

Join us on an ADVENT-ure at Toowong Uniting Church. Starting December 1, would you commit to doing five things:

**ONE: Pray Daily** – set yourself the challenge of spending a consistent length of time in prayer. Whether 10 minutes or two hours, the length matters less than your resolve to devoting some uninterrupted time to just being with God.

**TWO: Daily Nourish Your Soul from God's Word** – take some time each day to read the bible and ponder its word, As part of these adventures with God we will suggest a passage and provide a short reflection on it for each day but reading our notes is much less important than thinking carefully about the scripture passage looking for ways to put what you read into practice and seeing how it might inform your prayers

**THREE: One Act of Fasting per Week** – Advent was once, like lent a time of fasting. Fasting normally involves abstaining from food for spiritual purposes. It is not so much that we deny ourselves in order to earn spiritual credit and favours from God. Rather the act of abstinence expresses our love for and devotion to God, expecting nothing in return. Advent-ures with God challenges us to one act of fasting per week. Depending on your past experience, this might be fasting for one day each week, or one meal per week, or like lent doing without a different luxury each week (chocolate, soft drinks etc).

**FOUR: A Weekly Act of Worship** – Commit yourself to joining with God's people once each week for corporate worship. This is important because when we commit ourselves to personal devotions it is easy to assume this is all we need. But it is not. We must also worship in the company of one another. Of course there are times when we simply cannot get to church.

**FIVE: A Daily Act of Service** – find an opportunity each day to intentionally serve someone else through word or action. It might be as simple as offering a compliment where you would have kept silent, sending a card of encouragement, inviting someone for a meal, lending a helping hand, picking up a piece of rubbish.

# Advent-ures With God

The ADVENT-ure: I will commit to

1. Pray every day
2. Nourish my soul daily from God's Word
3. One act of fasting per week
4. A weekly time of worship
5. A daily act of service

For more detail see back page—page 12

Toowong Uniting Church  
Advent 2010—Week 3



## A Christmas To-do List

Most of us have heard the Christmas story so many times that we think we know what it's all about. But the fact is, we might have passed over some important pieces. If we look a little harder, we might find a whole new piece of the Nativity scene that's been in the closet for years—never unwrapped.

*Adapted from Bible Study Material by Mark Mitchell and JoHanna Reardon*

## Week 3 Day 1

### Core Reading

**Luke 1:57-2:21**

In Luke's Gospel, the Christmas story is not just about one birth—it's about two. Before we read about the birth of Jesus, we read about the birth of John. In fact, John's birth gets more coverage than Jesus' birth. If we just read about Jesus' birth apart from John's birth, we don't really get the whole story. It's like reading *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy without reading *The Hobbit*, or teaching a kid how to play rugby, but never teach them to kick a ball.

If we're going to do Christmas right, we have to look at both of these births.

### Discussion Questions:

**[Q]** Why is so much attention given to John's birth in this account? What does his birth tell us about Jesus' coming?

**[Q]** How might John's birth have prepared the people of that day for Jesus' birth?

**[Q]** How might hearing the account of his birth have given John courage when things got tough later in his life, when he was imprisoned?

Today I will pray for:

Today's intentional act of service will be:

Sometime later, I heard that Henk's mother had gone into his attic room and found him before the chair, with the picture of Jesus in his hand. Henk was home with the Lord. When I heard about his death, I wondered if he had been singing, "Jesus, I come to Thee" at that last moment.

This Christmas, kneel before the Lord Jesus and praise him. This includes believing, obeying, telling others, and taking time for holy wonder. Don't leave out any one of those things.

**Action Point:** Which of the four things (believe, obey, tell others, experience holy wonder) do you struggle most with, and why? Pray that God will help you in that area? Could you ask someone else to pray for with regard to this?

Today I will pray for:

Today's intentional act of service:

## Week 3 Day 5

### **Bringing things together** **Reread Luke 1:57-2:21**

Corrie Ten Boom tells a story about working with mentally disabled young people after World War 2:

Henk was a boy who was a member of my Bible class for the mentally disabled. He came from a family with 11 children, and it was difficult for his poor, tired mother to give him much attention. Once I visited Henk at home, and his mother received me with such a thankful manner. "Henk talks so much about the stories you tell in his Bible class. He never remembers anything about any other class, but when he comes from your class, he talks to his brothers and sisters about it."

"Is Henk at home?"

"He's in his room upstairs, in the corner of the attic. He's there most of the time—he's really my easiest boy. We know he'll never become a professor or anything important, but he does work for a salary—he's in a government workshop where he makes clothespins the whole day. Dear Henk, he's so satisfied, but when he's at home the house is so full of noise that he goes to his attic room."

I went upstairs and found Henk on his knees in front of a chair. Before him was an old, dirty picture of Jesus on the cross. I stopped at the door to listen, for Henk was singing. His voice was soft and hoarse. He sang: "Out of my bondage, sorrow, and night, Jesus, I come, Jesus, I come. Into thy freedom, gladness, and light, Jesus, I come to thee. Out of the depths of ruin untold, into the peace of thy sheltering fold; ever thy glorious face to behold, Jesus, I come to Thee."

I've heard Bach played by Schweitzer, and anthems sung by gigantic choirs, but at that moment I felt as if I were in a cathedral with angels surrounding me. I tiptoed back downstairs without disturbing him, praising God again for the love he brings into the lives of "even the least of them."

## Week 3 Day 2

### **Core Reading**

### **Luke 1:67-79**

Notice the locations of these two births. The first one took place at home, while the other took place far from home. Zechariah and Elizabeth were from the hill country of Judea, and that's where their son was born. That's how it was supposed to happen in those days.

Not so for Joseph and Mary. They lived in the region of Galilee, in the little town of Nazareth, but late in Mary's pregnancy, they had to go south to Bethlehem.

It was a long journey, at least a three-day trip, and the timing couldn't have been worse. Perhaps in the back of their mind was the ancient prophecy about Bethlehem, that it would be the birthplace of the coming Messiah. It might have all made sense at that point, seeing God's hand in the decree, but it couldn't have been easy. To make matters worse, Bethlehem was filled with visitors who were there for the census. Mary and Joseph found shelter in what was most likely a cave or a stable for farm animals.

Don't be fooled by your adorable Nativity scenes. This wasn't a pretty sight. As they entered the cave, the manure smells might have knocked them off their feet. But the location was not the only difference between these two births.

One of the best things about bringing a new child into the world is getting to share it with your friends and family. In the case of John, all the friends and relatives were in attendance. That's the kind of thing you want. Everybody is there; everybody is happy for you.

It wasn't that way for Mary and Joseph. Jesus was born without any doting relatives around, without any fanfare. This is like the Ashes being played in an empty and silent stadium.

The one encouragement was the shepherds. There is some debate among scholars as to how shepherds were viewed in those days. Some have said they were despised; others believe that attitude didn't really develop until later. Either way, we know for sure that shepherds were just ordinary, unlettered folk.

That's not to say there wasn't a lot of joy in this event. It all started with the angel, who said, "I bring you good news of great joy." It was customary in the Roman Empire for poets and orators to declare peace and joy at the birth of one who was to become the emperor. Now, in that same pattern, came the good news of joy occasioned by the birth of a Savior.

At the end of chapter one, Zechariah, filled with the Holy Spirit, blurts out what has historically been called the Benedictus. It's a prophecy, more about Jesus than about John. Zechariah praises God for bringing redemption and salvation to his people. He sings about God's tender mercy, which will result in the forgiveness of sins. And he likens the coming of Jesus to the sunrise that will give light to those who sit in darkness and guide them in the way of peace. Read Luke 1:67–79.

So we have not one birth but two. One took place at home, with doting friends and relatives in attendance; the other took place far away from home, in a stable, with no one there but animals and a few shepherds. Both of them were occasions of great joy and singing. Both of them took place in accord with Jewish law—naming and circumcising the boy.

You might be thinking, *That's all fine and good, but what does it mean for me?* In the cast of characters of these two births, we see representative responses to the Christmas event that teach us something about our response. In fact, all of this is capsulated in the response of the shepherds to the angel's words (Luke 2:15–20).

**[Q]** John 1:67 says that the Holy Spirit prophesied through Zechariah. How would you sum up the prophecy?

**[Q]** How did John prepare the way for Christ when they were both adults?

**[Q]** How did Christ's coming fulfill each of the following:

Forgiveness of sins (v. 77)

Reveal God's tender mercy (v. 78)

Shine on those living in darkness (v. 79)

Guide our feet into the path of peace (v. 79)

**[Q]** How can you engage in holy wonder? Read the following and check any you would like to implement this Christmas season. When you're finished, share what you checked with the group. In the coming weeks ask each other how you are doing on engaging in holy wonder.

\_\_\_ In the middle of my shopping, I'd like to stop, pull out my Bible, and read the Christmas story.

\_\_\_ I would like to gather my children around a Nativity scene each night to unwrap a different piece, and talk about the role it plays in the Christmas story.

\_\_\_ I would like to wake up early one morning and find a place to watch the sun rise and meditate on Zechariah's words: "The rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace."

\_\_\_ I would like to write the words of the angel on a 3x5 card and pull it out every time I eat: "I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people."

\_\_\_ Your own idea for engaging in holy wonder.

Today I will pray for:

Today's intentional act of service:

You cannot speak of what you have not seen and experienced in your own life. But when you embrace Christ—or, more accurately, he embraces you—something happens to you. You know it. Paul says, “God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us” (Romans 5:5). If you, like the shepherds, have experienced that, you have to tell others about it.

They weren’t preachers, they weren’t missionaries, but that didn’t matter. They had heard and seen something that meant salvation for the whole world. If you saw a fire and heard a small child screaming in the window, you wouldn’t wait for the professionals—you’d run in there and get that child out.

Christmas trees, roast turkeys, and exchanging of gifts are fine. But if we do all that stuff but don’t talk about Jesus—if we fail to speak of the real meaning of it all; if we neglect to tell someone that this child was born as Savior and Lord, that he was sent by God to die on the Cross to purchase with royal blood our own deliverance from sin, death, and the devil; if we neglect to publish that abroad—we’ve failed to do Christmas right.

The angel said that this is good news of great joy which shall be for all the people. Not just religious people, not just Western people, not just poor people or rich people or smart people or not-so-smart people—for all people. So don’t let Christmas go by without telling someone about Jesus.

**[Q]** Name at least one person you could talk with about how much Christ means to you this Christmas. It could be a child, a relative, a neighbor, or a coworker.

4. **Experience holy wonder.** We see it in the people who heard the news about John’s birth. Luke 1:66 says, “Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, ‘What then is this child going to be?’” We see a similar reaction when people heard what the shepherds were saying.

You get the feeling that Mary took it even a step further: “But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.” When you write your to-do list, put that on there, too. Amidst all the activity, stop and treasure all these things. Ponder them in your heart. Engage in some holy wonder.

**[Q]** What purpose did the shepherds play in these events (Luke 2:15–20)?

Today I will pray for:

Today’s intentional act of service will be:

## Week 3 Day 3

**Core Reading**

**Secondary Reading**

**Luke 2:1-12**

**James 2:14-26**

There are at least four things we can learn about what to do at Christmas through this account. We will look at two of them this morning and two of them tomorrow.

1. **Believe.** Zechariah failed to believe that God would do what the angel promised him. That’s why he was silent until his son was born. Mary, in contrast to that, believed that what the angel said really would take place. As soon as the angels left, the shepherds looked at each other and said: *What are we waiting for? Let’s go straight to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened.*

There is no debate. There is no procrastination. They don’t decide to sleep on it. They don’t go to the local library for research. They just believe it. That’s faith. Scripture says that without faith, it’s impossible to please God. The angel said, “On earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.” Who is that? It’s those who respond to God’s gift through faith. Scripture says, “For by grace you have been saved, through faith ....”

Faith means you say yes to all that God did through Christ. Yes, he is the Savior of the world. Yes, he came to die for my sins. Yes, through him I find forgiveness and new life. Yes, I want to follow Christ as Lord. Yes, I will orientate my life around him so that he can use me to make a difference in the world. Faith isn't a spectator sport; it's an active embracing of all that God has promised in Christ.

**[Q]** In what way are you having trouble believing God? How might you be debating, procrastinating, or making excuses for your unbelief?

Is there one concrete action you could do today that would be a demonstration of faith?

2. **Obey.** We see obedience in the naming and circumcision of both John and Jesus. Zechariah named his first and only son John. It couldn't have been easy. He faced some pretty serious family pressure: *John? There's no one in our family named John! What kind of name is that?*

There is a time to break with family tradition in obedience to God. Maybe the hardest time to do that is at Christmas. Zechariah learned that neither he nor his family calls the shots; God does.

We see the same obedience in Joseph and Mary. We sometimes think of Christmas as a rather tame holiday. We think of sweet little baby Jesus asleep on a bed of hay—tiny little hands that could do no harm, a bright halo above his head. Everyone loves that because it's so innocuous and safe. But Christmas isn't safe! That baby is the King of kings and the Lord of lords. He has come to usher in a kingdom that rivals the kingdom of self. That's threatening. He bids those who would follow him to take up their cross daily—to lay aside our own right to rule ourselves, to surrender to his rule.

The world loves to celebrate the birth of Christ, but they hate to obey him as the Lord of their lives. Everyone wants to keep Christ in the manger. But the manger is meaningless apart from the Cross. As one writer put it many years ago: "This little babe, so few days old, is come to rattle Satan's fold; all hell doth at his presence quake, though he himself for cold does shake." Christmas is a time for obedience.

**[Q]** Is a misplaced loyalty to tradition holding you back from obeying God? If so, how can you break free from that?

**[Q]** How might you be keeping Christ in the manger instead of letting him be Lord of your life?

Today I will pray for:

Today's intentional act of service will be;

## Week 3 Day 4

**Core Reading**  
**Secondary Reading**

**Luke 2:8-20**  
**Acts 3:1-10**

This morning we continue to reflect on the lessons learned from the two central births in the Christmas narrative.

3. **Tell others about him.** That's the next thing to put on your to-do list—tell others. We see that at John's birth. It says that when Zechariah's friends heard him praise God, they began to talk about it all throughout the hill country of Judea. It was hot, but holy, gossip that spread like wildfire.

It's in the shepherds that we see it best. When they arrived in Bethlehem and saw the child lying in the feed trough, "they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child." Observe the progression: they heard the angels; they went to Bethlehem; they saw the child; and then they made known the news.