



ENTER God's presence

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. — Isaiah 40:1-2

Heavenly Father, we thank you for the peace and comfort that comes to us through your word. May we encounter again the peace that only you can give as we gather around your word today and as we journey together through this Advent season and celebrate the gift of your son this Christmas. Amen



SHARE life together

1. Share your highs and lows with each other?
2. Share how you went with your living purposefully from last time?
3. What is your favourite story? What is it about that story that grabs your attention?
4. Do you tend to re-watch or re-read tv shows, movies, or books? Are they still as enjoyable the second time around?

Stop the Spread. Santise! It's a message we have heard ad nauseum over 2020. Clean and disinfect surfaces you use often such as benchtops, desks and doorknobs, sanitise your mobile phones, keys, wallets and work passes. Sanitise, sanitise, sanitise. While it may be a message we have heard anew this year, the truth is that we have been sanitising the message of Christmas for years and perhaps that's the reason that the real message of Christmas is obscured. We have sanitised so well, that perhaps we have unknowingly stopped the spread of the greatest message of all. Our carefully manicured nativities are so squeaky clean and beautifully arranged. Our Christmas trees and twinkling lights and beautifully wrapped presents underneath are picture perfect. The smells of Christmas baking fill our senses and ignite our memories with happiness. But the first Christmas was not a storybook rendition that ends with "happily ever after. It was immersed in darkness, surrounded by uncertainty and contaminated with the stench of sin. Christmas is more than a story...far more; and that is what we will explore this week.

Week beginning:
Sunday 29th Nov 2020

Worship series:

Christmas is more than a...



VERSE for the week

The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, as it is written in Isaiah the prophet: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way"

Mark 1:1-2



REMEMBER this week

Christmas is more than a story. It is a divinely inspired, purposely designed and radically executed rescue plan to save the world God loves; a world that includes you.



LISTEN attentively

Read Mark 1:1-8

5. **What key words/thoughts/ideas/questions arise for you as you hear this text?**
6. **What do you hear this scripture saying to you right now?**
7. **How does Mark's introduction to the Gospel of Jesus compare with your normal experience of the Christmas story?**

The thing about a story, whether it is fictional or factual, is that every story teller will tell the story slightly differently. This is why we have 4 different Gospel accounts. Each gospel writer emphasises different aspects of Jesus' nature, his teaching, his actions. That does not mean that one is right or better than the others. What it means is that we only get the full picture when we take in all the different perspectives that are on offer from Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. While they may all have differences, one thing that unites them all is their purpose. Their purpose is to record details of the life, teachings, and actions of Jesus in order to show that he was God's promised Messiah.

Have a look at Isaiah 40:1-11

8. **What statements do you see in this passage that could relate to Jesus?**
9. **Verses 3-5 are almost used word-for-word in the beginning of Mark's gospel. How do these Old Testament connections help you to see Christmas as more than just a story?**

Depending on how you translate and interpret the Old Testament, there are at minimum 44 prophecies about the Messiah. Others count as high as 414 passages of Old Testament Scripture that foreshadow or point to Jesus. However you figure it, there is no denying that the story of Christmas was not an accident. It seems pretty clear that God had this plan in mind right from the very beginning and he was determined to let his people in on the plan. He shared it through his prophets like Isaiah, he established the practice of sacrifices for forgiveness which foreshadowed the sacrifice of Jesus, he even had John the Baptist there to prepare the way and to announce Jesus' arrival like a medieval herald announced the arrival of a visiting guest or dignitary. Unfortunately though, like many stories, each time the story gets retold it can become easier and easier to ignore.

10. **What is your earliest recollection of the nativity story? Was it a Sunday School play, read to you from a Children's Bible, or did you only really stop to listen much later in your life? What can you remember of hearing the story of the birth of Jesus for the first time?**
11. **The birth of Jesus, the birth of God in human flesh, is without a doubt the most significant story since the creation of the universe. How do we avoid letting it become just another story or fairy tale.**



GROW deeper

Part of our issue is that we fail to recognise the fulness of what this story really is. Yes it is a story, a series of events, which have a historical record and did actually occur at some time in human history. But these events fundamentally change the reality in which we live. This story is also a gift, a gift from God to his creation. It is also an invitation from our creator to reconnect with him in a new relationship that is not defined by our separation from him but by his proximity to us. Yet it is a story that we hear so often, that we can easily lose sight of the incredible implications of this story. Some of it, things like angelic visions and virgin births, also jar against our sense of logic and can tempt us to put the whole thing into the fairytale category. Put that together with the slow secularisation and commercialisation of the holiday period and you end up with a highly sanitised story which does little more than give us a warm and fuzzy feeling on the inside.

12. **What do you think John the Baptist would make of our/your Christmas preparations? How does our celebration of the birth of Jesus 'prepare the way of the Lord'?**

Mark's Gospel begins the Good News of Jesus Christ by establishing John the Baptist as the one who the Old Testament said would be the forerunner of the Messiah. The one who would prepare the way. In his speech about Jesus, John says, "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." The story of Christmas is the continuing story of God dwelling with his people, he did it in the tabernacle, then in the temple, then in the person of Jesus and through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, is now living with us, and in us, by the power of the Holy Spirit which Jesus promised to his disciples. This story is more than a story. It is an invitation for you to enter a new life with new possibilities because your God has come to be with you.

13. How might you respond differently to an invitation than you would to a story?



LIVE purposefully

The invitation to live with Jesus is not a one time thing. Martin Luther talked about 'daily baptism'. It is not that he had water sprinkled on his head every day, but he understood that each day he had to remember God's promises and to respond to everything that God offered him in his baptism; grace, forgiveness, and eternal life. Each day we can sanitise the Christmas story make it impotent in our lives. However, just as easily, we can wake each day and ask God to bring the hope, joy, love, and peace of the Christmas story alive in our lives again and make it something that impacts our daily living even more than the Covid-19 virus may have.

14. How could you remind yourself to live in the love and joy of Christmas each day?

15. There is no denying that the season of Christmas brings about a certain change in our communities. How might we help keep those feelings of generosity and good will alive throughout the rest of the year?

16. Over the next 4 weeks consider reading the beginning part of each Gospel story. Each has a unique beginning and each highlights something different. Get to know the whole story.



PRAY intentionally

- Praise God for the gift of his son, Jesus
- Thank Jesus for the hope, joy, love and peace that the story of his birth brings to our world.
- Ask the Holy Spirit to bring the reality of Christmas alive in your life.



BLESS one another

You might like to address one person in your group and make the sign of the cross in the air as you say...

[Name], may the hope of Christ fill your Christmas with so much more. Amen.