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SESSION ONE

Luke 2:1–20

Learner Session Guide



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

Why Was Jesus Born?



Focus Image



He Qi, "Nativity"

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Gather

Check-in

Take this time to connect or reconnect with the others in your group and give a special welcome for newcomers. Today, we will hear one of the most familiar stories in the Bible, called the “Christmas Gospel.” Mary and Joseph were strangers in Bethlehem, where there was “no place for them in the inn” (Luke 2:7). We 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
on which as king so rich and great
to be enthroned in humble state.*

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*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

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

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 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?



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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 as the governor of the Roman province of Syria, which included Galilee and Judea.

- 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?



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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: Augsburg 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 gospel truth of Jesus. Describe how each evangelist opens your heart and mind to understand Jesus’ birth.life?

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

Be ready to look back over the work the group has done during the session.

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

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?



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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

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).