



The Presbyterian Church in Canada

# Presbyterians *Read*

## Third Week of Advent

### Theme: Signs, Salvation and Promises Fulfilled

“Once we figure out the sign, whether of a pregnant woman, of a mother who has just given birth, of a newborn, even of baby clothes in a stable, our next step is to work out the symbolism, or what that sign ‘signifies.’ If we start to look for the light of the divine in front of our eyes rather than search the stars, we’ll be ready when we hear stories of sowers and seeds, vines and fig trees, yeast and fish. Signs are all around us, if we take the time to look” (92).

### Opening Prayer

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

*Loving Redeemer, we thank you for the shepherds as well as Simeon and Anna, who were among the first to witness the gift of salvation you gave us through the birth of your son. Help us to embrace this gift in the way that they did by glorifying you and sharing the good news with others. Send your Holy Spirit to open our minds and reveal your will as we study together today. This Advent create opportunities for us to share what we know about Jesus and the path he offers to salvation. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.*

### Online Chat Box Prayers

Now that participants will have had the chance to get to know each other in weeks one and two, consider experimenting with the format of the opening prayer. One option is to ask people to share requests in the chat function of whatever video conferencing platform you are using.

- Open the prayer with a few simple words: “Today, Lord, we bring before you our prayers...”
- Leave time for people to type their prayers into the chat box.
- Read the prayers as they come in.
- Close with the recommended prayer included here.

## Gathering Questions

As participants gather for this third week of study, begin with a question that will both allow people to get to know each other better and start exploring the topic. Here are a couple ideas for introductions that are related to the theme of this week's study:

- Nativity scenes come in all different forms (e.g. live nativities, scenes for home, big scenes in public places, church scenes). Tell us about one of your favourite nativity scenes from the past or present. Why is it your favourite?
- Share an example of a time that you received a sign from God. If you've never had a sign from God, what type of sign do you think would best speak to you?

## Overview of Chapter 3

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

In this week's reading, Levine explores the historical and political settings of the nativity. For many of us, this chapter likely challenged some of our longstanding ideas about the details surrounding Jesus' birth. The reason that Mary gave birth the stable, the identity of the shepherds and the meaning of the star have all been subjected to well-meaning but contextually misaligned interpretations. When we read primarily through the lens of contemporary assumptions about pregnancy, purity and social placement, we can easily miss the deep significance of God coming into the world as a baby in a manger.

Signs are important in the nativity story, but, just as important is how the signs are interpreted. Levine reminds us that, when reading the gospels, we need to pay attention to what significance those in the stories are attributing to the signs they receive. The angels' appearance to the shepherds is the part of the story that draws our attention because it is supernatural. Yet, the signs that have most significant to the shepherds in the story are the earthly and material signs of cloth, a feeding trough and a flesh-

## Visuals to Accompany this Week's Reading

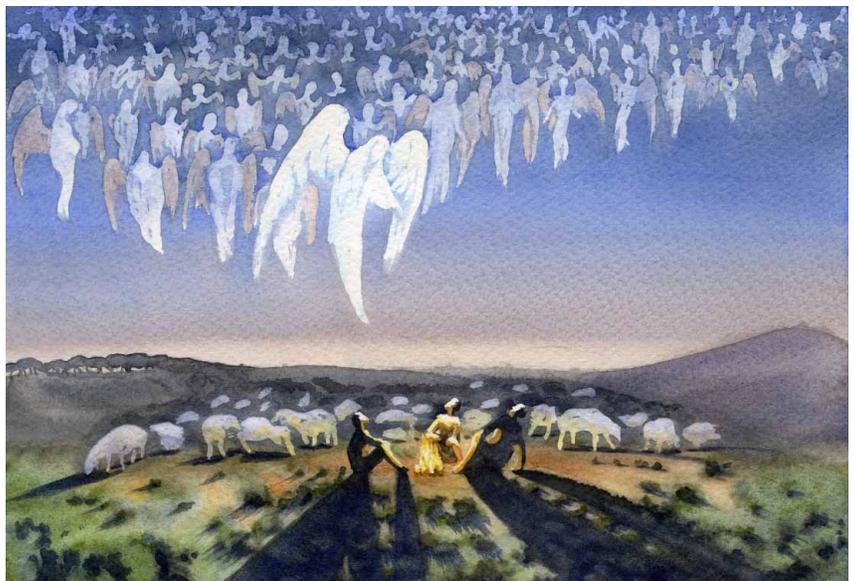
Visuals are extremely important in online gatherings but can also be useful additions to in-person gatherings. Images help participants stay focused and make important connections between material. Here are a few images that are in the public domain and can be used to accompany this week's discussion:

### Shepherds

- William Unger's The Annunciation to the Shepherds
- Simon Marmion's Annunciation to the Shepherds
- Jacobo Bassano's Annunciation to the Shepherds

### Simeon and Anna

- James Tissot's The Aged Simeon
- Roadside Shrine of Presentation in the Temple (Austria)



*Annunciation to Shepherds by Host of Angels*

and-blood baby. The incarnation is about the physical and biological—God taking on flesh. Luke reminds us to “pay attention to earthly matters, neighbors and relatives, shepherds, and who else might be at the inn. Celestial armies can wait” (93).

This focus on the paying attention to the material world aligns with the salvation narrative unfolding in Luke’s gospel. In the Old Testament, salvation was written about as freedom from harmful or unjust political and material condition (e.g., being saved from war, hunger, disease, plague and oppression). Even though salvation came to mean “salvation from sin and death” for people in Luke’s church, his gospel maintains salvation’s connection to relief from whatever is oppressing God’s people in the now. Salvation in the present is what Simeon declares when he holds the Christ child in the temple: “My eyes have seen your salvation” (v. 30). With Jesus, we have much to hope for in the future (eternal life), but we are also encouraged to embrace the salvation that is available to us in the here and now.

### **Delving into the Themes**

Choose one of the following questions to get the discussion about chapter 3 of the book going.

Chapter 3 of *Light of the World* challenges many assumptions that exist within Christian tradition about the circumstances surrounding Jesus’ birth. What features of Levine’s portrayal of the nativity surprised you or challenged your previous understandings or beliefs?

The part of the nativity story covered in this chapter explores the roles that several different characters played in the nativity: Mary, Joseph, the angels, the shepherds, Anna and Simeon. Which of these characters do you most identify with right now? Why?

### **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 2: 1–20**

Read the first part of the Scripture passage slowly using the CEB translation found on pgs. 81–82 of *Light of the World*. Since the verses aren’t numbered in the book, please note that you will stop reading after the line: “Everything happened just as they had been told” (v. 20).

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

### **Questions**

- 1) How does the angel’s annunciation to the shepherds compare to that given to Zechariah and to Mary?

2) The symbol of the shepherd is significant in the New Testament. Here, we have the first appearance of shepherds.

- What do the shepherds symbolize in the nativity story?
- What do shepherds symbolize in the larger Christian story?
- How might the image of Jesus as “the good shepherd” speak to the needs of our communities and the world today? What other images for Jesus could be helpful in our time?

### **Second Part of the Passage: Luke 2:21–40**

Read the second part of the Scripture passage slowly using the CEB translation found on pgs. 82–83 of *Light of the World*. The passage begins with the line: “When eight days had passed, Jesus’ parents circumcised him and gave him the name Jesus” (v. 21).

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

### **Questions**

Like Zechariah and Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna connect the story of Jesus’ birth to Israel’s history and present hope of a coming messiah.

- What does the information that Luke gives us about Simeon and Anna’s lives tell us about Jewish practices and beliefs?
- How do their reactions to Jesus differ?
- What is Simeon’s prophesy about Jesus’ life? What stories in the New Testament are fulfillments of this prophesy?
- What promises do we have from Jesus about our lives? List some of the promises. Which ones do we need to share with our community and remind ourselves of in this time?

### **Online Tip: Allow Time for Reflection**

Sometimes leaders get so caught up with delivering information that we forget that people need time to absorb the material being presented in order to engage with it fully. Give participants time to pause and reflect. For this week’s Biblical reflection, consider some of the following ideas:

- Request that people turn off their cameras and microphones and spend time reading and reflecting on the verse and the questions on their own for 5 minutes.
- Read the passage and questions together. Then play music for a few minutes while people formulate responses. They can type them in the chat box or wait to share them out loud after the time is up.
- Consider giving participants a question from this section ahead of time and ask them to come with a few short sentences prepared as a response. Have participants share their responses at the beginning to get conversation going. Or, provide a question for them to ponder after the meeting and share with the group at the next meeting.



## Spiritual Practice

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

### Attention

In discussing the signs the shepherds received, Levine writes that “signs are all around us, if we take the time to look (92). She encourages us to start to look for the “light of the divine in front of our eyes rather than searching the stars” (92). This is only possible if we are paying attention to what is going on around us.

This week’s spiritual practice is paying attention—taking the time to notice where God is at work in our everyday lives. While it is unlikely that you’ll see a heavenly host appearing in the sky, it is very likely that you’ll notice moments of grace, opportunities for gratitude, evidence of your connection to others and signs of the presence of the Holy Spirit.

The following suggestions for paying closer attention to what is going on around you are adapted from Adele Ahlberg Calhoun’s *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*:

- Do one thing at a time. For example, if you are washing the dishes, just wash the dishes (no radio or music, talking or Netflix). Notice all five of your senses while you are doing the task. What are you touching? What do you see? What do you smell? Do you taste anything? What do you hear? Notice also how you are feeling: Do you feel happy, sad, content, angry, etc.?
- Slow down. Choose one way that you’ll purposely slow down this week: intentionally choose to drive in the slow lane or stand in the slow line at the store, linger longer over a meal, take a longer shower than usual, speak more slowly, read slowly, listen to others attentively and do not rush away from the conversation.
- Choose a cue to bring you back to paying attention. For example, every time you hear the phone ring or wash your hands, ask God to make you present to the moment.

### Closing Prayer

To close this week, consider spending a few minutes in silence practicing a simplified method of centering prayer.

- Invite participants to settle into a comfortable position.
- Ask them to choose a simple word, phrase or verse from Scripture that expresses their desire for God (e.g., good shepherd, Jesus, grace, love).
- Invite them to let go of thoughts and pay attention to the word they’ve chosen.
- Leave a few minutes of silence for people to be still and pay attention to the presence of Jesus.
- After a few minutes, gently speak a few words of thanks and praise to God to end the time of prayer.