

St Albans URC Cluster
ADVENT STUDY COURSE
2021

Christmas Surprises

Week 1
Occupation



Prepare

Sing to the Lord a New Song

“ ‘Hark the Herald’, ‘Silent Night’, ‘Once in Royal’ and finish with ‘O Come all ye Faithful’. If you’re in Yorkshire, begin with ‘Christians Awake’. Oh and if you must get funky, ‘Come and join the Celebration’”.

But new songs? At Christmas? Forget it. People expect to have the old carols. That’s what they come for. They want to feel comfortable, as if we’ve been polishing the cross and baking mince pies since last Christmas, so they can find everything just as it was before.

But what if, just once, we used some of those carols about unmarried mothers, overbooked hotel rooms, shepherds so terrified they ran to Bethlehem, wise men so mistaken that babies and toddlers were slaughtered?

Or even took it further and sang songs about how God can take our pain and transform it?

How living in the church is hard because we do not agree and don’t know how to differ?

How everyone’s secret fear of not being good enough or of having committed the sin for which there is no forgiveness, can be taken, soothed, challenged, changed, and how our lives can be recharged, revitalised, re-inspired simply by knowing that God is with us?

Maybe then we will go on to write the song of our lives so that others may sing in their turn. Instead of finding everything as it was last year, what if God’s Christmas guests found a renewed, open, accepting, people ready to change, ready to listen, ready to sing the terrifying song of the angels in a new chromatic key instead of monochrome uniformity? Even ‘Silent Night’ was a new song once!

© Carole Elphick

Listen

O little town of Bethlehem
Phillips Brooks

O little town of Bethlehem
How still we see thee lie
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
the silent stars go by;
yet in thy dark streets shineth
the everlasting Light;
The hopes and fears of all the years
are met in thee tonight.

O morning stars together
proclaim the holy birth,
and praises sing to God the King,
goodwill and peace on earth.
For Christ is born of Mary;
and gathered all above,
while mortals sleep, the angels keep
their watch of wondering love.

How silently, how silently,
the wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts
the blessings of his heaven.
No ear may hear his coming;
but in this world of sin,
where meek souls will receive him, still
the dear Christ enters in.

O holy Child of Bethlehem,
descend to us we pray;
cast out our sin, and enter in;
be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels
the great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us,
our Lord Emmanuel.

Listen

Funny Kind of Night

© John L Bell

Funny kind of night, funny kind of day,
tax collectors, child inspectors,
all in disarray;
funny kind of day, funny kind of night,
royal kings and lesser things
align with dark and light.

*TO GOD IN THE HIGHEST
BE GLORY WHICH NEVER ENDS,
AND ON EARTH BE PEACE
AND GOODWILL TO ALL GOD'S FRIENDS.*

Funny kind of day, funny kind of night,
babies cry, traditions die
and fear itself takes fright;
country folk enquire what is right or wrong
while above, in tongues of love,
the sense is veiled in song.

*TO GOD IN THE HIGHEST
BE GLORY WHICH NEVER ENDS,
AND ON EARTH BE PEACE
AND GOODWILL TO ALL GOD'S FRIENDS.*

Funny kind of night, funny kind of day,
first begotten, half-forgotten
treasure lies in hay;
wise men on the move wonder what to bring,
while innkeepers and light sleepers
hear poor shepherds sing.

Reflect

"O little town of Bethlehem" is probably America's favourite carol. It was written shortly after the Civil War in 1868 by the rector of Holy Trinity Church, Philadelphia, Phillips Brooks. He had been inspired to write it when on a visit to the Holy Land three years earlier, and on Christmas Eve he had stood on the traditional site of the shepherds' fields and looked out over Bethlehem.

The words of his carol capture the Christian truth that insignificant Bethlehem became a meeting place for all our longings, and that this was the location of God's gracious response in giving us Jesus.

At that time, even in the backwoods of Israel, for the ordinary people of the Jewish homeland, Rome was the dominant political factor. Although they might not have seen Romans themselves on a day to day basis, the imposition of Roman power was certainly there. In the case of client kingdoms (like Judea), Herod's rule and Herod's forces would have been the political entity. But everyone knew that Rome was the source of the wealth and also the source of many of the problems that occurred in the Jewish state. So the political reality of the day was of a dominant alien power overseeing life on a day to day basis. Bethlehem, a city under occupation, was the place chosen for the birth of the Prince of Peace.

John Bell has written many carols which help to put a modern and thought-provoking twist on the Nativity narrative. His songs and carols relate the issues we encounter in our modern Christian life, with the life and teachings of Jesus.

In 'Funny Kind of Night', the focus is on the inhabitants who would have peopled the streets of Bethlehem. In contrast to Brooks' version, which paints a picture of the landscape of the town and the silence, Bell's carol cleverly contrasts the holy and the human, the irony of the workaday world found interwoven with the sacred and numinous. The momentous and the mundane all happening at once in a little spot in the back of beyond. One of the most poignant aspects of the nativity is that of the 'Prince of Peace' is born in a land occupied by the military. 'God with us' whatever life brings. Certainly a time of surprising contrasts on that first Funny (peculiar) Night.

Read

Micah 5:2-

Bethlehem Ephrath, you are one of the smallest towns in the nation of Judah. But the Lord will choose one of your people to rule the nation - someone whose family goes back to ancient times. The Lord will abandon Israel only until this ruler is born, and the rest of his family returns to Israel. Like a shepherd taking care of his sheep, this ruler will lead and care for his people by the power and glorious name of the Lord his God. His people will live securely, and the whole earth will know his true greatness, because he will bring peace.

Matthew 2:4-

Herod brought together the chief priests and the teachers of the Law of Moses and asked them, "Where will the Messiah be born?" They told him, "He will be born in Bethlehem, just as the prophets wrote, 'Bethlehem in the land of Judah, you are very important among the towns of Judea. From your town will come a leader, who will be like a shepherd for my people Israel.' "



Meditate

Look at these works of art. Does either speak to you as a good representation of Bethlehem at the time of Jesus' birth? Use each one as a focus for meditation.



'O Little Town of Bethlehem'
by Carol Sheli Cantrell



'Scar of Bethlehem'
by Banksy

Pray

Maybe it is in the waiting for God,
not in the wandering from store to store,
that we find our way.

Maybe it is in the friendship of God,
not in the frenzy of the crowds,
that we are led to the manger.

Maybe it is in the steadfast love of God,
not in the pile of stuff under the tree,
that we find what we have been searching for all our lives.

Maybe, God of Advent,
this year will be different.

Maybe we will let you lead us to Bethlehem.

Thom M Shuman

Jesus, we are waiting,
here in St Albans, here in Hertfordshire,
waiting for you to come into our houses,
our streets, our shops and offices,
to fill them with light and peace.

We are waiting, Jesus...

Come and live in us.

Jesus, we are waiting,
to turn ourselves round,
to bring health to our sick,
to welcome our refugees,
to comfort the forlorn,
to be your ears and eyes,
to be your hands and feet
in this world that needs you so much.

We are waiting, Jesus...

Come and live in us.

John Davies

Think

- Do you think of Jesus would choose for us to see him as 'A wondrous gift'? 'A meeting place' for your hopes and fears?
- Bethlehem was an ordinary place at the edge of the Roman empire. So was St Albans. What if Jesus had been born here?
- The word "occupation" can be loaded, with a variety of connotations. What does the word bring to your mind? Is there such a thing as a "benign" occupation?

Act

Bethlehem, located in the West Bank, Palestine, is surrounded in part by a wall. It's a sign of the divisions that continue to afflict the region. Built by Israel along and within the West Bank, the state of Israel refers to it, as a separation barrier.

Find out about Embrace the Middle East, which works in partnership with more than forty projects in Israel and Palestine, Lebanon and Egypt. It is funded entirely through generous donations, appeals, legacies and grants from individuals.

www.embraceme.org

Take a walk in your neighbourhood.

As you walk, say a prayer for those who live in your street, those known by name or those unknown who are behind the front doors. Expand your prayer to include all who live in the same town as you. Pray that all these might experience the presence of God this Christmas.

Write your own alternative carol reflecting current concerns.

Here is an example © Paul Bradbury:

O little town of Bethlehem

In captivity you lie

Amidst your nervous, terror-ed sleep

The sentinels pass by.

In occupied streets shining

An endless burning light,

The hopes and fears of exiles' tears

Are met in Him tonight.

Table Talk

(mealtime conversation starters for families or friends)

- Which is your favourite carol? Why?
- If you had been walking through the streets of Bethlehem on the night when Jesus was born, what sights and sounds do you think you would have experienced?
- How do you choose your Christmas cards? What do you look for?
- Who might not be looking forward to Christmas?
- Have a conversation about this picture:



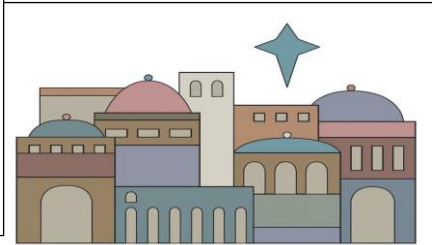
Create



☆ Advent tree #1

Make a lit house. A house template, ribbon, glue and an LED light are in the craft bag. Cut, fold and stick the template. Insert the light. Attach ribbon and hang from your tree.

Cut pieces of coloured sweet wrappers to create your own town of Bethlehem, similar to the picture. What do you think the buildings are- houses, inns, places of worship?



If you have a paper booklet this image will be included in the pack. If you are reading this online the picture is attached. Colour in the picture. Add figures of Mary and Joseph? What might they have talked about as they travelled to Bethlehem?



Create a conversation!

On a Christmas walk through your town, look for signs of Christmas preparations: coloured lights, shop windows... If baby Jesus were being born in our own time, where might it have happened: in a Sainsbury's storeroom? A changing room in a sports centre?



We cannot tell how Bethlehem,
Christ's birthplace,
where bombs explode
and deadly missiles fall,
may speak to all
the leaders of the nations
out of the shadows
of a concrete wall.
But this we know,
that all God's pilgrim people
who live in hope
that one day wars will cease,
must join to build
a highway through the desert,
a road where all
may come and go in peace.

(sung to The Londonderry Air)
© Jean Mortimer

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