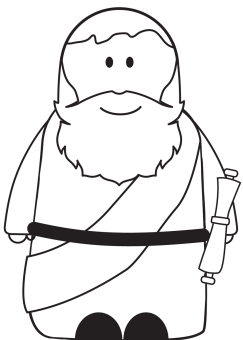
ISAIAH

Isaiah was a prophet who lived in scary times in the kingdom of Judah (around 740 to 700 B.C.E.). The people were afraid of the nations around them, but God didn't want them to live in fear. God told Isaiah to give the people an important message. The message was that someday a baby would be born that would save everyone. God told Isaiah his name would be Immanuel, which means God with us (Isaiah 7:14). This message told the people that God had not forgotten them and that He was going to do something to save them. It was a message prepared with love, and gave the people hope for the journey ahead.



MICAH

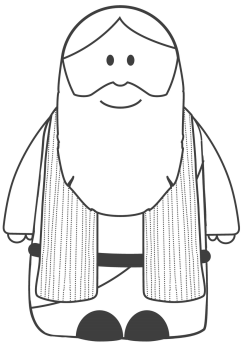
Micah was another prophet who lived in dangerous times in Judah (around the same time as Isaiah). The people were scared that their country would be taken over. During this time, people had forgotten how to look after each other. They were not looking after the poor or the widows, and rich people were making unfair business deals and stealing from each other. Micah encouraged them to stop, tell God they were sorry, and start looking after each other, but they didn't listen. He also gave them a message of hope. He told them that, one day, God would restore the world. That He would send a Messiah, their Saviour, and that this messiah would be born in Bethlehem, one of the smallest clans of Judah (Micah 5:2).





WEEK 2

ZECHARIAH



Zechariah was a priest working in the temple. Him and his wife, Elizabeth, faithfully served God all their lives but were not able to have a child which, in their culture, was a terrible disgrace. On one ordinary workday in the temple, the angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah, assuring him that God had heard their prayers. Despite their old age, Elizabeth would have a child, a son called John; and that God would use Him to lead people back to God. He would be the one who would prepare the way for the Messiah to come (Luke 1:13).

Zechariah's response to the angel's message was quite understandably shock, confusion, and disbelief. He questioned how, and in response was silenced and unable to speak until the baby was born. Elizabeth had the baby, they named him John, and Zechariah was able to speak again. I wonder if Zechariah's time of silence helped him focus on what was to come. When he was able to talk again, He praised God for the wonderful gift that his son would be, not just for his family but for the whole world (Luke 1:64).

JOSEPH

Joseph was chosen by God to be the earthly father of Jesus. He was a carpenter by trade and worked in Nazareth. We don't know exactly why God chose Joseph, but we can guess that it was because he was a man who honoured God with his life, and that it showed in his actions.

When Joseph found out that Mary (his not yet wife) was pregnant, he wondered what was going on. He thought he should leave her, but an angel visited him, and explained that he need not be afraid, and so he stayed (Matthew 1:20). He travelled with her on the long visit to Bethlehem and looked after her and the infant Jesus by taking the family to Egypt when they were in danger. He took on the role of protector like any good father should, even though there were many things that could have distracted him.

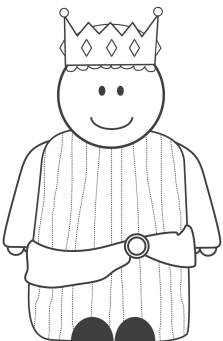


CAESAR AUGUSTUS

Caesar Augustus was Roman Emperor in the days when Rome ruled over many of the places we hear about in the Christmas story, including 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 were very concerned about the control the Romans had over them and wanted Caesar and his people to go away.

During his reign, Caesar declared a census, much like the ones we have today, to count the number of people in the Roman world (Luke 2:1). Unlike today, they couldn't be counted where they lived, and instead had to travel long distances back to where their relatives had lived. It was because of this that Mary and Joseph found themselves taking the long trip to Bethlehem. While they were there, Jesus was born, in the very place the prophets had said.

Mighty Caesar was considered a son of the gods, but little did he know that amidst the distraction of the census, the real Son of God was born.



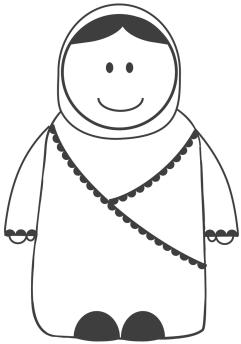


WEEK 3

MARY

Mary was a Jew. She knew God and would have been familiar with the prophetic promises that God would send His Son. But could she have ever imagined the part that she would play in the story? She was an unmarried teenager when an angel visited her and announced she would have a baby. Not just any baby, but the son of God. Can you imagine how scared and frightened she would have been? The angel knew, and told her, "Do not be afraid" (Luke 1:30).

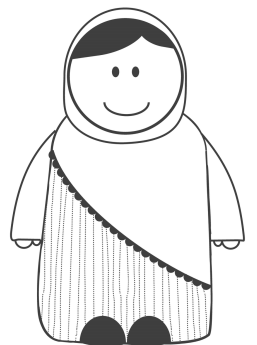
God knew how vulnerable Mary was, and how anxious this news would leave her but had chosen her specifically to carry his son. Mary wasn't left alone, and went to visit her relative Elizabeth, who was also having a baby under special circumstances (Luke 1:39). Mary and Elizabeth shared a special bond, and no doubt their time together was one of sharing and caring and preparing for the long-awaited arrival of both of their special children Jesus and John.



ELIZABETH

Elizabeth was Zechariah's wife and together faithfully followed the Lord. They had tried to have a baby for a long time but couldn't. This was a great disgrace, but they never stopped praying for God to give them a child. When Elizabeth finally did become pregnant, she was overjoyed and said The Lord has done this for me, he has shown me favour and taken away my disgrace, (Luke 1:25).

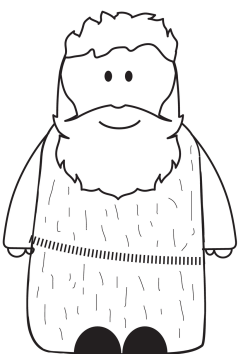
Imagine the silence in their house with Zechariah unable to speak. Thankfully Elizabeth's cousin Mary came to visit after receiving her own unbelievable pregnancy news. Elizabeth immediately recognised that Mary's baby was God when her own baby jumped inside her. She said to Mary "blessed are you among women and blessed is the child you bear!" (Luke 1:42). How great would it have been for Mary and Elizabeth to support each other during this time of their life, and how to be able to share in hope by bringing these special babies into the world.



JOHN THE BAPTIST

John is the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth. The one the prophets said would "prepare a way for the Lord". We don't know much about John's childhood, but as an adult he was known to wear clothing made of camel's hair and eat locusts (grasshoppers) and wild honey (Mark 1:6). He was considered a prophet and told his followers that there was one who was more powerful than him to come and that he was not even worthy of untying his sandals.

John baptised many people, including Jesus, and proclaimed that Jesus was the Lamb of God (John 1:29). With the closeness of the bond between their mothers Mary and Elizabeth, the unexpected nature of their births, and the extraordinary similarities of their lives, John and Jesus had a unique relationship and together shared in bringing a new hope to the world.



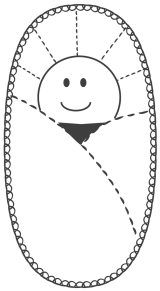


WEEK 4

JESUS

Any family who has ever expected a baby knows that there is a lot to think about, plan and prepare for. God had been preparing and planning for the birth of Jesus for a long time, yet the way he arrived in the world was still completely unexpected. The people were waiting for a messiah - one who would save them from the Roman empire. The last thing anyone expected was a baby, born in an overcrowded house, wrapped in strips cloth, and put to bed in an animal feed box, but that is exactly what happened.

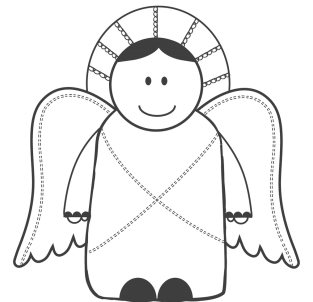
From the very moment Jesus started to grow inside Mary's body, his life was full of surprise and unexpected things. God loved the world so much that he sent Jesus as a baby, to be our Messiah, to save the world (John 3:16), and that is the most unexpected joy of all!



ANGELS

Angels are messengers, and what amazing messages the angels brought at the first Christmas! They announced the miracle pregnancy to Mary, told Joseph that Mary's child was the Son of God, and a whole host of them 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 it's clear their presence was obviously really challenging - they always had to say, "Do not be afraid!" (Luke 2:10)

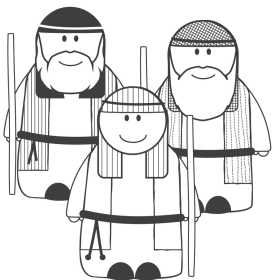
In each of these cases the angels brought news of Joy. The situations turned out very differently to what Mary, Joseph, or the shepherds might have initially thought, but somehow, they got past the fear and the shock and responded in Joy. They didn't turn away from the surprise, or say it wasn't meant for them, but embraced and welcomed the unexpected Joy!



SHEPHERDS

For the shepherds, the night of Jesus birth probably started just like any other: watching and protecting their sheep. They would have been startled to full attention with the sudden appearance of an angel on an otherwise quiet countryside. Understandably, the Shepherds reacted in fear, but the angel told them not to be afraid before sharing some amazing news with them. They said it was good news and would bring Joy to all people. A messiah had been born in Bethlehem, and they would find him wrapped in cloths, and lying in a manger (Luke 2:12).

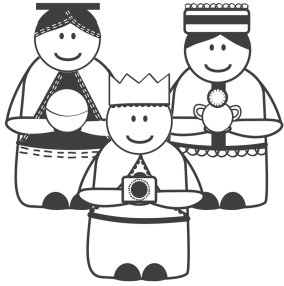
When the Shepherds heard the news, they immediately chose to go and find the baby, and then spread the word about what had happened. Shepherds in Bible times weren't rich or powerful. They were smelly and dirty and looked down upon, yet God chose them. He chose them to be first to hear of the birth of 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 unexpected joy!





WEEK 5

WISE MEN

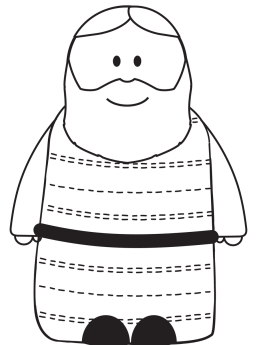


When a bright new star appeared in the sky, a few wise men knew that this meant a new king had been born. They didn't know where, or how long it would take to find the king, but they started their journey to find and welcome the King of the Jews (Matthew 2:2). They followed that star and found themselves in the Palace of King Herod. Imagine their surprise upon arrival when instead of a young messiah, they found an old king who was totally unaware and frightened of what this news might mean for him.

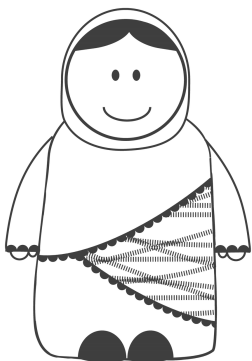
Herod sent them away and eventually the star led them to where Jesus was. Jesus may have been 2 years old before the wise men found him, and presented him with their gifts of Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh (Matthew 2:11). These might be strange gifts for a baby, but they were gifts worthy for a King. As the Wise Men unwrapped their gifts, they embraced Jesus and all the Joy that he brought to the world.

SIMEON

God told Simeon that he wouldn't die until he'd seen the Messiah. So, Simeon waited and waited and grew older and older. Others might have been discouraged by the long wait, but Simeon wasn't. He waited patiently until one day he was led to the temple courts. He may not have understood why he went to the temple that day. It may have been inconvenient, and he may have had other plans, but Simeon went anyway, and there he met his savior. He took the baby in his arms and praised God (Luke 2:28). Sometimes it's the little things we do, the things that are not in our plans, or that are inconvenient they give us the most joy in the long run. Simeon saw Jesus recognised him as the Messiah and embraced him joyfully.



ANNA



Anna was an old woman who had spent most of her life at the temple. She was a prophet, and enjoyed talking to God, praying, worshipping, and praising him. One day, when she was at the temple, she got to meet the baby Jesus. It would have been a wonderful day for her. Mary and Joseph had come to present Jesus at the temple, the custom at the time. Anna, who had spent so much time in this place praying and waiting, instantly recognised, and understood who He was. In response, she went up to Mary & Joseph, gave thanks to God and started telling everyone about the child (Luke 2:36).

Anna's story is a beautiful reminder of patience, trust, and joy. 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 everyone around her.