



We come to Christmas with songs in our hearts and gifts in our hands all while spinning away at the work of preparation. If you pause throughout this season, what questions begin to emerge in your mind?

Are you ready?
Are you focused or distracted?
Do you still approach the story of the Advent with *holy wonder*?

Do you allow yourself the freedom to boldly ask the questions in your heart? For many, we spend an entire month of wondering "Is it true?", "Can someone explain this?" or "So what?!"

The magi asked "Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews?" (Mt 1:2)

King Herod asked "Where is the Christ child to be born?" (Mt 1:4)

Mary asked "How can this be since I am a virgin?" (Lk 1:34)

This Sunday School series is designed to discuss some common Questions for Christmas and allow our FPC community to ponder such questions together.

Our 4 questions:

- How do I tell others what Christmas means to me?
- How do I afford Christmas?
- How important is the Virgin Birth?
- Who should I celebrate Christmas with?

Pray before each class...for honest reflection and encouragement for each other... and above all, that God might be glorified through our study.

Q 1: How do I tell others what Christmas means to me?

We enter a season where more than ever, the people of Christian faith are challenged (and challenging) the way we talk about what we really believe at Christmas. We have many symbols of a cultural holiday: a man in a red suit, greenery and red berries, snowflakes, snowmen...and sometimes a star, a manger, shepherds, a middle eastern couple seeking refuge...and baby.

1. Have you ever experienced a time when sharing your faith at Christmas caused a problem?
What happened?
Did it change the way you talk about Christmas?
2. How do you feel when people get angry about using too much/too little religious expression during Christmas?

Sometimes we're "allowed" to talk about it. Sometimes we aren't. The fact is we tend to talk about the things that are important to us, right? When you bump into someone at the store or parking lot...what do you talk about? (kids/grandkids, sports, work, health issues, the weather)

Today, we'll look at the song of Zachariah. A song of joy about how his son John would prepare the world for the Messiah.

Passage: (Luke 1:68-76-79) The VOICE translation

Zachariah at the birth of his son, John:

⁶⁸ "May the Lord God of Israel be blessed indeed! For **God's intervention has begun**, and He has moved to **rescue** us, the people of God.

⁶⁹ And the Lord has raised up a powerful sign of **liberation** for us from among the descendants of God's servant, King David.

⁷⁰ As was **prophesied** through the mouths of His holy prophets in ancient times:

⁷¹ God will liberate us from our enemies and from the hand of our oppressors!

⁷⁶ And you, my son, will be called the prophet of the Most High. For you will be the one to prepare the way for the Lord

⁷⁷ So that the Lord's people will receive knowledge of their freedom through the forgiveness of their sins.

⁷⁸ All this will flow from the **kind and compassionate mercy of our God**.

A new day is dawning: the Sunrise from the heavens will break through in our darkness,

⁷⁹ And those who huddle in night, those who sit in the shadow of death, will be able to rise and walk in the light, guided in the pathway of peace."

Discussion questions

3. How does the story of John the Baptist and Zachariah's song give us wisdom and ideas on "preparing the way of the Lord"?
4. How do you talk about...
 - God's intervention to rescue? v.68
 - Fulfillment of prophecy? v.70
 - knowledge of freedom from sin? v.77
 - the compassionate mercy of God? v.78
5. Based on Zachariah's joyful song (or other passage) how might we express appropriately and publicly what we believe?
6. (If time...similar to Question 3 above, but with more application) When we cannot use words, how might we *live out* the same good news that Zachariah proclaims? [possible answers: be a people who rescue, encourage the discouraged, point people to liberation, demonstrate compassion, etc.]

Q2: How do I afford Christmas?

The lesser question here is *why do I spend so much money at Christmas?*

SMALL GROUP QUESTION: (7 min)

How did you grow up experiencing gift-giving?
How has it changed?

The Magi (Matthew 2:1-12)

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem² and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

³When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵"In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

⁶"But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel."

⁷Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

⁹After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

LARGE GROUP DISCUSSION:

Many of us can think of someone who has been financially stressed with Christmas. For them/us, it becomes a question of competing values: generosity over simplicity; pride over humility; extravagance over stewardship.

1) What does the Bible teach us about giving -- for special occasions? (travel, gifts)

A symbol of adoration – gifts to Solomon

A symbol of affection – (Fatherly) "For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened."

2) What does Jesus himself seek from us?

The magi presented *themselves* and worshipped.

To be fully present - (i.e. Mary, Martha)

3) Why do you think some people choose to go more into debt just to "afford Christmas?"

4) How do we participate in the discipline of *simplicity* (R. Foster) with Christmas?

"The Christian discipline of simplicity is an inward reality that results in an outward lifestyle. ...Because we lack a Divine Center, our need for security has led us into an insane attachment to things. We must clearly understand that the lust for affluence in contemporary society is psychotic. It is psychotic because it has completely lost touch with reality. We crave things we neither need nor enjoy. We buy things we do not want in order to impress people we do not like." Richard Foster, *The Celebration of Discipline*.

5) If Christ is our "reason for the season" how might we introduce simplicity into our holiday celebration?

(Doing so might mean that we communicate something new to our loved ones... how do we do this? Has someone had to be honest with you about new practices/new traditions surrounding gift-giving?)

For those who struggle with over-buying, one idea:



The graphic features a light yellow background with a blue border. At the top, the text "4 Christmas Gift Challenge" is written in a large, bold, red font. Below the title, the website "www.moneysavingsisters.com" is in a smaller, red font. Underneath the title, there are four icons: a robot-like figure for "1. Something they want", two green gift boxes tied with red bows for "2. Something they need", a red t-shirt for "3. Something to wear", and a green book for "4. Something to read".

What other ideas do you have?

- Set a budget and keep it
- Reuse / Re-gift
- Practice gratitude and service
- Avoid commercials and manipulation from mass media
- Avoid seeing someone else's spending habits as an example.

Q3: How important is the Virgin Birth?

Passage: Matthew 1:18-25; Luke 1:26-38

Two volunteers to read:

¹⁸ This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

²⁰ But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³ "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").

²⁴ When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. ²⁵ But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

²⁶ In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

²⁹ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰ But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. ³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

³⁴ "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

³⁵ The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called^[a] the Son of God. ³⁶ Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. ³⁷ For no word from God will ever fail."

³⁸ "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE:

Supernatural birth narratives in Ancient Near Eastern literature were meant to impress upon the listener the importance of the person. (Alexander the Great, Caesar, Hercules, John the Baptist)

THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Our faith declares it. The Scripture tells it. Therefore, it is our Truth and we declare it regularly: Apostles Creed: "conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary"

And yet, there is more at stake:

- Uniqueness of Christ
- Prophetic necessity (Isaiah 7:14)¹

Catholic tradition says Jesus's birth was not normal; No pain and Mary remained a virgin.

- Dale Moody:
 - "Miraculous conception" is our common understanding of the doctrine.
 - Evidence: Jesus's accusers chose to word their distrust in Jesus because he was an illegitimate son
- Dale Bruner:
 - Acts and Paul's teachings absence of virginal birth narratives were a matter of *tact*, that is, the bodily resurrection was hard enough to swallow, why preach a miraculous birth as well and open Jesus' origins to ridicule and calumny?" (Raymond Brown)
 - Woman-only origin: Mark 3:35, 6:3, Romans 1:3, Galatians 4:4.
 - Genesis 3:15-16 – seed of a woman – where a seed-bearer is male!

Discussion questions

- 1) What might be at stake for not believing the virgin birth/virginal conception?
 - a. Challenge to *uniqueness* of Jesus (and Mary, in Catholic doctrine – as she is "blessed above all women")
 - b. Rejection of biblical teaching from two Gospels. (What else then (i.e. other miracle...the resurrection even!) would we discredit along the way?)
- 2) Does Jesus' supernatural birth have an implication on our supernatural rebirth? How so? (John 1:13)
- 3) *What do we do* when we struggle to believe the Virgin Birth?

¹ References: Orr, *Virgin Birth*; Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*; Pope Benedict XVI, *The Infancy Narratives*.

Q4: Who do I celebrate Christmas with?

God placed us in a family² and yet we often enter our family gatherings with varying feelings of joy or hesitation. Many of us enjoy these gatherings deeply, yet some experience deep frustration.

SMALL GROUP

So to start off with...(person next to you):

Who do you usually spend the holidays with? Who do you look forward to being with the most?

Let's look at a passage that shows us how God might look at being hosts and guests.

LARGE GROUP (LUKE 2:8-20 – pick a volunteer or two)

Following the birth of Christ in Bethlehem...

⁸ ... there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

¹⁶ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

Consider the literary juxtaposition of angels and shepherds. A glorious messenger is accompanied by an army (literally, "host"=military term) of messengers and appears to lowly shepherds.

What if they appeared at the Temple?
To Herod? In a synagogue?
In Rome?

Shepherds: *poiménes* – context: night-watchmen of the flock; economically, socially undignified.

Angels: *aggélos* (pronounced like an•GEL•os – where the g is hard like GOOD.) When do angels usually appear in Scripture? Is this scene any different?

The Gospel story is introduced with quiet, personal

² The blessing of family: Gen 2:24; Exod 20:12; Josh 24:15; Psalm 103:17; 127:3-5

invitations. As such, there is an extraordinary emphasis on *hospitality (and the lack of)*. This theme would return throughout Jesus' ministry and into the birth of the Church.

- Can you think of a time when Jesus talked about hospitality...or demonstrated it?

Some ideas/examples

- Every miracle of Christ portrays His unique hospitality as blesses those in His kingdom.
- Luke 10:1-16: (72 sent out: "The kingdom of God has come near to you.") Jesus also expects his disciples to be extraordinary *guests*.
- Luke 14: Parable of the Great banquet - Radical inclusivity
- Luke 24:13-35 – Disciples on the road to Emmaus w/ Jesus
- Acts 9:43-10:48 – Cross-cultural hospitality; salvation to the Gentiles
- John 2 – water to wine at a wedding; John 4 – woman at the well

- How does this kind of hospitality resemble or differ our traditional expressions?

APPLICATION

- Who is the "stranger" that you might welcome? Or pay attention to? Or be with?

[NOTE: be prepared to talk about refugees, homeless, minorities, "enemies"]

- How might we introduce *unique and biblical hospitality* into our traditions of Christmas?