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Introduction

Book of Faith Adult Bible Studies

Welcome to the conversation! The Bible study resources you are using are created to support the bold vision of the Book of Faith initiative that calls “the whole church to become more fluent in the first language of faith, the language of Scripture, in order that we might live into our calling as a people renewed, enlivened, empowered, and sent by the Word.”

Simply put, this initiative and these resources invite you to “Open Scripture. Join the Conversation.”

We enter into this conversation based on the promise that exploring the Bible deeply with others opens us to God working in and through us. God’s Word is life changing, church changing, and world changing. Lutheran approaches to Scripture provide a fruitful foundation for connecting Bible, life, and faith.

A Session Overview

Each session is divided into the following four key sections. The amount of time spent in each section may vary based on choices you make. The core Learner Session Guide is designed for 50 minutes. A session can be expanded to as much as 90 minutes by using the Bonus Activities that appear in the Leader Session Guide.

• Gather (10–15 minutes)

Time to check in, make introductions, review homework assignments, share an opening prayer, and use the Focus Activity to introduce learners to the Session Focus.

• Open Scripture (10–15 minutes)

The session Scripture text is read using a variety of methods and activities. Learners are asked to respond to a few general questions. As leader, you may want to capture initial thoughts or questions on paper for later review.

• Join the Conversation (25–55 minutes)

Learners explore the session Scripture text through core questions and activities that cover each of the four perspectives (see diagram on p. 6). The core Learner Session Guide material may be expanded through use of the Bonus Activities provided in the Leader Session Guide. Each session ends with a brief Wrap-up and prayer.

• Extending the Conversation (5 minutes)

Lists homework assignments, including next week’s session Scripture text. The leader may choose one or more items to assign for all. Each session also includes additional Enrichment options and may include For Further Reading suggestions.

A Method to Guide the Conversation

Book of Faith Adult Bible Studies has three primary goals:

- To increase biblical fluency;
- To encourage and facilitate informed small group conversation based on God’s Word; and
- To renew and empower us to carry out God’s mission for the sake of the world.

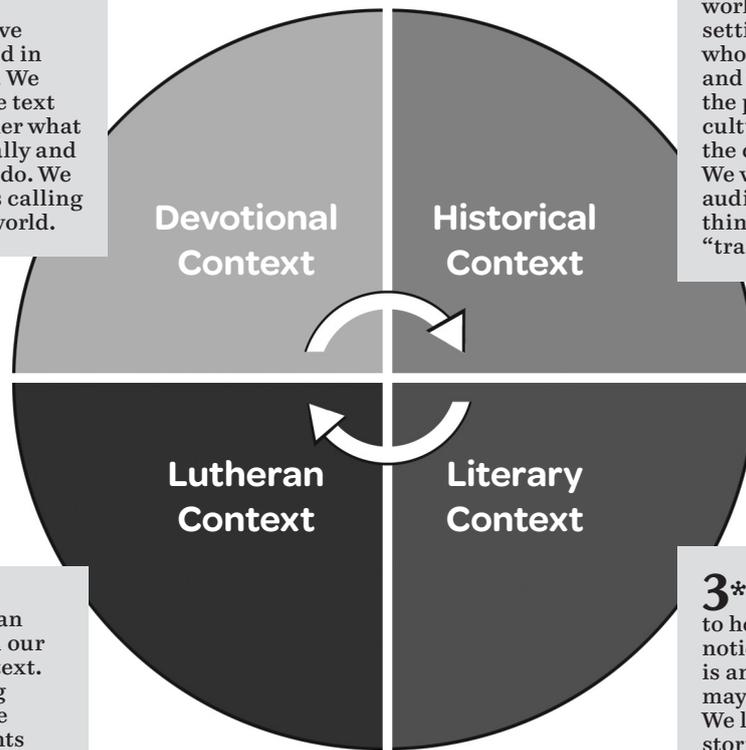
To accomplish these goals, each session will explore one or more primary Bible texts from four different angles and contexts—historical, literary, Lutheran, and devotional. These particular ways of exploring a text are not new, but used in combination they provide a full understanding of and experience with the text.

Complementing this approach is a commitment to engaging participants in active, learner-oriented Bible conversations. The resources call for prepared leaders to facilitate learner discovery, discussion, and activity. Active learning and frequent engagement with Scripture will lead to greater biblical fluency and encourage active faith.

1 We begin by reading the Bible text and reflecting on its meaning. We ask questions and identify items that are unclear. We bring our unique background and experience to the Bible, and the Bible meets us where we are.

5 We return to where we started, but now we have explored and experienced the Bible text from four different dimensions. We are ready to move into the “for” dimension. We have opened Scripture and joined in conversation for a purpose. We consider the meaning of the text for faithful living. We wonder what God is calling us (individually and as communities of faith) to do. We consider how God’s Word is calling us to do God’s work in the world.

2* We seek to understand the world of the Bible and locate the setting of the text. We explore who may have written the text and why. We seek to understand the particular social and cultural contexts that influenced the content and the message. We wonder who the original audience may have been. We think about how these things “translate” to our world today.



4 We consider the Lutheran principles that help ground our interpretation of the Bible text. We ask questions that bring those principles and unique Lutheran theological insights into conversation with the text. We discover how our Lutheran insights can ground and focus our understanding and shape our faithful response to the text.

3* We pay close attention to how the text is written. We notice what kind of literature it is and how this type of literature may function or may be used. We look at the characters, the story line, and the themes. We compare and contrast these with our own understanding and experience of life. In this interchange, we discover meaning.

*** Sessions may begin with either Historical Context or Literary Context.**

The diagram on p. 6 summarizes the general way this method is intended to work. A more detailed introduction to the method used in Book of Faith Adult Bible Studies is available in *Opening the Book of Faith* (Augsburg Fortress, 2008).

The Learner Session Guide

The Learner Session Guide content is built on the four sections (see p. 5). The content included in the main “Join the Conversation” section is considered to be the core material needed to explore the session Scripture text. Each session includes a Focus Image that is used as part of an activity or question somewhere within the core session. Other visuals (maps, charts, photographs, and illustrations) may be included to help enhance the learner’s experience with the text and its key concepts.

The Leader Session Guide

For easy reference, the Leader Session Guide contains all the content included in the Learner Session Guide and more. The elements that are unique to the Leader Session Guide are the following:

- **Before You Begin**—Helpful tips to use as you prepare to lead the session.
- **Session Overview**—Contains detailed description of key themes and content covered in each of the four contexts (Historical, Literary, Lutheran, Devotional). Core questions and activities in the Learner Session Guide are intended to emerge directly from this Session Overview.
- **Key Definitions**—Key terms or concepts that appear in the Session Overview may be illustrated or defined.
- **Facilitator’s Prayer**—To help the leader center on the session theme and leadership task.
- **Bonus Activities**—Optional activities included in each of the four sections of “Join the Conversation” used by the leader to expand the core session.
- **Tips**—A variety of helpful hints, instructions, or background content to aid leadership facilitation.
- **Looking Ahead**—Reminders to the leader about preparation for the upcoming session.

Leader and Learner

In Book of Faith Adult Bible Studies, the leader’s primary task is facilitating small group conversation and activity. These conversations are built around structured learning tasks. What is a structured learning task? It is an open question or activity that engages learners with new content and the resources they need to respond. Underlying this structured dialog approach are three primary assumptions about adult learners:

- Adult learners bring with them varied experiences and the capability to do active learning tasks;
- Adult learners learn best when they are invited to be actively involved in learning; and
- Adults are more accountable and engaged when active learning tasks are used.

Simply put, the goal is fluency in the first language of faith, the language of Scripture. How does one become fluent in a new language, proficient in building houses, or skilled at hitting a baseball? By practicing and doing in a hands-on way. Book of Faith Adult Bible Studies provides the kind of hands-on Bible exploration that will produce Bible-fluent learners equipped to do God’s work in the world.

Books of Faith Series

Book of Faith Adult Bible Studies includes several series and courses. This Luke unit is part of the Books of Faith Series, which is designed to explore key themes and texts in the books of the Bible. Each book of the Bible reveals a unique story or message of faith. Many core themes and story lines and characters are shared by several books, but each book in its own right is a book of faith. Exploring these books of faith in depth opens us to the variety and richness of God’s written word for us.

Luke Unit Overview

The Gospel of Luke invites readers—including us—to explore the story of Jesus and his mission as God’s Chosen One (Messiah). From the joyous accounts of Jesus’ birth in a manger in Bethlehem to the stark images of his crucifixion at Golgotha to the “eye-opening” meal at Emmaus, we are invited

into a remarkable story. The evangelist (the writer of Luke) describes how God has broken into our world and history by sending the one who is Messiah and Savior. In these eight sessions, you and your class will explore eight key texts in the life of Christ and search for the meaning and truth revealed in them.

Session 1 (Luke 2:1-20) asks, “Why Was Jesus Born?” In the most familiar of the Christmas birth narratives, Luke’s story reveals that Jesus’ birth is really about God’s reign coming to earth. The “timeless truth” of the story is more compelling because it is “timely.” Jesus was born in a real time and place, in an occupied country where all threats to imperial authority were fiercely suppressed.

Session 2 (Luke 2:21-40) asks, “What Will Become of This Child?” The infant Jesus signified that God’s promises would be fulfilled, even in the face of opposition. Simeon and Anna witness that the child signifies the fulfillment of God’s promises for Israel’s consolation and Jerusalem’s redemption. But the infant Jesus will also be a sign of the rejection of God’s purposes by God’s own people. Thus, only God knows what will become of God’s people because of the Christ child.

Session 3 (Luke 4:14-30) declares, “Let God Be God!” God of the Bible is not under our control. This story reveals the reign, or mission, that God is bringing into the world through the Messiah, Jesus. As we hear this story in Christian congregations, the direct question confronts us, “If Jesus is the Messiah, are we ready to receive his reign as he defined it?”

Session 4 (Luke 7:1-17) asks, “What Was Jesus Doing?” As God’s Messiah and prophet, Jesus went about Galilee, preaching, teaching, and healing, and he commissioned his disciples to continue those actions in his name. This session focuses on Jesus’ raising the son of a widow and healing a centurion’s servant. The gospel does not promise that Jesus’ followers will be immune from sickness and death, but Jesus provides glimpses of the life and healing that God intends for all who trust in him.

Session 5 (Luke 9:18-36) asks, “Why Must Jesus Die?” Jesus was understood to be the fulfillment of God’s promises to Israel, responding in scriptural terms to the question “Who is Jesus?” But as we get all of those titles straight, the enduring question becomes “Why did Jesus have to die?” Jesus was no victim of fate or politics. Jesus was driving the action forward. He was enacting God’s script.

Session 6 (Luke 15:1-32) declares, “And Grace Will Lead Me Home.” Taken together, the stories of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son draw us into the world of God’s love for the lost. But we are also alerted to the controversial nature of Jesus’ ministry that stretched the bounds of Israel’s law and angered its religious leaders. How will we respond when we confront the lost or those who may not “fit” our picture of God’s proper people?

Session 7 (Luke 23:26-49) asks, “Ah, Holy Jesus, How Hast Thou Offended?” This session focuses on the events leading up to Jesus’ crucifixion. The execution of Jesus tested all of God’s promises of justice and mercy. Standing at the foot of the cross, we are both tormented and deeply inspired by what we see and hear.

Session 8 (Luke 24:13-35) asks, “How Did Jesus’ Resurrection Change the World?” Jesus’ resurrection is not simply a fact from the past. It is a transformative event. “I want to know Christ,” says Paul, “and the power of his resurrection” (Philippians 3:10). Luke’s story leads us deeply into how the experience of Jesus’ resurrected presence turned fearful followers into apostolic witnesses.

Luke 2:1-20



Focus Statement

When Jesus was born, God entered our earthly lives.

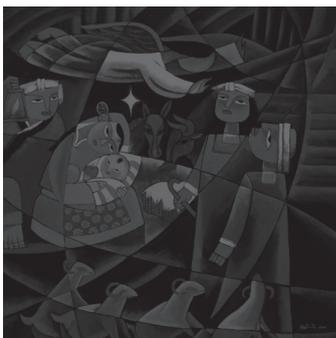


Key Verse

To you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.
Luke 2:11



Focus Image



He Qi, "Nativity"
© He Qi. Used by permission.

Why Was Jesus Born?

Session Preparation

Before You Begin . . .

An old saint once noted, "Christians can be so heavenly minded they are no earthly good!" But Luke's story of Jesus' birth is about God's reign coming to earth. Imagine holding an infant in your arms. Think about the human, earthy, physical details of caring for a baby, and consider the promise that God has for the world in every child. Now, suppose you are Mary, holding Jesus. What do you believe God has in mind for the earth?

Session Instructions

1. Read this Session Guide completely and highlight or underline any portions you wish to emphasize with the group. Note any Bonus Activities you wish to do.
2. If you plan to do any special activities, check to see what materials you'll need, if any.
3. Have extra Bibles on hand in case a member of the group forgets to bring one.
4. Set up a nativity scene. Do not include the magi, because they are not in Luke's telling of the nativity story.

Session Overview

The "Christmas Gospel" is an excellent place to begin the eight sessions on Luke. Most people are familiar with the story and often connect personal memories with it. What are your earliest memories of hearing the story? Who told it to you? Who were you with? People have happy and sad Christmas memories. In the hymn "O Little Town of Bethlehem," we sing, "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight!" You already know how the story goes, but as you move together in the coming sessions, listen with Mary and ponder in your heart how God's purposes will unfold in Jesus' life. And how about the unfolding story of your life? Where will Jesus' story meet the hopes and fears of your life and the lives of all the participants?

LITERARY CONTEXT

Luke's story is praised for its "timeless beauty," and it has been loved through the centuries and all over the world. Imagine

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staging a Christmas pageant in a place where people had never heard the story, perhaps among a remote tribe in the Amazon forests. How would you tell the story (plot, characters, messages) to reveal its richest truth about what God was doing through Jesus' birth?

We don't know as much as we'd like to know about how people learned Israel's scriptures, but the stories in Luke 1–2 about the miraculous births and childhoods of John and Jesus in are almost a running commentary on the stories of Samuel and David in the book of 1 Samuel. Mary's praise of God (Luke 1:46–56) even echoes the prophetic speech made by Samuel's mother Hannah in 1 Samuel 2. For those who remembered Samuel and David, the stories of John and Jesus revealed God's completion of the story that God began long ago. Both stories are filled with clues that God had a particular kind of king in mind. Bethlehem is a powerful connection between the stories. As you read aloud from those two stories (1 Samuel 16:1–13; Luke 2:4, 2:15), listen for Bethlehem as the place where God is at work.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

All of the Gospels are continually mentioning the Roman occupation of the land. More than the other three, however, Luke's Gospel repeatedly sets the story of the nativity against the backdrop of the empire, explicitly mentioning three **emperors**—Augustus Octavian (Luke 2:1), Tiberius Caesar (3:1), and Claudius (Acts 11:28; 18:02; 23:26)—as well as numerous local governors, procurators, high priests, and kings appointed by Rome. The “timeless truth” of the story is more compelling because it is “timely.” Jesus was born in a real time and place, in an occupied country where all threats to imperial authority were fiercely suppressed.

Luke's story does not advocate subversive activity or overthrow of the Roman order, and Jesus' birth does not appear to have attracted attention from the empire. (Compare that with Herod's response in Matthew 2.) At the same time, it must be noted that loyalty tests in the Roman order included required public affirmations that Caesar is Lord; Octavian was given the honorary title of “Augustus” (his name in our story) and was widely acclaimed as the Savior. One public monument dated just before Jesus' birth acclaimed Octavian as “filled with a hero's soul,” making wars to cease so that “the Epiphany of Caesar” surpassed all his predecessors and any who would follow. “The birth date of

? **Emperors:**

After fierce wars between Mark Antony and Octavian for control of the empire, the Roman Senate proclaimed Octavian as emperor, or Caesar, and then gave him the honorary title of Augustus (the honored one). Israel's rulers were traditionally called kings and were anointed for office. The Romans insisted that only they could decide who was named king in Judea. Luke makes us aware of the importance of titles for both Octavian/Augustus and Jesus/Christ.

our god,” declares the inscription, “has signaled the beginning of the good news for the world.”

Into this historical context, the angels proclaim, “To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord” (Luke 2:11). At this point in the story with Zechariah and Elizabeth gone, the shepherds, Mary and Joseph—and we who are reading—are the only mortals who know that Jesus is truly God’s king, **Lord, Savior,** and Messiah. As you read, imagine what the Romans and their collaborators will think if the angels’ words get out. How will Pilate and Herod respond when Jesus heads toward Jerusalem? And after Jerusalem is destroyed, how will the Roman authorities regard Jesus’ followers? Those outcomes are foreshadowed in this opening announcement of Jesus’ birth.

LUTHERAN CONTEXT

This session provides an excellent opportunity to focus on reading the Bible for what shows forth Christ. Lutherans talk about how all Scriptures points to Christ. This approach welcomes the popular call to “keep Christ in Christmas,” which is no small task when the holiday has become so thoroughly commercialized. The participants will learn a wonderful truth when their homes are more filled with the Spirit of Christ in the Christmas season. Taking time to explore that could start a rich discussion because people already sense how important the Christmas season is.

As you discuss this story, keep the word *Christ* connected with the words *Messiah* and *King* because Jesus was born to be the Christ/Messiah/Anointed King. At the same time, don’t worry about getting it all figured out too quickly. These are political titles, but Jesus will give them new meaning. In his meditation on Mary’s **Magnificat**, Luther advised the prince to let the youthful Mary counsel him in governing well. Luther did not claim to be an expert in governance, but he understood that Mary was speaking as a prophet, telling the world how God reigns through King Jesus.

The world’s political forces are often tempted to believe that they are ultimate or divine, rather than seeing that they are actually using mortal methods. Caesar is not truly the Savior or Lord. The Lutheran tradition has also been dubious about high-sounding “Christian” politics, whether of the “Holy Roman Empire” or some modern claim to be God’s own party. Politics need to support and provide good governance—which is a worthy human

? **Lord, Savior:**

Both of these titles had been used for centuries by the rulers of the empires to assert the divine legitimacy of their reigns. In protest of the divine claims over Israel of the Babylonian Nebuchadnezzar, the prophet Isaiah quoted God, saying, “Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me. I, I am the Lord, and besides me there is no savior.” (Isaiah 43:10–11). When the angels declared Jesus to be the Savior, Lord, and Messiah, they were again declaring God’s dominion over the empires.

? **Magnificat:**

This Latin word identifies Mary’s poetic song in Luke 1:46–55 that began, “My soul magnifies the Lord.” Mary’s song is powerful, echoing the prophetic song of Hannah over the birth of Samuel. Both women were speaking of God’s might, especially in raising up the lowly and bringing down the high and mighty.

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vocation in making the world a more trustworthy place—but be wary of those who claim divine rights or presume that God is on their side.

The Lutheran tradition is equally suspicious of secular claims that God has no place in human politics or economics. The prophets continued to call all leaders and governments to God’s high standards of justice and mercy, and Luke’s story revealed Jesus to be God’s vessel of ruling the world. If the word *Christ* becomes too spiritualized, we miss the power of God coming in the flesh. At the same time, if the word *king* becomes too politicized, we forget that God is at work in the midst of—and often in the face of—Caesar’s empire, yet never captive to its claims.

In our story, Bethlehem is more than symbolically significant. It existed for a thousand years before Jesus, and it continues to be a real town two thousand years later. If you visit the “Christmas square” today in Bethlehem, you will find the Evangelical Christmas Lutheran Church alive in faith and active with education and health care for Palestinian families, but under great duress. This congregation is a sign of Jesus’ reign as they speak of “continuing Christ’s ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing in his home country.” Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus and David, is still a historic crossroads. Look up the Web site <http://www.elcjlh.org/cong/bethlehem>.

DEVOTIONAL CONTEXT

How can we feel the power of such a familiar story? Its beauty may make it seem sentimental, but it is a prophetic message of the Lord in our lives and for our world. The news is that when Jesus was born, God entered our earthly lives. Is that news promising or threatening? It is certainly life-changing, and world-changing!

Maybe the power of the story will hit you immediately, but don’t pretend something for yourself or others. None of us really controls our feelings, and we are certainly not empowered to control the feelings of other people. The Book of Faith approach is an exercise in trusting the Spirit to touch our lives and those of all the participants in God’s ways and time. Give the group time to wonder together about how they hear this old, old story in new ways.

The journey through Luke's story is just beginning, and it begins with gentleness and strength. Right at the start, we can sense with Mary and the shepherds that God is on the move. The details of our daily lives are illumined in the new light of Christ's presence with us! Not everything we have been doing looks good. In fact, we may be worried about secrets or deceptions we hope God might not see, even when we know better. At the same time, God has entered our earthly lives. If we follow Jesus, where will he take us? Or send us? Back to our flocks? At least for now, but what then? Luke's larger narrative will continually testify that God has not come just to expose us but to empower us. We are being swept into God's great mission of love for the world. When God has entered our lives, each of us and all of us together are called and sent.

Facilitator's Prayer

Lord Jesus, you were born among us to bring God's reign into our world. Come into my life, reign in my mind, my heart, my will that I may know the blessing of your presence. And make me an agent of your mercy and your righteousness in all that I am and do. Empower all in our study of Luke's Gospel with your Spirit that they will grasp anew the wonder of your birth, bringing your kingdom into the midst of the kingdoms of the world. In your holy name. Amen.

Gather (10–15 minutes)

Check-in

Take time to greet each person, and invite learners to introduce themselves to one another. This first session on Luke is also a significant moment to extend special hospitality to newcomers, to welcome all as Christ among us.

Pray

Pray or sing these verses from a hymn by Martin Luther.

*Welcome to earth, O noble Guest,
through whom this sinful world is blest!
You turned not from our needs away;
how can our thanks such love repay?*

*For velvets soft and silken stuff
you have but hay and straw so rough*

Tip:

Nametags are almost always a good idea; even people who know each other can forget names, and newcomers may be called by name more easily. Christmas nametags could be useful, but the story is not about Christmas trees or wise men, so try to find images of shepherds, angels, or the manger scene that are in line with Luke's script.

Tip:

Invite participants to join you in praying three verses from Martin Luther's Christmas hymn, "From Heaven Above." These lines need to be savored. You could pray them together, but be cautious of asking people to take turns reading aloud because some readers might struggle. Consider asking a capable reader or accepting a volunteer to lead the group. The poetic phrases are a powerful witness to be heard. If you have a clear solo voice in the group, you might ask that person to sing these verses as your prayer.

**Tip:**

Provide paper and pens or pencils for participants. Assure them that no one will be required to share what he or she writes, but encourage them to help get the conversation going. After participants have finished writing, take a few minutes to explore any thoughts or ideas they have. Welcome whatever they say! Write down notes on chart paper or a whiteboard.

**Tip:**

With advance preparation, you may find a way to darken the room before the reading and then illumine the scene suddenly at the moment when “the glory of the Lord” shone around the shepherds. In this birth, God entered our earthly lives.

**Tip:**

This session includes several suggestions for activities, and you may find some helpful. Make sure, however, that you take your time, treasure some moments for quiet, and give people the chance to dwell deeply in the wonder of this story. Calm and reflective moments are precious opportunities for people to experience God’s presence.

*on which as king so rich and great
to be enthroned in humble state.*

*Ah, dearest Jesus, holy child,
prepare a bed, soft, undefiled,
a quiet chamber in my heart,
that you and I may never part.*

Amen.

(“From Heaven Above.” *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 268, verses 8, 11, 12)

Focus Activity

Suppose a non-Christian friend asked you, “Why in the world was Jesus born in a stable?” Using only two minutes, write down the first things you would say.

Open Scripture (10–15 minutes)

In order to hear the story with fresh ears, consider bringing this text to life in one of the following ways:

1. Ask three to five people to be a “family” in which the children gather on Christmas Eve and the father or the mother reads the story to them. Encourage all the others to listen as if it were their family. What do they hope the children will hear? What power does the story itself have when parents read it to their children in their homes?
2. Set up your own “nativity pageant” with a narrator, Mary, Joseph, a baby, an “angel of the Lord,” and a “heavenly host” to recite the appropriate lines. At first, this will seem like the usual Christmas pageant, but for this activity, ask the other participants to listen as if some of them were Jewish residents of Bethlehem and some of them were Roman officials.
3. Imagine staging a Christmas pageant in a place where people had never heard the story, perhaps among a remote tribe in the Amazon forests. How would you tell the story (plot, characters, messages) to reveal its richest truth about what God was doing through Jesus’ birth?

Read Luke 2:1–20.

- What words or phrases caught your attention in this familiar story?

- How do you sense God’s reign “in the highest heaven” coming to earth?
- How do you imagine the shepherds felt when they returned to their flocks?

Join the Conversation (25–55 minutes)

Literary Context

1. The Gospel according to Luke is famous for its literary beauty, and this story is widely loved, even among people who know very little about Jesus or the Christian faith. Although the author’s identity is never revealed, the first four verses of the book (Luke 1:1–4) acknowledge that many others have written accounts and emphasize that our author is intent on telling “the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.”

- Luke 2:1–20 supplies the script that is re-enacted in Christmas pageants in every nation on earth, but this passage isn’t only for children. Look again at the lines delivered by the characters in the story. For you, which voices announce the truth of what God is doing here? How do you imagine those voices sounding?

2. Luke’s story of Jesus’ birth follows wonderful accounts of angelic announcements to Zechariah (Luke 1:13–19) and Mary about God’s purposes in the births of John and Jesus (1:28–37). The story also echoes with old scriptural accounts of the birth of Samuel (1 Samuel 1:1–2:10), who anointed David as Israel’s king. The Hebrew word for the “anointed one” is *Messiah*, and the Greek word is *Christ*.

- Why is Bethlehem called “the city of David”? See 1 Samuel 16:1–13.
- God took David “from the sheepfolds” where he was tending sheep (Psalm 78:70–72) to anoint him as the shepherd king of Israel. Notice that the angelic messengers explicitly mention “the city of David” as the birthplace of “a savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord” (Luke 2:11). What clues do you get in the story about the kind of king that Jesus will be?

3. Mary plays a powerful role in Luke’s story. The angel Gabriel tells her that she will bear this holy child. As God’s faithful servant Mary declared, “Let it be with me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). She also prophesied that Jesus would fulfill the promises that God had made to Israel (Luke 1:54–55). Mary was silent in this story, but she “treasured all these words and

+ Bonus Activity:

Compare Mary’s *Magnificat* in Luke 1:46–55 with Hannah’s prophetic speech in 1 Samuel 2:1–10. Invite learners to work in pairs or groups of three so they can have both readings open at the same time. Alternatively, you could present the two passages side by side by projecting them or making a handout. Ask participants to note similarities and jot them down on chart paper.

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Bonus Activity:

Invite participants to discuss the role that Jesus seems to play in modern culture. How has culture's attitude changed regarding Jesus and the celebration or recognition of his birth? This topic can be a touchy one for many. Some may feel that culture has lost much of the sense of having or celebrating Christ in Christmas. Others may say that changes are good and reflect the more diverse nature of our culture. This activity is not intended to cause debate or argument, but it is likely a topic that is close to the surface in many communities.



Palestine in Jesus' Time
Lutheran Study Bible, p. 2109



Tip:

The distance is about 70 miles (113 km) in a straight line, but the walking route would have been somewhat longer, likely south along the Jordan Valley and Jericho before turning east toward Bethlehem.



Tip:

The purpose of this historical section is to remember that Jesus was not born in a fictional “once upon a time,” but in a real time and place.

pondered them in her heart” (Luke 2:19). She would soon hear “a sword will pierce your own soul too” (see Luke 2:35).

- Luke’s account of Jesus’ birth causes believers and unbelievers to join Mary in wondering, “What in the world will become of this child?” How does Mary’s response of treasuring and pondering these words prepare you for all that lies ahead in Luke’s story of Jesus?

4. With which character or characters do you most closely identify in the story of Jesus’ birth? Why?

Historical Context

1. Note the following places on the map of Palestine in Jesus’ time: Nazareth, Galilee, Bethlehem, Judea, and Syria. How far did Joseph and Mary have to travel on their trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem? Imagine taking the journey by foot or on a donkey when about nine months pregnant.

2. Luke regularly alerts the reader to what is happening in the Roman Empire and in the local governance of Roman and Jewish authorities (see Luke 3:1–2; Acts 18:2). Here he mentions the “registration” of the whole empire by Caesar Augustus (probably for taxation and military conscription) and identifies Quirinius.

- Why do you think information about the Roman emperor and governor are explicitly given in the story?

3. The official Roman messengers proclaimed the “good news” that Caesar was the “savior,” and all citizens were required to declare, “Caesar is lord!”

- What do you imagine the Romans might have thought if they heard that God’s messengers (the angels) had announced that the “good news” was the birth of Jesus, “a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord” (Luke 2:11)?
- Why are those public titles for Jesus still “good news” for our time?

4. Historians believe that by the late first century (when Luke’s Gospel was written), the Roman armies had already destroyed Jerusalem, burned the temple, and killed or taken Israel’s leaders into slavery.

- In the midst of troubled times when Luke’s story was first read, how do you expect the story of Jesus’ birth renewed people’s hope in God?
- How does the Christmas gospel continue to be especially powerful in times of sorrow or suffering in your family, or in the world? How do suffering people still find hope in this wonderful story?

Lutheran Context

1. Martin Luther compared the Bible to the straw-filled manger that held the Christ child. Lutherans speak of the Bible as the book that reveals Jesus Christ to us. What message about Jesus is “revealed” in this text from Luke? Who has revealed Christ to you most clearly in your life?

2. God’s living word speaks both God’s law and God’s promise, sometimes bringing judgment and again announcing hope. God’s word exposes how we have turned away from God, and yet it also reveals God’s love and care for us.

- Take a few minutes to think about the past week. What if the angels interrupted your life just as they surprised the shepherds? What would you want to hide from God? What hope would their message give you?

3. Martin Luther was a biblical scholar who understood that the power of the four Gospels lies in their faithfulness to the one gospel that is the good news of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Luther wrote:

Such a story can be told in various ways; one spins it out, the other is brief. Thus, the gospel is and should be nothing else than a chronicle, a story, a narrative about Christ, telling who he is and what he did, said, and suffered—a subject which one describes briefly, another more fully, one this way, another that way. (“Brief Introduction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels,” Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings, ed. Timothy Lull, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989, p. 105).

- Read Matthew’s story (Matthew 2:1–18) of Jesus’ birth. Notice how the cruelty of Herod the Great threatens to overshadow the joy of what God is doing. Both Luke and Matthew are telling the



Bonus Activity:

That God chose to come to earth—to be with humanity in the form of a baby born in a manger—is both remarkable and unexpected. Invite learners to imagine other ways that God might have decided to break into our lives or to bring life and salvation. Ask learners to tell or even draw a picture of how this might have happened. Then reflect on what difference it makes that God came in this humble way.



Tip:

When Luther spoke of the “theology of the cross,” he emphasized how the story of Jesus is “down to earth,” not only in its earthy details about shepherds and taxation but also in the profound sense of God dwelling with human beings in the midst of our difficulties.

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Bonus Activity:

Imagine staging a Christmas pageant in a place where people had never heard the story, perhaps among a remote tribe in the Amazon forests. How would you tell the story (plot, characters, messages) to reveal its richest truth about what God was doing in through Jesus' birth?



Tip:

Be sure to pause and listen if participants tell about what they are suffering or if they express that their hearts have been touched while hearing about someone else's struggles. That could be the most "teachable moment" in your group's understanding of why God has come among us.

gospel truth of Jesus. Describe how each evangelist opens your heart and mind to understand Jesus' birth.

Devotional Context

1. Take another look at the Focus Image on p. 5. How is it similar to or different from other images of Christ's birth? What is most striking to you about this image?
2. We opened our session with verses from Luther's Christmas hymn, "From Heaven Above." It echoes one of the deepest convictions of the Reformation that God has acted to justify and save us. The Gospel story is about how God came to earth among us, and not about our spiritual ascent to God. The Gospel according to John (1:14) declares, "The Word became flesh and lived among us."
 - Take a few minutes to reflect on your family's Christmas traditions. Many are good family fun, but some may bring everyone closer to God's intention. Write down one or two ways that observing Christmas could highlight the good news that Jesus' birth means "God is with us."
3. Both Luke and Matthew highlight that Jesus, God in the flesh, was born into a displaced, refugee, or undocumented family.
 - Take time to pray for all the work that is done among refugees in the name of Christ by our congregations, Lutheran Social Ministries, Lutheran World Federation, and Lutheran Immigrant and Refugee Services.
 - How can you see yourself embodying the good news of Jesus in the world?
4. People have happy and sad Christmas memories. In the hymn "O Little Town of Bethlehem" we sing, "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight!" You already know how the story goes, but as you move together in the coming sessions, listen with Mary and ponder in your heart how God's purposes will unfold in Jesus' life. And how about the unfolding story of your life? Where will Jesus' story meet the hopes and fears of your life?

Wrap-up

1. If there are any questions to explore further, write them on chart paper or a whiteboard. Ask for volunteers to do further research to share with the group at the next session.

2. Strongly encourage the participants to begin the daily readings, as outlined in the enrichment sections of their learner guides.

Pray

Lord Jesus, you came as God among us and as an infant in a poor family dislocated by the kingdoms of the world. God's promises for a ruler and Savior all came true in you. You are our Savior and Lord, God who has come among us. Help us be as joyful as the shepherds and join the angels in giving thanks to God. Empower us by your Spirit to tell the world of your love, and give us courage and hope to serve within your reign in this world and the next. We pray in your blessed name, Lord Jesus. Amen.

Extending the Conversation (5 minutes)

Homework

1. Read the next session's Bible text: Luke 2:21-40.
2. Take out a manger scene from Christmas storage and put it on your TV, monitor, newspaper, or wherever you get the news of the world. Leave the "wise men" in the box for now, and simply pray the Lord's Prayer for God's kingdom to come on earth as in heaven. With your family or others, discuss how God's kingdom came to earth, and consider what will happen next in Luke's story when the world's rulers find out.
3. Re-read Luke 2:1-20 with special attention to verse 19: "Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart." Which words do you treasure most in the story, and how do you ponder them in your heart and live them?

Enrichment

1. If you wish to read through the entire book of Luke during this unit, read the following sections this week.
 - Day 1: Luke 1:1-25
 - Day 2: Luke 1:26-38
 - Day 3: Luke 1:39-56
 - Day 4: Luke 1:57-66
 - Day 5: Luke 1:67-80
 - Day 6: Luke 2:1-20
 - Day 7: Luke 2:21-40



Tip:

Encourage learners to reflect during the coming week on how their lives are blessed because God came among us when Jesus was born.



Tip:

Encourage the participants to keep a journal of their thoughts and prayers as they do the daily readings. You may wish to provide a low-cost notebook or journal that people could bring along to future sessions.

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2. Do an Internet search for “images of nativity” or “images of the birth of Jesus.” Make note of any images that are especially appealing or interesting to you. You might also consider looking at Christmas scenes from around the world at the following Web site: <http://campus.udayton.edu/mary/gallery/creches/crechesworld.html>

For Further Reading

The Gospel According to Luke by Michael Patella in New Collegeville Bible Commentary Series (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005). Presents a very accessible commentary to help people read the whole story.

“Session 1: Caesar and Lord” in *Learning Luke: The Apostolic Gospel* by David L. Tiede and friends (selectlearning.org, 2009). A twelve-session video series with study guides on how Luke’s story empowers God’s mission.

Provoking the Gospel of Luke: A Storyteller’s Commentary by Richard W. Swanson (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2006). Provides dramatic clues for presenting the lectionary readings from Luke.

Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament: Luke by David L. Tiede (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1988).

Looking Ahead

1. Read the next session’s Bible text: Luke 2:21–40.
2. Read through the Leader Guide for the next session and mark portions you wish to highlight for the group.
3. Make a checklist of any materials you’ll need to do the Bonus Activities.
4. Pray for members of your group during the week.