

Sunday 17th December 2023 (Advent 3)

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God is love, let us adore God by sharing God's love.

God is ever present, around us and within us, we worship together in God.

Advent 3

Advent is a time of preparing for a new baby, a time to create space for reflection and wonder.

The candles flicker, casting shadows and spreading light, as we gather to tell stories old and new.

Advent God, **shine from us today.**

In this story of birth and wonder we find the promise of God with us. As we live in wonder and love we build our own story to share and encourage others. When we've encountered God, we have a truth to tell, when we have seen God's light, we have a light to share.

Advent God, **shine from us today.**

When we worship together we are preparing our own family story of meeting God in the ordinary and unexpected, may we have the courage to tell this story so that others may sense God's invitation.

Advent God, **shine from us today.**

Stories are filled with joys and sorrows, hard times and celebrations, despair and hope. We share our very ordinary and yet extraordinary story, the story of faith and journey, challenge and change, and trust that those we share with will glimpse the light of God.

Advent God, **shine from us today**

As we light this 3rd candle we remember the story we share, and the hope we feel. May we have confidence to become story tellers, inspiring new babies and old babies with our words. Even when we don't feel we can find the words may the light of your love shine upon and fill us that we may speak and show and tell the story of your extraordinary gift of love. **Amen.**

This Sunday we celebrate the story of Christmas in readings and carols. Rather than the biblical readings this year we are using storytelling version. We invite you take some time and reflect with us as we prepare for Christmas.

Introduction

The Christmas Story, as we hear it in Luke and Matthew, begins long ago when the Prophet Isaiah promised the people a Saviour who would release them from the captivity of exile. They were a people separated from all they new, experiencing new ways, new food, new life and yet longing for the old ways and all they meant to them. Some of the people adapted better than others but that brought other problems as they lost their sense of identity with their roots.

Into this comes the voice of the prophet – Isaiah 7 (13-16)

O House of David, you aren't satisfied to exhaust *my* patience; you exhaust the Lord's as well! ¹⁴ All right then, the Lord himself will choose the sign—a child shall be born to a virgin!^[b] And she shall call him Immanuel (meaning, "God is with us"). ¹⁵⁻¹⁶ By the time this child is weaned^[c] and knows right from wrong, the two kings you fear so much—the kings of Israel and Syria—will both be dead.

The story

Mary was a young woman, engaged to a man called Joseph and they lived in Nazareth. One day Mary was visited by an angel, a very surprising and quite frightening occurrence. The angel spoke to Mary, telling her she was going to have a baby, a special baby and even telling her what she should name the baby. In a daze, Mary challenged the angel,

how could she have a baby when she was not married but in the end Mary accepted the angel's words, and once the angel had left got quite excited and sang a song of praise to God.

Then she told Joseph, who was not as excited and very troubled by this turn of events. What was he to do, whatever he did it would not look good for him or for Mary. But then, he too was visited by an angel and reassured he said he would still take Mary to be his wife.

As Mary's pregnancy progressed a decree was issued that everyone must return to the home town and be counted in a census. Joseph's home town was Bethlehem, so he and Mary had to travel 70 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem. The only option was to walk but Mary was heavily pregnant by this time and so Joseph found a donkey that she could ride. The journey took many days and they were both glad when they neared Bethlehem.

Bethlehem was heaving with people who had returned for the census and all the inns and lodging houses were busy. As Mary and Joseph searched for somewhere to stay they realised it was not going to be easy to find somewhere. After many fruitless enquiries they were desperate as they knocked on another door. Sorry, no room, but something in the innkeeper's heart must have seen their desperation and he offered them space in the stable with the animals. It was better than nothing, at least they would be dry!

Tired from the long journey they settled down and then Mary felt a twinge, and before the night was over, amidst the straw and the smell of animals, a baby born was born. His name was Jesus as the angel had said it should be.

As all this was happening, out in the fields shepherds were sat around the campfire trying to keep warm as they watched over the flocks. It was an ordinary night, clear and starlit and they chatted quietly as the fire crackled.

Suddenly, in the sky above them, angels appeared, and a strange noise filled the air. Frozen with fear, the shepherds heard a voice, 'Fear not, I have good news'. Still in shock the shepherds heard that a special child had been born in Bethlehem and they were invited to go and see him, he was in a stable of all places and they would be guided there by a star. While some stayed to watch over the flock, the rest, still a bit dazed, looked to the night sky and followed the brightest star to the stable.

When the shepherds found the stable beneath the star, they looked in to see a baby wrapped in cloth lying in a bed of straw in the feeding trough. Mary and Joseph were looking in awe at their son whilst the animals rustled quietly in the background. The only light came from the moon and a small candle placed carefully on the floor.

The shepherds approached and told Mary and Joseph what had happened in the field and why they had come. Invited to come closer they gently touched the baby and wonder filled their hearts. They left to tell their friends all that had happened.

The shepherds were not the only visitors. Some while later three wise men from the east arrived telling how they had followed the new star in the sky. Having understood what this star might mean they had brought gifts for the baby – gold, frankincense and myrrh – riches for a very special baby who became recognised as a great gift from God for the whole of humanity.

Jesus grew and became the hope of peace, joy and love in the world through his life, teaching, death and resurrection. Today we exchange gifts at Christmas to remember the wondrous gift of Jesus to the world.

Reflection – A refugee's Christmas carol

Charles Dicks wrote in a Christmas Carol, "We choose this time because it is a time, of all others, when Want is keenly felt, and Abundance rejoices."

Most of us have seen a film of A Christmas Carol, Scrooge, Scrooged or the Muppet Christmas Carol. We know the theme of the story, looking back the present and what is to come and how what we do today can change our own and other people's futures. It is the gospel message.

We were reminded that the roots of the Christmas Story lie with a people in exile, refugees, and that Jesus and his family were also forced to be refugees. An article in The Telegraph this year offers an insight into the lives of two child refugees living in Italy.

[Read A Refugee's Christmas carol](#)

Refugees like Gerges and Awet feel powerless, they have hopes and dreams but are struggling with living in a strange land far from family. Their faith gives them something to hold on to, and the stories of their faith give them hope that life will get better, but they need help. What can we do to help?

You could contact those who are supporting refugees in your community and find out what they need or perhaps make a donation to help them. Christmas is for everyone.