



CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE CHRISTMAS KIND

SPECIAL DAYS

PREPARATION

- Ask members to choose a favourite Christmas carol beforehand (and a reason or story why, if they wish to). Prepare carol sheets and recorded music if necessary
- Choose an angel craft that your group would enjoy making. You can find some ideas on the [FM Pinterest page](#). Make sure you have all the resources needed
- Make a small gift for each member - inside clear bags or disposable cups with a lid add: sachets of coffee / hot chocolate or teabags, Time Out or KitKat biscuits, tea-light candles, and a verse of Scripture card to reflect on, eg John 1:14 (MESSAGE)
- Prepare to play the song 'Help from Heaven' by Matt Redman
- You may wish to have pens and paper handy for the quiz

INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

The season of Christmas is a time filled with encounters! We will spend time meeting and greeting lots of people in all sorts of places, ranging from a brief encounter with the shop assistant at the till whom we have never met before, to a much longer period spent with those we love most. Some of these encounters will be because we connect with people in a deep way.

This session will help us to focus on the story of the first Christmas - a story we may all know well - but to look at three 'close encounters' within it and to see what they may teach us this Christmas. This is best done by looking at the 'encounters' in three sections throughout the session with a final conclusion at the end.

ACTIVITIES

QUIZ

Play a quiz based on Christmas movie quotes.

1. 'Every time a bell rings, an angel gets his wings.' (*It's a Wonderful Life*)

Connect



2. 'Faith is believing in things when common sense tells you not to.'
(Miracle on 34th Street (1947))
3. 'Merry Christmas, ya filthy animal!' *(Home Alone 2, Lost in New York)*
4. 'Just remember, the true spirit of Christmas lies in your heart.'
(The Polar Express)
5. 'Maybe Christmas, he thought, doesn't come from a store. Maybe Christmas ... perhaps ... means a little bit more. *(How the Grinch stole Christmas)*
6. 'But for now, let me say - without hope or agenda - just because it's Christmas - and at Christmas you tell the truth - to me, you are perfect.'
(Love Actually)
7. 'If you're worried and you can't sleep, just count your blessings instead of sheep. And you'll fall asleep counting your blessings.' *(White Christmas)*
8. 'God bless us, everyone!' *(A Christmas Carol)*
9. 'Seeing isn't believing. Believing is seeing.' *(The Santa Clause)*
10. 'This is extremely important. Will you please tell Santa that instead of presents this year, I just want my family back.'
(Home Alone)

SING

Invite members to say what is their favourite carol and to share a memory or reason why they chose it. Spend time singing the carols together. You may need song sheets and music ready.

CRAFT

Create some **angels** together.

Talk about how sometimes we meet angels unaware and suggest that they give their craft as a gift to someone who has been like an angel in their life.

GIFT

Make a small gift for each member of the group to take home and use to help them find a special time for a 'close encounter with God this Christmas'. (A hot drink sachet, a Time Out or KitKat and tea lights in a clear bag or disposable cup with a lid.)

Connect



You will need also need to include a Scripture verse, eg:

📖 'The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighbourhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, generous inside and out, true from start to finish.'

(John 1:14 MESSAGE)

Ask members to take the gifts home, make themselves a nice drink, light their candle, eat their biscuit, and meditate on the Scripture verse, asking God to draw close to them as they sit quietly.

BIBLE READING/THOUGHT

MARY'S CLOSE ENCOUNTER

📖 **Luke 1:26-38 (NLT)**

Can any of us begin to imagine how Mary must have felt when she had her close encounter with Angel Gabriel? Mary is a young woman, probably in her early teens, getting ready to marry Joseph and is just going about her daily business. Suddenly there is an angel in front of her, telling her she is highly favoured by God. The Scripture says Mary is 'greatly troubled' by the situation, but that is probably a bit of an understatement - after all, this Gospel is written by a man!

Yet, in her fear, Mary is still able to listen to the heavenly messenger and even asks, 'How this will be?' If it were any of us, we'd probably have been struck dumb at this close encounter and struggled to have found any words at all. Our question would probably have been, 'Are you sure you have got the right woman?' But the Angel answers Mary by reassuring her of God's plan recorded in the Scriptures which she would have known all her life, and reminds her that nothing is impossible to God. And Mary's response is simply to say, 'Let it be.' Or as the *New Living Translation* puts it, '*I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true.*'

JOSEPH'S CLOSE ENCOUNTER

📖 **Matthew 1:18-24 (NIV)**

Our imaginations may lead us to wonder about the parts of this story that do not get a biblical record - for example the conversation when Mary informs her parents of that close encounter with Gabriel. Or the one where she tries to tell Joseph too. They might have been a most interesting read! Instead, what we get is the record of Joseph's close encounter with an angel of the Lord, not in a physical appearance like Mary but rather in a dream.

Connect



Dreams can be strange, can't they? Sometimes our unconscious mind throws up all sorts of muddled images as we sleep, and we wake wondering what on earth happened. Do you think that might be how it felt for Joseph too? Scripture tells us that he was a man of integrity who did not want to disgrace Mary publicly, so he must have gone to bed with a heavy heart and a head full of questions as to what to do for the best.

His close encounter, through a dream, gives Joseph his answer and he is reassured that what has happened is of God. He too is reminded of Scripture about the promised Messiah that he will have known about since he was a boy. *'The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel (which means "God with us").'*

Like Mary, Joseph did not hesitate to respond positively to this close encounter and we know that he did exactly what was asked of him.

THE SHEPHERDS' CLOSE ENCOUNTER

Luke 2:8-20

We are told that the shepherds were keeping watch that night, and while they may have been expecting a close confrontation with a wild animal, it's unlikely to have ever crossed their minds that they would experience a close encounter with the angel of the Lord and his heavenly host!

Can you imagine their faces as the sky filled with God's messengers? Words like terrified, sorely afraid, frightened, with great fear, terror-stricken have all been used to describe how they felt about this close encounter. But again, they also were reassured, told not to be afraid, but rather to listen to the most amazing news that was to be shared with them - the news that the Saviour of the world had been born in their town and that they should go and see for themselves.

What would have happened if they had decided not to go? If they had decided they couldn't leave the sheep or were just too frightened to respond to the message they had heard? However, we know that the Scripture tells us that they didn't just 'go' - they hurried, with haste, quickly! In fact they 'went running', 'as fast as they could', so excited were they to find the Christ-child the angels had told them about. And once they had seen him, they returned to the fields praising God for all they had seen and heard - and no doubt sharing the news of this close encounter that had been theirs.



CONCLUSION

Close encounters this Christmas

So, there in that story we know so well, we have seen three close encounters of the Christmas kind. But did you notice that there was a pattern in them? Each time the encounter caused the recipients to be afraid, to be troubled, to be concerned. But every time they were reassured and told not to be afraid because this was all God's plan. And in response, each of them did exactly what they were asked, even though they certainly didn't fully understand the whole story of what was happening.

Sometimes when we encounter difficult times in our lives, we feel afraid, unsure and troubled. Yet God tells us in his word not to be afraid, 366 times - one for each day of the year and a spare for a leap year! God wants us to trust in his plan and purpose for our lives, even when we cannot understand the way, and to follow his leading by reaching out in faith.

So, this Christmas, may each of us take time to seek a 'close encounter of the Christmas kind' by making space in the busyness of it all to spend time alone with God and to seek afresh his will and purpose for us. We can be confident that whatever that may be, we do not need to be afraid because there is always help from Heaven available to us.

REFLECTION

Play the video '[Help from Heaven](#)' by Matt Redman

SONGS

- ♪ SASB 393 'Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!'
Play the [lyric video](#) by Clydebank Salvation Army
- ♪ SASB 114 'Light of the world (Here I am to worship)'
Play the [lyric video](#) by Hillsong
- ♪ SASB 100 'Angels, from the realms of Glory'
Play the [instrumental video with lyrics](#) by Kelston Stanford
- ♪ SASB 133 'Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God among us'
Play the [instrumental video with lyrics](#) by The Salvation Army Oshawa Church

Connect



WEBSITE AND CONTACT DETAILS

- Connect website: www.salvationarmy.org.uk/connect
- Family Ministries website: www.salvationarmy.org.uk/families
- Emails: familyministries@salvationarmy.org.uk
- Facebook: @sarmyfm
- Twitter: @ukifamily
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