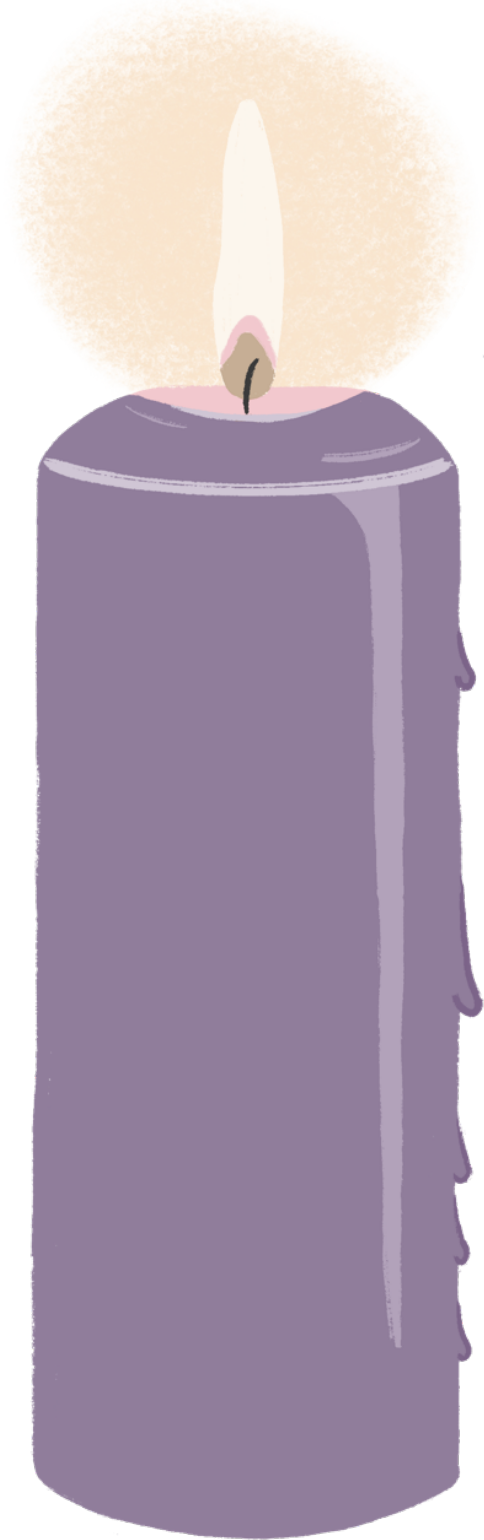


Illuminating Christmas

pause for thought
in a busy December



Ponderings by
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“The Magnificat” is adapted from the Book of Common Prayer (1662).

Contents

Foreword by Very Rev Dr Susan Brown	i
Preface	ii
Studying together	iv
Tiny artworks ... big messages	v

Materials for Advent

In praise of pondering	1
Week 1: 'Hope'	2
Week 2: 'Peace'	12
Week 3: 'Joy'	20
Week 4: 'Love'	30

Festive 'story sermons'

'Christmas Day'	40
'Epiphany'	48

Additional resources

Four brief Advent chats	55
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And finally ...

A Christmas request	59
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Foreword

There are those who reckon the sum total of their knowledge can be summed up on the back of a postage stamp. Robin Hill and Katie Hill have used the humble stamp as a means of inspiration to help expand our understanding of the implications of the coming of Christ at Christmas. Using early Christmas stamps from around the world as their springboard, the pair go on to open up Scripture for others in creative ways as through story, prayer, music and 'pondering', Robin and Katie give us the opportunity to talk, listen and ponder – and then to ponder some more.

Aided by familiar characters and a few not so familiar, we are invited not to rush, but to meander with purpose, towards a Christmas that has very real pertinent and practical implications and out-workings today. This is an accessible, not at all scary, way to explore together the rich seam of Advent tradition in old and new ways.

Robin and Katie have done all the hard work of drawing materials together. Ministers and worship leaders can use the materials for the four Sundays in Advent, tailoring them to suit your local situation.

Groups meeting more informally, would benefit from having someone who can familiarise themselves with the material before the meeting, in order to help everyone participate more fully in the gathering.

This congregational resource is a way of ensuring that when it comes to Advent, there's no chance, from here on in, that what we know about this pre-Christmas season can ever be confined to the back of a postage stamp!

Be blessed as you plan and meet and talk and listen. Be even more blessed in your pondering, as you give your faith some air and let it go deep.

I guess what I'm saying is that this material has my 'stamp' of approval!

Thank you Robin Hill and Katie Hill. Bless you both!

*Very Rev Dr Susan Brown
Moderator, Presbytery of Lothian & Borders*

Preface

The aim of this set of seasonal materials is to give hard-pressed ministers, elders and study group leaders a range of resources to help them through the marvellous (if outrageously busy) month of December.

What you have here can be used in at least three different ways:

1. It offers a set of four Bible studies covering key topics for the weeks of Advent. Here you will find a combination of scriptural passages, questions for discussion and illustrations, all set around a specially created short story. The four weekly parts will take you through the season of Advent, drawing upon its traditional themes: Hope; Peace; Joy; and Love. Perhaps our two key elements – Scripture and story – can ‘speak to each other’, so sparking imagination and enlivening discussion.
2. The course can also be seen as having the makings of a preaching resource for a hectic December. The stories themselves can be used as what we might call ‘story sermons’, either in their current form or dramatised according to the range of actors available. The other resources might be adapted to fit worship contexts over Advent and Christmas. You have our permission to make what you find here fit your needs, so be creative and have fun!
3. Towards the end of the document there are four pages which provide starters for midweek presentations, whether in church or school, or at events.

Advent is a time of opportunity. As December approaches, the Church encourages its members to pause in festive preparations, finding a place free of tinsel in which to contemplate the true meaning of Jesus’ birth. For many, this can be a welcome time of spiritual study at a hectic point in the year. Different routes toward Christmas have been plotted Sunday by Sunday, whether via characters (the fathers and mothers of the faith, the prophets, John the Baptist, and Mary, for example) or those ‘Hope, Peace, Joy, Love’ themes. Other ways of getting from Advent Sunday to Christmas Day are possible, of course.

What ultimately counts is the destination: Christ.

Curiously, the season of Christmas – from the big celebration of 25th December to the arrival of Epiphany – tends in many congregations to be a period in which church attendance is lower than usual. Services over ‘the 12 days’ coincide with family gatherings, short breaks or general exhaustion. Consequently (and more than a little weirdly) it might be fair to say that congregations are likely to invest more reflection in Advent’s time of preparation than in ‘the main event’ itself. Perhaps we need to ‘draw Christmas back’ in some sense, enabling churches to reflect upon the Child in the manger at a point in the calendar which makes sense to frenetic 21st century living. Advent may emerge as the best point in the calendar for churches to consider together the glory of Christ’s Incarnation ... just a little ahead of time. In this way, spiritual preparation might go hand-in-hand with reflection upon the coming impact of Emmanuel, ‘God with us’.

Each of our Advent story sermons comes with its own biblical theme. Over the four studies we will encounter some unusual characters from around the world: a girls’ school headmistress from 1930s Brazil (Advent Sunday); a centuries-old church building in rural England (Advent 2); a first century steward at the Bethlehem census (Advent 3); and a small boy visiting his Welsh auntie (Advent 4). But could we really end our journey of discovery at the final Sunday of Advent? Surely not, so two more stories await us: for Christmas we will drop in on a French-Canadian girl with a mysterious box. And for Epiphany, who else but certain wise men of the east, out under the night’s sky. The purpose of these last two tales is to round off our winter trek at its right and proper destination: the arrival of Jesus Christ into our world.

We are very grateful to Vicki White and Kenneth Simpson for their literary prowess so willingly shared, and to Susan Brown, Fiona Burnett, Corrie Douglas-Young, Ann Durnford, Carol Finlay, Suzie Fletcher, Leslie Milton, Alec Shuttleworth, Huw Thomas and Peter Wood for their help and encouragement in so many ways!

Finally, many thanks go to Lyndsay O’Riordan and the Church of Scotland’s Study Leave scheme for all their kind support for this project.

*Robin Hill and Katie Hill
East Lothian, September 2023*

Studying together

This guide should be e-mailed out to all participants well in advance of the first group meeting. Alternatively, copies can be downloaded free of charge from:

www.longniddrychurch.org.uk .

Course leaders should look over each session's resources in advance to acquaint themselves with what they will be handling. They should also encourage group members to take some time to read and re-read the two passages of Scripture for the week, allowing the texts to 'sink in'.

On the day of each meeting participants should bring with them the Bible of their choice, paper and pen. A copy of the Church of Scotland Hymnary, fourth edition, would be a handy (though by no means essential) addition. Other hymn books will offer fine alternatives to the sacred songs suggested here – just seek and find.

A standard pattern is followed week by week across the four group meetings, with key participants listed beside each heading:

A gathering prayer	leader
This week's texts	two volunteer readers
An Advent story	volunteer reader(s)
Meet the characters	group chat: 15 minutes
Back to the Bible	group chat: 15 minutes
The big question	group chat: 15 minutes
A hymn for reflection	volunteer reader (or all sing!)
The five-minute ponder	silent reflection: 5 minutes
Feedback	group chat: 5 minutes
A sending prayer	leader

Each session should be completed in 90 minutes.

And if you plan to meet online, keep each session brief.

Also, why not consider inviting neighbours with no church connection into your group? It could be fun to gather in this way, sharing insights and learning together.

Tiny artworks ... big messages

Christmas stamps were the visual inspiration for this project. If you would like to see the ones which sparked each story into life, here they are. All United Kingdom stamps listed should appear on www.collectgbstamps.co.uk

'The mysterious tale of bright eyes': Brazil 200 Real stamp (1939–40)

An image of a young woman with an angel in the background. This can be a difficult stamp to track down, so try here:

www.stamps.org/news/post/the-first-christmas-stamps

'Like living stones': United Kingdom 1st class stamp (2000)

A night view of a mediaeval church building illuminated by the moon, warm light from inside streaming through its windows into a dark world.

'A big, big something': United Kingdom 33p stamp (1992)

A stained-glass window depicting three generations of shepherds, the oldest stroking a lamb which he is holding.

'Gareth had a little lamb': United Kingdom 18p stamp (1987)

An illustration depicting a young boy looking out of a window late at night with a single star in the sky shining down upon a little country church.

'The secret box of Madame Noyer': Canada 30c, 35c and 60c stamps (1982)

A set of three photographs which together make up a Nativity set: the holy family (30c); shepherds and sheep (35c); and the Magi (60c). Try this source:

<https://postagestampguide.com/canada/stamps/search?query=Christmas+1982>

'Asleep with the camels': United Kingdom 2½p stamp (1971)

Another stained-glass window showing an angel looking down on the sleeping wise men.

In praise of pondering

If ministers and priests were to ask their Sunday congregations where in the gospels they might find the quaint old notion of pondering, someone would probably yell back, "In the Christmas story!". Another person might say, "That's what Mary does," before adding smartly, "Luke chapter 2: the arrival of the shepherds."

Sadly, pondering seems to have fallen out of favour in our hectic 21st century world. And that's something of a shame. To ponder is to be open to spiritual discovery – taking the time, creating the space, inviting the holy into the realm of the everyday. This understated activity involves both head and heart, making it so much more than mere thought. In truth, pondering is less concerned with a 'thinking' and more to do with a 'working through' whether of an issue, a feeling, an experience, a matter for decision, a jumping off point.

Pondering, in short, is a good thing. Whatever our reasons for doing it, when we choose to engage our busy selves with a spot of serious pondering we can find those selves changed in one way or another, and this brings us back to that smart answer about Luke chapter 2. For the mother of Jesus, the dramas surrounding her firstborn's arrival called for a properly pensive approach: '... Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.' (Luke 2:18; you might also like to see Luke 2:51 for more of the same, only a little further on in Mary's sometimes tricky parental experience.)

Perhaps 'treasuring' and 'pondering' can go hand in hand. In the seasons of Advent and Christmas this can certainly be the case for the person of faith, though both of these head-and heart activities will need a fair bit of commitment if they are to bed down in the soul of the believer. How, for example, can we treasure the riches of Christ's coming in the physical crush and mental exhaustion of December? (Perhaps by deciding to step back from the frenzy of it all?) And how can we ponder the life-changing – world-changing – joys of Jesus' birth when festive planning tries so hard to derail us altogether? (Maybe by choosing to enter into a different kind of Christmas?)

A different kind of Christmas? It's certainly worth pondering.



‘Hope’

***Since ancient times no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you,
who acts on behalf of those who wait for him.***

Isaiah 64:4

Week 1:

Leading to 1st Sunday of Advent

Before we start ...

Read these Bible passages with care at least once before the group meets:

- **Isaiah 64:1–9:** a prayer for redemption; and
- **Luke 1:26–45:** announcing the birth of Jesus Christ.

A gathering prayer

Let us pray:

God of Advent Hope,

you are our rock, our foundation, and we praise your holy Name.

In the wintry chill of our darkness, come to us with warming light from heaven. In the midst of many fears and disappointments, turn our lives around so that we might place our hope in you.

Then may we look in true faithfulness to new horizons as yet unseen, rejecting our selfish intentions as, in your holy company, we rediscover your better way.

Be with us now to guide our thoughts and to define our actions. Amen.

This week's texts

In your group, ask for volunteers to read the two Bible passages. After each, write down and share together any words or phrases which stand out as interesting or unusual. These might be useful in discussion. Then move on to this week's story ...

‘The Mysterious Tale of Bright Eyes’

... a story of hope

The time: 1939.

The place: Sao Paolo, Brazil.

The scene: the office of high school headmistress Fernanda da Silva who is meeting with Bernardo Pereira, the city’s Director of Education.

The issue: mounting rumours of a teenage girl and an unidentified angel.

Drumming her fingers on her mahogany desk, the headmistress mused quietly: “A most promising girl. For a child of the favelas, she has to be one in a thousand – quite likely one in a million. Maria truly is remarkable.”

Mr Pereira drew deeply upon his fizzing cigarette, exhaling like a nervous dragon as he eyed up Miss da Silva.

“That is as may be, dear lady ... but an angel? A high school student claiming to have met an angel in broad daylight? It makes no sense. If I have to report this to the Board of Education ... well!”

Miss da Silva rose from her chair and strolled to the window.

“When Maria won her scholarship it was a modest award: just enough to cover our fees, uniform, books, materials. But from the very start I had such high hopes for her. So much ability. So much promise.”

Staring out at the midday rain bouncing off the school veranda, the teacher nodded: “Her life story sums up well why we have scholarships at all. Her early years were challenging to say the least. Her father, Joaquim dos Santos, had been a waiter. It all went wrong in the Depression. With the crash of 1929 Joaquim faced penury while Anna, his wife, found herself with a young daughter and a broken husband to support.”

"Never easy," frowned the Director.

"The girl made it through to age eleven – somehow. One summer's day Father Antonio brought her to meet me. In front of me I saw a girl of ability and temperament who simply had to be kept in education by any means possible, right through to ... who knows? Medical school? The diplomatic corps? A career in politics? The law perhaps?"

"Certainly a gifted child with a future worthy of investment," admitted her visitor.

"But Director, the story of Maria goes far beyond academic abilities and future prospects. This was a child of quite uncommon wisdom: someone who looked out for those around her, sharing whatever she had, little though it may have been. And I can tell you this much ..." Miss da Silva paused for a moment to gather her thoughts. "The child was ... how shall I put it? ... wise, not only in the sense of being studious or thoughtful. Maria proved herself a person of maturity – a true depth, far beyond her years. This girl could lose herself for hours on end in what she called her 'ponderings'. After school she would go to a high place and sit on her favourite bench looking out upon the sprawling metropolis. Maria's purpose – in truth, her reason for being – seemed to be the righting of wrongs wherever poverty and opulence might look each other in the eye."

"So then, a young Communist?"

"You are not alone in wondering that. This Maria of ours has vision, the very clearest of vision. You could sense it – see it, almost. The sort of child whose eyes simply exude a brightness. Such rare luminosity; such alertness to all dimensions of living. No sir: here is a life inspired by heaven, not by Comrade Trotsky."

The Director shook his head, raising his hands as if toward the heavens. "But now young Bright Eyes is gone, drawn away by an angel, or so she would have us believe." He lit another cigarette. "An angel indeed! More likely some local boy on the lookout for a pretty girl."

"True, there is a certain José: a carpenter, older than Maria."

"Hah! It is just as I thought: when young girls go astray every time it is a boy. You mark my words!"

Miss da Silva turned smartly on her heel and returned to her desk.

"Forget José; let us focus on Maria. In 30 years of teaching I have never encountered any pupil who could match her for maturity. So when she came to tell me of her visitor, the truth is ... well ... I believed her. That much I freely admit, both as her teacher and as a person of faith."

"You and your faith! While you were nurturing those 'high hopes', this little lady and her José were running rings around you. She should have been monitored. She should have been stopped. But now it has come to this!"

Miss da Silva sent out a headmistress's tut of disapproval in the direction of the Director: "If Maria has indeed received a higher calling, who am I to stand in her way? And in any case, she is gone and she is gone for good: her scholarship paid back in full, each and every book and jotter returned to her form teacher. Even her uniform is washed and neatly pressed, ready for the next girl."

Mr Pereira reached for his breast pocket, grabbing a silk handkerchief to wipe the gathering sweat from his forehead: "Next girl??? There won't be a 'next girl'! When the papers get hold of this – my, my! – the uproar that will ensue right around the city, then across all Brazil. The Standards Commission will be down on us like a ton of bricks. And before you know it, I will be the one forced into placing this school under mandatory provisions. I will be a laughing stock and nothing more."

An uneasy silence filled the air, as Miss da Silva leant back in her chair.

"Let us pause," she said pensively, an uncharacteristic softness in her voice. "This is not about you. Just as it is not about me. There is a bigger picture here: a picture of a girl in touch with a greater reality. When we grasp the full significance of this strange scene, surely we can agree that not even the city fathers would have the slightest chance of influencing Maria's future ... Maria's *chosen* future."

Opening a drawer Miss da Silva reached in and tenderly withdrew a page torn from a now-relinquished jotter: "Here is what my young friend so kindly handed me as she left our school for the final time. Listen, so you can make up your own mind."

The headmistress unfolded the sheet and started to read:

My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Saviour, for he has regarded the lowliness of his handmaiden. From now on all generations shall call me blessed, for he that is mighty has done great things for me and holy is his name. His mercy is on them who fear him, throughout all generations. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has put down the mighty from their seat and has lifted up the humble and weak. He has filled the hungry with good things and the rich he has sent away empty.

With that, the precious note gently was folded once more and returned to its place of safe keeping. Silence filled the heavy air until Mr Pereira at last came to his senses.

"Damned Communists – I knew it! Where will it all end? Just tell me, *where?*"

In her coolest, most singularly measured voice Miss da Silva said: "This, Bernardo, will end precisely where it began. In God."

Meet the characters

Chat about some of the main players in this story:

- **Miss da Silva** is filled with hope for her pupil. This strong-minded headmistress also risks a great deal in supporting the girl's departure to a new and unknown life, 'in God. When have you felt – or experienced others feeling – pulled between the safety of the material world and the call of heaven?
- **Mr Pereira** hears the story of the missing pupil and can only blame political extremists (or boys!) for leading her astray. In what ways is the God of the

Incarnation dangerous, and are we called by God to follow a similarly radical path in our own journeying?

- **Maria dos Santos** – a person of fresh, youthful hope for a troubled world – does not appear in the story. But what can you 'see' of her in your mind's eye?

Back to the Bible:

Isaiah 64:1-9

This reading calls passionately for God to live up to his reputation and act to end oppression. The writer seeks divine intervention through which enemies will be taught a lesson they would not quickly forget, as God causes 'the nations to quake' before his majesty (64:2).

Despite generations of disobedience before God, Isaiah still finds space for hope in the One who comes 'to the help of those who gladly do right' (64:5). There is acknowledgement of God as 'our Father', the one who creates and shapes a people of faith who are described as being 'all the work of your hand' (64:8).

Consider together one or more of these three questions:

- Biblical academic Paul D. Hanson suggests that this text shows God who 'does not retreat into divine obscurity, high and lifted above the messiness of human conflict'. Rather, it is God who 'hears and responds to the pleas of the afflicted. Throughout this period of waiting, in what ways does this passage relate to our situation of human need and hopefulness?
- The call for God to 'rend the heavens and come down' (64:1) is both dramatic and heartfelt. Would we be ready for the mountains to tremble, or might we simply prefer to live as we are?
- In your experience, in what ways does God act 'on behalf of those who wait for him' (64:4)?

Luke 1:26-45

Now think about the story of the angel Gabriel visiting Mary. The arrival of a heavenly visitor straight out of the blue would be a life-changing experience for anyone. But for a young girl, looking forward to setting up home with her partner Joseph, it must have been an enormous shock to have received an envoy straight from God. No wonder then that Mary became 'greatly troubled' (1:29).

In carrying Jesus through pregnancy Mary would become nothing less than the mother of God (1:35). Even this momentous news would not be enough to daunt Mary, as she responds confidently and in hope: 'I am the Lord's servant' (1:38).

Again, pick one or more of these discussion starters:

- The word 'angel' comes from the Greek *aggelos* meaning 'messenger'. The message he brings is sent from God who chooses to be involved in the workings of the world. What messengers of God are found in today's world?
- Mary's response to the announcement from heaven is clear and unequivocal: 'May your word to me be fulfilled' (1:38). What mix of emotions might Mary be experiencing as she gives her affirmation to the angel?
- Elizabeth declares: 'Blessed is she who has believed ...' (1:45). How might we value the example shown to us in young Mary's deep and remarkable faith?

The big question

- **Mary responded to the angel Gabriel both positively and in hope when she was faced with her moment of life-changing decision. What would it take to move you away from 'the old familiar' into a challenging 'new unknown'?**

A hymn for reflection

Read or sing together a relevant hymn, such as *No wind at the window* (CH4:287).

The five-minute ponder

To round off the session, take five minutes of silent contemplation, writing down one simple 'reflection point' to take away with you to consider over the week to come.

Feedback

After the five minutes are up, feel free to share what you have come up with among the group as a whole.

A sending prayer

Let us pray:

God of Advent Hope,

you give us strength in times of weakness, a lamp when all is cloaked in dim shadow. As with Mary, your willing, humble servant, may our hope be placed in you alone, our Lord and our Redeemer.

As night-time lengthens and wild winds blow, rekindle the warm and gentle glow of hope within us. Be our true companion on the journey, our hope both sure and certain, now and always. Amen.



‘Peace’

***As you come to him, the living Stone – rejected
by humans but chosen by God and precious to
him – you also are being built ...***

1 Peter 2:4–5

Week 2:

leading to 2nd Sunday of Advent

Before we start ...

Read these Bible passages with care at least once before the group meets:

- **Isaiah 26:1–12:** looking to God's victory; and
- **1 Peter 2:4–12:** the living Stone.

A gathering prayer

Let us pray:

God of Advent Peace,

you are the source of life and the fountain of mercy, challenging our mistakes and pointing us to the saving truth of your holy Word.

In the anger and violence of this world let the gentle call of your divine peace be heard and heeded. Show us how to live lives of openness and healing in which the rights of all are honoured and protected.

Be with us now so that we may learn to take your rule of peace to ourselves, living within that from this time on, for the sake of your Kingdom. Amen.

This week's texts

In your group, ask for volunteers to read the two Bible passages. After each, write down and share together any words or phrases which stand out as interesting or unusual. These might be useful in discussion. Then move on to this week's story ...

‘Like living stones’

... a story of peace

I cannot say if you and I have met before, though I suppose it seems quite possible. I am a building, and a very old one at that: a place of worship crafted by hands long stilled by death. I have offered sanctuary in troubled times. I have been a place of tranquillity to weary ones seeking rest from life’s rigours. Above all, the peace which I have both embodied and instilled across the centuries ... well, it pleases me.

For generations more than I could number I have welcomed so many worshippers just like you. I have smiled as couples have gone from aisle to altar, ready to make the happiest vows of their young lives. I have seen babies brought to my font. I have offered tranquillity to the departed, soon to be raised aloft with solemnity and given their place of rest within my graveyard.

Good days, bad days, joyful days, painful days, high days, holy days, all kinds of days ... I have surely seen them all. And still they come seeking the comfort of their God, whose property, and whose place I am pleased to be. Peace I offer to each as best I can; and some they choose to take that peace for nurturing in their hearts.

When first I stood here, stone upon freshly dressed stone in those far-off days seven centuries in the past, worship was so very different to that which is offered up in modern times. Ah yes, but change is ever in the air. Nothing save the courts of heaven will last forever, or so they say. My years rolled by and, with them, the world moved on: age to age it went, new knowledge hand in hand with curiosity deep enough to rock many a strong foundation. Formal schooling brought learning to young minds. Bibles came into print, and in large number, offered in the common language of the day for all to hear and take to heart. Suddenly the message of the Christ-child was in the ears and upon the souls of those who chose to ponder its meaning. Faith sprouted and blossomed, opening up as some gentle flower in rays of summer sun. Sitting within my pews the people encountered an honest faith that was truly there for all to acquire – the very gift of God.

It is strange to recall the mighty catalogue of change I have witnessed across these centuries, whether in language or in liturgy. Perhaps the greatest revolution of all was to come with the advent of industry across this once verdant land. With the blow of a whistle people could venture away from our green fields to find their place in spreading, sprawling towns which grew and grew in noise and billowing smoke. While cities emerged from steadings and moorland, life changed beyond all recognition upon our farms: fewer labourers, fewer families arriving to praise God upon the Lord's Day. Those who travelled far away would rarely return, so convinced were they by some bright new future just beyond their reach: a clattering, clamouring world of grime and betrayal.

Then there were the wars. For year upon hate-fuelled year the tear-stained folk would come for prayer all dressed in black, weeping bitterly for sons – and sense! – all gone, all gone. These were troubled times when faith held true for many, while others turned their backs upon the Prince of Peace, their nightmares all too vivid and too real, poor souls.

And so I stand, a witness to some 700 winters, and still largely as of old. There might be spots of wear and tear, 'tis true. Yet I pride myself on having willing helpers who keep me bright and clean, draft-proof, water-tight, year in, year out, as I worship God in this quiet little corner of an English village. Here I bear witness to the One who made my stones longer ago than even I could tell. And it is good indeed to cast my mind back upon the ways in which I helped to nurture peace across so many generations, over all the circling seasons: Lent; Easter; Advent; Christmas ...

Ah yes, the blessed feast of the Nativity! My favourite time of all. Across those rolling centuries the truth of the Messiah's birth has captured minds and captivated hearts unnumbered. How good for them to hear again the message from on high:

Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.

And once all words were done, and carolling complete, how good for me to feel the remnant of warmth from candle-glow on dim December night, those worshippers trudging back to home and hearth. Now filled with hope to fuel another year

unfolding, reflecting on their shadowy world now wreathed in softest light, all wrapped in wonder of the Incarnation which once again was theirs to take ... if only they would choose.

Down to this day the message of heaven's peace rings true – as it did on Bethlehem's plains so long ago. For in this wisdom of old, our world might encounter comfort in the Word of God made flesh: that gentle babe from heaven high, laid upon a manger. Perhaps that is why many still make their way to my oaken doors on a winter pilgrimage of peace. In their curiosity, may the green shoots of Jesus' birth herald for them new life at Easter.

And now I should rest, but here's a thing to send you on your way ...

Some people call me 'church': a building which can look back over so many centuries of care and service, and can look forward in similar vein to more miracles of faith. Yet there is a strangeness here, for really I am no church at all: I am but a fragile vessel built of stone and wood and glass, destined for mortal destruction as we all must surely be, whether soon or in time as yet unknown.

So listen well ... for you, in truth, are the stones who make up the Church: the Church formed of flawed humanity that will always be renewed in Christ; the Church even yet made visible on earth wherever the faithful play together at being Bethlehem.

Christ's Peace be upon you ... you who are the Church.

Meet the characters

Chat about some of the main players in this story:

- **The old building** is a setting of history, presence, and peace. Does this speak to your experience, or does a place of worship mean something different to you?
- **The worshippers of old** were caught up in a society which changed dramatically over time. In what ways might this building have offered deep,

inner peace in the midst of turmoil? And to what extent could the same be said of our own church buildings in today's world?

- **The Christmas visitors of today** come to the building on 'a winter pilgrimage of peace'. What might that 'peace' mean for them, and how might we help enable God's peace to be experienced more fully in the lives of those once-a-year Christmas visitors?

Back to the Bible:

Isaiah 26:1-12

This reading praises the God whose promise of salvation is sure (26:1) while also suggesting a link between trusting in the Lord and receiving peace (26:3).

Meanwhile, those who 'dwell on high' in 'the lofty city' (26:5) will be brought down in all their human pride and material ambition.

As for the righteous, their path is a level one, and their way smooth (26:7). God becomes the desire of the people's hearts, the writer's soul yearning by night and his spirit longing in the daylight (26:9). God it is who establishes peace for the people (26:12).

Consider together one or more of these three questions:

- The Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says that in Advent, 'we receive the power of God that lies beyond us'. In what range of ways does our age-old faith take us beyond our time ... our place ... our selves?
- Isaiah's message to the people is that those whose minds are 'steadfast' (26:3) in placing their trust in God will find peace, despite knowing threats all around them. What experiences from our own living either confirm or challenge Isaiah's view?
- We read of 'the lofty city' being laid low (26:5). Is this wishful thinking – a mere cry of solidarity with those who know persecution in their troubled lives? Or is there something more here, concerning God's passion for justice in an unequal society?

1 Peter 2:4-12

Now think about the imagery of stones which the writer draws from a variety of biblical sources. Just as the right stone – however unusually shaped and thoughtlessly scorned – can be put to good use by the keen-eyed master builder, so too the Incarnation and the Easter triumph of Christ displays God setting in place a sure corner stone upon which the Church will be built.

While some will stumble (2:8) others will be transformed into something remarkable: 'a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God' (2:9).

Again, pick one or more of these discussion starters:

- List some of the many qualities of stone (2:4). In what ways can Jesus be understood as 'the living Stone'?
- In the parable of the tenants (Mark 12:1–12) Jesus echoes the Hebrew Bible in looking to Psalm 118. This states that the rejected stone comes to have overwhelming significance. Yet in our current reading the writer recalls from Isaiah 8:14 that this same stone can present jeopardy for some. Who is at risk of tripping and tumbling?
- The Church has a God-given calling to 'declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light' (1 Peter 2:9). Is the Church of today pleased to live in these bright, heavenly rays? Or are we perhaps more comfortable dwelling in our earthly shadows?

The big question

- **If your church building could speak, how do you think it would compare its current worshipping community with that of past generations and centuries?**

A hymn for reflection

Read or sing together a relevant hymn, such as *Christ is made the sure foundation* (CH4:200).

The five-minute ponder

To round off the session, take five minutes of silent contemplation, writing down one simple 'reflection point' to take away with you to consider over the week to come.

Feedback

After the five minutes are up, feel free to share what you have come up with among the group as a whole.

A sending prayer

Let us pray:

God of Advent Peace,

you give us security and calm, safe within the shelter of your embrace.

All nature cries out for your saving grace, that your beloved Creation might be nurtured and cherished, not destroyed for selfish gain and misplaced comfort.

Bless your Church across this troubled planet, and place within the heart of each a zeal for all good things which come together to reveal your will for a world gone wrong.

As we look towards a distant light from heaven, keep our eyes open, we pray, and our minds alert to the signs of your coming ... your promise ... your peace. Amen.



‘Joy’

***But the angel said to them,
‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that
will cause great joy for all the people.’***

Luke 2:10

Week 3:

leading to 3rd Sunday of Advent

Before we start ...

Read these Bible passages with care at least once before the group meets:

- **Isaiah 61:1–4; 8–11:** good news to the oppressed; and
- **Luke 2:8–20:** shepherds and angels.

A gathering prayer

Let us pray:

God of Advent Joy,

you are the bringer of heaven's Good News into our earthly lives, whether we be young or old. In these days of preparation we thank you for the opportunity to look forward to the coming of your Son at Christmas.

By the grace of heaven itself, lead us from the fields of our everyday living into the joyful presence of a baby in whose birth we will find our purpose. Amen.

This week's texts

In your group, ask for volunteers to read the two Bible passages. After each, write down and share together any words or phrases which stand out as interesting or unusual. These might be useful in discussion. Then move on to this week's story ...

‘A big, big something’

... a story of joy

It is nothing if not varied being on crowd control at a census. All manner of folk turn up out of nowhere, and all at once. Some are local, and they’re usually easily dealt with: a case of, ‘Just head down to the square and look for the big tents’. Others though are a little more challenging, especially if they’ve been on the road for days and turn up at my post all ragged and exhausted. Some are well-to-do with fancy ponies carrying them to their destination in comfort. Others might have an overburdened donkey or a temperamental mule to help them bear their load.

For the most part though it’s just a constant flow of folk – the anxious and the angry – slogging their weary way into Bethlehem from goodness-only-knows where. On blistered feet they come, a sad procession of troubled folk, doing just what Caesar wants of them.

In that long and hobbling succession of humanity few faces ever stand out. Everyone’s the same: grey and sullen, silently wishing they were somewhere else. Not one of them wants to be there in the depths of winter, travelling to their ancestral home just to sort out their tax affairs. Then what? The indignity of turning round in their tracks to trudge straight back home again. Such a nonsense!

Still, that’s Empire for you. If Rome needs revenue, Rome will have it.

It’s not so bad for me, of course. As a resident of Bethlehem with family dating back no doubt to the days of King David himself, all I had to do was stroll along to the square and get in early with my registration. That’s when the official taking my details and asked if I wanted to make some easy money with a bit of stewarding. As I was Bethlehem born and bred I knew the terrain, says he, so I would be able to keep the crowds in order, funnelling them through the system. So that’s me, stationed just off the Jerusalem road ready to spring into action at a moment’s notice. It’s nothing special, though it does have its odd highlights.

Just the other day there was a poor young woman: all but carried into town by her husband. Pregnant she was, and due any day – you could tell just by looking at her,

poor soul. I saw them in the morning all wrapped up against the cold, but shivering still after what would have been a sleepless winter night under the stars. They asked me for directions, so I sent them to the heart of the town and wished them Godspeed. Then a full four hours later – four hours! – I spotted them heading back my way. Only this time the poor girl was looking grim.

“What can we do?” the husband asked me, all of a panic, his thick accent marking him out as a northerner from Galilee. “She’s gone into labour and the child must be born.”

Now if anyone knows his way around the backstreets of Bethlehem it’s me. And it should be said that most folk hereabouts are family of one sort or another, so I knew just the very people. This relative, Isaac, had asked me before the census to (let’s just say) ‘source some provisions’ for his hospitality business. Now he owed me one. More importantly though, there’s his wife Dinah: a wise woman, equipped with ‘the knowledge’ ... if you get my meaning.

“Leave it all to me,” I said in my very best firm-but-fair voice. “You come along, young lady. My cousin – third cousin actually, but who’s counting? – has an inn not so very far away. And his wife will give you and your little one every assistance. Lovely folk. You’ll like them.”

In no more than 20 minutes we were there, the pair of them sat down on a bench outside the inn, while I pushed my way through the throng of rough humanity inside. Isaac was stood by a familiar-looking cask of wine doing a roaring trade, Dinah filling cups as soon as they were emptied.

“Cousin!” I yelled over the din. “Remember that ‘help’ I gave you? I need something in return. It’s ... well ... it’s a big, big something.”

I explained the tricky situation to them, and they were fine about it all. No room, said Isaac, and that much was obvious. But just for me they would do what they could. I blessed them both and, as Dinah hurried out ahead of me, I shook Isaac warmly by the hand. Then, after a quick beaker of the rich and red, I made a swift shuffle through the crowds back to my deserted post.

At the end of my duties for the day I couldn't get that poor couple off my mind – worried I was, if truth be told. So back to the inn I went, hearing Dinah's comforting voice coming from a tiny outhouse round the side. Surely not, I thought to myself. But right enough, there she was on her knees in the straw, a reassuring arm around the new mother's shoulders, a tiny little boy all secure there, wrapped up in a bundle. Right beside them the girl's husband was looking on with a mix of pride and astonishment of the sort Dinah must have seen a thousand times.

"All is well, Samuel. All is well. And this young woman has been our hero, haven't you my lovely? You did just as I asked, every single step of the way, and now look at your reward – a gift from heaven, as I always says to my mothers."

"But Dinah," I asked, not wanting to cause offence, "did it really have to be here?"

"Broke my heart to bring her in among the animals. Still, better to be here with the gentle bleating of goats than back in that jungle of an inn with its yelling and brawling and goodness knows what all going on within our walls. Give me these animals over those ones any night of the week."

Just then the outhouse door creaked open and in crept three figures, one no more than a lad, the next a strong young man with a shepherd's crook and the third an older bloke with a lamb on his arm. Shepherds, they were, and no mistaking.

"The baby," smiled the grandfather shepherd in an embarrassed sort of way, as though tasting the awkwardness. "We come in search of the special baby."

"I don't like this," whispered the boy. "I don't like it at all. Bethlehem is no place for the likes of us. It's time we were back with the flock where we belong."

His young father gave the boy the strangest words of comfort, which pricked the ears of Dinah and me in no small way. "Micah," says he, all calm and kindly, "remember what the angel said to us this very night, that we were not to be afraid. And the host from on high: if we have heard such joyful tidings fresh from the lips of angels, then those heralds will most surely have brought their greeting ..."

He paused.

"... from heaven?" mouthed young Micah, his gaze fixed upon the eyes of his father.

"You're right Isaiah!" cried the old man, now strangely invigorated by the sight before his wondering eyes. "As sure as my name is Amos, the angels' task has been to carry heavenly tidings to us: good news of God's own Son!"

Dinah and I exchanged glances, I with furrowed brow and she with a sudden look of astonishment in her gentle eyes. All who were gathered around the slumbering mother and child took in the scene with a new sense of wonder. No, we took it in with a good deal more than that: with a reverence that came so easily.

Old Amos boldly stepped forward. Turning his eyes to the tiny lamb asleep on his own broad arm, he proclaimed to it the message of a sacred text: words every child of Bethlehem would learn by heart at synagogue:

I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and will bring them back to their pasture, where they will be fruitful and increase in number. I will place shepherds over them who will tend them, and they will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing," declares the Lord. "The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The Lord Our Righteous Saviour.

In that sacred moment no-one made the slightest sound as each pondered those prophetic words. All was silence, but for the distant carousing of uncouth travellers with their wine and their dice, and the nearer scuffling of hooves amid the warmth of straw.

In time we heard another voice: "Say it again," came the tentative words of the poor girl's husband who stood by the manger. "Say again, good sir, the name by which he will be called."

"Why," smiled Amos, now looking intently at the pale, drawn face of a girl whose motionless features danced in the light of a flickering lamp. "The child – *her* child – will be The Lord Our Righteous Saviour."

“Amen,” whispered the man, seeming to hear these old, familiar words as if for the first time. Then, looking Dinah in the eye, he said in tones both grave and humble: “My dear Mary cradles one who is truly a gift from heaven.”

“It is so,” came the nod of a wise woman who had lived up to both her title and her calling. “This night, Joseph, may she embrace her dreams.”

At that, Amos handed a tiny lamb to his own little grandson. “Let this task fall to you, young Micah. Have no fear ... only be joyful.”

The child took the gift they had brought for the child, laying the lamb upon the soft, dry hay. Micah smiled at the man by the manger, and the man smiled back. No words needed saying at a time such as this.

Taking one last look around him, the old man smiled too before turning to his family with a timely instruction: “Now, boys ... back to the flock.”

So it was that the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Meet the characters

Chat about some of the main players in this story:

- **Micah** is young, anxious. He has done his duty in coming to an overcrowded Bethlehem, but now he wants to flee its noise and danger. Are we similarly tempted to run away from dangerous places where God is at work?
- **Isaiah**, his father, has grasped something of what is going on, and leads his son towards an understanding of God’s divine intention. He takes the angelic message and helps his son understand its significance. Do we similarly recognise the need to live out the meaning of Christmas?
- **Amos** looks back (Jeremiah 23:3–6) intoning long-cherished words of prophecy, then handing on a special task to his grandson. How should today’s followers of Jesus play their part in giving precious gifts of mystery and wonder to those who are beginning to find faith?

Back to the Bible:

Isaiah 61:1-4; 8:11

This reading from the Old Testament sounds particularly familiar to the ears of Christians. We find it echoed in the New Testament through the story of Jesus' visit to the Nazareth synagogue where he reads from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah (Matthew 13:53-58; Mark 6:1-6; Luke 4:16-30).

Whether from the pen of Isaiah or from the lips of Jesus, this text is dynamite in its emphasis upon the anointed one of God whose mission is to preach, to proclaim, to bind up, to release and to comfort. In terms of each of these actions the one being sent by God has a divine commission to reach out to those in greatest need: those who are poor or broken-hearted; captives; prisoners; all who mourn; and those who grieve (61:1-3).

Consider together one or more of these three questions:

- Isaiah links God's good news to the poor with action aimed at overcoming injustice, so enabling joy and peace to be ushered in. What does the adult Jesus imply when he reads this passage, telling the synagogue: 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.' (Luke 4:21)
- What are the implications of 'an everlasting covenant' (61:8) for God and humanity?
- In this secular age, faith so often appears to be in retreat. Is our trust in God strong enough to hold to the prophecy that, 'the Sovereign Lord will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations' (61:12)?

Luke 2:8-20

Now think about the story which comes immediately after the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem (2:1-7). Following the revelation that Jesus' birth was just about as basic as could be imagined, Luke goes on to describe the drama of the herald angels proclaiming their message of joy to those startled shepherds.

Again, pick one or more of these discussion starters:

- New Testament scholar Richard A. Burridge notes that Luke is the only gospel writer to describe Jesus as 'a Saviour' who is 'Christ the Lord'. At Christmas we happily revel in the arrival of a tiny baby, yet is this joyful, upbeat response sufficient for the coming of God's chosen Messiah?
- The angels passed on a message of faith which became real for the shepherds once they had 'hurried off' to the manger (2:16). The affirmation they received in Bethlehem came through their personal experience of Jesus. Are there lessons here in relation to the Church's role in God's mission today?
- Consider the possibly harsh implications of the inn and the birthplace. The manger scene fills us with concern for a mother and baby forced out to the edges among smelly, dirty animals. Would the inn have offered a better maternity ward?

The big question

- **Whoever the innkeepers were and whatever their motivation, they showed hospitality to a couple in real distress, unwittingly providing a birthplace for Jesus Christ. What lessons can we learn from this for our own approach to welcoming people facing danger or distress?**

A hymn for reflection

Read or sing together a relevant hymn, such as *Jesus is born* (CH4:311).

The five-minute ponder

To round off the session, take five minutes of silent reflection, writing down one simple 'reflection point' which you will take away with you for the week ahead.

Feedback

After the five minutes are up, feel free to share what you have come up with the group as a whole.

A sending prayer

Let us pray:

God of Advent Joy,

you give us freedom from despair. While the world calls us off and away to false pleasures and personal gain, you open our ears to the startling call of the angels reaching out to speak Good News of a tiny child laid in a humble manger.

Like those startled shepherds, let us go to Bethlehem, and there ... find the joy which is ours in the person of Jesus Christ. Amen.



‘Love’

Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?

Luke 15:4

Week 4: leading to 4th Sunday of Advent

Before we start ...

Read these Bible passages with care at least once before the group meets:

- **Romans 16:25–27:** a blessing; and
- **Luke 15:3–7:** the lost sheep.

A gathering prayer

Let us pray:

God of Advent Love,

you are the inspiration of all true care, all genuine concern. In showing what it means to love us first, you have presented each one with a priceless pattern for living and a template for meaningful community.

Equipped with all that we need, may we be bold to reach out in love of your Son and in service of our neighbour, as instruments of your unflinching, tenacious grace.
Amen.

This week's texts

In your group, ask for volunteers to read the two Bible passages. After each, write down and share together any words or phrases which stand out as interesting or unusual. These might be useful in discussion. Then move on to this week's story ...

‘Gareth had a Little Lamb’

... a story of love

Frowning in a pensive sort of way, the Rev Alwyn Roberts seemed surprised by the object staring back up at him, right there in the middle of the village green. Unable to overcome his curiosity, the minister of Buarth Newydd knelt down to take a closer look and found himself talking to a cuddly toy.

“Now what might you be doing here?” he asked, before furtively looking around to make sure no-one had overheard him.

Realising they were all alone he took the little lamb in one hand and pushed himself up with the other. “There we are. Let’s take a look at your label ... Leiden. So you’re Dutch. Come on, little one: you’re a long, long way from home.”

It was one thing to find a child’s toy in the middle of a Welsh village, but it would be quite another to track down its far-distant owner. The Dutch Consulate probably had bigger things on their mind than a mislaid toy.

“Maybe, thought Dr Roberts, “I should enlist the local constabulary.”

* * * * *

“Sheep ... black in colour,” mumbled Sergeant Williams.

“Dutch ...” said Dr Roberts.

“Hand-made by the looks of him.”

“... from Leiden ...” added Dr Roberts.

“Minor wear and tear to three hooves. Front nearside hoof undamaged.”

“... in The Netherlands? ...,” prompted Dr Roberts.

“Now then ... if no-one claims this little fellow he’ll be yours, minister. In two shakes of a lamb’s tail, if you’ll pardon the expression.”

* * * * *

Meanwhile, far away in London, little Gareth Rees was having a tough conversation with his Mum and Dad.

"No, my darling. Not in the cafe. We've checked."

"Not at the swimming pool either. They denied all knowledge."

"Not at Auntie Bronwen's, or at Auntie Bronwen's friend's, or at Auntie Bronwen's friend's next door neighbour's."

"We've tried everywhere."

"We've not tried everywhere," whispered Gareth, "coz if we'd tried everywhere we'd've found Hugo. And we will find Hugo. We must."

Mum and Dad exchanged nervous glances across the table.

"Gareth bach, ..."

"No," he interrupted before his father could sweet-talk him into submission. "I've always, *always* had Hugo. We've got to go back to Auntie Bronwen's and look some more. ... Please???"

"Auntie Bronwen lives four hours away. And yes, we will be going back, but not until Christmas," said Dad apologetically. "It's tough, I know – we all know. That weekend was so busy. We went all over the place. You could have dropped your lamb anywhere."

"Or *you* could've." Gareth shot a knowing glare at his blushing father.

"Well," chipped in Mum urgently, "look on the bright side. Only a few weeks until Christmas now, and Oma will be over from Leiden. Maybe she could make you another."

"No-o!" cried Gareth. "There won't be another."

* * * * *

In far-off Wales a certain minister was checking his diary for December.

"Men's club party ... nursery Santa visit ... Christmas tree festival ... three school concerts ... 26 acts of worship ... one stray wedding ... little Rhian's Baptism ... plus,

no doubt, several funerals. That should keep me busy through to Boxing Day. So, where to start?"

Just then the phone rang. It was Sergeant Williams with some news.

"Morning minister," he chuckled, his voice ringing loud and clear down the line. "I am pleased to report that Christmas has come early. Nobody has claimed the stray sheep, so he's now officially your very own. Fascinating animal: turns out he came all the way from Holland."

* * * * *

The days rolled in, the nights grew long, and soon the family was getting ready to gather for Christmas Eve. Oma Dafne caught her flight at the last minute (same as ever) with Gareth there at arrivals to receive the biggest of grandmotherly hugs. Then it was into their bulging little car for the long, long drive to Wales. Mum took the wheel, with Oma in the passenger seat, chatting away to her daughter in Dutch, and the boys snoozing behind. Four hours later, their journey thankfully over, they drew up to Auntie Bronwen's for more hugs and lots of warming cocoa.

That night Gareth couldn't sleep. He just lay in bed mapping out in his mind all the places Hugo might have been dropped: the community centre ... the shops ... the library ... the village green ... the fire station. It was no use; his little black lamb could indeed have fallen out of Dad's backpack anywhere.

Just then he heard a tiny flurrying of snow against his window. Wide awake, he slid out of bed and quietly pulled back the heavy velvet curtain. The wintry scene was surprisingly bright, a sparkling of fresh snow lying all around. A real white Christmas, thought Gareth, as he took in the glorious scene before him.

And then he looked up.

Off in the distance there shone a great star high in the sky, bright as bright could be. And right below it the little Welsh chapel where Auntie Bronwen played the organ Sunday by Sunday. He would stay up really, really late tomorrow and get to go to the half past eleven Watchnight Service, falling asleep in the gentle candlelight, no doubt, just as he had always done before. The warm, vivid memory

of past Christmas Eves was enough to make him feel drowsy, so back into bed he crawled, counting black sheep until at last he was asleep.

* * * * *

Some twenty-four hours later, the little chapel was glowing with warmth and buzzing with late night excitement. The family arrived just in time, and were hastily ushered to a vacant pew tucked in by a side window. This suited Gareth fine as it meant he would be near to where Auntie Bronwen was seated at the organ. It's good to be here, thought Gareth – good to be in a special place on a special night.

The service got underway in traditional style. *Once in royal David's city* rang out, filling the old building with spirited Welsh singing. Then came a prayer. It was a long prayer: long and dull, with far too many old-fashioned words. Gareth started to fidget, opening one eye and then the other, peeping out this way and that. Bored stiff by the monotonous voice of Dr Roberts, he decided to take a look around the beautiful sanctuary with all its decorations twinkling in the candle light. Mum, Dad and Oma sat with heads bowed, eyes firmly shut. It was just the same with all the other folk too.

Gareth decided to pop his head round the side of the pew to look at the Nativity scene which filled the chancel with Christmas beauty. There was a knitted Mary, a Joseph, some shepherds and their sheep: three big white ones plus ... a little black lamb who was looking straight into Gareth's eye. While Dr Roberts droned on and on with his thees and his thous, his wherefors and his therefore, Gareth tiptoed silently out from his pew, not a single soul looking his way – except for a smiling organist who wasn't about to distract her nephew in any way. Up crept Gareth to that manger scene, removing one particular hand-made cuddly toy and feeling for a familiar label which might confirm the hopes of his now pounding heart. In the tiniest of letters he mouthed the words:

**To baby Gareth with all our love
Oma Dafne & Opa Hugo, Leiden**

Before The Lord's Prayer was even half-way through, the little boy had given his auntie a triumphant thumbs-up, receiving a wink and a noiseless "Shhhhhh" in

return. Seconds later he was tip-toeing gingerly back to the pew, the others blissfully unaware of the unlikely reunion that had taken place right in front of their closed eyes. And before the organ could strike up *Away in a manger*, a little lamb and a little boy were fast asleep together, safe and sound once more.

* * * * *

Christmas Day dawned bright and early for a little shepherd boy resplendent in his dressing-gown cloak and tea-towel headdress. And there, under a protective arm, a little black sheep smiled knowingly, safely home once again to *almost everyone's* utter astonishment. This, said a very relieved Dad, had to be a little bit of a Christmas miracle. But there was no time for pondering ... not yet anyway.

"Come on!" yelled Gareth (who – truly – had never imagined the story ending any other way). "Everyone knows me and Hugo have a baby to visit on Christmas morning."

Meet the characters

Chat about some of the main players in this story:

- **Gareth** is adamant that his beloved lamb must and will be found, no matter how ridiculous the odds, how unlikely the outcome. What does this tell us about the boy's approach to what we might call 'salvation'?
- **Oma Dafne** arrives alone. By the end of the story we discover that she too had a Hugo, after whom Gareth's lamb was – presumably – named. The most special of possessions are often those which can bring us into contact with love and loss and yearning. Can you think of any special objects like that?
- **The vicar** made everything possible by finding the lamb. What might his reaction be when he sees the shepherd-boy Gareth arriving back on Christmas morning with the lost-then-found-then-strangely-disappeared sheep tucked under his arm ... a sheep which is now the vicar's property?

Back to the Bible:

Romans 16:25-27

This briefest of our readings comes after a great long list of greetings from Paul to Priscilla and Aquila, his 'fellow-workers in Christ Jesus' and many others in the Christian community of Rome (16:3–16). After all sorts of rounding off material (16:17–24) Paul offers his readers a short but pretty dense concluding benediction to send them on their way.

Consider together one or more of these three questions:

- This passage offers a young church an enthusiastic and loving blessing from the great leader Paul, bringing together within its few lines references to God's plan, the teachings of the prophets and the coming of Jesus. There is a journey from lost to found implicit in Paul's words and realised at Bethlehem. In what ways do we 'own' that same trajectory in our own faith?
- What had been unseen across the ages is now made visible through the Incarnation, and so the lost are given new avenues to God, in and through Christ's love. Does this neatly split salvation history into B.C. and A.D.? Or is there a continuity of grace which binds the two periods together?
- Key ideas in this powerful little text point us towards God (and Paul) actively reaching out in love to those who need to hear a message of divine grace. For example, we read the words: 'proclaim'; 'revelation'; 'revealed'; 'made known'; and 'come'. In what ways can the 21st century church be encouraged by the kind and loving message of the 1st century Paul?

Luke 15:3-7

Now think about the story of the lost sheep, one of the three related parables of Jesus found in Luke 15. Whether the power of finding something precious is illustrated through a wayward sheep, a concealed coin or a son who has left his family apparently for ever, each parable exists to indicate the wonder of finding something which had gone astray which is able to be restored.

In his commentary on this text, minister and writer Leith Fisher describes this trio of parables as one of 'the huge moments in Luke's gospel'. In terms of the glory of salvation it sits pretty neatly alongside those huge 'Christmas moments' of Luke when we encounter the praise of a young girl (1:46–55), the praise of an old man (1:68–79), the praise of a company of angels (2:13–14) and the praise of shepherds (2:20) – and all on account of God's saving love, present in a fearful world.

Pick one or more of these discussion starters:

- Leaving 'the ninety-nine in the open country' sounds unwise in a land of hungry wolves. Why take such a huge risk on account of one wayward sheep?
- Jesus refers to those 'who do not need to repent'. Why their lack of 'need', and what do you think Jesus might be pointing to here?
- This tiny parable is followed by those of the lost coin (Luke 15:8-10) and the lost son (Luke 15:11-32). How do these three little stories of salvation combine to teach us about the nature of God's love?

The big question

- **Luke chapter 15's 'lost and found parables' (sheep; coin; son) have a vital place in Jesus' teaching. To what extent do you find them:**
 - a) a comforting reassurance?;**
 - b) a call to action?**

A hymn for reflection

Read or sing together a relevant hymn, such as *In the bleak midwinter* (CH4:305).

The five-minute ponder

To round off the session, take five minutes of silent reflection, writing down one simple 'reflection point' which you will take away with you for the week ahead.

Feedback

After the five minutes are up, feel free to share what you have come up with the group as a whole.

A sending prayer

Let us pray:

God of Advent Love,

you give yourself at Christmas, showing that you are ready to let go of glory, saving us in our lostness.

In your dedication to saving each one of your sheep, we are blessed indeed. In realising that we are cherished, may we walk in the light of your boundless love, sharing it wherever you might lead us.

In the Name of Jesus Christ, your Son, born for all Creation at Christmas, our Lord and our salvation. Amen.

Advent ends ...

... and Christmas dawns ...



‘Christmas Day’

***Let all creation rejoice before the Lord,
for he comes ...***

Psalm 96:13

Readings for the day:

- **Psalm 96:** God the supreme King; and
- **Luke 2:1–14:** the birth of Jesus.

‘The Secret Box of Madame Noyer’

... a story for Christmas Day

Little Natalie loved Christmas. She had lived through six Christmases in total and she could remember each and every one ... well, three of them definitely. But those three Christmases had given Natalie some of her happiest, loveliest memories of all.

Christmas was particularly special to Natalie because she had been born on Christmas Day itself. (“Just like Jesus,” she would say with a big smile.) Friends often told her that it must be sad to have Christmas presents and birthday presents all on the same day, but Natalie didn’t mind one little bit. Her Christmas birthday was a time like no other in all the year: a time of keen anticipation when the family would pack up the car, head out of Montreal and drive, drive, drive those many long miles out to the back of beyond where Grandma and Grandpa had their house by the lake.

Soon enough the day of the big drive dawned. Snow was everywhere to be seen but the city knew how to deal with it. All packed up with boots and coats and far too many presents, they set off into a white and magical land of vast expanses. The twins slept for most of the journey, but they were just tiny little boys, not yet toddlers. Natalie, on the other hand, knew the route like the back of her hand and kept chattering about Grandma’s festive muffins and Grandpa’s Christmas barbecue in the great (and very cold!) outdoors. Far too many hours later, the travelling finally at an end, Natalie leapt from her seat and rushed to hug her waiting grandparents. “Just in time!” yelled Grandma. “Tomorrow we’ll have the best Christmas Day ever, all rolled into the best birthday too. The ice is thick on the lake. The snow is deep

enough for turning into a castle, and you wouldn't believe all the food we've got in store. We'll be barbecuing until midnight!"

"And if the weather's fair," added Grandpa, "you and I can sneak away to try and spot that family of moose up in the forest. They were down foraging at the clearing only two days ago."

"Can't wait," beamed Natalie, clapping her hands in glee, knowing that even with the arrival of the twins, Grandpa would still make special time for her, his "princess".

All slept well that night, happy to have made it safe and sound, and delighted to be all together in a house so cosy it must have been made for winter. Snug in her own little bedroom Natalie listened to the wind whistling at the chimney, as the snow began falling in true Canadian style.

On Christmas morning Natalie woke to the happy chatter of a working kitchen. Yawning her way downstairs, she could hear Grandpa asking where the special Christmas muffins were to be put.

"They're on the table already, darling ... just like I told you."

Pushing at the living room door, a big shock lay in wait as Natalie found herself well and truly startled. Her eyes closed tight against the field of white light which was assaulting her from the snowy scene outside. In time, she squinted reluctantly through the huge window which looked down to the lake. Only problem was, no lake could be seen. Just unrelenting whiteness.

"Merry Christmas Natalie, and Happy Birthday! Hope you like your snow heavy," grinned Grandpa.

"No!" frowned the brow-furrowed little girl, realising that all the plans of the previous night had been turned into a total white-out.

"There'll be no going out this Christmas!" hollered Grandma in a voice that sounded altogether a bit too upbeat. "In these parts we know when we're stuck indoors. And this weather means we're well and truly stuck indoors!"

Natalie was upset, and nothing – not even a special Christmas muffin – was going to please her. She had so wanted to skate on the pond and visit the moose and flip some barbecue steaks on a freezing porch. But in all honesty she could see for herself that none of this would be. So she just lay on the sofa and stared out at a world of flurrying snow, vast and mesmerising.

After a few dismal minutes she felt a heavy weight flopping down beside her.

“So kid,” asked Grandpa, “how are we going to celebrate?”

“Dunno,” shrugged Natalie. “How can we celebrate when it’s all so horrible?”

“We-e-ell ...” said the old man in his didn’t-you-know-I-was-bound-to-have-a-bad-weather-plan-up-my-sleeve sort of voice. “A secret box might help.”

Natalie sat up in an instant.

“A secret box?”

Grandpa nodded conspiratorially.

“Why don’t you follow me, eh?”

Up and up they climbed to Grandpa’s den tucked away in the loft far above the noise of bubbling soup pots and annoying twin babies. Sitting down at a gnarled old workbench, Natalie spotted what had to be the secret box on top. Made of red-lacquered wood of finest walnut, and carved in fine detail,, it had a fresh new label tied to its metal clasp. And that label simply read: ‘Natalie’.

“So then, here’s the story,” Grandpa whispered softly. “The other day, old Isabelle Noyer drove over to visit with Grandma for the afternoon, and she brought this with her. Natalie, you wouldn’t believe it: this box has been handed down through the generations from the days of her great, great grandmother way back in the 19th century. Can you imagine? Anyway, Isabelle has no kids of her own, so she wondered if you might like it to take care of it from now on. Why not take a look inside?”

And so, undoing the clasp, Natalie ever-so-gently lifted the lid and stretched her neck upwards to see what might lie within.

“Wow Grandpa,” she gasped. “It’s Mary and Joseph ... and other little people too ... so, so beautiful!”

Grandpa chuckled. “I knew you’d like them. Go on: let’s see who all we can find.”

The next hour went by in a flash as together they named the figures in turn, studying each one closely before sorting them into three groups. Jesus, Mary and Joseph came first, along with a rough-looking manger and a sackcloth blanket. Next there was a group of shepherds, all wrapped up against the cold. Last of all came the wise men with their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

“And look,” cried Grandpa just like a six-year-old, lifting out the last of the secret box’s mysterious contents: a wooden backdrop which pulled out like a concertina to reveal a night-time scene of stable and sand, sky and star, beautifully hand-painted more than a century earlier.

The precious contents of the box were just fabulous, like nothing Natalie had ever seen in her life.

Through a long and wondrous Christmas morning she lost herself in acting out the story of Jesus’ birth, placing the many characters here and there. And as she did so she placed herself within the meaning of the child in the manger. Meanwhile a proud grandfather looked on enthralled, as he quietly pondered the drama of the ages being played out before him.

In time her story-telling was complete, as wise men on camels started their long journey home from Quebec to the lands of the Orient. Natalie was overjoyed, but there was something she just had to ask:

“Are they really mine to keep, Grandpa? Will Madame Noyer be OK with me taking them home to Montreal?”

“Yes ... and no,” replied the old man gently. “All this is yours now, that’s for sure. But we’ve got to remember what a precious box this really is. If you were to take

these figures home, in half a minute little Pierre and Antoine would have them broken or chewed or thrown out the window. So what do you say we just keep them here, safe and sound? For now at least they'll be your special Christmas secret."

"I suppose," sighed his grand-daughter, again a little disappointed. "See, I want to have Jesus with me all of the time, not just at Christmas. ... Hey! What's so funny?"

Grandpa was chuckling. He picked up the manger with its tiny baby.

"That, Natalie, is the whole point. Jesus is born, but that's only the start. He comes to be one of us, in our lives – just like you said – all of the time. That's why we celebrate him coming ... living ... dying ... rising to new life at Easter, showing that nothing will ever stop God's love. Come to think of it, there's even a song about it."

And with that the old man took a big, deep breath and, raising his voice to the warm wooden rafters above them, started to sing a soft Christmas lullaby:

*Holy Jesus, God incarnate,
sleeping now in peaceful rest.
Mary's loving eyes to watch you,
child and mother heaven-blest.
Star and angel knew your glory,
shepherds gathered where you lay.
Through the bitter snows of winter
slumber safely while you may.*

*Holy Jesus, wise men travel
with their gifts so rich and fine.
First, the gold to speak of kingship;
frankincense of power divine;
then the myrrh, a gift prophetic,
pointing out a mystery:
in your start an end envisaged;
life and death in unity.*

*Holy Jesus, here among us,
sent from God for our own good.
Bread of Life that will be broken
on a cross of rough-hewn wood.
In the wine-red blood of suffering
we will see your love's true way.
May we join your path to Easter,
setting out on Christmas Day.*

*"Holy Jesus, God incarnate", copyright © 2020
by Robin Hill and Alec Shuttleworth.
Tune: Yr Hun Gân (CH4:590)*

Personal ponderings for Christmas

- Natalie is perplexed a couple of times on Christmas morning. How do the two gospel accounts of Christmas deal with great expectations ... puzzling surprises ... transformed realities?
- With the birth of Jesus you might pause to reflect on the idea of Christ being born into our lives, but is this *particularly* so at Christmas?



‘Epiphany’

Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star ...”

Matthew 2:1–2

Readings for the day:

- **Isaiah 60:1–6:** the future glory of Jerusalem; and
- **Matthew 2:1–12:** visitors from the east.

‘Asleep with the camels’

... a story for Epiphany

It all started with a great star, unexpected, and perplexing too. No astrologer had predicted the moment of its rising and no philosopher could explain its constancy as it journeyed through the heavens by night. Yet there it was.

As searchers of the skies, the three friends owed it to themselves to make sense of its presence. And as people of faith who placed their trust in the Maker of those skies, they wondered at what might be ahead of them.

Saddling up their camels off they set, the sun at their backs each morning and in their eyes by dusk, leading them on until the star – that same troubling star they had seen at home – guided them through the dark, almost taunting them to their windswept faces.

... Search ...

... seek and find ...

... the prize so great ...

... yet missed with ease. ...

... Spurn the sad ways ...

... of heartless potentates ...

... to find eternal majesty ...

... come down for all the world ...

"A star, gentlemen," murmured Melchior, lost in the mists of deepest thought. "Of course! ... 'A star will come out of Jacob.'"

"What was that?" asked Caspar, his eyes fixed upon the sandy way ahead.

"He said, 'a star', Caspar." Thus spoke Balthazar, scholar of faiths. "And, as usual, Melchior leads us to the truth. Now, let me remember that riddle of the scrolls. Ah yes: 'I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a sceptre will rise out of Israel.' The Hebrew Book of Numbers – a prophecy of old, I'll warrant, foretelling a king born to the Jews ..."

"... born to the Jews," interrupted Caspar. "This matches well with Isaiah's hope of later years:

For unto us a child is born'. And there, if I am right, the same prophetic star made manifest before us now. See how it points us straight and true in the direction of fair Jerusalem, city of Kings.

Over desert dunes they trekked both day and night, pausing but briefly for simple fare and snatches of sleep. And so they travelled westward, ever westward, until upon the horizon they spied at last their goal – Jerusalem the Holy.

Late in the day they tethered their camels near the city's eastern gates and set about their task. From public well to city tavern they wandered, asking the same question at every turn: "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?"

Many whom they met acknowledged the star to be a mysterious visitor to their own sky, yet no city dweller was to speak of an infant king. Until, that is, they chanced upon a palace official who seemed unusually interested to meet them.

"Dear friends," said he, "my master, His Majesty, would happily agree to an audience, if only you would grace him with your presence. Report, if you will, to the Palace Guard early in the forenoon."

Next day with great excitement – and trepidation too – the travellers arrived as requested and were taken into the great throne room where Herod himself received them. The audience with His Majesty proved helpful, pointing the three away from the city altogether, to the most unlikely little village, some nine miles away.

... And so they made their weary way ...

... to David's city, humble Bethlehem ...

... as proclaimed of old in Scripture ...

... to the child they longed to find ...

... before whom each one knelt ...

... to give his precious gifts. ...

... This infant of the heavens ...

... at once both Star and Sun. ...

Their task complete, their mission at its end, the travellers left the mother and her child, bidding them safe passage to their home. Those wise men had their answer now, yet through their wild discovery more fears and worries crammed their aching heads. That mother so young; that child so helpless; those prophecies of deep antiquity. And not least that aged monarch, so strangely under threat from an unlikely pretender. What might it all mean, this conspiracy of circumstance and destiny? And should they return to Herod to lodge their report? The matter was not clear.

Relaxing that evening around a fine table spread with food and drink, they went over all they had encountered, marvelling at their experiences. The night was fair, with the firmament a velvet black, each sparkling pinprick familiar as of old. The three laid down in the place they loved the best: under cover of their friend and companion, the spangled sky. Rich were their memories of what they had seen, yet soon the veil of sleep enveloped each, and they fell headlong into a sleep like no other. And as they lay there, side by side, they shared in a dream most peculiar.

Before them, the royal palace in Jerusalem, its solid doors now closed and barred against all threat. Through a great window in a high and regal tower, the form of Herod was made plain, mouth raging, arms flailing in agonies of despair. Below the nightmare scene there lay a glittering path that headed to the east and gentle sunrise. Then a voice, as of an angel, whispered soft and sweet:

... Hush now! Do not make a sound ...

... here upon the dusty ground. ...

... In your dreaming hear this plea ...

... sent from highest heaven to thee. ...

... Flee from Herod with all speed ...

... for he plans a dreadful deed. ...

... Spurn the city's courts this day ...

... going home some other way. ...

The night passed in a flash, each awakening at once refreshed and oddly inspired.

"Gentlemen," said Melchior, stroking his beard pensively. "It is my firmest conviction that we know what must be done. ... Is this not so?"

His colleagues nodded their agreement.

"Since last night all has changed – and not for the better," said Balthazar.

"Now, dear friends," added the third wise man, "let us saddle up our camels in readiness for a swift escape!"

Caspar was already on his feet, a sandy bedroll under one arm and his thick winter blanket under the other.

A few minutes later all were busying themselves with water skins and meal pouches, in preparation for the long, long journey to come. It had been an arduous few weeks in the desert, and the travellers had been hoping for a return leg free of anxiety. Now though, their plans would need to change.

As the three made to set off, camels watered and panniers fastened, Balthazar issued forth a word of caution: "No mark, no sign, not the slightest inkling of our presence at this camp must linger behind us. Herod the fox will place his vicious hounds upon our scent, so speed and stealth are of the essence."

Off they sloped together, side by side, musing once more upon their rich experience of a challenge like no other.

"That dream ..." started Caspar.

"It will stay with us for ever," noted Balthazar, "like an owner's brand burnt into our very souls. Yet still, this burning is most gentle, is it not? Like as a gift that will remain upon us our whole lives through."

"But what of the holy one?" asked Caspar. "And of the girl who is his mother? How can they survive against the spears and staffs of Herod's ruffian throng? My heart goes out to them in the turmoil that is theirs. Surely this King Jesus, as now we know him to be called, will end his days in blood, another victim of another tyrant."

"It may well be," said Melchior, "though consider this: we gave our gifts, knowing just what each would show in time to come. Gold for a king's majesty; incense for God's holiness; and myrrh - yes, myrrh for death's cruelty. Lest we forget, we too gained a gift: a dream by which we might find our way safe home. Perhaps the blessed child will have his own celestial dreams for guidance ... and the assurance of a heavenly goal most worthy of some great sacrifice."

... on ...

... and on ...

... they went, ...

... pondering ...

... the infant King: ...

... the signs and portents, ...

... those drowsy camels' steps, ...

... and mysteries sent from on high ...

(Inspired by Walter Brueggemann's reflection on Matthew 2: "Off by Nine Miles".)

Personal ponderings for Epiphany

- The wise men's ethics and actions were guided by a shared dream. What guides you in the life decisions which you make?
- The tiny story of the wise men and their quest for a king has inspired biblical and theological scholars, as well as painters, authors, poets and composers. You might like to listen to Peter Warlock and Bruce Blunt's choral piece, *Bethlehem Down*. Alternatively, spend some time with Gian Carlo Menotti's short opera, *Amahl and the Night Visitors*. These and other works, are readily tracked down on the internet.

Advent chats for schools (and other places too)

Week 1: 'Hope'

Text: *For no word from God will ever fail.* (Luke 1:37);

Visual aid: A sealed envelope containing a spiritual Christmas card with a written message inside: 'God is with you.'

- *Take a moment to ask your audience about envelopes which arrive in the mail. We don't know what lies inside an envelope; it could be good news, bad news, an invitation, a bill, a happy greeting or just junk mail.*
- *Open the envelope to reveal a Christmas card. Take some time to describe the ways in which the card shows the story of Jesus' birth. (You might put the image into Powerpoint and ask people to describe what they see.)*
- *Now open the card to reveal the hand-written personal message inside: 'God is with you.'*
- The Bible says that many months before Christmas Day, Mary the mother of Jesus received a very personal message. This wasn't delivered by the Royal Mail but by an angel who greeted Mary with the words, 'the Lord is with you'. The angel told Mary she would become the mother of God's special son. The message was clear: nothing would be impossible with God.
- Mary trusted that angel, and she trusted God too, knowing that God was with her in the big and dangerous adventure that would lie ahead.
- The message of Christmas is all about God ... with ... us. Christians love to think about the nearness of God in that tiny Christmas baby who was born long, long ago: a baby who was loved so much by Mary, the young woman who placed her trust in God.
- Mary knew that God *is* with us.

Week 2: 'Peace'

Text: ... *the Lord, the Lord himself, is the Rock eternal.* (Isaiah 26:4);

Visual aid: a large masonry stone (or a used brick).

- *Start off by showing everyone the great big stone and asking for words to describe it ... [big; heavy; mossy; dirty; strong; etc.]*
- *This stone is no ordinary stone. It has very clear signs of being worked by a builder. It has been cut and chiselled and shaped so it can play its part in something much bigger. Ask what ... [a house; a wall; a castle; etc.]*
- Big strong stones can be used to make big, strong buildings and structures of one sort or another. And well-made buildings can last for hundreds – even thousands – of years, which is quite a thought.
- This Christmas, people will be going to church to celebrate the birth of Jesus 2000 years ago. Some will go to ancient and tiny chapels to worship God. Others might attend huge cathedrals put up hundreds of years ago. Around the world there are loads of historic buildings which have welcomed Christmas congregations many, many times over the years as people have gathered to sing their carols and to pray their prayers and to listen to the Bible stories of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem. They have heard about Mary and Joseph, angels and shepherds, wise men and gifts, and – above all – Jesus, the child in the manger, born into our world so we can know God.
- The funny thing is that if we were to wait long enough all those wonderful old buildings would wear out and fall down. (Just go to the city of St Andrews and you will find a really old cathedral by the sea which is now lies in ruins.)
- Rocks may look and feel like they are very strong yet just like everything on planet earth they will eventually wear out. But the Bible says that in God we have an everlasting rock. God's love is stronger than anything you might find in our world, and that love comes to us from heaven in the shape of a human baby called Jesus ... each Christmas ... each day ... always ... and for ever.

Week 3: 'Joy'

Text: *Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened ...* (Luke 2:15);

Visual aid: A party blower. (Check with hosts before using it!)

- *Unannounced, silently show everyone the party blower. Make it toot, before pausing for a brief, quizzical moment. Repeat, a little louder. Finally do it again, this time making a bigger squeak.*
- *Tell everyone that party blowers can be really noisy, so cover your ears now if you think you might be scared. (After the appropriate warning, blow really loudly!)*
- Party blowers might seem like terrifying things if you have never heard one before, but you quickly learn that they are nice, fun things, not horrible at all.
- In the Bible story of Christmas which we find in Luke's gospel, some shepherds who were watching their sheep and minding their own business suddenly got a big fright – though not from a party blower.
- According to the story what happened was this: an angel from heaven arrived in front of them and God's glory shone all around. That night, those shepherds knew what it felt like to be terrified, but the angel told them not to be afraid. The angel was bringing good news of great joy for everyone.
- The news was that a baby was born in Bethlehem: Jesus, sent from God into a world of fear and hatred. The humble shepherds were the first to hear the good news and would be the first to visit the baby.
- If one angel had been terrifying, imagine how those shepherds felt when a whole crowd of angels turned up right in front of them, praising God. But the funny thing is ... the shepherds knew not to be terrified, because what they had heard was good news, not bad. So instead of shaking with fear they said: 'Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened ...'
- They hurried off and found Mary and Joseph and the baby, who was lying in the manger. Then they spread the news about this amazing birth – great good news that Jesus had arrived from heaven to show us all God's love.

Week 4: 'Love'

Text: *Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.* (Luke 15:6);

Visual aid: A precious cuddly toy in a bag.

- *Hold up the bag and show everyone that there is something – or someone – inside. Put your hand in and carefully bring out your childhood cuddly toy, telling the story of why s/he is so special to you.*
- *Ask for some examples of similarly special furry friends.*
- Here we are, drawing close to the big day: only 'x' more sleeps 'til Christmas! So it might surprise you that this week my Christmas story isn't really a Christmas story at all ... except, of course, that it really kind of is.
- When Jesus was a grown-up he loved to tell stories about God which used well-known every-day things to help him make his point. These special stories were called parables and they encouraged people to ponder and to wonder about both the world they lived in and what the Kingdom of God is all about.
- Here is a very short parable which Jesus told about a precious cuddly animal (in this case a real, live sheep):
Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbours together and says, "Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep."
- This parable makes the point that God is delighted – overjoyed! – when someone who is far from God is found by God ... and brought back by God ... and welcomed by God as one of the family.
- In that very first Christmas 2000 years ago, the message from heaven was a message of joy ... and finding ... and bringing back ... and welcoming: 'Do not be afraid ... a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.'

A Christmas request ...

We have provided these resources for you free of charge. If you use any of them whether in churches, schools, homes (wherever) please consider taking up a charitable offering at your congregation's Christmas Eve service to benefit the wonderful work of the Church of Scotland HIV Programme.

The Programme's aims are:

- to break the silence on HIV and AIDS;
- to stand together with partner churches overseas in their HIV outreach;
- to offer practical support, speaking up for the voiceless; and
- to involve every member of the Church of Scotland in its life-changing work.

People living with HIV do not look for our sympathy but for solidarity and support. Working with our partners, the Programme builds hope where it is most needed.

Here are just a few examples of how our donations make a big difference:

Caribbean (Presbyterian Reformed Church in Cuba):

Providing a space of socialisation and integration where people living with HIV and their families can feel welcomed. They will also offer workshops on various topics and health-related supplies.

Asia (Christian Conference of Asia, Thailand):

Building an HIV-competent church and community, CCA aims to enhance solidarity and action among faith communities in Asia towards ending HIV in the region.

Africa (Ekwendeni Hospital Orphan Care Project, Malawi):

This project aims to provide for orphans and vulnerable children through good nutrition, educational support and access to health and social services on the same basis as other children. Among other areas of activity it will finance high school education for 20 young people, while providing psychological and social support through its proven 'children's corner' scheme. It will also enable volunteer training.

Middle East (Presbyterian Evangelical Church in Egypt):

A Programme grant has helped re-establish and run an awareness-raising project on

blood-transmitted diseases, covering Hepatitis C alongside HIV/AIDS. Through education it aims to change negative attitudes and overcome stigma.

Scotland (Positive Help, Edinburgh):

Offering practical help to people infected or affected by HIV. Our grant assists in the operation of the charity's volunteer transport programme which encourages drivers to take clients, for example, to and from clinics, hospitals and other social care centres.

Your donation to the Church of Scotland HIV Programme can be made:

- by bank transfer (contact hiv@churchofscotland.org.uk for details); or
- by cheque payable to 'The Church of Scotland HIV Programme'. This should be sent to The Church of Scotland HIV Programme, 121 George Street, Edinburgh EH2 4YN.



*When 25th December comes, have a hopeful, peaceful, joyful and loving Christmas.
And, if you can, thank you for supporting the Church of Scotland HIV Programme.*

Robin and Katie