

BORN IN THE CITY OF DAVID

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Luke 2:1-20

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." (Luke 2:15)

Daily Bible Readings

M	Dec. 16	Isa. 11:1-9	The Coming King of Peace
T	Dec. 17	Isa. 43:14-21	God Is Doing a New Thing
W	Dec. 18	Isa. 64	O God, Come Down and Save Us!
Th	Dec. 19	Mic. 5:1-6	A Great and Peaceful King
F	Dec. 20	John 1:1-5, 9-14, 16-18	The Word Became Flesh
Sa	Dec. 21	Heb. 1	Christ Is King! Worship Him!

STEPPING INTO THE WORD

Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), founder of the Jesuit movement, sought to help Christians experience intimacy with Jesus. Ignatius recommended using our imagination to engage biblical stories, particularly stories in the Gospels. His ideas are beneficial with familiar stories, such as the birth of Jesus from Luke 2. Using our imagination can help us experience a story from a fresh perspective.

Consider engaging our senses as we read and ponder the story. What would the scene look like up close and from a distance? What smells or sounds might be present? If someone is touching something, what might it feel like? If someone is eating, what might the food taste like?

Think about using our imagination to identify with a character in the story. In the story of Jesus' birth, we might imagine we are a companion on the journey. We might put ourselves in the place of an animal, perhaps a donkey on which Mary rode. We could imagine the story from Mary or Joseph's point of view, or as a shepherd or magi. We sink into the story as deeply as we can, imagining the smells, sounds, events, people, and emotions. The goal is to be with Jesus, in the story, as deeply and as completely as we can.

When my children were young, one of my favorite Christmas books told the story of Jesus' birth from the point of view of a mouse in the stable. I bet that author had no idea she was engaging in a form of Gospel contemplation recommended 500 years ago.

Creator God, you gave us our imaginations. Help us enter into the story of Jesus' birth with fresh eyes and new perspectives. Thank you for Jesus and the great gift we celebrate at his birth. Amen.



SCRIPTURE

Luke 2:1–16

2:1 In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no place in the guest room.

⁸Now in that same region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ¹⁴“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger.

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

JESUS, ANGELS, AND SHEPHERDS

The journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem is about 90 miles. Scholars believe it would have taken Mary and Joseph four to seven days to travel that distance. Christmas cards and other Christmas images show a pregnant Mary riding on a donkey with Joseph walking beside her. Note that in Luke's account, no donkey is mentioned.

Joseph is descended from the lineage of David, centered in Bethlehem, the "city of David" (Luke 2:11). We remember Bethlehem from the story of Ruth, as well as from David's anointing by Samuel to be king (1 Sam. 16:1–13). Recent scholarship has emphasized that Joseph undoubtedly had relatives living in Bethlehem. The Greek word that is usually rendered "inn" (Luke 2:7 NRSV) can also refer to a guest room in a home. Joseph's relatives' guest rooms were likely filled to capacity because of the census, so Joseph and Mary stayed in the part of the relatives' homes where their animals lived. This interpretation would indicate that Mary and Joseph would not have been alone at the time of Jesus' birth. Women relatives would have been there to help Mary.

Throughout the Old Testament and here in the Nativity story, fear is the first response to God's angels. These supernatural beings remind us of how small, finite, and sinful we are and how incompatible we are with the holy God who sends angels to humans. Despite the glory of the angels, their first words to Zechariah, Mary, and the shepherds are "Do not be afraid" (1:12–14, 29–30; 2:9–10).

Usually, shepherds stayed out with their sheep (2:8) only during the lambing season, which would be early spring, so scholars suggest that Jesus was probably born in the spring. Using shepherds as witnesses connects this story with the many Old Testament passages involving shepherds, including numerous instances where God is referred to as a shepherd (including Ps. 23, Ezek. 34, and Zech. 11). The shepherds' role also reminds us of Mary's words to her cousin Elizabeth that God lifts up the lowly (1:52).

As they make their announcement to the shepherds, the angels use three names for Jesus: Savior, Christ (Messiah), and Lord (2:11). These early chapters in Luke's gospel make significant points about the Messiah. Jesus is the Son of God, the true heir of the Davidic promise (1:32), and the anointed Servant and anticipated Savior (2:11), reminding us that God always keeps

God's promises, and often keeps them in ways beyond what we can even ask or image (Eph. 3:20). Jesus has come to inaugurate a unique and unexpected kingdom that will surprise everyone he encounters.

? In what ways do the angels and shepherds speak to you about the uniqueness and unexpectedness of Jesus' birth?

UPSIDE-DOWN KINGDOM

When we think of kingdoms, we often picture elaborate castles and huge halls hung with banners, or throne rooms filled with courtiers and ladies in waiting, dressed in formal clothes and wearing priceless jewelry. Jesus, a newly born king in a royal lineage, is nestled in his mother's arms in a humble space where animals stay. Jesus's courtiers are shepherds, wearing clothes they probably slept in while in the fields. Mary's words to Elizabeth in Luke 1:46–55 describe an upside down world where the lowly are honored and the mighty are brought down. This care for the downtrodden and God's distaste for the powerful is not a new idea. It is also visible in Hannah's prayer when she thanks God for the birth of Samuel, who will anoint David king (1 Sam. 2:1–10, 1 Sam. 16:1–13).

Jesus's uniqueness as a king is visible in this scene, with animals, shepherds, and angels in attendance. In his 1811 hymn "Brightest and Best of the Sons of the Morning," Bishop Reginald Heber describes Jesus's birth: "Low lies his head with the beasts of the stall." Jesus's placement with the animals at his birth is deeply meaningful for Christians who work for environmental justice and those who care about the wellbeing of animals. Heber's hymn continues: "Angels adore him in slumber reclining, maker and monarch and Savior of all." The presence of the glorious and fearsome angels alongside the shepherds shows the glory and humility of this king, a mind-bending juxtaposition. Jesus, born into the house and lineage of David, is indeed "maker and monarch and savior of all," and he will inaugurate a kingdom with many unexpected and disconcerting characteristics.

The presence of the shepherds also reminds us of many passages in the Old Testament that identify God as our Shepherd. Psalm 23 is probably the best known. In Zechariah 11, God describes the leaders of Israel who have shepherded God's people unjustly. God takes over the role of shepherd to care for the people. Ezekiel 34 presents a similar picture of human shepherds

who have not cared for the sick sheep or fed them and who have not sought out the lost sheep. “I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep,” says God (v. 15). These prophecies in Zechariah and Ezekiel are fulfilled in Jesus: “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11). Our maker is both our monarch and our savior. The kingdom of God is centered on this person, Jesus, born among the animals and honored by angels and shepherds.

? What signs of Jesus’ coming kingdom do you find in the birth of Jesus among animals, attended by angels and shepherds?

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

The story of Jesus’ birth is full of unexpected contrasts and disconcerting juxtapositions, including a baby born among animals, a king heralded by angels yet honored by shepherds, and a life-changing event that happens in a small town outside the public eye. These contrasts and juxtapositions can fuel our prayers. We can pray that the Holy Spirit would help us to be open to how these unexpected contrasts and juxtapositions might play out in our own lives.

The angels call Jesus “Messiah, Savior, and Lord,” yet he is cuddled with his mother in a humble place. We can pray that God would help us see the small, insignificant, and humble places where God’s Spirit is at work, and Jesus is present. We might ask for help to be willing to interact with children, those with disabilities, the elderly, and people we view as insignificant. We might pray for the patience to slow down and listen, so we can learn something new about life, love, and God’s priorities. We might request God’s help with our listening skills. We might pray that God would guide us to people and situations where we would experience the unexpected.

So many components of our lives can seem small and insignificant. Fifteen minutes washing dishes and cleaning off countertops. Mowing the grass, washing the car, and cleaning the toilet. Typing a memo about something mundane. Contacting the plumber. Yet if the angels can herald the birth of a baby in insignificant circumstances, God can also illuminate the everyday activities of our lives. We can pray that God would help us experience Jesus’s presence as we go about our lives.

Jesus’ birth among animals, as well as the shepherds’ visit from the angels as they tended sheep, remind us that God is the

creator of the whole earth. Every animal on earth was made by God and is beloved. The psalmist writes, “The earth is full of your creatures” (Ps. 104:24). Every hill where those shepherds accompanied their sheep was made by God with loving care. “The heights of the mountains are his also” (Psalm 95:4). We can pray that we would care for God’s beautiful creation in our actions and choices. We can pray that we would honor animals in the way we treat pets and in how we purchase and eat meat or refrain from doing so.

We can pray that we would be open to the unexpectedness of the kingdom that Jesus inaugurates. Only God can prepare us for the unsettling and often awkward relationships, priorities, and truths that Jesus calls us into.

? How might you pray in some new ways because of the unexpected contrasts and juxtapositions in the story of Jesus’s birth?

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes from the Uniform Series provide additional information about today’s Scripture.

1. God has a long history of using shepherds in significant roles, including Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, and Amos; also, consider how frequently Scripture compares God to a shepherd (see Zech. 11, for example).
2. Throughout the Old Testament and in the Nativity story (1:12, 29; 2:9), fear is the first response to God’s angels, indicating that these are intimidating, obviously supernatural beings whose very presence reminds us of how finite and sinful we are, and how incompatible we are with even these extensions of God’s holy presence.
3. A huge theme for Luke is that of being a witness (2:1–18): it is the natural response to seeing/experiencing God at work and is our commissioned task as his followers (Acts 1:8–9), naturally extending into making disciples who will also stand as witnesses (Matt. 28:18–19).
4. Mary’s response to her child’s birth reminds us that God’s work always has deeper levels and meanings that take time and pondering to soak in and understand (see Ps. 119:15, 27, 148).