



Small Group Tools: FaithWalk

Small group experience for the week following December 25, 2011
ISAIAH 9:2-7, LUKE 2:1-14, JOHN 1:1-15

Community

THEME: EXPECTING JESUS – GOD IN OUR FLESH

God has come to us in human flesh in the One named Jesus Christ. This Jesus was present and active at the beginning of all things, and continues to be present and active in the work of the Kingdom of God among us. God continues to speak to us through the Son who “reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power.”

WHAT DO WE WANT OUR SMALL GROUP TO KNOW?

Jesus is present and active from the first moments of creation. His incarnation (coming to us in human flesh) is the center of the Christmas story.

WHAT DO WE WANT OUR SMALL GROUP TO DO?

Trust the promise that God shows up in the flesh: the Word made flesh, Jesus, light in our darkness, God in our flesh, life in our death, the gift of Christmas that we open today and every day.

INTRODUCTION

For this series, consider creating your own Advent wreath, consisting of four candles or lights in an outer ring surrounding a candle or light in the center. (*Go online and search the term “Advent wreath” for ideas.*) Each week, light another outer candle or light until, at Christmas, all of the lights are glowing, representing the Light of the World who has come into our darkness.

Last week, all four outer candles were lit. This week, place a larger candle or light in the middle, representing the Light of the World who has come into our darkness.

ICEBREAKER

What’s more important to you this time of year, gifts from people or time spent with people? What’s your favorite Christmas present memory?

PRAY TOGETHER

God, you have come to us in our darkness, so desperately in need of your light. Open the places in our lives that are closed, lift us up when we have fallen, heal the wounds of the holiday season, be the light in our festive darkness, that we may be a light in the darkness of other peoples’ lives during this season of Christmas. In the name of Jesus, the Light of the World, we pray. Amen

Content

(*Read Isaiah 9:2-7*)

Mark Throntveit, Professor of Hebrew and Old Testament at Luther Seminary, says:

“Isaiah 7:1 – 9:7 relates God’s coming to us in the birth of a child who will become a sign of God’s presence among us (“Immanuel: God with us”). ... When the New Testament points to Jesus as this child (Matthew 1:23; Isaiah 7:14) or when Handel declares the same with regard to Isaiah 9:6, they are expressing their belief that Jesus is the fulfillment of this divine intention. Isaiah was not looking forward to Jesus; how could the birth of Jesus be a sign to Ahaz? Matthew and Handel mean to say that this is the way God acts. Through things as simple as the birth of a child, God fulfills his gracious purpose for us. As Isaiah says, “The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this!” (9:7b)” (*workingpreacher.org*).

DISCUSSION What do you hear God saying through the prophet Isaiah when you hear this passage? Why do you think God chose to bless and deliver God’s people through the birth of a child? Why not some sort of cosmic feat, like you’d expect in a good Hollywood movie? How does this outlook inform our view of the present, and future?

(*Read Luke 1:1-14*)

Luke’s account of Jesus’ birth includes many of the well-known aspects of the Christmas story we’ve grown to love. For example, the census to fulfill the prophecy of Micah 5:2, which tells us that the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem. Or the “inn theory” of Jesus’ birth, which is likely legend because of archeological evidence and the way middle eastern hospitality operated at that time.

So what’s the deal here? Where did Mary and Joseph stay? Scholars now suggest that it wasn’t an inn at all that Mary and Joseph couldn’t get into. The Greek word for “inn,” as in an ancient hotel, is “pandocheion.” This is the word that Luke uses in the story of the Good Samaritan. But that isn’t the word that Luke uses in the story of Jesus’ birth. Instead, Luke uses the word “katalouma,” which usually means a guest room. That’s the meaning given in Luke 22:10-13, the story of the Last Supper. It might help here to understand something about the homes in Jesus’ day. Most were merely one divided room: a living space, and a lower level for animals. Some actually had a guest room – a katalouma – either at the back of the house or on a second floor.

DISCUSSION How does this explanation fit with your understanding of what happened at the time of Jesus' birth? What is most significant to you about this story? Why? Do you have a guest room in your home? Would you open it up and invite strangers to live there? Why or why not?

So, let's tell the story of Jesus' birth in a more likely way. Being a good Jew, Joseph sets off for his ancestral home of Bethlehem to register for the census in the fall of 4-5 B.C. He doesn't have to take Mary with him, but he does. Perhaps he's afraid for her safety, perhaps he doesn't want to be separated from her, perhaps he doesn't want to miss the birth of this miraculous child. Or maybe the Spirit nudges him. They journey together for several days, and finally arrive in Bethlehem. They connect with people in the town and are welcomed into someone's home. However, the guest room of that home is already full with some other travelers. It wouldn't be good manners to kick these other guests out, so Mary and Joseph are welcomed into the main room of the house. Sometime during their stay, Mary gives birth ... which almost always happened in peoples' homes. And when the baby Jesus is born, he is placed in one of the feeding troughs.

DISCUSSION How does this story fit with the story you've come to know through the years? What's different? What's significant to you about this story? How does the Christ child birth in a home give meaning to our lives today?

Despite the obscurity of Jesus' birth, it doesn't remain a secret for long! Shepherds are the first to hear the great good news of the Savior's birth. This continues Luke's theme of God lifting up the poor, the outcast and the underdog. But Luke is also saying some other important things:

The Savior has come for the humble of this world, those who know they haven't got a prayer.

When it comes to the Messiah, it isn't the righteous and religious on the inside who "get it." It is those on the outside who respond with faith: a peasant girl, shepherds, Roman centurions, lepers. Jesus is found by, and found in, "the least of these."

Remember that Jesus is descended from David, who was also a shepherd. Jesus will shepherd his people.

An angel appears to these shepherds, and the "glory of the Lord" shines around them. What is glory? It is the visible manifestation of the divine splendor. In the shepherds' case, it sounds like a brilliant light; it "shone" around them.

In Jesus' day, it was taught that the glory of the Lord dwelled in the Jerusalem temple, specifically above the foundation stone located on the floor at the center of the Holy of Holies. This foundation stone was believed to be the very stone that Jacob laid his head on while sleeping at Bethel (Genesis 28), when he saw in a dream the

angels of the Lord ascending and descending a ladder from heaven to earth. So catch the significance of what Luke is saying: with the birth of Jesus, God's glory has left the temple. It is being revealed to common people. God has come to earth.

DISCUSSION What intrigues you about this "big reveal" of God? How would you react, if you were one of the shepherds? How does God's glory leaving the temple give meaning to our lives today?

GOING DEEPER

From Pastor Jeff Marian's commentary on Luke:

"One of the most stunning aspects of Luke's gospel is its insistence that God has a special bent toward those whom society considers 'losers.' From God's choice of Mary to give birth to the Savior, to the choice of Bethlehem as the Savior's place of birth, to shepherds being the first to both hear and bear witness to the Savior's birth, to the Prince of Peace being born in a manger ... all of it is Luke's way of confessing his belief that the Savior has come for the 'losers' of this world. If you don't think you're a loser, then you really don't need a Savior and Christmas is, quite frankly, not a big deal. But if you're like me, and you know just how broken, hopeless and helpless you are ... if you're like me, and you sometimes feel like an outsider, unlovable, unredeemable and unworthy ... then Christmas announces some of the best news you'll ever hear. God is *for* us. God is *with* us. Although Christmas is Jesus' birthday, he has come into the world so that we might be born anew as insiders of God's love and life. That will bring light into your darkness, life into your lifelessness, and hope into hopelessness. As a loser, I like that!"

DISCUSSION How does it feel to be challenged to see yourself as a loser? Why is it so important to gain this frame of reference at Christmas time? What is the gift that God gives in Jesus? How does God coming to us in human flesh make a difference for our lives? Why is Christmas a big deal to so many people, Christian and non-Christian? How is a Christian's view of the "big deal" different from non-Christians?

Application

For next week, read John 1:1-4 and share with the group how you see Jesus bringing light into the darkness of this world.

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord, you have come into our hopelessness, and now the light of your holy love and forgiveness shines brightly through your Son, Jesus the Christ. May we see in you light, life and renewal as the world lives in darkness, looking simply to spend and consume. Keep us faithful to your promises, that we may proclaim your coming into the world. Amen.