



LITURGICAL SEASONS

CHRISTMAS

Season of Wonder and Hope

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Introduction

Alive in the Word brings you resources to deepen your understanding of Scripture, offer meaning for your life today, and help you to pray and act in response to God's word.

Use any volume of **Alive in the Word** in the way best suited to you.

- **For individual learning and reflection**, consider this an invitation to prayerfully journal in response to the questions you find along the way. And be prepared to move from head to heart and then to action.
- **For group learning and reflection**, arrange for three sessions where you will use the material provided as the basis for faith sharing and prayer. You may ask group members to read each chapter in advance and come prepared with questions answered. In this kind of session, plan to be together for about an hour. Or, if your group prefers, read and respond to the questions together without advance preparation. With this approach, it's helpful to plan on spending more time for each group session in order to adequately work through each of the chapters.

- **For a parish-wide event or use within a larger group,** provide each person with a copy of this volume, and allow time during the event for quiet reading, group discussion and prayer, and then a final commitment by each person to some simple action in response to what he or she learned.

This volume on the topic of Christmas is one of several volumes that explore **Liturgical Seasons**. Our church accents seasons within each year to help us enter into the story of salvation. This is commonly referred to as the liturgical calendar. Its purpose is not to mark the passage of time but to understand the overall mystery of salvation in Jesus Christ, from his incarnation and birth through his ministry, death, resurrection, and sending of the Spirit. By meditating on the themes of these various seasons in the church year, we are more fully able to live the mystery of Christ in our own lives.

Prologue

There's nothing quite like the satisfaction of the day *after* Christmas when the presents have been opened and “oohed and aahed” over, the chaos has settled, the meal eaten, clean dishes are ready to be put away, and the giant after-Christmas sales have already begun. Job well done, we may be thinking. Maybe, however, we need to revisit this from the perspective of the meaning of Christmas.

In our church's tradition, Christmas is not confined to the weeks leading up to December 25, ending on the day itself when the stores are finally closed for a rest. Christmas is not even the twenty-four-hour period from Christmas Eve through Christmas Day. In our tradition, Christmas is a season that begins on Christmas Eve and, for Roman Catholics, extends through the feast of the Baptism of the Lord.

The Christmas season includes the feasts of St. Stephen and St. John and the Holy Innocents and the Holy Family, as well as the Solemnities of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, and the Epiphany. All of these serve as markers along the way, helping us to further reflect on the power of the nativity of the Lord, not simply as *a* special day but as a divine gift that changes *every* day throughout the year.

To heighten our appreciation of Christmas as a season, we focus on three New Testament passages in this book, passages that reveal the wonder and hope contained in a child's simple birth in Bethlehem centuries ago, and his birth in our hearts each day.

Marveling with the Shepherds



Begin by asking God to assist you in your prayer and study. Then read Luke 2:1-18, an account of the birth of Jesus.

Luke 2:1-18

¹In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole world should be enrolled. ²This was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³So all went to be enrolled, each to his own town. ⁴And Joseph too went up from Galilee from the town of Nazareth to Judea, to the city of David that is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, ⁵to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to have her child, ⁷and she gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

⁸Now there were shepherds in that region living in the fields and keeping the night watch over their flock. ⁹The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were struck with great fear. ¹⁰The angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Messiah and Lord. ¹²And this will be a sign for you: you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.” ¹³And suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and saying:

¹⁴“Glory to God in the highest
and on earth peace to those on whom his
favor rests.”

¹⁵When the angels went away from them to heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go, then, to Bethlehem to see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶So they went in haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the infant lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known the message that had been told them about this child. ¹⁸All who heard it were amazed by what had been told them by the shepherds.

After a few moments of quiet reflection on Luke 2:1-18 consider the background information found in “Setting the Scene.” This information will help you put the passage in context.

Setting the Scene

Gospels do more than simply communicate factual information about Jesus, the main character. They are tools for evangelization, meaning that they are written as an invitation to encounter and then to enter into a relationship with Jesus. Gospel writers tell the story for an audience that they are a part of, but do it in such a way that calls for a response even generations later.

The inspired writings attributed to Luke, which include the Gospel as well as the Acts of the Apostles, show a keen awareness of the world into which Jesus was born and the church was established. References to historical persons, events, and geographical locations demonstrate that Jesus entered into a specific set of circumstances as Good News for the real world. This lesson alone, that God comes to meet us in the reality of our lives, is one of the central truths of our lives as followers of Christ and is the heart of the Christmas message.

In the opening lines of his gospel, Luke indicates that he is writing down “in an orderly sequence” a narrative of the events surrounding Jesus. His writing style is methodical, allowing the story to unfold in a way that takes the reader on a journey—a journey from the promises made to Jewish ancestors to their fulfillment in the cross and resurrection of Jesus, and then in the Acts, on to the far corners of the world.

All eighty verses of the first chapter of Luke prepare the way for the birth of Jesus. There are two annunciations: one to Zechariah, the

husband of barren Elizabeth, and one to Mary, young and betrothed to Joseph. There are two canticles: one proclaimed by Mary while still pregnant and visiting Elizabeth and one proclaimed by Zechariah after the birth of his son John (the Baptist). In the midst of these pairings, John's birth to Elizabeth and Zechariah breaks ground for Jesus, the one for whom he will later prepare a way in the desert (Luke 3:1-20).



In chapter 1, Luke has taken the time to connect the new work of God coming in the birth of Jesus to the expectations building in God's people for centuries. Zechariah and Elizabeth evoke God's faithfulness to Israel for generations,

while Mary and Joseph help us to transition into the time of the long-awaited Messiah. The stage is set for the birth of Jesus, the Messiah and Lord.

The passage from Luke 2:1-18 will be considered a few verses at a time in the section below. Occasional questions in this section and following sections may be used for personal reflection, journaling, or group discussion.

Understanding the Scene Itself

¹In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole world should be en-

rolled. ²This was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³So all went to be enrolled, each to his own town. ⁴And Joseph too went up from Galilee from the town of Nazareth to Judea, to the city of David that is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, ⁵to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.

Jewish hopes for the Messiah, the anointed of God, included the expectation that he would come from the house of David, and David's family was from Bethlehem in the region of Judea. The prophet Micah, who ministered to God's people over seven hundred years before Jesus was born, had referred to Bethlehem as "least among the clans of Judah" and the place that would produce the "one who is to be ruler in Israel" (Mic 5:1).

At the time of the birth of Jesus, Israel was a small nation-state in the midst of many others that made up the Roman Empire. Caesar Augustus, also referred to as Octavian, was the Roman Emperor at this time (ca. 27 BC–AD 14). So great were his accomplishments—among them restoring peace after the assassination of Julius Caesar and establishing an imperial dynasty—that various historical records indicate he is referred to as "son of god" and even as "savior." We are meant to catch the irony that the child Jesus, born on the margins of society in an insignificant region of the empire, would be recognized as the true Savior and Son of God, and his rule would be like no other.

What messages about power are common today? Where have you discovered the Christian message in tension with the cultural messages about power?

When has a physical journey helped you to discover or identify God's work in your life?

Whether there was an actual census at the time is disputed by historians who cannot find any evidence, but we miss the point if that's all that consumes us. The evangelists crafted the story of Jesus to emphasize his significance. The journey of this couple from their home in Nazareth to the place of their family origin at a time when the region saw its own turmoil may prompt us to consider many journeys of significance, the greatest being God's journey from divinity to humanity, from heaven to earth, in the birth of his Son.



We are also reintroduced to the main characters—Joseph, his wife Mary, and the child still in her womb.

“While they were there, the time came for her to have her child,⁶ and she gave birth to her first-born son. She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

It's a simple story line: circumstances shift as the newly betrothed couple makes their journey, simple and far from ideal arrangements are made for a birth, and the child's mother treats her son with the tenderness required of the moment.

Naturally, we imagine the scene, meaning we immediately conjure up images and the feelings that go along with them. People have been doing

so since the story was first told. Through art and literature and music and pageants, we want to picture the scene, to capture some of the mix of anxiety and wonder that surely charged the air where Mary and Joseph found themselves. We want to see that child lying peacefully in a makeshift cradle. We want to hear the whisperings of his parents who are far from home. We may even want to picture the innkeeper who would have heard the birth and maybe felt a twinge of regret that they were not given better conditions.



This manger in Bethlehem has been called the most famous feeding trough in history! A manger is basically a place for livestock to feed, most often thought of as a trough. Some of these feeding areas were actually located in an open lower level of a simple home built into a hillside, making it easy for sheep and goats and cows to enter when needed. This child, destined to be the savior as the angels will later proclaim (2:11), makes a bold statement about the human condition simply by being born in such simple surroundings.

The reference to Mary's "firstborn son" is quite intentional and has little to do with whether he may have had natural brothers and sisters. First of all, in ancient Judaism the firstborn son had certain rights according to Mosaic Law, rights to blessing and inheritance, and the firstborn was often dedicated to God much as first-fruits were offered to God at harvest. Secondly,

Jesus was laid in the place where cattle are fed, in a town whose name, Bethlehem, means "house of bread." In what ways does Jesus feed you?

by God's grace believers become sons and daughters of God, brothers and sisters to Jesus (see John 1:12-13; Rom 8:16-17; Eph 1:5-6).

⁸Now there were shepherds in that region living in the fields and keeping the night watch over their flock. ⁹The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were struck with great fear. ¹⁰The angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Messiah and Lord."



Shepherd's Field near Bethlehem is a popular pilgrimage site today. Whether or not it is the actual field, there is no doubt of the devotion many feel in regard to these lowly dedicated keepers of flocks. Shepherds were considered among the lowest of laborers but, for yet another connection with tradition, we know Israel's most revered king, David, shepherded flocks in that region as well (1 Sam 16:4-13).

In Luke's account, the shepherds are the first to hear a proclamation of the birth of the savior, the Messiah, the Lord. An "angel of the Lord" and "the glory of the Lord" produced fear in

them. The Greek word *phobos* is translated here as fear which we might understand as being scared, but may also be translated as reverence or wonderment. It's easy to imagine that the shepherds, busy about their nightly routines, might experience a mixture of both in response to such an extraordinary event.


“Be not afraid” is among the most frequently used responses throughout the Bible. Far from being a stock answer, these three words signal that God is doing something new, something out of the ordinary. These three words also remind those being addressed—those in the story and readers now—that God is in control. If the fear is associated with the feeling of being frozen in terror, God proclaims that such fear is needless. If the fear is in fact wonder and awe, God invites the kind of trust that will not leave us unchanged.

In the Roman Empire, it was customary upon the birth of an emperor's son to proclaim the good news that peace and prosperity would follow in his footsteps. Politicians and poets spread this good news across the land. In the scene from Luke's gospel the proclamation of Good News comes from an angel and is given to the lowliest of people to spread throughout the land.

The child will be savior, Messiah, and Lord. Savior was a term often given to rulers in the Greco-Roman world. In this context, however, the “savior” is a liberator, much in the line of Moses who was God's instrument of freedom for those enslaved in Egypt. In the gospel accounts we will see Jesus act as liberator to those who are oppressed, caught in their own sinfulness,

In the *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-55), Mary proclaims that God “has thrown down the rulers from their thrones but lifted up the lowly” (v. 52). How is this illustrated in the scene at Shepherd's Field?

When has fear created an obstacle to your spiritual growth? When has God's assurance transformed your fear?



Savior
Messiah
Lord

and ostracized. As Messiah, the child will grow to proclaim and establish God's kingdom as had been promised to David centuries before. As Lord, Jesus possesses true power and authority, given by the Father, a power that surpasses that of emperors and kings, a power that is divine. These titles serve as an introduction to his entire ministry and the meaning of his life, death, and resurrection.

¹²“And this will be a sign for you: you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.” ¹³And suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and saying:

¹⁴“Glory to God in the highest
and on earth peace to those on whom his
favor rests.”



Having just been told that the child is Savior, Messiah, and Lord, the shepherds are told to look for a sign. Surely they would have expected some sign of royalty or power, perhaps a throne or a temple or a castle. Instead, the sign is that simple manger where the

baby is lying. This contrast or paradox is only the first of many that will be part of the life of Jesus, and the lives of his followers. He was a humble man but filled with authority, he was the bringer of truth who also offered mercy and forgiveness, and he was the healer and sinless one who nonetheless faced a horrible death.

Caesar Augustus, the emperor noted at the start of this account, was known for establishing a period of peace, Pax Romana, which allowed the empire to breathe a short sigh of relief. It was a time when borders were protected and it was relatively tranquil. Now, in the field where shepherds kept their watch, the angels proclaim that God's glory is reflected in the peace embodied in Christ. This is not the mere absence of war, but the promise of wholeness and restoration, a peace that surpasses that of Caesar Augustus.

¹⁵When the angels went away from them to heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go, then, to Bethlehem to see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶So they went in haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the infant lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known the message that had been told them about this child. ¹⁸All who heard it were amazed by what had been told them by the shepherds.

The wonderment of the shepherds did not leave them in a stupor, having experienced a manifestation of God's presence, having been told of a long-awaited Messiah. They moved,

How could you use this Christmas season to be an ambassador of the kind of peace Jesus offers?

they set their feet in the direction of Bethlehem to see with their own eyes what had taken place.

It might be fair to say that an encounter with the divine never leaves us without a mission. For the shepherds, the mission was to make known the message, giving witness to what they had seen and heard. They represent not only all who spread the Good News but the very kind of people who need to hear the message that their

Savior has arrived. Their mission, and ours, is to evangelize. We tell what God has done among us, what we have seen, how we have been changed in the encounter.

Those who heard the news from the shepherds were “amazed.” Amazement can take the shape of being surprised but it can also mean that someone is incredulous, wondering if the event lacks credibility. Further, the root word is “maze,” so to be amazed may mean there is lingering confusion. Those who were amazed may or may not have moved into faith and trust. The message of the shepherds invited them to wonder at God’s goodness and to have hope that the promises of God were being fulfilled. Will those who are amazed take steps toward the manger? Will we?



What steps are you taking that will draw you closer to the manger and the gift that it holds?

Praying the Word / Sacred Reading

Spend some time reflecting on a nativity scene, perhaps one in your parish or one in your home.

- *Why does this scene capture your imagination?*
- *How might you have reacted if you were one of the shepherds?*
- *Who would you have told first when you left the manger?*

As you close your reflection time, speak to God about the shepherds and ask how you might be like them. Ask for the grace to open yourself to the glory of God in the normal course of your daily routine.

Living the Word

The child lying in a manger was a sign for the shepherds, a confirmation that what they had been told was real, a sign that God brought heaven to earth.

Where are the mangers in your life, the places that serve to remind you of God's faithfulness and presence? If they are physical places, take time to visit one or two of them to recall God's care. If they are places in your heart, talk about them with your family or close friends. These are reminders of the marvelous gift of God's Son, and also reminders of our call to evangelize.