



The Presbyterian Church in Canada

# Presbyterians *Read*

## First Week of Advent

### Theme: Memory, Miracles and Meaning-Making

“This sense of being shaken up is Advent good news. Christmas should be more than putting up the tree and wrapping the presents. It should give birth to something that shakes up the routine, something that gets us to see the world otherwise. That shaking up is what it means to follow Jesus. To love one’s enemies is scary; to take up one’s cross is terrifying. Yet at the same time, Luke reminds us, there is a legacy that carries us forward and a promise that God will remember the covenant and bring about eternal justice” (34).

### Welcome and Introductions

Welcome to Presbyterians Read! Engagement from participants in this book study will be better if you take the time for good, rich introductions at the beginning of the gathering. Here are a few ideas for introductions that are related to the theme of this week’s study:

- 1) Bring an object that is connected to a good memory for you. Take turns showing your objects and explaining the memories.
- 2) Share a story that gets told repeatedly in your family in less than two minutes. What do you think this story reveals about your family?
- 3) What is a favourite memory of Christmas that you have?

### Opening Prayer

Use your own words of prayer, invite someone in the group to pray or use the short prayer below:

*Loving God, we praise you for your faithfulness. We thank you for your servants Elizabeth and Zechariah who remembered your promise and trusted you to deliver your people. As we study the nativity story in Luke, send your Holy Spirit to open our hearts to receive your message. This Advent help us to remember your deep compassion that shines light into the darkness. Guide us on the path to peace and show us the way to invite others along the journey. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.*

## Welcoming in Online Gatherings

When people join an online gathering, it is often an abrupt transition from whatever they were doing before straight into “being on” in front of a group of people. Unlike gatherings in person, where we often must physically travel somewhere (e.g. to church, to someone else’s home, to the local café), most online gatherings that happen these days happen in our homes. We are being asked to transition from private to public in the matter of minutes.

- When you are welcoming people, acknowledge the transition that is being made. Think of what a meeting is like during the first few minutes when you are gathering in person. Allow for a few minutes for people to get comfortable and, if appropriate, give people a bit of time for chit chatting before starting.
- Put up a welcome slide as people are signing on that illustrates the basics of the meeting platform as well as introduces the discussion theme.
- Adopt a posture of honesty and humility. There is a certain amount of awkwardness when meeting online (tech issues, delays, people speaking over each other). Treat this with light-heartedness. Admit that certain things are awkward, model what it means to go-with-the-flow and encourage others to be patient.

## Overview of Chapter 1

*Consider reading this overview together as a group. It will help contextualize the discussion questions and focus the conversation.*

Contemporary readers can sometimes forget that the Gospel writers were storytellers. Like storytellers today, they used the literary conventions, religious symbolism and cultural references of their time to strengthen the story they were telling. The nativity is one of the stories that people may find hard to accept because there are differences among the Gospel accounts. Levine reminds us that to dismiss the nativity on account of discrepancies is to read the texts incorrectly. She explains, “Matthew and Luke were not writing newspaper reports striving for historical accuracy” (11); they were writing “to explain to readers removed from that time and place what the birth of Jesus signifies” (12). They were writing not just with the “*what*” in mind but also with the “*so what*”—the world-changing implications of the conception and birth of Jesus of Nazareth.

Luke combines memory and miracles to set the scene for Jesus’ birth. He begins with Zechariah, whose name means “God remembers,” and Elizabeth, a woman long past child-bearing age who conceives a son. Elizabeth’s miraculous pregnancy connects her to the matriarchs of the Old Testament, such as Sarah and Hannah, who conceived sons through God’s



*Archangel Gabriel Struck Dumb Zachariah,  
Alexandr Ivanov, Wikimedia Commons*

intervention in what seemed like impossible situations. As representatives of the older generation, Elizabeth and Zechariah connect Israel's past to the event of Jesus' birth. In starting with these two figures, Luke is calling on the communal memory of those he is addressing. He is essentially saying, "Pay attention! Remember what has happened before in Israel's history? It is going to happen again. God remembers the loving, permanent covenant he made with us to bring about eternal justice."

Through Zechariah's words of praise, Luke reminds readers that God's actions in the past are connected to what is happening in the present and what will happen in the future. We are reminded that while God's actions often have deep personal implications—in this case, a new baby for an elderly couple—they are part of a larger communal story. The baby, like his father, grows up to be a prophet. The impact of who John becomes and what he proclaims extends well beyond his family or immediate community; "Prepare the way for the messiah God promised for he has come" is good news for all people.

### Understanding Historical Context

"The Bible is to be understood in the light of the revelation of God's work in Christ. The writing of the Bible was conditioned by the language, thought, and setting of its time. The Bible must be read in its historical context. We interpret Scripture as we compare passages, seeing the two Testaments in light of each other, and listening to commentators past and present. Relying on the Holy Spirit, we seek the application of God's word for our time" (5.4).

—*Living Faith: A Statement of Christian Belief*, The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1984.

## Delving into the Themes

Choose one of the following questions to get the discussion about chapter 1 of the book going.

What details about the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth that Levine unpacks in this chapter were new to you? How have these details enriched your understanding of the early part of the nativity story?

Levine explains that the nativity accounts were written to enlighten but also to "entice"—to draw us more deeply into the chapters of the gospel that follow (13). At what points did you find you were drawn into the nativity story? What parts of Elizabeth and Zachariah's story left you wanting to know more and why?

### Online Discussion Tip

Getting everyone to participate without talking over each other can be challenging in online gatherings. It can also be difficult to get input from those who may not be comfortable sharing. Consider virtually "going around the table"—offering each person the opportunity to speak by calling on them. It is as simple as looking at the participants list and going straight down it, offering each person the opportunity to answer the question. Be sure to give people the opportunity to "pass" if they do not want to share.

## Biblical Reflection

The passages that Levine uses as the basis of each chapter are long. For the purposes of discussion, the passage has been divided into two parts with a couple of accompanying questions for each. Choose which part of the text you'd like to discuss together, or, if you have time, discuss both sections. Consider inviting the group to decide what you will discuss based on their interests and time available.

### First Part of the Passage: Luke 1:5–25

Read the first part of the Scripture passage slowly using the CEB translation found on pgs. 21–22 of *Light of the World*. Since the verses aren't numbered in the book, please note that you will stop reading after the line: "She kept to herself for five months, saying, 'This is the Lord's doing...' (v. 25).

Read it a second time using a different translation. The New Testament was written in Greek, so all English translations are slightly different based on the translator's choice of wording. These differences allow for readers to hear the text anew and engage with the nuances of interpretation that come with reading a sacred text that was originally written in Greek. After reading it a second time, discuss the following questions.

### Questions

Jesus was born in a particular place at a particular time. Levine explains that, in order to understand Jesus, we must understand his place within Israel's history and God's longstanding covenant with the people of Israel at the time of his birth. What do we learn about the time, place and community into which Jesus was born from this passage from Luke? What further information do we wish Luke had provided? Why?

Angels are active throughout the Old Testament and New Testament as witnesses, messengers, aids to God's servants and vehicles of encouragement and strength. Spend some time reviewing the encounter between Gabriel and Zechariah. What role does Gabriel fulfill in the story that Luke is telling here? What do we make of the humour that Levine suggests is present in the encounter between Zechariah and Gabriel? What are the essential characteristics of what he announces?

### Use Breakout Rooms

If you have a group of more than five people in Presbyterians Read study group online, you may want to divide into smaller groups for the Biblical reflection part of this study. Divide the big group up into smaller three or four person groups. Send them into breakout rooms for a specific amount of time with the questions. 20–25 minutes would be a good amount of time for the biblical reflection in this section.

### Visuals to Accompany the Reading

Visuals are extremely important in online gatherings but can also be useful additions to in-person gatherings. Images help participants stay focused and make important connections between material. There are options in the public domain including: Alexandr Ivanov's Archangel Gabriel Struck Dumb Zachariah, William Blake's The Angel Appearing to Zacharias, James Tissot's Portrait of Zacharias and Elizabeth.



## **Second Part of the Passage: Luke 1:57–79**

Read the second part of the Scripture passage slowly using the CEB translation found on pgs. 22–24 of *Light of the World*. The passage begins with the line: “When the time came for Elizabeth to have her child...” (v. 57).

Read it a second time using a different translation. Then, discuss the following questions.

### **Questions**

Using the elements of Zechariah employs in his song (v. 67–79)—praising what God has done in the past, recalling God’s promises, naming areas where injustice continues to prevail, and affirmation/assurance that God is active in the world—discuss what your community’s song of would be right now.

- What has God done in the past for your family, neighbourhood, church, city or other community to which you belong?
- What areas of injustice, brokenness, oppression, or hurt continue to exist in that community?
- Which of God’s promises do you want to remind yourself and your community of at this time?
- What words can you speak that affirm God’s continued activity in the life of your community?

## **Spiritual Practice**

Each week there is a suggested spiritual practice for participants to engage in at home. It is recommended that you review the spiritual practice together as a group and discuss any questions that may arise.

### **Remembering as a Spiritual Practice**

Christians are part of a network of faith and understanding going back over thousands of years. Memory is an essential resource of knowledge about God’s activity. Remembering what God has done in the past is about more than gathering information; it is a way of understanding the world, our place in it, and our connection to others through God’s unfolding plan.

This week’s spiritual practice is purposeful remembering. Engaging in purposeful remembering—recalling events and seeing God’s presence—allows us to identify patterns of how God is at work and make decisions about how to live faithfully.

Here are a couple of ideas for engaging in purposeful remembering:

- 1) Find a quiet place to pray. Recall a significant person, place, thing or event from the past. Ask God to show you where God was at work in the situation you are recalling. Wait in silence for a response.
- 2) Pay attention to the memories that come to mind this week. Observe the memories and ask God what God would like you to notice about them.
- 3) Call, email or visit someone in your church who has been a part of the congregation you belong to for a long time. Ask them to tell you about a time in the history of the congregation that was challenging. Discuss where God’s presence was felt or experienced during that time and afterwards.

## Closing Prayer

When the angel visits Zechariah, he immediately reassures him that “your prayers have been heard” (Luke 1:13). Referring to this passage, Levine reminds us that “personal prayer is not selfish but honest; we should share our concerns with God . . . We pray for ourselves, but we cannot be concerned only for ourselves” (35).

- Open the prayer with thanks and praise.
- Invite participants to bring to mind something they are concerned about in their own lives. Pause. Leave time for people to reflect and pray it out loud if they are comfortable.
- Invite participants to remember a person or situation that requires God’s intervention. Leave time for people to lift those prayers up to God silently or aloud.

