



SENDTHEFIRE.CA

**theme:** Shepherds and Angels (Luke 2:8-20)

**materials:** Bibles, news story, 4 candles, lighter

## welcome

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If you were to host a party, and could invited anyone you wanted, (past or present), who are three people you would invite? Why?

*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

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This is the fourth week of Advent. The word *Advent* means “Coming”, and it comes from the Greek word *parousia*, which refers to the Second Coming of Christ. As you have different people read the Scriptures, have someone light four candles. After you are done reading, spend time in silence contemplating what you have heard, and then sing a Christmas carol together.

OT reading: *Isaiah 9:1-7*; NT reading: *John 1:1-18, 1 Corinthians 1:27-29*

## word

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Read Luke 2:8-20.

Why does God send the angels to tell shepherds, of all people, that the Messiah has been born?

Why didn't God announce the birth to Caesar Augustus or Herod?

The angels say that the news will be great joy for all the people. Which people?

How do the angels refer to Jesus? What do these titles mean?

What “peace” is God going to bring through Jesus?

What peace has Jesus brought to you?

What are the different ways people reacted to the news about the birth of Jesus?

How did you react the first time you heard about Jesus?

Why did the shepherds glorify God?

Why, and how, do you glorify God? What does this accomplish?

## witness

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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.

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.



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## action points

Arrange a time of carolling with your cell. Find a convenient street corner, go wandering down streets, or stand by a Salvation Army Kettle and sing the praises of Jesus and the remembrance of his coming to earth.

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. Cell is also a great time to bring your cartridges or tithes to the Church.

## leader's guide

Throughout the book of Luke there is a repetitive theme of odd characters being singled out to receive the favour of God. Be it prostitutes, tax collectors, or shepherds, the ones who are seemingly least likely to occupy a place in the story are the ones who are mentioned. If you wanted a civilised and appropriate reception for the birth of the King of Kings, you would probably not invite shepherds. They were not generally educated or clean, not very high on the social ladder. But it is to the shepherds near Bethlehem, not to King Herod nor Caesar Augustus, that the angels come to deliver the message. It is these regular labourers who are privileged to come and witness the newly born Saviour.

The shepherd, though a lowly character in reality, also held an iconic place in Israel's imagination. David was a shepherd, and the leaders of Israel were often described as "shepherds" (bad shepherds, if they were leading the flock astray). Could Luke be focusing the reader's attention here again on the fact that Jesus is standing in the line and inheritance of King David? Or perhaps on the destiny of Jesus, to be the Good Shepherd of Israel, the true leader and King?

We often don't recognise it now, but the first witnesses to this story, and the first readers of Luke's account, could not have helped but see Jesus' birth set in the context of Caesar Augustus' Roman Empire. A calendar has been discovered from before the birth of Jesus that talks about Augustus, saying that the city should celebrate the "evangelium", or good news, of Augustus' birth, as he was the Saviour of the world, and the Son of God (adopted son of Julius Caesar). Augustus was the most powerful man in the world, and one of the most powerful humans in history. His Empire stretched throughout the known world, and he was able to enforce the *Pax Romana*, or Roman Peace which brought a type of stability to much of the world. He was the chief priest of Rome, and also carried the title "Father of his Country". His authority was absolutely unequalled. Upon his death in AD 14 he was declared a god by the Roman Senate. Augustus ruled the world at the time Jesus was born, and many of the titles ascribed to Jesus by the angels and others were titles that were also ascribed to Augustus. In terms of social and political power, Augustus had far more rights to the titles than Jesus, who was born in an insignificant little town in an insignificant corner of the Empire, laid in a manger, and visited by humble shepherds. But the angelic host declares a different reality to the shepherds, the reality that God was going to use that which was considered nothing in this world to shame those who thought themselves great.

This angelic announcement contained the message that great joy was coming into the world for "all people". This refers first and foremost to the people of Israel, who had been waiting for a Messiah and Redeemer for generations. It must be understood that the characters in this story are thinking primarily in terms of the salvation of Israel. It is likely that Jesus' broader deliverance and salvation – really to all people – is being foreshadowed here, but it is still very much a Jewish story that we are reading.

The angels then identify Jesus, connecting him again to the line of David, and calling him Saviour, Christ and



Lord. The term “Saviour” was used in the Hebrew Scriptures, and refers to God acting to bring about the deliverance of his people from slavery, calamity or exile. Now, God is going to bring about his salvation through Jesus, who is also identified as the anointed (set aside for the specific purposes of God) Christ and Lord, an indicator or ultimate authority. The angels tell the shepherds where and how they will find this Saviour, Christ and Lord, wrapped in clothes and lying in a manger, of all places. The angels then glorify God, and announce that God’s peace will be given to those on whom his favour rests. God’s peace is not merely the absence of conflict, but instead refers to the complete blessings that were associated with the coming of the Messiah. It means that peace between God and humanity would be made, and that the blessings of God could be received in a whole new way by those who receive his son.

The shepherds go and find the baby with his family, and then share what the angels had told them. The people living in the area who heard of this were astonished by this news, and didn’t know quite what to make of it. The shepherds’ confirmation of Jesus’ identity caused Mary to quietly contemplate what it all meant. And the shepherds, having seen the proof of the angels’ announcement, went away glorifying God. In so doing, they were simply recognising the glory that God already possesses, and were participating in the proper honouring of God.