



The Presbyterian Church in Canada

Presbyterians *Read*

Fourth Week of Advent

Theme: Shifting Power, an Alternative Kingdom and a New Way

“The Greek for ‘route’ is ‘hodos.’ According to the Book of Acts, people who gathered in the name of Jesus were not called ‘Christian’; the term is in fact very rare in New Testament texts. They were called ‘followers of the way’ (hodos). Thus, the Magi, like the shepherds in Luke, become early evangelists. Neither group has the full story, but they are on the way” (135).

Opening Prayer

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

Emmanuel, God with us, we praise you for your faithfulness. We thank you for the Magi, who traveled far to find your truth. Reveal to us the glory of your son as you did for them and lead us on the path that Christ sets out before us. Guide us with your Holy Spirit as we study the Scriptures so that in their light we may see light. This Advent embolden us as followers of “The Way” to invite others along on the journey. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

Gathering Questions

As participants gather for this final 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 few ideas for introductions that are related to the theme of this week’s study:

- Invite participants to bring a favourite Christmas photo. Take turns showing your photos and explaining why they are your favourite.
- What was the most memorable gift you ever gave to someone else? What were the circumstances that led to you giving it? What was the recipient’s reaction?
- Have you ever had a dream that you thought was from God?

Overview of Chapter 3

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

This week's reading explored Jesus' birth story as it is told in Matthew. While it might be tempting to skip over the genealogy at the beginning of Matthew's gospel, Levine reminds us that this part of the text alerts us to many of Matthew's major concerns. These concerns include Jesus' embeddedness in Jewish tradition, the important role of women in the salvation narrative, God's use of unexpected people and the birth of Jesus as good news not only to Jews but also to gentiles.

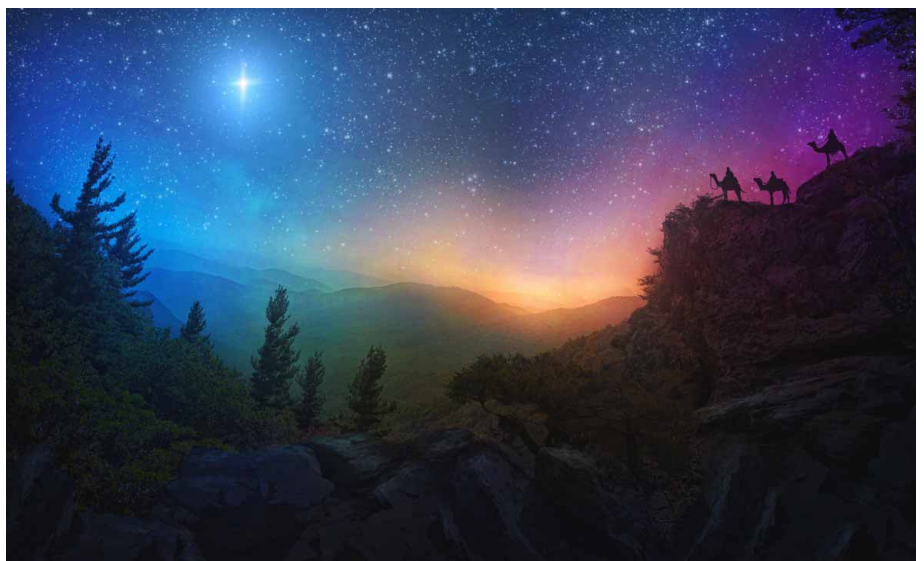
One of the major differences between Matthew's account of Jesus' birth and Luke's is that Matthew is concerned with connecting Jesus to the royal line of King David—the lineage out of which the people of Israel had been told the messiah would come. Matthew quickly establishes, however, that this king who has come is different than the types of kings the people of Israel were accustomed to. As Levine explains, Matthew begins a pattern, seen throughout the gospel “of depicting people in authority—whether Herod the Great or Pontius Pilate or the high priests—as working in opposition to the ‘kingdom of heaven’ that Jesus proclaims” (127). Matthew establishes from the outset of the gospel that this messiah—a baby born in a manger—will rule in a way that is the opposite of those who usually hold power.

The Magi, who only appear in Matthew's gospel, are not the kings that some legends have made them out to be. They are Zoroastrian priests, whose presence in the story, according to Levine, indicates the “universal rule of this new child, the yielding of all ancient wisdom to him” (134). Matthew makes it clear that, despite the Magi's generosity, “Jesus is not a king who needs gold” (132). The dreams of warning that the Magi receive after seeing the Christ child sent them “back to their own country by another route” (Matthew 2:12). Levine speculates that Matthew uses the word “route” purposefully. The word “Christian” is rarely used in the New Testament. Instead those who gathered in the name of Jesus were called “followers of the way” (135). By not returning to Herod, the Magi have chosen Jesus over an oppressive worldly leader. They are the first of many non-Jewish people throughout the gospels to choose “the way.”

Delving into the Themes

Choose one of the following questions to get the discussion about chapter 4 of the book going.

While the first three chapters of Levine's book focused on the nativity according to Luke, this one focused on Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus. What are the commonalities between the two accounts? What are the differences?



Now that you've had the opportunity to look in depth at the nativity stories in Mathew and Luke, what do you think of the following statement that Levine makes?

"Each Gospel narrative should be savored independently. Let's at least for a little while keep the Magi and the shepherds separate, and let's recognize that a story this magnificent should not, cannot, be presented in only one version" (p. 114).

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.

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.

First Part of the Passage: Matthew 1:18–25

Read the first part of the Scripture passage slowly using the CEB translation found on pg. 111 of *Light of the World*. Since the verses aren't numbered in the book, please note that you will stop reading after the line: "Joseph called him Jesus" (v. 25).

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

Questions

While Mary was the focus of Luke's nativity story, Joseph is the focus of Matthew's. What insights about Jesus' birth does this shift in perspective offer?

Many assumptions have been made about how Mary's pre-marital pregnancy would have been treated by those in her society. On pages 120–122, Levine corrects some of the common misinterpretations. How does this shift your understanding of Mary and Joseph's role in the nativity?

Second Part of the Passage: Matthew 2:1–15

Read the second part of the Scripture passage slowly using the CEB translation found on pgs. 112–113 of *Light of the World*. The passage begins with the line: "After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the territory of Judea..." (v. 21).

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

Questions

What did you learn about the Magi and their journey to meet Jesus in this chapter that is new to you?

The last line of *Light of the World* says, “Set at a particular time and in particular places, the first two chapters of Matthew continue to hold meaning, because the stories that they tell are also our stories” (139). This statement echoes an earlier one that Levine made:

“It is not impossible that we can imagine a heavenly kingdom on earth, ruled by justice

and compassion rather than by sword. It is not impossible that we can not only remember but also be inspired by our past stories and tell them, even live them, anew” (p. 70).

- How do you see the story of the nativity as part of your community’s story (family, friend group, cultural group, church, neighbourhood, city)?
- What has inspired you about the nativity story this Advent? How will you be telling and living it anew?
- What are you and your community doing to live by justice and compassion? What actions might God be calling you towards to participate in God’s kingdom here on earth?

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.

Compassion

God’s compassion and mercy abound in the nativity story. We are invited to participate in God’s kingdom agenda by following Jesus, who showed compassion to the people that others overlooked (e.g. outcasts, prostitutes, women, foreigners and those who were mentally and physically ill). For Jesus, “compassion was a call to action, to healing and to restoration” (Calhoun 206).

Christmas is an exciting time, but it can also be a difficult time for many people. This week, our spiritual practice is compassion towards ourselves and others. The following suggestions for practicing compassion are adapted from Adele Ahlberg Calhoun’s *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*.

- 1) Become quiet and still. Read the nativity as it is told in Matthew or Luke. As you read, focus on one character: Elizabeth, Zechariah, Mary, Joseph, Simeon, Anna, the shepherds, or the Magi. What do you see from their perspective? What was it like to undergo such a lifechanging experience? What was it like to be called on by God in this way? What fears and worries might they have been feeling? What type of compassion might they have been in need of?
- 2) Draw up a list of people who share their gifts with you. Go beyond thinking about family and friends to considering those whose services you receive (e.g. ministers, teachers, hairdressers, service people, healthcare workers etc.). Next to each name write down any needs you know they have (e.g., personal, financial, physical, etc.). What is God calling you to do? Listen, journal, act.

Online Visual Tip

There is an opportunity to add visuals to this part of the study. Find different pictures of the Magi for your PowerPoint presentation. Invite people to discuss how these pictures compare to what Levine teaches us about the Magi in this chapter.

3) Ask people “how are you?” this week and take the time to genuinely listen. Avoid the desire to rush out of the conversation. Ask follow-up questions. If appropriate, offer to help them or pray for them.

Closing Prayer

Since this is the last week of the study, invite participants to share prayer requests arising out of what has been shared and discussed over the last few weeks. Here are a few ideas for topics of prayer:

- Is there something that God has revealed to you through this study that you’d like to pray about?
- Is there a person, situation or event that has been on your heart this Advent?
- Are there specific prayers for Christmastime that you’d like to share?

Pray about these things together, but also consider inviting people to commit to continuing to pray about them over the Christmas season and into the new year.

