



12th November – 24th December 2023
Resources for personal and lifegroup use
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Quotable Quotes

“At this Christmas when Christ comes, will He find a warm heart? Mark the season of by loving and serving others with God's love and concern.” Mother Teresa

“And when the Lord Jesus has become your peace, remember, there is another thing: goodwill towards all. Do not try to keep Christmas without goodwill towards all.” Charles Spurgeon

“Peace with God, peace with others, and peace in your own heart.” Rick Warren

“Anyone thinking of the Holy Child as born in December would mean by it exactly what we mean by it; that Christ is not merely a summer sun of the prosperous but a winter fire for the unfortunate.” GK Chesterton

“All the Christmas presents in the world are worth nothing without the presence of Christ.” David Jeremiah

Who can add to Christmas? The perfect motive is that God so loved the world. The perfect gift is that He gave His only Son. The only requirement is to believe in Him. The reward of faith is that you shall have everlasting life.” Corrie Ten Boom

You can never truly enjoy Christmas until you can look up into the Fathers’ face and tell him you have received his Christmas gift.” John Rice



Overview

Our new Sunday life & midweek series is intended to help us journey into the big story of God in grace and mercy that will soon be upon us. Advent is a season in the church calendar dedicated to the hopeful anticipation of the arrival or 'advent' of Jesus of Nazareth. During these weeks leading up to Christmas, many of the faithful engage in prayer, meditation and scripture-study that emphasizes hope, peace, love and joy. *The core purpose of Advent is to prepare our hearts for the coming of Christ.*

This advent season anticipates this 'coming of Christ' from three different perspectives: the physical nativity in Bethlehem, the receiving of Christ in the hearts of the believers and the eschatological second coming of Christ.

Children from a young age often begin a countdown of excitement and anticipation of the coming of Christmas Day by opening their Advent Calendars, door by door until the celebrations begin. We too need to keep in focus, and maintain hold of, the excitement and anticipation of what is to come.

In this series we take a special look at some of the key characters who were involved in that very first Christmas Story. Luke's Gospel and other scripture passages share eye-witness accounts of the people who were present at the time, and who were pivotal to the events that took place two thousand or so years ago.

As we look at these Christmas characters in this Advent series, we hope to make a deeper study, and gain a clearer understanding of the contributions and roles that these special people had in the greatest story ever told:

1. Mary
2. Zechariah and Elizabeth
3. Simeon and Anna
4. Joseph
5. Shepherds
6. Wise Men
7. Jesus

These characters have much to reveal to us about the Christmas Story, and the coming of our Lord Jesus. We gain insight from focussing on their individual lives and stories, and the unfolding events they were involved in. Through this series we will try to put ourselves in the shoes of some of the most familiar characters of Christmas and we will see how each of them points to the greatest character of all: Jesus.

Let us capture afresh the wonder of this season over the next few weeks by soaking in the anticipation of what lays before us in the hope, peace, love and joy brought to us by our amazing saviour, Jesus Christ.



Week 1:

Christmas Characters

Mary Jesus' Mother

Isaiah 7:14; Luke 1:26-38; Luke 1:46-55

God chose an extraordinary young woman called Mary to be the mother of Jesus. Mary is first introduced to us in the bible as 'a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph' (Luke 1:26-27). The 'virgin birth' had already been foretold of course in the old-testament (Isaiah 7:14). Mary's betrothal to a respected member of society was vital, as life was precarious for women in Judea and Galilee in the first century. Women had few or no inherent rights, and marriage was the path to some degree of liberty and dignity. In some situations, marriage was even necessary for survival. Betrothal was absolutely binding and usually lasted for a year before marriage. So, Mary's life had been following traditional expectations up until the point of the Angel Gabriel's astonishing news! The traditional pathway and order of things was about to be shockingly overturned. Mary was at first greatly troubled, or scared by the Angel's visitation (Luke 1:29). It is not surprising then that the Angel Gabriel said to Mary, 'Do not be afraid' and then followed up with, 'for you have found favour with God' (Luke 1:30). We learn that after asking 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' (affirming the miraculous nature of this conception) Mary's gentle, faithful and obedient nature took the news in her stride and accepted that the Holy Spirit would come upon her. Mary's response to this life-altering news reveals much about her character. She was clothed in humility and meekness as we find Mary glorifying God, while acknowledging her own humble place in comparison (Luke 1:46-49). Mary's meek spirit did not mask a weak individual but instead Mary was a woman of courage. Mary's faith in God was steadfast and strong, which would serve her well for the many challenges that lay ahead of her – her pregnancy, the birth of her son, Jesus' life, and finally his death and resurrection.

Reflections and Questions:

1. Read the chosen bible passage in at least two versions. What stands out?
2. Why did God choose Mary as the mother of the Christ child?
3. Why did it matter that Mary came from Nazareth?
4. Why was it crucial that Mary be a virgin?
5. What was it that concerned Mary in the Angels words? (Luke 1:28)
6. Mary knew God's will for her (Luke 1:38) – how do we discern God's will for our lives?
7. What do you think gave Mary the strong belief that the Lord would do what He said?
8. How does Mary encourage us in our own lives?



Week 2:

Christmas Characters

Zechariah and Elizabeth

Luke 1:5-25; Luke 1:57-66; Luke 1:67-80

In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. They were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and by now they were both very old (Luke 1:5-7). Elizabeth had truly shown that she was patient over the years as she prayed and prayed for a baby.

Then one day when Zechariah was in the Temple serving as a priest, an Angel of the Lord appeared to him and said, '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.' Zechariah showed some lack of faith here when he displayed doubt in his response to the angel. He said, 'How can I be sure of this?' (Luke 1:18) because he knew that he and his wife were old in their years. Zechariah was then muted for a period of time because of his doubt and unbelief. So, Elizabeth's prayers had been answered and she became pregnant with John (the Baptist). Her tenacity and patience had been rewarded. When the time of the birth came, she shared her joy! Zechariah remained mute until the baby was eight days old. He could not speak but he wrote down on a tablet, 'his name is John' – he now believed it. Zechariah even sang a song of praise that acknowledged John to have a very special role later on – to prepare the way and the coming of the Lord Jesus, 'And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him.' (Luke 1:76)

They now had their long-awaited-for baby, and their faith had grown.

Reflections and Questions:

1. Read the chosen bible passage in at least two versions. What stands out?
2. Who was Elizabeth in the bible? And how does her life feature in this big story?
3. Why was Zechariah so doubtful of the news of him and Elizabeth conceiving a child? Was he punished for his doubting of the Angel's message? And if so, why?
4. During their pregnancies, do you think that it was significant that Elizabeth and Mary were related, rather than just a pair of close friends?
5. It was customary then for parents to name their sons after the father's name (Zechariah), so why did they call him John? (Luke 1:57-64)
6. We all know of people who have longed for a baby and have had the pain and anguish of having to be patient and wait. What does this story teach us about prayer in this situation?
7. What are the key characteristics that we can learn from this man and woman of faith?



Week 3:

Christmas Characters

Simeon and Anna

Luke 2:22-38

Simeon was thought to be a 'just and devout' man of Jerusalem (Luke 2:25-35), who met Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus as they entered the Temple, to fulfil the requirements of the Law of Moses on the 40th day after Jesus' birth. Jesus was being presented at the Temple. According to the biblical account, the Holy Spirit visited Simeon and revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen the Christ child. Upon taking Jesus into his arms, Simeon uttered a prayer which is still used today in some churches. Christian traditions sometimes commemorate February 2nd as the feast of Candlemas (the presentation of the Lord). Simeon appeared relieved and grateful that he was able to be present in this act of prayer in the Temple whilst holding Jesus. He was praising God for him in his arms which he believed would now allow him to die peacefully in the knowledge of Jesus' salvation for him (Luke 2:29-32). His job was done, his time of everlasting peace could now come.

As Simeon was prophesying in the Temple that Jesus was the Lord's Messiah, a lady called Anna came over to them. Anna was a prophetess herself and she came and met with them. Then 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. Anna had been at the temple for many years without leaving, and had worshiped night and day, both fasting and praying (Luke 2:36-38). Her character shows her steadfast dedication and devotion to the Lord.

Reflections and Questions:

1. Read the chosen bible passage in at least two versions. What stands out?
2. Are Simeon and Anna the forgotten Christmas characters do you think? Where do they fit in to the Christmas story?
3. Why was Simeon at the Temple on the day Jesus was presented?
4. What was he praising God for (Luke 2:28-32)? Do we praise God for the same?
5. What quality of Anna's character and life are quite remarkable? Could we see ourselves doing this?
6. Of all the human characters in the Christmas Story, it is Simeon and Anna who most clearly understand the full meaning of Christ birth – is this true? Why?
7. What are the characteristics then that we can learn from this man and woman of faith?



Week 4:

Christmas Characters

Joseph

Luke 2:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25; Matthew 2:13-15; Matthew 2:19-23

Joseph was born in the family line of Judah to Jacob and he lived in Nazareth of Galilee. He was a trained carpenter and he was betrothed to a young girl called Mary. Joseph was not a rich man (as we see later when the story pans out and we witness the circumstances around Jesus' birth and place). Joseph was at first shocked by the news of Mary's pregnancy but because he was faithful to the law and yet did not want to expose Mary to public disgrace, he decided that he would divorce her quietly (Matthew 1:19). After the extraordinary news of Mary's pregnancy that was not due to him, Joseph acted both mercifully and graciously – he did not want to 'stone' Mary (for adultery) nor did he want to publicly disgrace her – he was prepared to protect her honour. As he was considering this situation, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.' (Matthew 1:20-21). Joseph's true character becomes clear in his response to this dream. He was obedient to this message and he put all his own feelings to one side. Joseph took Mary home as his wife (Matthew 1:24). He showed courage and strength to protect them both from the slander and ridicule of the times, and he was self-controlled in not laying with her until after the baby Jesus' birth. And mostly, his humility was evident as a man taking a role almost in the background to this greater character, the central character of the greatest story ever told - of the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus our saviour.

Reflections and Questions:

1. Read the chosen bible passage in at least two versions. What stands out for you?
2. Who was Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus? (Luke 1:27)
3. What part did Joseph play in God's choices?
4. What points to the fact that Joseph was a law-abiding man? (Matthew 1:19)
5. Joseph put himself in a possible position of ridicule and scorn. Would we be prepared to do this in our lives? Do we have a personal story of standing up for something?
6. Would you say that Joseph was a hot-headed or a humble man? Why?
7. What are some of these characteristics that we ourselves can learn from this man of faith?



Week 5: Christmas Characters

The Shepherds
Luke 2:8-20; Psalm 23

The shepherds were living out in the fields minding their sheep, watching their flocks, like any other ordinary day. Suddenly, one night, this 'ordinary' became extraordinary, truly astonishing! An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.' (Luke 2:8-12). A heavenly host then appeared with the angel and praised God. Once the angels had left, the shepherds said, 'Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.' The shepherds were obedient and diligent – they did not question and dismiss the message but believed what they had been told and just went on their way. They found the baby in the stable manger and they worshipped him.

When they had seen the baby Jesus, the Shepherds began glorifying and praising God. They returned to spread the word concerning what had been told to them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them (Luke 2:17-18).

These Shepherds can be considered the first evangelists who proclaimed the good news about Jesus to those all around them.

Reflections and Questions:

1. Read the chosen bible passage in at least two versions. What stands out?
2. What role did the shepherds play in the unfolding Christmas story?
3. Jesus was later known as the 'Good Shepherd' – how do you relate that name, to these Shepherd men? Are there similarities or none?
4. The shepherds displayed such trust and faith – what points to this being true? (Luke 2:15)
5. The shepherds were so excited when they witnessed the baby Jesus that they came back to tell everyone about him? Are we as exuberant at spreading this fantastic news?
6. So, what was the pivotal role of the shepherds in the Christmas Story
7. What are some of the main characteristics we can learn from these shepherd men?



Week 6:

Christmas Characters

Wise Men

Matthew 2:1-12; Matthew 2:16-18

The wise men, were middle-eastern Magi who spotted a miraculous guiding star to Bethlehem. They followed this star and they paid homage to the infant Jesus as King of the Jews. When King Herod heard this news of the infant King's birth he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. 'In Bethlehem in Judea,' they replied, for this is what the prophet has written: 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.' Micah 5:2

So, Herod called the Magi and said, 'Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.' After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. They opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. The gold represented Jesus' kingship, the frankincense Jesus' deity and the gift of myrrh (embalming product) foreshadowed Jesus' death. The gifts of the Magi point to the ultimate gift as they illuminate the different aspects of Christ's identity. He is King, he is God, and in his marvellous Grace, he died so that we might live.

Reflections and Questions:

1. Read the chosen bible passage in at least two versions. What stands out?
2. Why was King Herod so disturbed at the news of this baby's birth? How would it affect him? And did he really want to go and worship him? (Matthew 2:8)
3. What is the reason behind the name 'Wise Men' – why are they deemed to be wise?
4. What would wisdom look like in our lives?
5. The Magi were Gentiles – what does their visitation, and the visitation of the Jewish Shepherds teach us about Jesus and the Christmas Story?
6. Why did the Magi make a diversion in their homeward bound journey? (Matthew 2:12)
7. What are some of the characteristics we can all learn from these three men?



Week 7:

Christmas Characters

Jesus

Isaiah 9:6; Luke 2:1-7; Matthew 1:18-23; John 1:14

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6). This Old Testament prophecy pointed to the way ahead for the coming of the baby King Jesus. These characteristics of Jesus are awesome! He is God and Father, a Prince and a Counsellor. He is wonderful, mighty, everlasting and peace personified.

The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14).

Jesus was born. Jesus bears the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control in measures that we cannot comprehend.

Jesus' birth was the beginning of the good news for all. There was no royal welcome in a palace, but just a warm humble stable that welcomed him to earth. His birth and life were given to us by God because God loved us so much (John 3:16).

There is no greater character in the Christmas Story – He is the Christmas Story.

Celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ is more than a Christian holiday or Christian festival. It is more than an occasion to decorate our houses. It is an opportunity to pause and give thanks for the Love, Hope, Peace and Joy found in Jesus – our Saviour and friend. As we exchange gifts to each other it is a time to remember the ultimate gift that God gave us, in Jesus.

Reflections and Questions:

1. Read the chosen bible passage in at least two versions. What stands out?
2. What does it mean 'the word became flesh'? (John 1:14)
3. What is the significance of Jesus being born of Nazarene parents and being born in just a lowly stable?
4. Do you think that the build-up of the Nativity scene of all these different characters points to the one who the story is about? Do we need all the other characters or just Jesus himself?
5. God sent Jesus to earth to save us – how does he do that for us? And do we have a role and responsibility to play too? (John 3:16)
6. Jesus teaches us how to love like God loves – through self-sacrifice on the cross. How is our love-health? Would we lay our lives down for others too?
7. What are the characteristics we can all learn from this baby, this man, this son of God?