

Presbyterians *Read*

Second Week of Advent

The Savior and our Need for Saving

Open the Gathering with Prayer — *Choose your own prayer or read Psalm 91 responsively.*

Gathering Prompt — *Choose one invitation to start connecting with each other and the week's themes.*

Have you ever experienced being saved or rescued? For example, a friend or family member helping you get out of a difficult or dangerous situation. What did it feel like?

Choose a hymn or Christmas song that uses the word “saviour” in it. For example, “O Lord my God / How Great Thou Art” (#332), “Saviour like a Shepherd Lead Us” (#485), “God Rest You Merry Gentlemen,” or “O Holy Night.” What aspects of Jesus’ saving power does the hymn highlight? How does the hymn depict the saviour’s impact on those he came to save?

Overview — *A short summary of the chapter to remind participants of the main themes and to explore some of the ways Christians have understood Christ’s saving power.*

Yeshua — The Hebrew form of the name Jesus is *Yeshua*, which comes from “the personal name for God in Hebrew, *Yahweh*, and the word for ‘to save’ or ‘to deliver,’ *yasha*” (48). Jesus’ name, therefore, means “God saves,” “God delivers,” or “God helps” (48).

Saved from Sin — In the New Testament, sin “is used to describe both the inner predisposition or inclination to stray from God’s path and the actual act of straying” (52). As humans, we all experience an inner and outer pull towards leaving the good path God created us to pursue. Faith in Jesus and the transforming work that he does in our lives “draws us to God’s path, strengthening and delivering us from our compulsion to stray” (60).

Something Extra to Consider

The Cross in the Reformed Tradition

Christ's death on the cross and God's work of reconciliation through it are central to the Reformed faith. However, there is much about it that is widely debated and misunderstood. In part, this is because "God's reconciling act in Jesus Christ is a mystery" (*Living Faith* 3.4.3). Even within the Reformed Tradition there are multiple approaches to the doctrines of atonement and reconciliation.

Spend some time researching Atonement and Doctrines of the Reconciliation from a Reformed perspective. A good place to start is with The Presbyterian Church in Canada's statement of belief, *Living Faith*, which describes Jesus as Saviour in the following way:

- 3.4.1 Jesus is the Mediator
through whom God has come to us
and through whom we come to God.
- 3.4.2 Christ died for our sins.
The innocent one bore our condemnation on the cross.
He suffered and was put to death
for the sin of the world.
- 3.4.3 God's reconciling act in Jesus Christ is a mystery
which the Scriptures describe as
the sacrifice of a lamb,
a shepherd's life given for his sheep,
atonement by a priest.
It is also the innocent dying for the guilty,
the ransom of a slave,
payment of a debt,
and victory over the powers of evil.
Such expressions interpret the love of God
revealing the gravity, cost, and sure achievement
of our Lord's work.
Yet that love we cannot fully explain.
God's grace, received by faith alone,
pardons and justifies,
redeems and reconciles us.

The first part of this statement from *Living Faith* reminds us of the centrality of the incarnation to Christ's identity as saviour. It is through Jesus that "God has come to us," and it is also through him that we are reconciled to God. As we discuss the nativity, it is important to keep in mind the connection between the incarnation and the cross. The Orthodox icons of the nativity make it clear that the incarnation is not separate from the death and resurrection of Jesus. They often portray the Christ child in a cradle/manger that looks like a tomb and the nativity scene is usually depicted as happening in a cave, reminiscent of the tomb Christ was buried.

Grace — Grace is the unmerited favour of God. Even though we are sinful as humans, God’s goodwill and favour is freely given to us. Since grace is a gift, we do not need to earn it. Christ came to incarnate God’s love, and his life and death gave us the ultimate example of God’s grace in action.

Saved from Hopelessness — Jesus’ death on the cross reminds us that “our life has meaning” (68). Hamilton reminds us that the incarnation is “Christ walking with us, speaking to us, and demonstration for us the love of God and our value and worth” (68).

Inquiry — *Initial questions, thoughts, new ideas arising out of the reading.*

What details in this chapter were new or interesting to you?

How have these details enriched, shaped or challenged your understanding of Christ’s birth?

Scripture — *Re-read key scripture passages together.*

In this study, we are seeking to “**understand the purpose of the incarnation**” (18). Read the following two scripture passages with this purpose in mind.

Matthew 1:18–21

AND

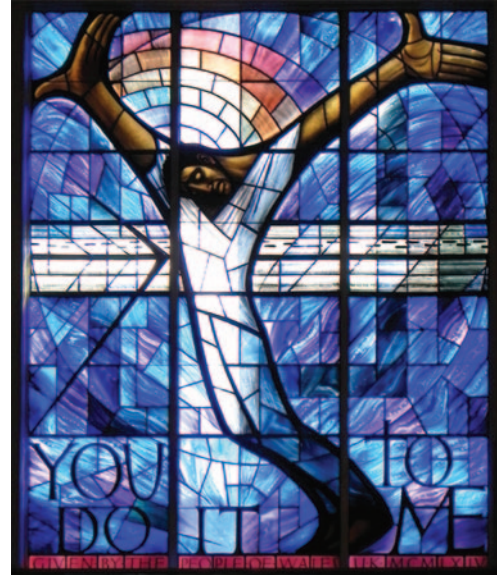
Luke 2:8–14

Discussion — *Questions related to the scripture passage.*

Incarnation comes from the Latin word that means “*embodied in flesh*” or “*taking on flesh.*” As Hamilton explains, “God did not simply inspire Jesus, or speak through Jesus...[God] became flesh *in Jesus*” (9). What details in each of the above passages highlight the incarnational nature of Jesus’ birth?

In both scripture passages, regular people are suddenly thrust into God’s unfolding divine plan in unexpected ways. How do Joseph (in Matthew) and the shepherds (in Luke) react? How do you think you would have reacted if you had been in their places?

In this chapter, Hamilton describes the many things that Jesus came to save us from, including sin, hopelessness, despair and death. Joseph and the shepherds were among the first to hear Jesus named as saviour and it changed their lives forever. How has your community, your family or your life been impacted by the good news of Jesus as Saviour?



John Petts. Christ Crucified, from Art in the Christian Tradition, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN.

Living Practices — Practices connected to the theme for participants to engage in between sessions.

“Incarnation was about, in part, Christ walking with us, speaking to us, and demonstrating for us the love of God and our value and worth” (p. 68).

Daily Examen — One of the main messages of this chapter was that “you matter to God” (69) and “you are loved” (73). Yet, as all of us know, it is sometimes difficult to recognize and embrace the love of God. The practice of “daily examen” will help you to reflect on where you were most and least present to God’s love during the day.

- At the end of each day this week, take time to think about the encounters and activities of your day one at a time. Ask yourself one or two of the following questions:
 - Where did I give or receive love in this activity or interaction? How did I withhold love in this activity or interaction?
 - What was the most life-giving part of my day? What was the most life-thwarting part of my day?
 - When today did I have the deepest sense of connection with God, others and myself? When today did I have the least sense of connection?
- Pray about the “highs” and “lows” of your day. Invite God to help you be more aware of God’s loving presence during your daily life.

This “Living Practices” section is based on ideas found in Adele Ahlberg Calhoun’s *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us* (IVP, 2015)



John August Swanson. Shepherds, from Art in the Christian Tradition, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN.

Close the Gathering with Prayer — *Choose your own prayer or use the one below.*

SALVATION

Blessed are you, O God who saves
and who redeems all things.

Simeon saw salvation and a new beginning
in the promise of a child who would be your Good News and salvation
to all people.

You are grace in moments of narrow judgement,
you are stillness when we are frantic,
you are peace when we are anxious,
you are justice in the face of cruelty,
you are freedom when we are paralyzed by fear,
you are reconciliation where relationships have been damaged,
you are resurrection in the face of death.

You offer security to a reeling world,
and your embrace is our resting place when we are lost.

In an often harsh and bitter world, you are sweetness,
and you look with kindness on our failings and you offer us a new start.

Open our minds to the meaning and saving power of your incarnation,
and let us see your grace and redemption at work around us.

