



CELL

ADVENT

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### SESSION ONE:

Our carol for this session is the old favourite '**Joy to the World**'. This song of praise speaks of the joy that entered our world when God's son was born here on earth. In today's session, we will discover how each character in the Christmas story prepared for the arrival of Jesus. As we focus on one line of the song, we will consider if there is room in our hearts for Jesus and how we can place him at the centre of this Christmas.

### SESSION TWO:

In today's session, we will reflect on a line from the well-known carol '**Hark! the Herald Angels Sing**'. Jesus came to bring light and life to our lives, and Advent is the perfect time to consider what that means for each one of us. What is your experience of the light of Jesus, and how does his light shine in the darkness you face in life? In John 8:12, Jesus said, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.' This Advent let us focus on Jesus as the Light of the World.

### SESSION THREE:

Our final session of Advent focuses on the last two lines of '**In the Bleak Midwinter**'. At times when we are focused on giving and receiving gifts for each other, this song urges us to consider the gift we will bring to Jesus. What gift can you bring Jesus this Advent? The carol reminds us that the gift most precious to Jesus is our heart.


Any text in italics represents notes for the leader. It gives more context around the Scripture/activity. You may choose to share verbatim, summarise or not share at all.

# LET EVERY HEART PREPARE HIM ROOM

Our carol for this session is the old favourite, **'Joy to the World'**. This song of praise speaks of the joy that entered our world when God's son was born here on earth. In today's session, we will discover how each character in the Christmas story prepared for the arrival of Jesus. As we focus on one line of the song, we will consider if there is room in our hearts for Jesus and how we can place him at the centre of this Christmas.

## WELCOME

In today's session, we are focusing on preparing our hearts for Jesus this Christmas.

 In the run-up to Christmas, what do we usually spend time preparing for?

We make all these preparations, but the Christmas experience doesn't always live up to our expectations. We're going to watch a clip from the film *Arthur Christmas* where the celebrations of Christmas aren't exactly going to plan.

Carefully watch this clip from *Arthur Christmas* and see if you can answer questions about it.


### CHRISTMAS, THE BOARD GAME – ARTHUR CHRISTMAS (2:19)


[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rd3c\\_dPNb3o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rd3c_dPNb3o)

1. What colour is the bauble on top of the Christmas tree in the centre of the game? **Yellow**
2. What does Arthur have on his Christmas jumper? **Baubles**
3. What are Grandsanta, Santa and Steve arguing about? **They all want the Santa playing piece**
4. What piece does Santa suggest Steve should be with his 'bright ideas'? **Candle**
5. What piece does Arthur end up with? **Turkey**
6. What animal attacked Mrs Santa on the ice? **Polar bear**
7. What is the name of Steve's space-age sleigh? **S1**
8. What happened to the Grandsanta's drunken elf? **Fell out of the sleigh (bonus point for 'over Lake Geneva')**
9. What carol does Arthur have to sing backwards? **'Silent Night'**
10. What colour is Arthur's Christmas hat? **Red**

 Do you think the Christmas family have grasped the true meaning of Christmas? If not, why not?

## ADDITIONAL ACTIVITY

 What special preparations does your family make for Christmas?

 Do you have any family traditions that you always follow? Share them with the group.


## WORSHIP

Throughout Advent, each session will start with a song that will form the basis for our thoughts and reflections. Today we will listen to the uplifting words of 'Joy to the World'. As you listen to the music and reflect on the words, think about the message the song is trying to convey.

 **Joy to the World (4:16)**

<https://youtu.be/Q9qDTtTEu9I>

Read through the lyrics.

 Which line or phrase stands out for you? Explain why.

Verse 1

**Joy to the world! the Lord is come;  
Let earth receive her King,  
Let every heart prepare him room  
And Heaven and nature sing.**

Verse 2

**Joy to the world! the Saviour reigns;  
Let men their songs employ  
While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains  
Repeat the sounding joy.**




Verse 3

**He rules the world with truth and grace,  
And makes the nations prove  
The glories of his righteousness  
And wonders of his love.**

— ISAAC WATTS (1674-1748), SASB 113

This video version of 'Joy to the World' has a section added with the following lyrics:

*Peace on earth, tidings of comfort and joy wash over,  
Mountains and hills burst into song as we cross over,  
There are no limits, Heaven has come to us.*

-  What images come to mind as you hear those words?
-  Is this the kind of joy you feel as a Christian? If not, why not?
-  What distracts us from experiencing the joy Jesus wants us to?

In today's session, we are going to focus on one line from this well-known carol: 'Let every heart prepare him room'.

## ADDITIONAL ACTIVITY

Many Salvation Army families have experienced the frantic tidying up that occurs when the corps is host to a visiting band or songster group for the weekend! As a child, I can remember every nook and cranny of the house would sparkle in preparation for our guests. Mum would buy Shloer and Viennetta (considered 'posh' in the 80s), and we would all have to be on our best behaviour.


- \* Can you relate to this experience? If so, how?
- \* How does your household prepare for visitors?
- \* In what way do these experiences link to the words 'Let every heart prepare him room'?
- \* In our starter, we thought about different ways that we prepare for Christmas. How could we shift our focus this year?

## WORD

Our familiarity with the Christmas story can lead us to skip over details without considering the significance of these events. In today's session we are taking time to prepare room in our hearts for Jesus. To do this, we need to look at the way the participants of the story prepared for the arrival of Jesus.

**Leader's notes:** Give out the 'Let Every Heart Prepare Him Room' handout, which will be used in the 'Word' and 'Witness' sections of the session. As you explore each character's experience in the Christmas story, encourage the group to jot down what they have discovered about each character. The 'Word' section is longer as it explores the **response** of each character. The 'Witness' section is shorter and gives the group a chance to **reflect** on the response of each character. There is space on the handout for the group to jot down their response and reflection.

### ZECHARIAH

 **Read: Luke 1:5-22**

<sup>5</sup> In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. <sup>6</sup> Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. <sup>7</sup> But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

<sup>8</sup> Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, <sup>9</sup> he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. <sup>10</sup> And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshippers were praying outside.

<sup>11</sup> Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. <sup>12</sup> When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. <sup>13</sup> But the angel said to him: 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. <sup>14</sup> He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, <sup>15</sup> for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. <sup>16</sup> He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. <sup>17</sup> And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous – to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.'

<sup>18</sup> Zechariah asked the angel, 'How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.'

<sup>19</sup> The angel said to him, 'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. <sup>20</sup> And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.'

<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. <sup>22</sup> When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realised he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.

Zechariah was the first to be visited by an angel who told him that his son would be the ultimate preparation for the birth and ministry of Jesus.

 How did Zechariah react?

 What did God do to help Zechariah wait for the arrival of his son John?

 **Read Luke 1:57-66 to find out what happened to Zechariah when John was born:**


<sup>57</sup> When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. <sup>58</sup> Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.

<sup>59</sup> On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, <sup>60</sup> but his mother spoke up and said, 'No! He is to be called John.'

<sup>61</sup> They said to her, 'There is no one among your relatives who has that name.'

<sup>62</sup> Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. <sup>63</sup> He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, 'His name is John.' <sup>64</sup> Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God. <sup>65</sup> All the neighbours were filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things.

<sup>66</sup> Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, 'What then is this child going to be?' For the Lord's hand was with him.


 In what way do you think Zechariah's time of silence prepared him for the birth of Jesus?

## ELIZABETH

We have already heard that Elizabeth's pregnancy was a miracle as she was an elderly woman.

 **Read Luke 1:23-25 to discover Elizabeth's reaction to the news.**

**<sup>23</sup> When his [Zechariah's] time of service was completed, he returned home. <sup>24</sup> After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. <sup>25</sup> 'The Lord has done this for me,' she said. 'In these days he has shown his favour and taken away my disgrace among the people.'**

 How did Elizabeth react to the news about the birth of John?

Elizabeth recognised that God had blessed her and made her son a critical part of the story of the birth of Jesus.

## MARY

 **Read: Luke 1:26-38**


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

**<sup>29</sup> Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup> But the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favour with God. <sup>31</sup> You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. <sup>32</sup> 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, <sup>33</sup> and he will reign over Jacob's descendants for ever; his kingdom will never end.'**

**<sup>34</sup> 'How will this be,' Mary asked the angel, 'since I am a virgin?'**

**<sup>35</sup> 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 the Son of God. <sup>36</sup> 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. <sup>37</sup> For no word from God will ever fail.'**

**<sup>38</sup> 'I am the Lord's servant,' Mary answered. 'May your word to me be fulfilled.' Then the angel left her.**

 How did Mary react to the news that she would give birth to God's son?

Mary prepared for the birth of Jesus with a heart of obedience. Although she questioned the angel, she was ready and willing to serve.

## JOHN THE BAPTIST (AND ELIZABETH ... AGAIN)

It seems strange to discuss the reaction of a baby that hasn't been born yet, but read Luke 1:39-45 to find out John the Baptist's reaction.

**<sup>39</sup> At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, <sup>40</sup> where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup> When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. <sup>42</sup> In a loud voice she exclaimed: 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! <sup>43</sup> But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? <sup>44</sup> As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. <sup>45</sup> Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfil his promises to her!'**

 How did John the Baptist – and Elizabeth – react to the presence of Jesus?

Elizabeth's unborn child leaped for joy within her, and she responded with the same joy. Their hearts were filled with anticipation as they prepared for the birth of Jesus.

## JOSEPH

Joseph often takes a back seat in the Christmas story.

 **Read: Matthew 1:18-25**




<sup>18</sup> 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.

<sup>19</sup> 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.

<sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> 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.'

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

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

 How did Joseph prepare for the birth of Jesus? How could he have reacted?

### THE MAGI


There is one group whose preparation for the birth of Jesus barely gets a mention.

Read Matthew 2:1-2 and discuss how the Magi prepared for the birth of Jesus.

<sup>1</sup> After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem <sup>2</sup> 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.'

Many scholars suggest that it may have taken up to two years for the wise men to find Jesus. Up to that point, they fixed their eyes on the star and kept moving forward.

Each of these characters prepared their hearts in different ways for the arrival of Jesus. (We haven't forgotten the shepherds, as they will feature in Session Two.)

 Which character's preparation interests you the most? Explain why.

### ADDITIONAL ACTIVITY

Zechariah and Mary both burst into song as they prepared for the arrival of Jesus. Watch the following clips to hear their words of praise.

 **The Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55) – Mary's Song of Praise and Justice (1:14) – Luke 1:46-55**  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VvrJsy7xaXY>


 **Zechariah's Song – James Beauregard (3:45) – Luke 1:67-79**  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kwavglPhNGA>

### WITNESS

**Leader's notes:** For the Witness section, the young people will have an opportunity to reflect on each character's reaction to the coming of Jesus. They will then consider the position of their own heart as they prepare for Christmas. Reflection questions are provided in the 'Let Every Heart Prepare Him Room' handout (shown below).

Give the young people time to complete the response sections on the handout. You may want to use this version of 'Joy to the World' – [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uivhzg\\_fROU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uivhzg_fROU) by Charles Szczepanek, as they spend time in reflection.

Discuss their responses to the different characters.

 How can we prepare room in our hearts for Jesus this Christmas?


## ADDITIONAL ACTIVITY

 What does the word 'scurryfunge' mean?

The Countdown lexicographer Suzie Dent posted this word on her Twitter feed. Here's what it means.

Scurryfunge: to rush around cleaning when company is on their way over.

At the start of the session, we discussed the preparation that takes place in the run-up to the arrival of a special event or visitor. We have seen the characters in the Christmas story preparing in their own way for the arrival of Jesus.

 In what ways can we avoid a Christian equivalent of a scurryfunge in the run-up to Christmas?

Jesus doesn't want us to bring a cleaned-up, perfectly presented version of ourselves this Christmas. Instead, he wants us to bring hearts that are prepared to spend time with him, obey him, rejoice in him and fix their eyes on him.

'Let every heart prepare him room.'



# LET EVERY HEART PREPARE HIM ROOM

## ZECHARIAH

**Reaction:**

**Response:**

How would a time of silence before God help you to prepare room for him this Christmas?

## ELIZABETH

**Reaction:**

**Response:**

Bring a heart of thanksgiving to God this Christmas. What has the Lord done for you?

## MARY

**Reaction:**

**Response:**

Where is God asking you to obey?

Will you say yes to God this Christmas? If so, how?

## JOHN THE BAPTIST

**Reaction:**

**Response:**

How can your heart be filled with joy at the gift of Jesus this Christmas?

## JOSEPH

**Reaction:**

**Response:**

Life may have taken some unexpected turns this year.

How is God asking you to trust in his plan for your life?

## THE MAGI

**Reaction:**

**Response:**

In what ways do you need to fix your gaze on Jesus this Christmas?

# LIGHT AND LIFE TO ALL HE BRINGS

In today's session we will reflect on a line from the well-known carol '**Hark! the Herald Angels Sing**'. Jesus came to bring light and life to our lives, and Advent is the perfect time to consider what that means for each one of us. What is your experience of the light of Jesus, and how does his light shine in the darkness you face in life? In John 8:12, Jesus said, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.' This Advent, let us focus on Jesus as the Light of the World.

## WELCOME

When does your family normally put up the Christmas lights?

How much effort do they make to light up your home?

Have a look at these Christmas lights from a house in California!

 **Take on Me (a-ha) 2020 Christmas Lights show**  
<https://youtu.be/0l5wcsJldiU>

**Leader's notes:** *It is not necessary to watch the whole clip, but once the group has got the idea, divide them into teams. They will need paper and felt-tips to design their own Christmas lights show. They can choose the building they want to base it on and then draw and label their light display. They will also need to choose a soundtrack for their light show. Once they have had sufficient time, they can share their ideas, and if you want to make things competitive, then you can choose a winning team.*

## ADDITIONAL ACTIVITY

Today's session is all about light.


You have one minute to write down as many songs as you can that feature the word 'light' in the title.

## WORSHIP

Throughout Advent, each session will start with a song that will form the basis for our thoughts and reflections. Today we will listen to words filled with light from 'Hark! the Herald Angels Sing'. As you listen to the music and reflect on the words, think about the message the song is trying to convey.

 **Hark the Herald Angels Sing (5:55)**  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XmtKLOB-0-I>

Read through the lyrics

 Which line or phrase stands out for you? Explain why.

Verse One

**Hark! the herald angels sing:  
 Glory to the newborn King;  
 Peace on earth and mercy mild,  
 God and sinners reconciled.  
 Joyful, all ye nations rise,  
 Join the triumph of the skies;  
 With the angelic host proclaim,  
 Christ is born in Bethlehem.  
 Hark! the herald angels sing:  
 Glory to the newborn King.**



Verse Two

**Christ, by highest Heaven adored,  
Christ, the everlasting Lord,  
Late in time behold him come,  
Offspring of a virgin's womb.  
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;  
Hail the incarnate Deity!  
Pleased as man with man to dwell,  
Jesus, our Immanuel.**

Verse Three

**Hail the Heaven-born Prince of Peace!  
Hail the Sun of righteousness!  
Light and life to all he brings,  
Risen with healing in his wings.  
Mild he lays his glory by,  
Born that man no more may die,  
Born to raise the sons of earth,  
Born to give them second birth.**

Focus on verse three and read through the words together.

-  What phrases stand out for you?
-  How would you sum up the message of verse three in one sentence?

### ADDITIONAL ACTIVITY

**Leader's notes:** Read the following quote to the group and then play the clip. Discuss their response to the idea that all the stars and galaxies rejoiced at the birth of Jesus. The clip is over five minutes long, but you can cut it short if needed.

**“ ‘Originally the hymn began, “Hark! how all the welkin rings. Glory to the King of Kings.’ The welkin, a term not used much these days, was the celestial sphere – the heavens, the afterlife, basically everything that wasn’t this earth. And it all rejoiced!’**  
— THE CAROLS OF CHRISTMAS, DAVID MCLAUGHLIN

Perhaps show this video as an illustration of what ‘the welkin’ might be:

-  **Stunning New Universe Fly-Through Really Puts Things Into Perspective – YouTube**  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGnX6GkrOgk>

### WORD

The carol for this session reminds us that the entirety of the heavens joined in praise and worship at the birth of the newborn king. Today we join the shepherds on the hillside and consider how light played a significant part in their story. First, let’s grasp the darkness that surrounded the wider society of that time.

-  **Read Luke 2:1-5 with additional notes from The Voice translation.**



**Leader's notes:** Give each member of the group a copy of *The Voice* translation of Luke 2:1-20.

**Luke 2:1-7 (VOICE)**

<sup>1</sup> Around the time of Elizabeth’s amazing pregnancy and John’s birth, the emperor in Rome, Caesar Augustus, required everyone in the Roman Empire to participate in a massive census – <sup>2</sup> the first census since Quirinius had become governor of Syria. <sup>3</sup> Each person had to go to his or her ancestral city to be counted.

This political background isn't incidental: it is crucial to the story. Conquering nations in the ancient world work in various ways. Some brutally destroy and plunder the nations they conquer. Some conquer people as slaves or servants. Other empires allow the people to remain in their land and work as before, but with one major change: the conquered people have to pay taxes to their rulers. The purpose of a census like the one Luke describes is to be sure that everyone is appropriately taxed and knows who is in charge.

<sup>45</sup> Mary's fiancé Joseph, from Nazareth in Galilee, had to participate in the census in the same way everyone else did. Because he was a descendant of King David, his ancestral city was Bethlehem, David's birthplace. Mary, who was now late in her pregnancy that the messenger Gabriel had predicted, <sup>6</sup> accompanied Joseph. While in Bethlehem, she went into labour <sup>7</sup> and gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped the baby in a blanket and laid him in a feeding trough because the inn had no room for them.

-  What dark situations did the people face at the time of the birth of Jesus?
-  What challenging personal circumstances were Mary and Joseph facing at the time?

**Leader's notes:** Before you read the next Scripture extract, allocate roles to the group. You will need a messenger, heavenly choir, and shepherds. The remaining sections of the text can be read by the group leader.

**Luke 2:8-20 (VOICE)**

<sup>8</sup> Nearby, in the fields outside of Bethlehem, a group of shepherds were guarding their flocks from predators in the darkness of night. <sup>9</sup> Suddenly a messenger of the Lord stood in front of them, and the darkness was replaced by a glorious light – the shining light of God's glory. They were terrified!

**Messenger:** <sup>10</sup> 'Don't be afraid! Listen! I bring good news, news of great joy, news that will affect all people everywhere. <sup>11</sup> Today, in the city of David, a Liberator has been born for you! He is the promised Anointed One, the Supreme Authority! <sup>12</sup> You will know you have found him when you see a baby, wrapped in a blanket, lying in a feeding trough.'

<sup>13</sup> At that moment, the first heavenly messenger was joined by thousands of other messengers – a vast heavenly choir. They praised God.

**Heavenly Choir:** 'To the highest heights of the universe, glory to God!  
And on earth, peace among all people who bring pleasure to God!'

<sup>15</sup> As soon as the heavenly messengers disappeared into heaven, the shepherds were buzzing with conversation.




**Shepherds:** 'Let's rush down to Bethlehem right now! Let's see what's happening! Let's experience what the Lord has told us about!'

<sup>16</sup> So they ran into town, and eventually they found Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in the feeding trough. After they saw the baby, <sup>17</sup> they spread the story of what they had experienced and what had been said to them about this child. <sup>18</sup> Everyone who heard their story couldn't stop thinking about its meaning. <sup>19</sup> Mary, too, pondered all of these events, treasuring each memory in her heart.

<sup>20</sup> The shepherds returned to their flocks, praising God for all they had seen and heard, and they glorified God for the way the experience had unfolded just as the heavenly messenger had predicted.

Here again is Luke's fascination with disadvantaged people. Jesus' first visitors are not ambassadors, dignitaries, or wealthy landowners. The first to pay him homage are simple shepherds, minimum-wage workers in the ancient agrarian economy. They have little to no status in the world. They are the humble and the poor whom God is now raising up to receive heavenly messages and an audience with the great King. This theme recurs as the story continues.

**DISCUSS**

-  What new understanding of the Christmas story do you gain from this translation of Scripture?
-  What words or phrases stand out for you?
-  In verse 9 it says that 'The darkness was replaced with glorious light.' What would that look like in our world today?

- 🗨️ What darkness needs the light of Jesus right now?
- 🗨️ Do you believe that the same 'light and life' described in verse 3 of the carol is available today? If so, why?
- 🗨️ What kind of people does the light focus on in this Scripture? The additional notes from *The Voice* translation may help with your discussion.
- 🗨️ If these events took place today, where do you think the angels would appear, and who would they meet?

In the Gospel of John we hear Jesus share with the people.

When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.'

John 8:12 (Voice)

- 🗨️ What is your experience of the light of Jesus in your life?
- 🗨️ How can we bring that light to others, not just at Christmas but throughout the year?

As we move through this season of Advent, let's follow the advice of Woodrow Kroll and experience the light and life of Jesus.

“**Glory in Christ and you can bask in his light for ever.**”  
— WOODROW KROLL

## ADDITIONAL ACTIVITY

Watch the clip that gives more context to the words of Jesus in John 8:12.

- ▶️ **Walk in the Light! – John 8:12 Our Daily Bread Video Devotional (2:00)**  
[https://youtu.be/\\_A88a7Eculc](https://youtu.be/_A88a7Eculc)

- 🗨️ How does the content of this clip develop your understanding of the words of Jesus?

## WITNESS

In John 8:12, Jesus says:

**'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.'**

It sounds like a nice sentiment, but what does it mean in our everyday lives? How can we experience the light of Jesus in a world full of darkness?

In the following clip, the theologian Amy Orr-Ewing explores the idea of Jesus as the light of the world.

- ▶️ **'I am the Light of the World' (John 8:12) – Amy Orr-Ewing – YouTube**  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ow54JmRsqRA&t=1814s>

Watch the clip from 22:22–27:39 and discuss the following questions.

## DISCUSS

- 🗨️ Amy shares how Jesus wants us to 'see more clearly' in his presence rather than see through rose-tinted spectacles. What do you think she means?
- 🗨️ How is a dark situation immediately changed by the light of Jesus?
- 🗨️ It may not be as extreme as Amy's story, but have you ever experienced a sudden change from darkness to light? What was it like? Share your experience with the rest of the group.
- 🗨️ In the final part of the clip, Amy shares how the light of Jesus shines within those who follow him. How have you experienced the light of Jesus in your own life or witnessed it in the lives of others?

**Leader's notes:** During this part of the Witness section, there are a number of options depending on your budget and setting. The aim of the activity is for the young people to identify an experience of darkness in their own life or in the world and have an opportunity to shine the light of Jesus into that situation. The focus needs to be on filling the situation with light.

The group will create their own light holder.

There are three parts to the activity:

- \* To create a symbol for the darkness they have identified.
- \* To incorporate the words of John 8:12.
- \* To light a candle to shine the light of Jesus into the situation.

You may have more creative ideas up your sleeve, but here are some options available at the Baker Ross website.

Search results for: 'candle' (bakerross.co.uk)

<https://www.bakerross.co.uk/catalogsearch/result/?q=candle>

Once the young people have completed their light holder, then, taking into account health and safety considerations, light the candles and turn off the lights. Give the young people an opportunity to pray as they listen to Lauren Daigle's 'Light of the World'. – [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5XC1MRiNU\\_g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5XC1MRiNU_g)

When the music is finished, ask members of the group to complete this prayer:

**'Jesus, bring your light and life into ...'**

(finish the sentence with the situation of darkness they have focused on).

When the group has shared, bring the session to a close with a prayer.

# LUKE 2:1-20

## THE VOICE TRANSLATION

<sup>1</sup> Around the time of Elizabeth's amazing pregnancy and John's birth, the emperor in Rome, Caesar Augustus, required everyone in the Roman Empire to participate in a massive census – <sup>2</sup> the first census since Quirinius had become governor of Syria. <sup>3</sup> Each person had to go to his or her ancestral city to be counted.

This political background isn't incidental: it is crucial to the story. Conquering nations in the ancient world work in various ways. Some brutally destroy and plunder the nations they conquer. Some conquer people as slaves or servants. Other empires allow the people to remain in their land and work as before, but with one major change: the conquered people have to pay taxes to their rulers. The purpose of a census like the one Luke describes is to be sure that everyone is appropriately taxed and knows who is in charge.

<sup>4-5</sup> Mary's fiancé Joseph, from Nazareth in Galilee, had to participate in the census in the same way *everyone else did*. Because he was a descendant of King David, his ancestral city was Bethlehem, David's birthplace. Mary, who was now late in her pregnancy *that the messenger Gabriel had predicted*, <sup>6</sup> accompanied Joseph. While in Bethlehem, she went into labour <sup>7</sup> and gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped the baby in a blanket and laid him in a feeding trough because the inn had no room for them.

<sup>8</sup> Nearby, in the fields outside of Bethlehem, a group of shepherds were guarding their flocks from predators in the darkness of night. <sup>9</sup> Suddenly a messenger of the Lord stood in front of them, and the darkness was replaced by a glorious light – the shining light of God's glory. They were terrified!

**Messenger:** <sup>10</sup> 'Don't be afraid! Listen! I bring good news, news of great joy, news that will affect all people everywhere. <sup>11</sup> Today, in the city of David, a Liberator has been born for you! He is the promised Anointed One, the Supreme Authority! <sup>12</sup> You will know you have found him when you see a baby, wrapped in a blanket, lying in a feeding trough.'

<sup>13</sup> At that moment, the first heavenly messenger was joined by thousands of other messengers – a vast heavenly choir. They praised God.

<sup>14</sup> **Heavenly Choir:** 'To the highest heights of the universe, glory to God!  
And on earth, peace among all people who bring pleasure to God!'

<sup>15</sup> As soon as the heavenly messengers disappeared into heaven, the shepherds were buzzing with conversation.

**Shepherds:** 'Let's rush down to Bethlehem right now! Let's see what's happening! Let's experience what the Lord has told us about!'

<sup>16</sup> So they ran into town, and eventually they found Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in the feeding trough. After they saw the baby, <sup>17</sup> they spread the story of *what they had experienced* and what had been said to them about this child. <sup>18</sup> Everyone who heard their story couldn't stop thinking about its meaning. <sup>19</sup> Mary, too, pondered all of these events, treasuring each memory in her heart.

<sup>20</sup> The shepherds returned to their flocks, praising God for all they had seen and heard, and they glorified God for the way the experience had unfolded just as the heavenly messenger had predicted.

Here again is Luke's fascination with disadvantaged people. Jesus' first visitors are not ambassadors, dignitaries, or wealthy landowners. The first to pay him homage are simple shepherds, minimum-wage workers in the ancient agrarian economy. They have little to no status in the world. They are the humble and the poor whom God is now raising up to receive heavenly messages and an audience with the great King. This theme recurs as the story continues.

“ ‘Glory in Christ and you can bask in his light for ever.’

— WOODROW KROLL



# GIVE MY HEART

Our final session of Advent focuses on the last two lines of 'In the Bleak Midwinter'. At times when we are focused on giving and receiving gifts for each other, this song urges us to consider the gift we will bring to Jesus. What gift can you bring Jesus this Advent? The carol reminds us that the gift most precious to Jesus is our heart.




## WELCOME

Throughout December we have explored well-known Christmas carols. For our starter today we are going to see how well you know these Christmas songs. You will hear an extract from a Christmas song and then will only get five seconds to shout out the next line of the song.

 **5 Second Quiz – Finish The Lyrics – Christmas Edition (7:59)**

<https://youtu.be/V2qtelstusI>

## ADDITIONAL ACTIVITY

-  What is your favourite / least favourite Christmas song?
-  What is your favourite / least favourite Christmas carol?
-  Why do you like/dislike them so much?

## WORSHIP

Throughout Advent, each session will start with a song that forms the basis for our thoughts and reflections. Today we will listen to words filled with light from 'In the Bleak Midwinter'. This unusual version of the song starts gently and gradually grows toward the line that is the focus of our session today. As you listen to the music and reflect on the words, think about the message the song is trying to convey. Verse two is shown below but not included in this version of the song.

 **Jamie Cullum – In the Bleak Midwinter (Amazon Original) (4:44)**

[https://youtu.be/\\_ELQ0ZoUkFM](https://youtu.be/_ELQ0ZoUkFM)

Verse One

**In the bleak midwinter  
Frosty wind made moan,  
Earth stood hard as iron,  
Water like a stone;  
Snow had fallen, snow on snow,  
Snow on snow,  
In the bleak midwinter,  
Long ago.**

Verse Two

**Our God, Heaven cannot hold him,  
Nor earth sustain;  
Heaven and earth shall flee away,  
When he comes to reign:  
In the bleak midwinter  
A stable place sufficed  
The Lord God Almighty,  
Jesus Christ.**

— CHRISTINA ROSSETTI (1830-1894)


Verse Three

**Angels and archangels  
May have gathered there,  
Cherubim and seraphim  
Thronged the air;  
But his mother only,  
In her maiden bliss,  
Worshipped the Beloved  
With a kiss.**

Verse Four

**What can I give him,  
Poor as I am?  
If I were a shepherd,  
I would bring a lamb;  
If I were a wise man,  
I would do my part;  
Yet what I can I give him –  
Give my heart.**

Focus on the final verse and read through the words together.

 How would you sum up the message of the final verse in one sentence?

## ADDITIONAL ACTIVITY

The first verse of Christina Rossetti's poem may give the wrong impression about the weather conditions at the time of the birth of Jesus.

Read and discuss what the author Nick Page has to say about this topic in his book *Christmas – Tradition, Truth and Total Baubles*.

**“ I love this carol. It's beautiful. But we have to face facts: it's meteorologically wrong. If the shepherds were in the fields, then the frosty wind was not making any moaning, the earth was considerably less hard than iron, and the water was like ... well ... water. As we've seen, the first Christians who bothered to think about the date of Jesus' birth put it at either March or November. Personally, I think November is more likely, in which case the average temperature for the region of Bethlehem in November is 12 degrees Celsius. Not warm, exactly, but not much chance of 'snow on snow, snow on snow'. Still, Christina Rossetti was a great poet. Which is why she chose poetry over accuracy and no doubt rejected her first version of 'In the slightly chilly late autumn ...' ”**

— NICK PAGE

## WORD

There are many characters in the Christmas story who bring a heart of worship to Jesus. As we explore their story, we're going to answer the following question:

 What do we learn about the heart of worship from these Christmas story characters?

**Leader's notes:** Give each member of the group a 'Give my Heart' handout. You can either work through the handout together or divide the young people into smaller groups. The handout is self-explanatory, but additional information is provided below to share with the group as they complete the handout.

### **The Shepherds – Luke 2:8-20**

The shepherds were keeping watch over their sheep on the hillside when the angel of the Lord appeared to them. This dramatic spiritual experience must have impacted their worship from that point onwards. They were surrounded by a group of ultimate worshippers who reflected the glory of God all around them. Once the shepherds had seen Jesus, they made sure everyone knew about it.

### **The Wise Men – Matthew 2:1-12**

The worship of the wise men was more of a slow burner. They saw the star and travelled a great distance to meet Jesus. Along the way they met King Herod, and quickly worked out that he wasn't worth their worship. They continued to follow the star and found Jesus at his home with Mary and Joseph. They brought many gifts for Jesus, but their first priority was to bow down and worship.

### **Simeon – Luke 2:21-35**

Simeon had served God his whole life. The Holy Spirit promised that Simeon would meet Jesus and he believed that promise. As Mary and Joseph entered the Temple Simeon knew his moment had arrived. He scooped up the child and broke into a song of worship.

### **Anna – Luke 2:36-38**

Anna was also God's faithful servant. This elderly woman had worshipped in the Temple for decades and shared her gift of prophecy. Night and day, she dedicated her life to worshipping God. She patiently waited to meet the newborn King, and once she had she shared the good news with everyone.

When the group have had a chance to explore each character's experience of worship, discuss the question at the top of the handout:

 What do we learn about a heart of worship from these Christmas story characters?

### ADDITIONAL ACTIVITY

In today's session we are considering what it means to worship God with all our hearts. Read and discuss the following quotes to see if they add to your understanding of worship.

**“Any man or woman on this earth who is bored and turned off by worship is not ready for heaven.”**  
— AW TOZER

**“I need to worship because without it I can forget that I have a big God beside me and live in fear. I need to worship because without it I can forget his calling and begin to live in a spirit of self-preoccupation. I need to worship because without it I lose a sense of wonder and gratitude and plod through life with blinders on. I need worship because my natural tendency is toward self-reliance and stubborn independence.”**  
— JOHN ORTBERG

**“Many Spirit-filled authors have exhausted the thesaurus in order to describe God with the glory he deserves. His perfect holiness, by definition, assures us that our words can't contain him. Isn't it a comfort to worship a God we cannot exaggerate?”**  
— FRANCIS CHAN

**“Worship has been misunderstood as something that arises from a feeling which “comes upon you”, but it is vital that we understand that it is rooted in a conscious act of the will, to serve and obey the Lord Jesus Christ.”**  
— GRAHAM KENDRICK

### WITNESS

Matt Redman is the composer of the well-known worship song 'Heart of Worship'. At the time that Matt wrote this song, his pastor was concerned that his congregation had lost their focus. The church was filled with young people in their teens and twenties and had a thriving music ministry. As one of the music leaders, Matt listened with interest as the pastor informed the congregation that they were about to enter a season of stripped-back worship. They were to bring their Bibles and their voices to the worship service and that was it. No instruments, no sound system, and no fancy visual effects. During this season, Matt wrote these words.

**Leader's notes:** Give the group a copy of the lyrics and read through them together.

#### Heart of Worship (SASB 635)

When the music fades, all is stripped away,  
And I simply come:  
Longing just to bring something that's of worth,  
That will bless your heart.  
I'll bring you more than a song,  
For a song in itself is not what you have required.  
You search much deeper within  
Through the ways things appear:  
You're looking into my heart.

I'm coming back to the heart of worship,  
And it's all about you, all about you, Jesus.  
I'm sorry, Lord, for the thing I've made it,  
When it's all about you, all about you, Jesus.

King of endless worth, no one could express  
 How much you deserve.  
 Though I'm weak and poor, all I have is yours,  
 Every single breath.  
 I'll bring you more than a song,  
 For a song in itself is not what you have required.  
 You search much deeper within  
 Through the way things appear;  
 You're looking into my heart.






— MATT REDMAN

I'm coming back to the heart of worship,  
 And it's all about you, all about you, Jesus.  
 I'm sorry, Lord, for the thing I've made it,  
 When it's all about you, all about you, Jesus.

**Optional** – If the young people do not know the song 'Heart of Worship' then a link is provided for them to listen to it.




 **Michael W Smith & Matt Redman – 'The Heart of Worship' (Worship Forever 2021)**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZOqHjyGKGlg>

-  What do you think Matt discovered during his time of stripped-back worship?
-  If your church leaders announced something like this, then how do you think the congregation would react?
-  How would your meetings change?
-  What do you think it means to worship God with all your heart?
-  What is your response to Matt's quote:

**“** *In the end, worship can never be a performance, something you're pretending or putting on. It's got to be an overflow of your heart ... Worship is about getting personal with God, drawing close to God.*


— MATT REDMAN

-  In what ways do you worship God?
-  What distracts you from worshipping him?
-  What worship commitment could you make to God as you enter 2023?

**Leader's notes:** Give the group time to write down one worship commitment that they will take into the new year. They can write it on the bottom of the 'Give my Heart' handout. Ask each member of the group to share their worship commitment and then pray with them.

### ADDITIONAL ACTIVITY

Our carol for today is officially 'In the bleak midwinter', but we can bring today's session to a close with the ultimate Christmas worship song. Join in the sing-along version of Pentatonix 'O Come, All Ye Faithful' and bring your heart of worship to God this Christmas.

 **(Sing-Along Video) O Come, All Ye Faithful – Pentatonix (3:41)**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ty-NvFUgK4>

# GIVE MY HEART

What do we learn about a heart of worship from these Christmas story characters?

SHEPHERDS  
Luke 2:8-20

WISE MEN  
Matthew 2:1-12

SIMEON  
Luke 2:21-35

ANNA  
Luke 2:36-38

What can I give him,  
Poor as I am?  
If I were a shepherd,  
I would bring a lamb;  
If I were a wise man,  
I would do my part;  
Yet what I can I give him –  
Give my heart.

– CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

“ ‘In the end, worship can never be a performance, something you’re pretending or putting on. It’s got to be an overflow of your heart ... Worship is about getting personal with God, drawing close to God.’

— MATT REDMAN

# IN THE BLEAK MIDWINTER

Verse One

**In the bleak midwinter  
Frosty wind made moan,  
Earth stood hard as iron,  
Water like a stone;  
Snow had fallen, snow on snow,  
Snow on snow,  
In the bleak midwinter,  
Long ago.**

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**Our God, Heaven cannot hold him,  
Nor earth sustain;  
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When he comes to reign:  
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A stable place sufficed  
The Lord God Almighty,  
Jesus Christ.**

Verse Three

**Angels and archangels  
May have gathered there,  
Cherubim and seraphim  
Thronged the air;  
But his mother only,  
In her maiden bliss,  
Worshipped the Beloved  
With a kiss.**

Verse Four

**What can I give him,  
Poor as I am?  
If I were a shepherd,  
I would bring a lamb;  
If I were a wise man,  
I would do my part;  
Yet what I can I give him –  
Give my heart.**

– CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

# HEART OF WORSHIP

**When the music fades, all is stripped away,  
And I simply come:**

**Longing just to bring something that's of  
worth,**

**That will bless your heart.**

**I'll bring you more than a song,**

**For a song in itself is not what you have  
required.**

**You search much deeper within**

**Through the ways things appear:**

**You're looking into my heart.**

**I'm coming back to the heart of worship,**

**And it's all about you, all about you, Jesus.**

**I'm sorry, Lord, for the thing I've made it,**

**When it's all about you, all about you, Jesus.**

**King of endless worth, no one could express**

**How much you deserve.**

**Though I'm weak and poor, all I have is  
yours,**

**Every single breath.**

**I'll bring you more than a song,**

**For a song in itself is not what you have  
required.**

**You search much deeper within**

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