

THE *Many Moods* OF CHRISTMAS

ADVENT STUDY 2020



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This Advent Study is based on the 2020 Advent Worship Series,
"The Many Moods of Christmas."

Nov. 29	Christmas Anticipation	Luke 1:5-22
Dec. 06	Christmas Catastrophe	Genesis 3:13-15
Dec. 13	Christmas Laughter	Matthew 1:18-25
Dec. 20	Christmas Ambiguity	Luke 1:26-38
Dec. 24	Christmas Mess...Christmas Magic	Luke 2:1-20

SESSION ONE

CHRISTMAS ANTICIPATION

Today we are beginning our Advent Season with a Sermon Series entitled “The Many Moods of Christmas.” In this first week we will be looking at anticipation – Christmas Anticipation. Now who doesn’t know what it feels like to anticipate Christmas?

Some of us immediately begin to think about our younger years and how we anticipated what was to come. Would we get to sing our favorite Christmas Carols; would we be chosen for a role in the Christmas Pageant; will we get to bake our favorite cookies; or would we get to take that trip to see family? The main item on our minds, for many of us, would be if whether or not we would receive all those gifts we had put on our lists! Yes, Christmas is full of anticipation. Now, if you were the parents in these cases, your anticipation would be completely different.

Our Christmas of 2020 is nothing like any Christmas we’ve ever experienced. The celebration of Christmas is deeply rooted in traditions – personally, within families, and within the church. Many of those traditions will have to be set aside during the pandemic, because they involve being in public spaces and gathering in large groups. Our anticipation this year is likely to bring much anxiety and concern for believers, regardless of age or walk of life.

Along with anticipation, we will be examining a few other moods and human experiences, such as what it feels like to go through a catastrophe, to take pleasure in the complete joy of deep laughter, as well as to experience those times in our lives when there is uncertainty and ambiguity.

Friends, we will be making a wide sweep on the spectrum of human emotions. We are going to examine these human emotions to see if we can find a way to safely journey with our friends to Bethlehem, so we can celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Let us begin!

We are going to examine these human emotions to see if we can find a way to safely journey with our friends to Bethlehem, so we can celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

SESSION ONE

CHRISTMAS ANTICIPATION

OPENING QUESTIONS

1. What is one of the biggest surprises you have ever had?
2. How did you react? Were you in complete acceptance or were you in utter disbelief?
3. When was the last time you doubted God and what caused your doubt?



PART 1: A MAN NAMED ZECHARIAH (LUKE 1:5-7)

⁵ In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶ Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. ⁷ But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.



GETTING THE PICTURE

We are a lot like Zechariah... doing the work of the church, being good citizens, faithful with our time... but where are our hearts?

Zechariah is an ordinary man, engaged in his religious activities...doing the 'work of the church.' He is a good man. But some things are weighing on his heart as he goes about his duties as priest. He has lost that excitement he used to feel. Perhaps he has lost some hope. The world around him is unsettling. Israel is in decline with a bad king and no improvement in sight.

Zechariah and Elizabeth have wanted a child but are not able. They wonder why... are they cursed, are they not good enough?

We are a lot like Zechariah... doing the work of the church, being good citizens, faithful with our time... but where are our hearts?

SESSION ONE

CHRISTMAS ANTICIPATION



DISCUSSION

1. In what ways are you able to identify with Zechariah or his wife, Elizabeth?
 - a. Have you become discouraged with current events and the world around us?
 - b. Have you become discouraged with where you are “in life?”
 - c. Do you feel some days like something is missing?
2. Have you ever felt that God has let you down or left you to struggle on your own? Or that God has not heard your prayers?
3. How did you deal with that and what was the outcome of your experience?

ADDITIONAL SCRIPTURE REFERENCES

Psalm 42:11 Common English Bible (CEB)

¹¹*Why, I ask myself, are you so depressed?*

Why are you so upset inside?

Hope in God!

Because I will again give him thanks,

my saving presence and my God.

Isaiah 40:28-31 Common English Bible (CEB)

²⁸*Don't you know? Haven't you heard?*

The LORD is the everlasting God,

the creator of the ends of the earth.

He doesn't grow tired or weary.

SESSION ONE

CHRISTMAS ANTICIPATION

His understanding is beyond human reach,

²⁹ *giving power to the tired
and reviving the exhausted.*

³⁰ *Youths will become tired and weary,
young men will certainly stumble;*

³¹ *but those who hope in the LORD
will renew their strength;
they will fly up on wings like eagles;
they will run and not be tired;
they will walk and not be weary.*



PART 2: ZECHARIAH AND THE ANGEL (LUKE 1:8-22)

⁸ Once when [Zechariah] was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, ⁹ he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. ¹⁰ Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. ¹¹ Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. ¹³ But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. ¹⁴ You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. ¹⁶ He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” ¹⁸ Zechariah said to the angel, “How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.” ¹⁹ The angel replied, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. ²⁰ But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.”

²¹ Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. ²² When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak.

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CHRISTMAS ANTICIPATION



GETTING THE PICTURE

Like Zechariah, our hopes and our anticipation of the plans God has for our lives can fade into disappointment and disbelief when God's timing differs from our own.

God sends the angel, Gabriel, to clearly lay out God's plan for the next few years of Zechariah's and Elizabeth's life, and the plan involves a child... exactly what they had longed for, for so many years.

God's plan included naming the child John, and assuring that the child would bring them joy and gladness. He would have the spirit and power of Elijah and be a catalyst in turning the hearts of parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous. He would make ready a people "prepared for the Lord."

Instead of feeling joy and excitement, Zechariah was terrified by the angel's presence and even doubted that what the angel said would happen was even possible. His doubt brought about a consequence – Zechariah became mute and did not speak again until the birth of the child.

Like Zechariah, our hopes and our anticipation of the plans God has for our lives can fade into disappointment and disbelief when God's timing differs from our own.



DISCUSSION

1. What is your level of anticipation for what God will do in your life?
 - a. What's an example of some purpose God had for your life that has already come to pass?
 - b. Did you realize beforehand that God was leading you toward some specific purpose, or did that realization come later?"
 - c. What have you felt recently that might be God leading you to some new important purpose in your life?

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CHRISTMAS ANTICIPATION

2. How in the past have you reacted to God’s direction or leading in your life? What feelings have you experienced: joy, hopefulness, fear, disbelief?
3. If you had been Zechariah, what would you have said to the angel?
4. Is it possible that if we feel God’s direction or leading toward a certain purpose or calling and we turn our head in disbelief, there could be a consequence?
5. God’s purposes and plans are always “...fulfilled in their time...” (v. 20). The New International Version (NIV) translation says, “...at their proper time.” What are ways you can better align your expectations to God’s timing?

ADDITIONAL SCRIPTURE REFERENCES

Jeremiah 29:11-13 Common English Bible (CEB)

¹¹ I know the plans I have in mind for you, declares the LORD; they are plans for peace, not disaster, to give you a future filled with hope. ¹² When you call me and come and pray to me, I will listen to you. ¹³ When you search for me, yes, search for me with all your heart, you will find me.

Psalms 27:13-14 New International Version (NIV)

*¹³ I remain confident of this:
I will see the goodness of the LORD
in the land of the living.
¹⁴ Wait for the LORD;
be strong and take heart
and wait for the LORD.*

SESSION ONE

CHRISTMAS ANTICIPATION



APPLICATION

1. Spend some time this week making a list of the things (traditions) you and your family most anticipate and look forward to during the Christmas season. Identify those traditions that will be impacted by social distancing and restrictions on large gatherings. Some will just be different – like “live streaming” the Christmas Eve service. For those that are impossible, adopt a new tradition that celebrates the Christmas season in its place.
2. There are many for whom the disruption of Christmas tradition is an insignificant outcome of the pandemic, in comparison to the other impacts, such as loss of loved ones, loss of income, or the threat of life-altering outcomes in the months to come. Set aside time this week to pray and to practice Holy Listening. Pray for God to use you and your family in some significant way to be his hands and feet during this season to touch the lives of those who are suffering or giving of themselves as essential workers to ease the suffering of others. When the Holy Spirit speaks to you, don’t be afraid or doubt (like Zechariah), but follow that lead.
3. Disappointment, expectations, skepticism, and the need to be in control each have the capacity to separate us from the love of God. They can steal our joy every day! What will you do this week to give up control and surrender these debilitating emotions?

SESSION TWO

CHRISTMAS CATASTROPHE

The emotions that accompany pain and adversity strike at our core. They can sap our strength and drain the joy from our life.

Last week we looked at the emotion of anticipation. We discussed how that could be either a good or a bad feeling. We also talked about how anticipation this year can quite possibly bring forth anxiety and concern for believers, regardless of age and stage of life.

Christmas of 2020 will not be typical! And that will be the case for our Advent Study this year! Yes, we can celebrate the Season; but we must be authentic in our response to current events.

This week we will look at “Christmas Catastrophe.” The emotions that accompany pain and adversity strike at our core. They can sap our strength and drain the joy from our life. As we reflect on this heartbreaking part of our Christmas story, however, we will hold fast to our hope in the Lord as we get closer and closer to the miracle of Christmas, the miracle of the virgin birth of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior!

In the Scripture this morning, we will be looking at Genesis 3:13-15. These three verses are packed with information that should lead to deep discussion in your small group.

SESSION TWO

CHRISTMAS CATASTROPHE

OPENING QUESTIONS

1. Do you have the tendency to be a catastrophic thinker (one who tends to expect the worst in any situation)? Or are you the type of person who is calm and collected most of the time?
2. If you were describing the Christmas Season, would you have ever thought you would be using the words, “catastrophe” and “Advent,” in the same sentence?
3. What does Advent mean to you? Are you open to changing that point of view?



AN EARLY PROPHECY (GENESIS 3:13-15)

¹³ *The LORD God said to the woman, “What have you done?!”*

And the woman said, “The snake tricked me, and I ate.”

¹⁴ *The LORD God said to the snake,*

*“Because you did this,
you are the one cursed
out of all the farm animals,
out of all the wild animals.*

*On your belly you will crawl,
and dust you will eat
every day of your life.*

¹⁵ *I will put contempt*

*between you and the woman,
between your offspring and hers.
They will strike your head,
but you will strike at their heels.”*

SESSION TWO

CHRISTMAS CATASTROPHE



GETTING THE PICTURE

Genesis chapter 3 presents a series of interactions between the first woman, the serpent, the first man, and God. It is the familiar story of the original sin and the fall of mankind. There is little disagreement that sin is still going full force in our world today!

But there is more to this passage than just the story of Adam, Eve, and the original sin. Tucked into the last verse is a prophecy - some good news. It's called *protoevangelium* from two Greek words: *protos* meaning "first" and *evangelion* meaning "good news" or "gospel." The protoevangelium in Genesis 3:15 is the first mention of the good news of salvation in the Bible.

Many believe that in verse 15, the "woman" is Mary and her "offspring" is Jesus. The good news, as we later see in the Gospels, is that Jesus will "crush" the power of the sin and death that abound in our fallen world through His resurrection. That is great news! But, note the last line of the prophecy; "...but you [serpent] will strike at their heels."

Jesus suffered those strikes at his heel. Jesus spent his life walking among us in this broken world. He experienced pain, inconvenience, sorrow, frustration, and oppression by those around him with worldly power and wealth. We celebrate that ultimately, he experienced the resurrection and the serpent's head was crushed. But the road to get there involved torture, humiliation, and death on a cross. The strikes at his heel were very real.

We, too, experience the "strike at their heels" of the protoevangelium. Some might say, with all that is happening around us today, there is no PEACE on earth. There is no JOY in the world. The strikes at our heel are very real and stem from the sin that abounds within each of us and in the world around us. Let's look deeper into this prophecy and the good news of the Gospel so that we can find our way to the celebration of Christmas.

Jesus spent his life walking among us in this broken world. He experienced pain, inconvenience, sorrow, frustration, and oppression by those around him with worldly power and wealth.



DISCUSSION

1. Before today, have you read and interpreted Genesis 3:15 as a prophecy foretelling the birth of the Messiah?

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CHRISTMAS CATASTROPHE

- a. How does the virgin birth of Jesus fulfill the prophecy?
2. This doesn't sound like some Bible verses/prophesies you might see on a Hallmark Christmas card! What makes this prophecy different? How does it compare to each of the familiar prophecies from Isaiah 7:14 or Isaiah 9:6-7 (see "Additional Scripture References" below)?
3. Isaiah 53:4-6 (see "Additional Scripture References" below) makes it clear that the strikes Jesus suffered against his heel brought the promise of peace and healing to each of us.
 - a. What makes it so easy for us to continually turn "... to our own way?"
 - b. In what ways do you feel the "strikes" of sin in your life?
 - c. In what ways do you and those around you feel the "strikes" of sin in our society?
4. How do we find the peace and healing that Isaiah speaks of?
 - a. Individually and personally?
 - b. As a church?
 - c. As a society?
5. How would you explain this verse to someone studying the Bible or the Book of Genesis for the first time? Have someone in your class read Genesis 3:13-15 from The Message.

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CHRISTMAS CATASTROPHE

ADDITIONAL SCRIPTURE REFERENCES

Isaiah 7: 14 New International Version (NIV)

14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.

Isaiah 9: 6-7 New International Version (NIV)

*6 For unto us a Child is born,
Unto us a Son is given;
And the government will be upon His shoulder.
And His name will be called
Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
7 Of the increase of His government and peace
There will be no end,
Upon the throne of David and over His kingdom,
To order it and establish it with judgment and justice
From that time forward, even forever.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this.*

Isaiah 53: 4-6 New International Version (NIV)

*4 Surely he took up our pain
and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted.
5 But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed.
6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to our own way;*

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CHRISTMAS CATASTROPHE

*and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.*

Romans 3: 23-24 Common English Bible (CEB)

23 All have sinned and fall short of God's glory, 24 but all are treated as righteous freely by his grace because of a ransom that was paid by Christ Jesus.

Romans 7: 18 New International Version (NIV)

18 For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.



APPLICATION

1. Stop for just a moment and think about what sin you might be convicted of today. Make a mental note or write it out in your journal. Make sure to take some time this evening to seek God's forgiveness.
2. In John 12:27-28, Jesus said, regarding the "strikes" he was about to face: "...it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!" He knew God had a purpose for His life, and he trusted God that in the end the serpent's head would be crushed. Take time this week to:
 - a. Re-read Romans 3:23-24 and thank God for His grace and celebrate the forgiveness that came to us through a Child in a manger.
 - b. Re-read John 12:27-28 and ask God to show you His purpose for you in these catastrophic times. Consider also these words of wisdom:

Don't be afraid of the troubles that surround you. In His own time, God "...will defeat what you can't, and he intends these troubles to be not enemies that finish you but tools of grace that transform you." - Paul David Tripp

- 1.

SESSION TWO

CHRISTMAS CATASTROPHE

2. Become the person God intends for you to be during times of difficulty “...and God will make you nourishment for other people.” - *Oswald Chambers*

3. Next week’s lesson is called “Christmas Laughter.” Come ready to share your best Christmas joke!

SESSION THREE

CHRISTMAS LAUGHTER

If you want to make God laugh, show Him your plans.

Here we are in Week Three of The Many Moods of Christmas. We've looked at Christmas Anticipation and then Christmas Catastrophe. In this session, we are taking a look at Christmas Laughter. Now that is quite a leap, wouldn't you say - from catastrophe to laughing!!

By the way, did you hear the one about the man who received a text from his boss? His boss said, "Send me one of your funny Christmas jokes!" The worker texted him back, "I'm busy working. I'll send one later." "That's hilarious," the boss said. "Send me another one!" The worker must have been a bit shocked when he received this message from his boss.

"Man makes plans... and God laughs." - *Michael Chabon*

Many people have said, "If you want to make God laugh, show Him your plans." Joseph, the one betrothed to Mary had to feel as though God was playing a joke on him. He had to be in a state of shock to learn that Mary was with child when they had not yet married, nor had they been intimate. We can only imagine what Joseph was thinking!

Let's get started!

SESSION THREE

CHRISTMAS LAUGHTER

OPENING QUESTIONS

1. Who arrived today with a good Christmas joke? (NOTE: Additional Christmas jokes are provided following the discussion and application materials for this week.)
2. Has anyone ever played a practical joke on you? What was it, and how did you respond to it?
3. Have you ever played a practical joke on anyone else? What was it, and how did it go over?
4. Have you ever had an experience you would describe as the surprise of a lifetime?
 - a. Did the event impact your life from that point forward? If so, in what way?
 - b. At the time, was it a positive or a negative event?
 - c. In time, have you seen God work in the circumstances surrounding that surprise of a lifetime to your personal good or the good of those around you?



BEST LAID PLANS (MATTHEW 1:18-25)

¹⁸ This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about^[a]: 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. ¹⁹ Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet^[b] did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

²⁰ 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. ²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus,^[c] because he will save his people from their sins."

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CHRISTMAS LAUGHTER

²²All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³“The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. ²⁵But he did Immanuel”^[d] (which means “God with us”).

²⁴When Joseph woke up, he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.



GETTING THE PICTURE

...armed with the confidence of being a part of God’s plan, Joseph and Mary went about quietly doing their part.

Joseph was an ordinary young man. He was a carpenter – hard-working and known to be faithful to the Jewish law and traditions. And like other ordinary young men his age, he had a plan. Mary was formally engaged to be married to Joseph. He would provide for her, and together they would establish themselves as a respectable young family in the community. Everything was in order and progressing as planned until Mary reveals that she is pregnant.

Joseph loved Mary and knew that without his help, she would be in danger, at the very least, of suffering disgrace among their family and friends and the larger community. And so, like any ordinary man, Joseph devises a new plan.

An angel of the Lord steps in, to ease Joseph’s fears, and bring him up to speed on God’s plan for Mary and him, and their soon-to-be-born infant son.

Perhaps there were raised eyebrows and whispers among their family and neighbors – but armed with the confidence of being a part of the Creator God’s plan, they went about quietly doing their part.



DISCUSSION

1. Humor is defined by two elements: incongruity and surprise. What about Joseph’s story in this passage is incongruous and/or surprising? Do you think Mary and Joseph every looked back at their derailed plans for a typical marriage and found humor in how God stepped in and re-wrote their plans?
2. **For the men:** If you had been in Joseph’s situation, what would have been the most difficult for you?

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CHRISTMAS LAUGHTER

3. **For the women:** If you had been in Mary’s situation, what would have been the most difficult for you?

4. What effect do you think this revelation and change of plans had on Joseph and Mary’s future marriage? On how they parented a child who would “save his people from their sins?”

The couple experiences a major surprise that might seem to nullify their personal sacrifices. Instead, they realize the depth of their love for each other.

The O. Henry short story, “The Gift of the Magi,” is a heartwarming tale about a young married couple who each make personal sacrifices to buy their loved one a Christmas gift he/she will treasure. When they present their gifts to each other, they are surprised to learn that the gifts purchased are ironically of little use because of the sacrifices made: Della, the wife, cut her long hair and sold it to purchase a platinum watch chain for her husband; and Jim, the husband, sold his gold pocket watch to be able to purchase elegant ornamental combs for his wife’s beautiful, long hair. The couple experiences a major surprise that might seem to nullify their personal sacrifices. Instead, they realize the depth of their love for each other.

5. In what ways are O. Henry’s characters, Jim and Della, and their story like the story of Mary and Joseph in regard to:
 - a. Personal sacrifice?

 - b. Selfless love?

 - c. Actions that reveal their love for one another?

 - d. Actions that reflect the spirit of Christmas and God’s gift to humanity?

SESSION THREE

CHRISTMAS LAUGHTER



APPLICATION

1. Read or re-read the short story, “The Gift of the Magi.” Consider ways in which you might “gift” a loved one or someone you’ve never met with an act of personal sacrifice, self-less love, and the true spirit of Christmas.
2. What plans do you have for the New Year 2021? Devote some time this week to Prayer and Holy Listening asking for God’s wisdom and leading as you refine and carry out those plans in the months ahead.

MORE JOKES TO CONSIDER

The Optimist

Little Susie had been born with a sunny disposition and was the most optimistic kid anybody had ever seen. She loved people and animals, and no matter what happened, she always saw the bright side.

She was also an artistic girl. So one Christmas, her parents got her a big bag of clay for making pottery. They put it on the back porch next to a bag of horse manure for the garden.

On Christmas Eve, dad wrapped the presents. It was a little dark on the porch, and as you may have guessed, he wrapped the manure by mistake instead of the pottery clay.

On Christmas morning, Susie was so excited to see what Santa had brought her. When she finally got to unwrap her big present, her parents watched with anticipation to see how much she liked her clay.

When Susie opened the package and then the bag inside containing several pounds of stinky horse manure, the parents were aghast.

But before they could apologize, Susie said, “Oh boy! I got a pony!”

Christmas Decorating

I wanted our street to have the prettiest decorations in the neighborhood, so I strung lit colored balls from house to house, all the way down the block. I did all the electrical wiring myself. If you’d like further information, just drive down Moorpark Street in North Hollywood. We’re the third pile of ashes from the corner.

- Bob Hope

SESSION THREE

CHRISTMAS LAUGHTER

Santa's Lap

A father took his son Billy to the Penney's mall to see Santa. They stood in line awhile, and finally the boy was able to meet Santa and sit on his lap.

"What would you like for Christmas, Billy?" asked Santa.

"An X-Box and a Hobbit game," Billy said.

"Okay, we'll see what we can do about that," said Santa with a big smile.

Later on that day they also went to see Santa at the Sears mall. When Santa asked Billy what he wanted for Christmas, Billy said, "An X-Box and a Hobbit game."

"Will you be a good boy and do what your daddy tells you?" Santa asked.

Billy turned to his dad and said, "Let's go back to the other Santa, Dad."

"Why Billy?" asked his father.

"Because I didn't have to make any deals with that one."

New Stamps

A guy goes into the post office and asks the clerk for some new holiday stamps.

The clerk behind the counter asks, "Which denomination?"

The guy thinks for a minute, then says, "Give me 5 Jewish, 2 Lutheran, and 7 Catholic."

Christmas Wish

When a father asked his little boy what he wanted for Christmas, the boy replied, "A baby sister."

As it turned out, the wife was pregnant and delivered on Christmas Eve. On Christmas day, she brought home a brand new baby sister for their son.

The next year, when the father asked his little boy what he wanted for Christmas, the boy said, "If it wouldn't make mommy too uncomfortable, I'd like a pony."

SESSION THREE

CHRISTMAS LAUGHTER

Rudolph

One Christmas, a mother asked her young daughter if she could name two of Santa's reindeer.

"Rudolph and Olive," replied the young girl confidently.

"Rudolph and Olive?" said the mother, quizzically. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, mommy, Rudolph and Olive. Like in the song."

"The song?" asked the mother. "What song?"

The girl sang, "Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer, had a very shiny nose. And if you ever saw it, you would even say it glows. Olive the other reindeer...."

SESSION FOUR

CHRISTMAS AMBIGUITY

Ambiguity is the quality of being open to more than one interpretation. It is being in a position of ambivalence or vagueness. How well do you cope with these states of being? Most of us do not do very well with doubt or obscurity.

We have come to the close of our Advent Study for 2020 and have examined several moods we can experience during this season. There was Anticipation, Catastrophe, Laughter, and finally, we look at Ambiguity.

Ambiguity is the quality of being open to more than one interpretation. It is being in a position of ambivalence or vagueness. How well do you cope with these states of being? Most of us do not do very well with doubt or obscurity. Mary, the mother of Jesus, was faced with this at her core, at a depth that none of us will probably ever encounter.

Dr. Seuss wrote a book about this very thing! It is entitled “On Beyond Zebra.” If you are familiar with the book, you will understand how this book relates so beautifully to our Scripture.

The sermon today talks about what it feels like when we encounter an instance for which we have no category. We live our lives by living in the limits of the same general types of experience. We group everything and every person according to those classes. In other words, we limit ourselves daily. For example, we have in our minds what a spider looks like because we have seen them; but if we push the envelope, no human being has really ever seen Spider-Man! That is simply out of the realm of possibility.

Most likely, that is how Mary felt when the angel Gabriel appeared to deliver the news that she would give birth to a son while remaining a virgin. As they say today, she probably just “couldn’t wrap her mind around it.” Can you?

The world says “don’t believe” because it can’t be proven. Pastor Chuck and Dr. Seuss think it’s a worthwhile journey and a wonderful adventure to see where life for the baby Jesus begins.

SESSION FOUR

CHRISTMAS AMBIGUITY

1. How would you define Ambiguity?
2. What has been the most challenging concept for you to grasp?
3. Do you feel ambiguous about what you're celebrating this season? Are you celebrating Santa or Jesus?



JESUS' BIRTH FORETOLD (LUKE 1:26-33)

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

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



GETTING THE PICTURE

Planning a wedding is a joyous time in a young lady's life. The mother gathers her daughter to her side, making lists regarding all that will occur during the festivities. The father is probably keeping lists of the expenses they will incur.

The period of engagement is a magical time for a young couple. Mary, the bride-to-be, lives in a small town called Nazareth of Galilee. Just imagine the whole community anxiously awaiting Mary and Joseph's wedding.

No other man had ever laid with Mary. She was a virgin. Mary was embarking upon a whole new experience with Joseph, the man she would live with the rest of her life, the man with whom she would make a home. It was during this time that Mary had a "Beyond Zebra" event. This was an experience that drove her into a state of ambiguity!

SESSION FOUR

CHRISTMAS AMBIGUITY



DISCUSSION (Part 1)

1. When Mary heard Gabriel say to her “Greeting, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you,” she became quite puzzled. She was “greatly troubled” and wondered what this could mean. Have you ever received a message that created fear, anxiety, or ambiguity?
2. In your faith walk, has God ever left you with the feeling of “Wait! What?!” Have you ever felt as though what you just heard is impossible?
3. When and how often have you had to say to yourself, “With God, all things are possible?”
4. How have you dealt with these situations, and what was the outcome?



GABRIEL DROP A BOMBSHELL (LUKE 1:34-38)

³⁴ “How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”

³⁵ 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^[e] the Son of God. ³⁶ 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. ³⁷ For no word from God will ever fail.”

³⁸ “I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled.” Then the angel left her.

SESSION FOUR

CHRISTMAS AMBIGUITY



GETTING THE PICTURE

All of this is difficult for Mary to comprehend. As Pastor Chuck says, this is “an instance without a category to explain it.”

Gabriel proceeds to tell Mary that she should not be afraid and that she has found favor with God! He then tells her that before she marries Joseph she will give birth to the Son of the Most High. Ambiguity? Fear? Confusion? Yes, all of those feelings!

All of this is difficult for Mary to comprehend. As Pastor Chuck says, this is “an instance without a category to explain it.” She was probably thinking, “What will people think?” She responded to Gabriel, “How will this be since I am a virgin?”

Gabriel told Mary, “The Holy Spirit will come upon 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. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God.”

“I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May it be to me as you have said.” Then the angel left her.



DISCUSSION (Part 2)

Mary’s willingness to live her life as God had planned it was nothing short of amazing! We could all use a bit of that as we journey this life. A willingness to trust and obey God when our score cards seem to register zero!

1. Have you ever been held back from believing something because you knew it could not be proven?
2. What worldly views cause you to challenge the ambiguous parts of the Bible; such as the virgin birth, miracles performed by Jesus, and most of all, His resurrection?
3. Do you find yourself being obedient to God when you don’t fully understand the call, or do you hesitate as Zachariah did when Gabriel visited him?

SESSION FOUR

CHRISTMAS AMBIGUITY

Many could not understand Joseph's reaction. He chose to stay by Mary's side as she went through her pregnancy and ultimately gave birth to our Lord, Jesus Christ. This is clearly a "Beyond Zebra" experience.

4. Have you ever judged another person who was called to follow God in a way you didn't understand? If so, how did you handle that, and what were the results?

In today's sermon, Pastor Chuck challenged us to step out of our comfort zone, that zone where we are confronted with doubt or ambiguity. Most of us feel better if we are in that place where we are certain about our surroundings, sure about the plans we have made about our lives and our futures. But in God's world, in the world of the Spirit, we are called to suspend this attitude and to enter the world of faith!

5. On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate your Faith Walk at the moment?
6. How would you describe it ten years ago, and what happened in your life to bring you to your current stage?
7. Which Spiritual Disciplines do you plan to use that will further your faith walk in the future?



APPLICATION

Today's sermon reminds us that God became flesh in the form of Jesus Christ. God willingly entered into our human weakness. The sermon also reminds us that many of us can easily grasp Jesus' divinity, but moving to that "Beyond Zebra" place to fully accept his humanness, takes us outside that realm of acceptance again.

As the Apostle John writes in his Gospel 1:14 "The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." This Scripture tells us of the birth of Christ!

SESSION FOUR

CHRISTMAS AMBIGUITY

As we approach this Christmas Eve and the glorious celebration of the birth of our Lord and Savior, we must never forget that this is the day we celebrate when Word became flesh in our world!

In our sermon, Pastor Chuck tells us a touching story about Tom, the pastor; Jim, a recovering alcoholic; and those people who showed up for Tom in the robing room.

Jim was just about to leave church because he was overcome with emotion. He told the pastor that he was leaving to have a drink. Tom, the pastor, did an amazing thing. He made an announcement that called for any other people in recovery to go to the robing room. Jim found himself at one of his lowest points graciously accepting help and encouragement from those who also suffered from alcoholism.

How do you show up for others as 'Jesus with skin on?'

The pastor proceeded to preach, and Word was becoming flesh in the choir room. As some might say, Jesus showed up with skin on!

The Mission Statement for Matthews United Methodist Church is "Reach, Teach, Praise, and Serve."

IT STATES:

We are committed to:

REACH people in the name of Christ,
TEACH everyone to be fully devoted disciples of Christ,
PRAISE God through worship and in everything we do,
SERVE others, as Christ taught us, to relieve suffering in the world.

1. How do you show up in the world living out this statement?
2. How do you show up for others as Jesus with skin on?
3. Does the Word of God become flesh through your actions?

Bring this Advent Study to a close with Christmas Greetings, Prayer, and a Blessing.

Many thanks to the Matthews United Methodist Church team who worked diligently on this “The Many Moods of Christmas” study guide. Your work will be a huge blessing to all who use this guide.

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