



SENDTHEFIRE.CA

theme: Away in a Manger (Luke 2:1-7)

materials: Bibles, news story, 3 candles, lighter

welcome

What is your ancestral "home town"? That is, where your parents, your family, your heritage is from. Have you ever been there? What do you think of it? Would you want to live there now?

Bring in a news item about your neighbourhood, city, country or world that you can discuss with the cell. Where do you see God in this story? Ask other members of cell to bring in stories to discuss in subsequent weeks.

worship

This is the third week of Advent. The word *Advent* means "Coming", and it comes from the Greek word *parousia*, which refers to the Second Coming of Christ. This is a time when Christians prepare for the coming of the Messiah, both in remembrance of how he came to earth as a baby, and in expectation of how he will come to us again. The readings during Advent in the *Worship* section will focus on hope, expectation, and patient joy as we look forward to the coming of our Lord. As you have different people read the Scriptures, have someone light three candles. After you are done reading, spend time in silence contemplating what you have heard, and then sing a Christmas carol together.

OT reading: *Micah 5:2-5*; NT reading: *Revelation 12:1-17*

word

Read Luke 2:1-7.

Why does Luke mention Caesar, the governor, and the census?

What is the purpose of the census?

Why does it matter that Jesus was born in Bethlehem?

What is the significance of Jesus being "born in a barn" and laid in a manger, because there was no room in the inn?

What traditional elements of the "Nativity Story" seem to be missing from Luke's account? Why?

If you didn't know the rest of the story of Jesus (or if you don't know it), what is his birth story preparing you to think about him? What kind of person will this be?

What does it mean to you that God came to earth as a baby and took on human flesh? What does that tell you about God? What does that tell you about humanity?

witness

Continue reading through the entire books of Luke and Acts with one other person. If the other person is a fellow believer, read them through in a public place, like a café (not yelling it out or anything, just reading it to one another). Make a regular time to come in and read together, and more likely than not someone will eventually ask you what you are reading and why.



SENDTHEFIRE.CA

If the other person is not a fellow-believer, perhaps choose a less public place to read, but again set regular times, daily if possible, to get together and read the Gospel. You don't have to read it all at once. Read two to three chapters at a time, and then meet another day to read some more.

action points

Get together a movie night and watch "The Nativity" or "Children of Men". How do these movies tell the story of the birth of Jesus?

The Salvation Army sponsors children around the world who are living in circumstances of poverty and oppression. Any offerings given at cell meetings go towards covering the costs of these sponsorships. Please challenge your cell to bring loose offerings each week, and bring a container to collect any such offerings that are given.

leader's guide

Jesus' birth story is intentionally set by Luke in its historic context. Luke is reinforcing again that this is something that happened at a particular moment in history (though the date is still vague), and not just some spiritual fantasy or story. So the life of Jesus does not just matter for the devotional exercise of his followers: it has real life, historical, world significance. Many scholars have suggested that Luke's account of the census does not reflect historical reality. There are still some questions around the date of the census and the birth of Jesus, but many scholars now accept that Luke's description of the census matches what we know about Roman practice. Censuses typically took a long time to complete, and their purpose was generally to identify all the people in a given territory who were eligible to pay taxes. Some censuses also had the purpose of causing all the residents in an area to swear an oath of loyalty to the Emperor. The Jewish historian Josephus mentions a Roman census that caused a riot in Judea. The census was a symbol of hated Roman power and would lead to hated Roman taxation. It is no coincidence that Luke links the census to Jesus' birth, as part of the context of this birth (as we saw earlier in the songs of Mary and Zechariah) is Israel's longing for the intervention of God to liberate them and restore them.

Luke is seemingly pointing out in this story the vast disparity of apparent power that exists between Caesar (as a representative of the world) and Jesus. Augustus Caesar really did have the power to disrupt the lives of the people in his territory so that he could count them all and tax them. Compared to this, Jesus' family has little to no power at all. And yet the story of Jesus is one of the true Kingdom of the true God confronting and winning victory over the kingdoms of the world. Luke has already mentioned King Herod, Caesar Augustus, and Governor Quirinius, and will later bring up Tiberius Caesar and Herod Antipas. Throughout the book of Luke / Acts, Jesus and his message is often (but not always) rejected by the world and those in authority, but is also often received in unlikely places. There is therefore no room for Mary, Joseph and Jesus in any kind of human habitation, and Jesus right from the first moment of his life is denied comfort. Jesus is rejected by the inn, but accepted into the lowly manger. The manger may also be reinforcing a theme about Jesus being Israel's shepherd (and the shepherd story comes right after this one).

Joseph and Mary had to travel from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem (about 90 miles, or 3 days), as this was Joseph's ancestral home town. He was of the line of King David, and Bethlehem was the place where David had been brought up. Its name is thought to mean "House of Bread". In the Old Testament the "City of David" typically means the hill of Zion in Jerusalem. In the New Testament, "City of David" refers to Bethlehem (which is roughly 4.5 miles away from Jerusalem). Micah 5:2 prophecies that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. Interestingly, this prophecy is fulfilled not by Joseph's decision alone, but by the imposition of the Roman



census. In other words, God is using this show of Roman power and authority to bring about his own plan of salvation.

There are some parts of the nativity story that seem to be missing here because they occur later on in the story, or in other gospels. The angels appearing to the shepherds occurs in the next few verses of Luke, and the wise men coming from the East are found in the book of Matthew. But Luke's version of the story is also strangely missing any cattle that are lowing, little drummer boys, donkeys that carry Mary and so on. These are later additions to the story from popular imaginings, and are largely harmless. But it is always important to look at what Luke does include in his history, and to ask why he includes it. We also have to be careful not to simply sentimentalize the Christmas story, thereby forgetting that this was a real world event that tells the history of God *actually taking on human flesh*. This is God inhabiting his creation, involving humanity in himself, giving humans the possibility of joining with him in his Kingdom. If this story doesn't stun and scandalise us, then we are not reading it very well.

Luke is setting up his history of Jesus very carefully with the story of his (and John's) announcements and births. He is giving the reader a framework through which to see and understand the rest of the story, to have a clue from the very beginning about who Jesus is and what he is expected to do. Angels, two unlikely women, Joseph and Zechariah even Caesar Augustus (unwittingly) are all playing their roles in fulfilling the prophecies of old about the coming Messiah, the ruler of God's people, the Lord and Saviour and deliverer of Israel, the unique Son of God.