



The Presbyterian Church in Canada

Presbyterians *Read*

Instructions

Weekly Readings: *Light of the World: A Beginner's Guide to Advent* is made up of four chapters: one chapter for each week of Advent. Readers have the flexibility of choosing to read a few pages a day or a whole chapter at a time.

Group Study: We recommend that you form discussion groups that meet once per week during Advent to discuss *Light of the World*. The four-part Presbyterian study guide, which is available for free download, is designed to work for discussion group meetings online or in person. For each week of Advent, the guide contains prayers, an overview of the theme, biblical reflection prompts and a weekly spiritual practice. The weekly study material is designed to be used after participants have read the chapter assigned for the week.

Whether you choose to reflect on these devotions alone or in a group, please feel free to adapt the material in this resource to suit your needs and context. There are a lot of questions in this guide; you do not need to use all of them. Choose the ones that you think would be most interesting for your group to discuss.

The Presbyterian's Read study guide provides all the material you'll need to lead a meaningful Advent study on *Light of the World*. If you are looking for additional material or videos to accompany the study, Abingdon Press, the publishers of *Light of the Word*, have a leader's guide and DVD available for purchase.

Leaders: It is helpful to assign a leader. Whether it is the same person or different leaders each week, they will be responsible for reading through this study guide ahead of time and for facilitating the discussion during the meeting. Leadership requires flexibility as well as preparation. While many people will have read each chapter carefully, others may not have prepared as thoroughly. This study guide aims to provide entry points into the discussion for all different levels of engagement.

Participants: You will get the most out of this Advent book study if you read the chapter for the week ahead of your group gathering. But, even if you have not kept up with the readings, be sure to still attend the discussion group gathering. You will be welcome, and the questions are structured so that you will still be able to contribute.

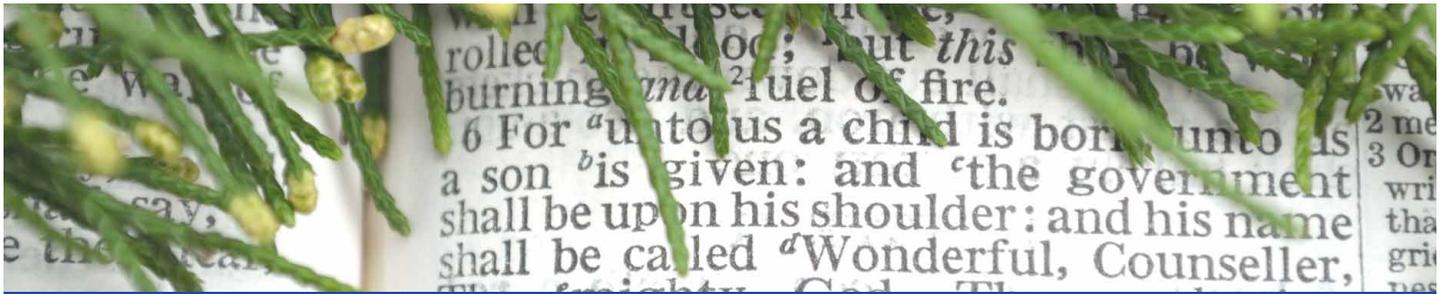
Engaging with Each Other: In Matthew 18:20, it is recorded that Jesus says: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” When we gather in small groups for a study like this, our aim is to celebrate Jesus’ presence among us, grow in our discipleship and encourage one another in our shared journey of faith. As we gather, we engage with each other in loving and respectful ways. Our goal is not to find the “right answers” but to grow closer to Jesus and to each other.

Weekly Spiritual Practices: Each week, you will be given a spiritual practice to try that aligns with the theme of the week. Many of the weekly spiritual practices have been adapted from Adele Ahlberg Calhoun’s *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices that Transform Us* (InterVarsity Press, 2015). We encourage you to engage in the exercises provided trusting that, even if you do them imperfectly, God is sure to meet you there.

Timing: If you follow the study during the four weeks of Advent, your last session will land very close to Christmas. You may want to consider starting the study the week before Advent or holding your last session in the New Year to re-group and discuss how this study shaped your Advent.



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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.

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?

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.

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.

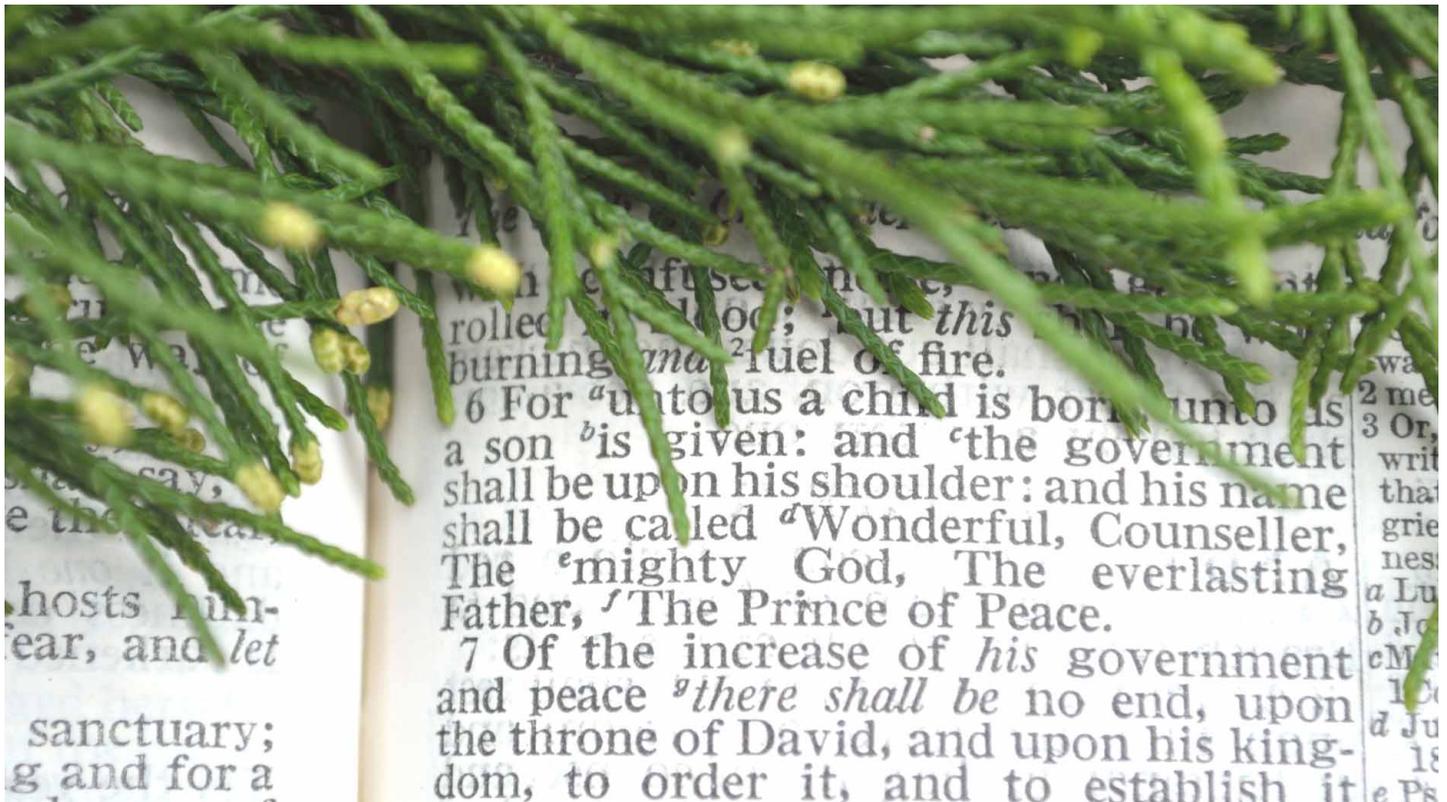
Here are a couple of ideas for engaging in purposeful remembering:

- 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.





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Second Week of Advent

Theme: God's Children, Annunciations and Exultations

“Brilliantly, Luke does not record what prompts this favor. There is no indication that Mary got divine notice because she helped her mother with the laundry, did well in school, had a beautiful singing voice, was pretty, prayed a lot, or was a virgin. We can fill in the reasons we want, but I prefer the readings that just let God be free to choose whomever: a fisherman, a cloth dyer, a tent maker, anyone” (p. 67).

Opening Prayer

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

Merciful God, we rejoice in the grace you have shown to us. We thank you for your servant Mary who humbly accepted your will for her life. Cultivate in us deep faith like Mary's so that we too will trust wholeheartedly and follow where you lead us. Guide us by your Spirit as we study your word to us in scripture. This Advent help us to honour you by treating others with the mercy, love and favour that you have shown us. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Gathering Questions

As participants gather for this second week of the study, begin with a question that will both allow people to get to know each other better and start exploring the topic.

Pacing in Online and In-Person Gatherings

Before starting this week's gathering, ask yourself:

- How was the pacing of last week's gathering?
- At what points did people seem most engaged?
- Was there too much or too little information discussed last week?
- Do we need more breaks or variety of types of activities this week?

It is important to be realistic about how much information, activities and discussion people can handle. There are a lot of questions in this guide; you do not need to use all of them. Choose the ones you will delve into this week based on what people seemed most interested in discussing last week.

Here are a couple ideas for introductions that are related to the theme of this week’s study:

- 1) What is the meaning of your name? Were you named after a relative, friend, celebrity? Or did those who named you simply like the name?
- 2) What were the circumstances surrounding your birth? When and where were you born? Who welcomed you into the world?

Overview of Chapter 2

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

Who was Mary? We know that she was the woman chosen by God to bear Jesus. We know that she had a relative named Elizabeth. We know that she became Joseph’s wife. We know that she was “highly favoured” by God. But, as Levine points out, we do not know much about Mary’s background. We are prone to making assumptions about Mary, especially when it comes to the question of why she is favoured by God. While we may think it was because she was particularly pious or well-behaved, Luke does not record what prompts God’s favour (67). Levine argues that this textual silence is significant; it reminds us that God is free to “choose whomever”—a regular person like you or me (67).

What matters just as much, if not more, than who God chooses is how they respond to being chosen. “Not all who are called respond” (67), Levine reminds us. Hearers and readers of Jesus’ time, familiar with the annunciation stories in the Old Testament, may have asked themselves: “will it be the father, mother or child who will be the focus of this story?” (61). Very quickly Luke makes it clear Mary is the focus of this annunciation. After a short period of initial confusion, Mary responds by naming herself as God’s servant and entirely gives herself over to God’s plan for her life.

Mary’s song of exultation, known as the Magnificat, praises God’s fidelity in the past and present. It focuses on the way that God invites us into relationship and asks us to witness

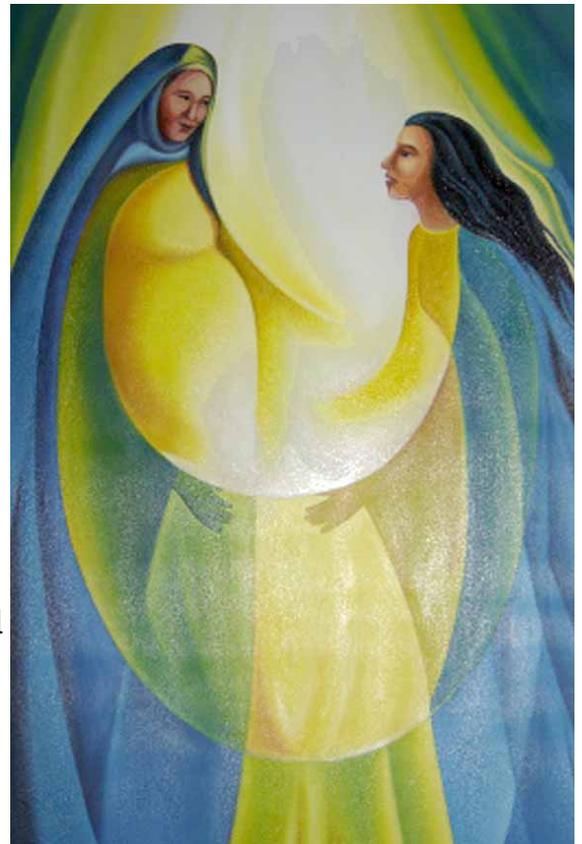
Online Tip: Visuals of Mary

Visuals are important for keeping people’s attention in online gatherings. Mary is probably one of the most depicted characters from the Bible. Find different artists’ renderings of Mary. Put several of them up on the screen as you read the overview of this week’s chapter. Ask people to choose which depiction of Mary coincides best with the portrait of her that Levine paints in this chapter.

Cleveland Museum of Art: Open Access Images of the Annunciation

Vanderbilt Divinity Library: Images of the Annunciation

Vanderbilt Divinity Library: Images of Mary and Elizabeth



Visitation, from Art in the Christian Tradition, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN

and participate in God’s mighty works. It is a reminder that “God could call on us, indeed has called on us, no matter our place or family of birth, economic status, or gender (70). God asks a lot, but, as we see through Mary, God also give us the strength to respond.

Delving into the Themes

Choose one of the following questions to get the discussion about chapter 2 of the book going.

What details about Mary’s story that Levine unpacks in this chapter were new to you? How have these details added to your understanding of Mary’s role in the gospel?

Levine writes that “Mary, the mother of Jesus, is remembered primarily because of her son, but motherhood is not her only characteristic. She, too, is poet and prophet and protector” (58). Considering all that you know of Mary, how does she fulfill these other roles? Are there any other roles you’d give to her? 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 1:26–38

Read the first part of the Scripture passage slowly using the CEB translation found on pgs. 53-54 of *Light of the World*. Since the verses aren’t numbered in the book, please note that you will stop reading after the line: “Then the angel left her” (v. 38).

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

Questions

Levine describes annunciations as a literary form or convention that invites readers to “delight in its variations” (61). Looking back at last week’s reading (Luke 1:13–25), compare Gabriel’s announcement to Zechariah to his announcement to Mary from this week.

Use Polling to Engage Participants

Some online meeting platforms allow you to poll participants. This is a fun way to gauge what direction participants would like to go with the discussion. The first question in this section lends itself well to a poll. For example:

Question: What detail about Mary’s story was new to you? If lots of details were new to you, choose the one you found the most intriguing.

- 1) the Bible doesn’t tell us much about Mary’s background
- 2) we make assumptions about why Mary is favoured but Luke doesn’t make it clear why
- 3) Mary’s namesake is Miriam
- 4) Mary is also a prophet
- 5) None

Look at the results of the poll and decide what you’ll discuss based on the results.

**Polling can also be done without the video conferencing feature by just asking for a show of hands.*

- In what ways are they similar? How are they different?
- What storytelling techniques does Luke employ in each of them?
- What are the extraordinary features in each birth story?

Incorporate Music

The nativity story has been an inspiration to many musicians and song writers throughout the years. Consider incorporating music into your Presbyterians Read gatherings. This can be done online or in person. Here are a few suggestions for music to accompany this week's readings:

- “Gabriel’s Song” by In Ordinary Time
- “My Soul Magnifies the Lord” by Steve Thorngate
- “Visitation Song” by Aly Aleigha

Second Part of the Passage: Luke 1:39–56

Read the second part of the Scripture passage slowly using the CEB translation found on pgs. 54–55 of *Light of the World*. The passage begins with the line: “Mary got up and hurried to a city in the Judean highlands” (v. 39).

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

Questions

Mary sings about salvation in a way that aligned with Jewish notions of salvation in Jesus’ time. As Levine explains it:

Salvation means freedom or release from current circumstances: slavery, poverty, ill health, hunger, and thirst. In her song, Mary is talking about salvation in the past and the present, not about the far future. She can feel the salvation, in her body, in her soul, in her spirit and in her womb (p. 76).

Read Mary’s song in verses 46–56 again with this notion of salvation in mind.

- How are the personal/individual and collective/communal brought together in Mary’s song?
- What is added to your understanding of salvation by reading Mary’s salvation song?
- What current circumstances do you and/or your community seeking release from?



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.

Praise

We see in Mary's song that Luke's gospel is, as Levine describes it, "a gospel of trust" and "a gospel of thanks" (77). Both Zechariah and Mary exuberantly express their trust and thanks for being chosen to be part of God's plan. They praise God when the miraculous happens, but we also know that they were people who expressed thanks to God in their everyday lives. Zechariah's burnt offering in the temple and Mary's deep knowledge of scripture in her song signal to us that these are people for whom praise is familiar.

This week's spiritual practice is praise. The way that each of us glorifies God is different because we are all uniquely made. What ways do you praise God in your daily life?

This week choose one way that feels right to you to intentionally praise God for what God has done in the past and/or the present. Here are a few ideas that might help:

- Use Zechariah or Mary's song as a model to write your own song of praise. Remember that their songs of praise are both personal and collective. What has God done for your community?
- Write out as many names for God as you can. Use the Bible as a reference to help expand your list. What do we learn about God from the different names? Which of these names resonates in your life right now? Use this name to pray or to make art out of it.
- Words of blessing appear over five hundred times in the Bible. Elizabeth's exultation is the first time it appears in Luke's Gospel. Today, people often use the word "blessed" very casually. Spend time pondering Elizabeth's proclamation this week. Invite God to show you or teach you something about blessing this week. How are you blessed? How is your community blessed?

Online Tip: Endings are Important

Sometimes we rushed through the end of online gatherings because we are running behind schedule or are already thinking about the next meeting; however, endings are important. We conclude most in-person meetings with prayer and have time to say goodbye. It is important to mark the transition between the online gathering and heading back into the rest of the day.



Closing Prayer

For the closing prayer this week, use the Magnificat as a model. Take turns saying one line each of this prayer:

With all of our hearts, we glorify you, Lord!

In the depths of who we are we rejoice in God our saviour.

Thank you for looking on us, your lowly servants, with favour.

Holy is Your Name.

You show mercy to everyone, from one generation to the next.

You have pulled the powerful down from their thrones and lifted up the lowly.

You have filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty-handed.

You have come to aid your servants.

We remember your mercy to your servant Israel.

Lord, come to our aid, just as you did for Israel's ancestors.

Look on us with favour, just as you did with your servant Mary.

Amen.

OR

- Invite participants to recall something they are grateful for. Leave time for people to reflect and pray it out loud if they are comfortable.
- Invite participants to remember a person or situation that God's intervention is needed. Leave time for people to lift those prayers up to God silently or aloud.





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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

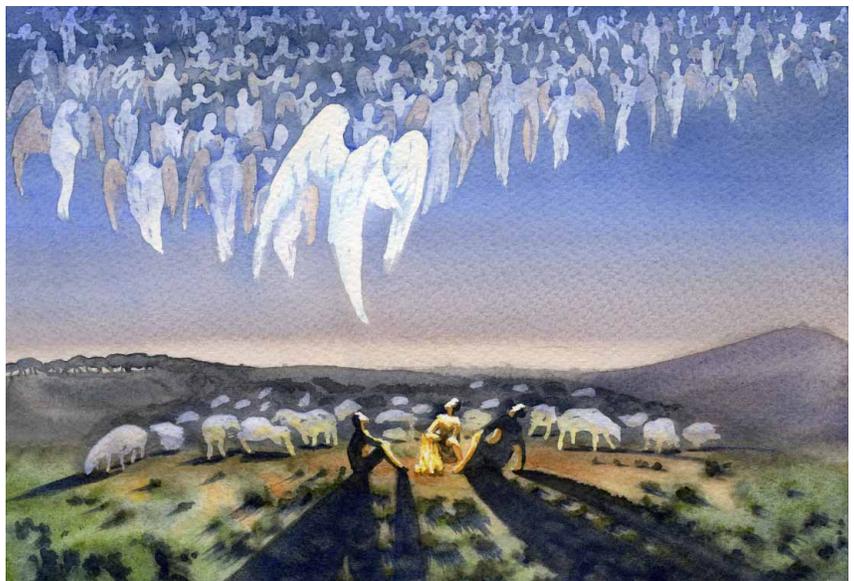
Visuals are extremely important in online gatherings but can also be useful additions to in-person gatherings. Images help participants stay focused and make important connections between material. Here are a few images that are in the public domain and can be used to accompany this week's discussion:

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.



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.

