



Mary and Joseph

MEETING AIM

To explore part of the Christmas story and investigate what it can teach us about discovering and appreciating Jesus.

BIBLE PASSAGE

Matthew 1-2; Luke 1-2

BACKGROUND

This session is designed for you to do online in a group video call (on something like FaceTime or Zoom). Make sure you have parental permission to do this, as well as following your church's safeguarding procedure.

This series will show us that it's when we believe that God knows best, and in faith do what he asks, that we make massive discoveries and enable God to use us powerfully. In this first session, we encounter Mary and Joseph. Exploring the surprises that they face should help young people see beyond the traditional story and explore more deeply what God is doing in the story. They should be able to reflect on what this story actually means, rather than just being a nativity play or Christmas card design.

JOINING THE SESSION 5 MINS

As people join you online, ask them to share what they have been doing during the past seven days. Ask them about a recent surprise they had.

INTRO ACTIVITY 10 MINS

You will need: a surprise!

Before the session, set up a surprise for your group. You could invite someone to join your online session (a local celebrity would be ideal, if you know one!). Alternatively, arrange for a small treat to be delivered to the young people's houses.

Stage your surprise (welcome your visitor or tell the young people what has been left outside their door), and then ask the group how it felt to be surprised.

What else could have happened that would have surprised the group? Give them a list of possible surprises (eg the roof falls in, the youth leader is arrested by armed police) and ask them to grade these possibilities from zero (not very surprising) to five (cataclysmic)!.

BIBLE EXPLORATION 10 MINS

You will need: pens and paper; phones

Read Luke 1:30-38 (Mary's surprise) and Matthew 1:18-25 (Joseph's). Challenge the group to choose three words to describe both Mary's and Joseph's responses. How might the young people have felt if they were in the same position? It's worth pointing out that while Joseph was probably a bit older, Mary would be the same age as some of the young people in your group. Can Mary and Joseph trust God through all this?

Go on to read Luke 2:1-5. After they had recovered from the shock of impending parenthood, along came surprise number two: Mary and Joseph would have to travel to Bethlehem just before the birth. This was around 75 miles. Challenge the group to discover how long this would take to walk, and also to find an equivalent journey in your own area. Ask if they think that God was still in charge.

Finally, read Luke 2:6-7, and try to identify what surprises lie in this passage. Also, chat about what differences there are in between the traditional Christmas story they might have encountered at primary school or in church as part of a nativity play, and what you read in the Bible. There is no inn or stable! Explain that the 'guest room' was likely to have been a special room built on the roof of the house especially for visitors. Mary and Joseph were forced to stay in the main part of a house (probably with Joseph's relatives) – where the family and the animals would have all been.

CHATTING TOGETHER 5 MINS

Discuss the following questions together:

- If you were Mary or Joseph, how might you have felt at each stage in the story? After each surprise?
- What do you think God is doing in this story? Why all the surprises?
- What does this story tell us about God? And our relationship with him?
- Where might we have to put our trust in God in risky situations?

CREATIVE RESPONSE 10 MINS

Looking back, it's clear that God's plan wouldn't have worked out without Mary and Joseph and their willingness to trust that he knew best. In small groups (if your video

conferencing software allows), challenge the young people to discover all they can about these three pioneers for God. How did these people demonstrate the same pattern of risky trust in their lives? What was their big challenge, how did they meet it, and what did God do as a result?

Gladys Aylward was a poorly educated London housemaid when God called her to China. Turned down by mission agencies, she spent all her savings on a ticket across Russia, then ran an inn and sheltered orphans. When the Japanese invaded they set a price on her head. Undaunted, she led 100 children over the hills to safety – a twelve-day trek.

William Carey was a Northamptonshire cobbler who decided God wanted him in India. Despite daunting obstacles and great personal misfortunes, he got there and stuck at the job for 41 years. He translated the Bible into the six main languages of India, battled social abuses, worked to bring prosperity to Indians and founded a renowned school.

Andrew van der Bijl was an ex-soldier who knew about risk-taking. So, as a young Christian in 1955, he started smuggling Bibles into communist countries, had many hair-raising adventures and saw many people come to faith. Worldwide organisation Open Doors now continues his work.

Come back together after a few minutes and share what you have discovered.

PRAYER 5 MINS

Ask the young people to sum up all they've learned from the three surprises in Joseph and Mary's story. How far would they be prepared to trust God? Finish by praying for faith to make their lives count by trusting him more.



The shepherds

MEETING AIM

To explore why God chose the shepherds to hear the good news, and what that means for us.

BIBLE PASSAGE

Luke 2:8-20

BACKGROUND

This session is designed for you to do online in a group video call (on something like FaceTime or Zoom). Make sure you have parental permission to do this, as well as following your church's safeguarding procedure.

The shepherds were some of the most unlikely people to be chosen to hear the good news of Jesus' birth. Likewise, young people can be ignored and marginalised, and yet they can be some of the most powerful messengers of God's good news.

JOINING THE SESSION 5 MINS

As people join you online, ask them to share what they have been doing during the past seven days.

INTRO ACTIVITY 10 MINS

Ask the group to imagine this situation:

You are sitting in the park after a hard afternoon's shopping. You're dressed in trainers and a T-shirt, your shopping bags are at your feet. You're tired. Suddenly, a smartly dressed man approaches you and says he's an equerry to the Queen, who is passing through your town and has expressed a desire to meet an ordinary person. Her limousine is just 500 yards away, the champagne is on ice, and you must come instantly. There is no time to change or freshen up – this is your one opportunity. You must leave your shopping and go.

Discuss: What would you do? What would your reasons be? What is the strangest invitation you have ever received?

BIBLE EXPLORATION 10 MINS

You will need: pens and paper

This session investigates the strangest Christmas invitation in the Bible story: the one that went via the angel to the shepherds. Read Luke 2:8-16. Why was this a

strange invitation?

Explain that at this time shepherds were not popular. They had no civil rights. They couldn't be witnesses in court cases. It was illegal to buy wool and milk from shepherds, since they were probably stolen goods. Shepherds were officially classified as 'sinners', excluded from the temple and synagogue. So for the birth to be announced to shepherds was pretty unlikely.

Work out a list of those who would be equally unlikely in our world. Compare results and write all suggestions up on a large sheet of paper.

There must have been hundreds of people nearby who were doing nothing that night, so why pick men who were on duty? Can the young people see any possible clues in verses 15-20? When you've discussed some ideas, summarise that the shepherds were unlikely people, but God knew they'd do the job perfectly.

CHATTING TOGETHER 5 MINS

Discuss the following questions together:

- If you were one of the shepherds, what would you think and do?
- What do you think the shepherds did next?
- Why do you think God sent the birth announcement and invitation to a group as lowly as the shepherds?

CREATIVE RESPONSE 10 MINS

You will need: Bible references below on your video conferencing whiteboard or chat function

Explain that there was another reason for including shepherds in the big moment. Play this six-question time-test game. Give the young people the first question to solve, telling them the answer is in one of the Bible verses on the list. Once they have the answer, they should come back and tell you. You should then ask the second question – and so on, until they complete the whole thing.

The questions and Bible references are:

- What did Jacob say God had been for him? (Answer: a shepherd – Genesis 48:15.)
- What did David think about God? (Answer: "The Lord is my shepherd" – Psalm 23:1.)

- How did Isaiah say God treated his people? (Answer: "He tends his flock like a shepherd" – Isaiah 40:11.)
- Which of Jesus' royal ancestors started as a Bethlehem shepherd? (Answer: King David – 1 Samuel 16:1,11,13.)
- What does Micah predict about a great leader who would come from Bethlehem? (Answer: "He will...shepherd his flock" – Micah 5:4.)
- How did Jesus describe himself? (Answer: "the good shepherd" – John 10:11.)

Afterwards, review the answers and summarise: God's ideal leader isn't a dictator, tyrant or despot, but the shepherd of his people. So when the king arrived on earth, God neatly underlined it by involving Bethlehem shepherds from the outset. Throughout the Old Testament, God shepherds his people; Jesus' ancestor King David was a shepherd; and God's coming king was destined to be a shepherd too.

PRAYER 5 MINS

What happened to the shepherds afterwards? Would they ever have seen Jesus again? Probably not, given that the average lifespan of a shepherd was between 25 and 40 years, and Jesus didn't begin teaching and healing until 30 years later. But their excitement and the story they spread (vv17-18) had an important part to play in preparing people for the work Jesus was to do three decades into the future.

Ask the young people to think about these questions in a moment of silence:

- Am I ever tempted to think that some kinds of people just aren't of any interest to God?
- Am I tempted to think that God wouldn't choose me for anything important?
- Am I prepared to trust God as the shepherds did, and get excited about the good news as they did?
- Am I happy to be a small part of something much, much bigger, without being the centre of attention all the time?

Close by praying about these things.

This session was inspired by ideas from the Premier Youth and Children's Work archive, adapted by ALEX TAYLOR.



Wise men

MEETING AIM

To make discoveries about Jesus, just as the wise men do.

BIBLE PASSAGE

Matthew 2:1-12

BACKGROUND

This session is designed for you to do online in a group video call (on something like FaceTime or Zoom). Make sure you have parental permission to do this, as well as following your church's safeguarding procedure.

The wise men make several important discoveries, from understanding that a new king was going to be born, to finding out that the new king wasn't in a palace, to finally meeting the new king in a house in Bethlehem. Christmas can seem such an overfamiliar story that we can miss the importance and impact of these discoveries. Try to approach this story afresh, and encourage your group to do the same.

JOINING THE SESSION 5 MINS

As people join you online, ask them to share what they have been doing during the past seven days.

INTRO ACTIVITY 10 MINS

You will need: glasses; blunt knives (ordinary cutlery is fine)

Before the session, watch how to do the three knife scaffold trick. Make sure everyone has four glasses of equal height and three knives. They should space three of the glasses out in a triangle, each more than a knife's length away from each other. Challenge the group to bridge the glasses with the knives so that they can balance their fourth glass on top of the knife scaffolding. Finally, show the young people how to do the trick.

Ask the young people how we make discoveries. Comment that it's often by trying lots of things that fail.

BIBLE EXPLORATION 10 MINS

You will need: pens and paper; map of the Parthian Empire

Read Matthew 2:1-8. The wise men studied astrology, which we now know has no scientific value. But through it they stumbled on the biggest discovery of all: that right then, a new king was being born who would transform the world.

Show your young people a map of the Parthian Empire (the Magi's most likely home) to show how far they may have travelled. They travelled for something between 950 and 4,000 miles. A camel does 18-25 miles a day. Ask the group to work out the shortest and longest time the journey would have taken. This teaches us something about commitment. If we sit on the sidelines, we will never make the big discoveries. We need to get stuck in.

Go on to ask the group these riddles:

- A fire breaks out on a plane. One passenger hurls himself out of the emergency door in desperation. He doesn't die. Why? (The plane is on the ground.)
- A man looks out of a window, desperate to open it, yet knows that opening it will kill him. Why? (He's in a submarine and the air is running out.)
- Romeo and Juliet lie dead on the floor surrounded by water and broken glass. How did they die? (They're goldfish – the tank broke.)

People sometimes don't get the answers because they have a wrong picture in their heads. What (very natural) wrong impression did the wise men have about the baby king? But they didn't give up, they just accepted that God's plan was different from their first impression and went on again. The Magi went wrong and sorted it out, and then when they arrived, they worshiped.

Read Matthew 2:9-12. Ask the group to find out what the three gifts are. Share their discoveries and then wonder together what the three gifts might mean. What do they tell you about Jesus?

CHATTING TOGETHER 5 MINS

Discuss the following questions together:

- What's your favourite part of this story?
- What do you think the wise men did next?
- What do you think God was saying by sending the birth announcement and invitation to a group like the wise men?

CREATIVE RESPONSE 10 MINS

You will need: pens and paper, notebooks or journals

Make sure everyone has pens and paper. Ask the young people to write or draw about the discoveries they have made today. Refer back to some of the questions you talked about in 'Bible exploration' and 'Chatting together' – you could think perhaps about what the gifts the wise men gave Jesus, the commitment they showed to finding the new king, or the what you might have given to Jesus.

Once everyone is finished, invite people to share if they would like to. (Don't insist; some might want to keep their thoughts private.)

You could deliver a special notebook or journal to each young person and encourage them to use this session as the start of journaling about their life and faith. It can be a positive thing to write or draw thoughts, feelings and discoveries about God and our relationship with him.

PRAYER 5 MINS

Go back over what the wise men discovered. Challenge people to think about the implications of the whole story for us. Are we prepared to take action and explore Jesus for ourselves? Are we prepared to examine our assumptions and check we've got the right picture? Are we prepared to be worshipers, not just onlookers? And are we getting to know God better through this whole process? Pray for your young people, asking God to make this Christmas a time when they understand more and know him better.



Herod

MEETING AIM

To explore the story of Herod and reflect on what it means for us.

BIBLE PASSAGE

Matthew 2:1-18

BACKGROUND

This session is designed for you to do online in a group video call (on something like FaceTime or Zoom). Make sure you have parental permission to do this, as well as following your church's safeguarding procedure.

The story of Herod in Matthew might remind us of several modern-day leaders – a paranoia and insecurity which affects their actions. However, God keeps Jesus, Mary and Joseph, and the wise men, safe from Herod's terrible actions.

JOINING THE SESSION

5 MINS

As people join you online, ask them to share what they have been doing during the past seven days.

INTRO ACTIVITY

10 MINS

Play this game together. One young person is king or queen. Everyone else fires questions at the monarch, who must respond but not smile, nod or give a shake of the head, say yes or no, or mention any number. As soon as the king or queen is caught out, the person who trapped them into the mistake gets crowned instead... and so on. Play this for nine or ten 'reigns': some will last a while, others very briefly, but all will be replaced quickly and suddenly.

BIBLE EXPLORATION

10 MINS

You will need: the song 'Be prepared' from *The Lion King*; pens and paper

Begin by playing the song 'Be prepared' from *The Lion King*. Ask the group how much they remember about the film, and the character who's singing this song.

Comment that for much of *The Lion King*, the wrong king is on the throne. That's exactly what was happening when Jesus was born. There were lots of rulers – the Roman emperor, the Roman

governor, the military, the religious leaders. King Herod was what was called a client king – he was king in Judea, but the Romans were really in charge. He lived as a Jew, but his lifestyle did not follow God's laws.

Read Matthew 2:1-8 and 16-18. Chat about why the group thinks Herod's response was so violent. What does it tell them about him? Ask the group to write down all the things that describe Herod. What might make him paranoid? What might motivate him? Get the groups to share their findings.

Ask someone to pretend to be Herod, and then encourage the rest of the group to ask the volunteer questions. The volunteer should try to answer as Herod might (they can get help from others in the group if they get stuck).

Finally, wonder together about what Matthew is doing, telling us this story. What might it mean?

CHATTING TOGETHER

5 MINS

Discuss the following questions together:

- What would the story be like if Herod genuinely wanted to worship Jesus?
- What does the story of Herod tell us about following God's way?
- Can you see people acting like Herod today? Why do people act this way?
- Have you ever acted jealously or taken steps to secure your own position? Why? Did it make you feel better?

CREATIVE RESPONSE

10 MINS

Read out these different scenarios and ask the young people what Herod would do. Then ask what Jesus would do. In your discussions, try to draw out the differences between the two kings – the worldly king and the real, heavenly king.

- Your best friend has decided to do a drama project with the best actor in your GSCE class. You really wanted to work with that actor yourself, but the teacher has made you work with the person who is only interested in lighting and backstage work, and hates performing.
- You enter your much-admired lemon drizzle cake into the church's baking competition, but it loses out to your

sister's rather pathetic-looking Victoria sponge.

- Your boyfriend / girlfriend has dumped you for someone in the year above.
- You walk past the same man every day. He begs outside the corner shop where you go to buy your daily bottle of chocolate milkshake. Every day you feel guilty about not doing anything to help him.

Once you have chatted through the different scenarios, try to come to some kind of conclusion of paths we should be following and why.

PRAYER

5 MINS

You will need: card or paper; scissors; pens

Ask the young people to cut out a crown shape from a piece of card or paper. In a time of quiet, ask the group to write or draw what they want to say to God in response to the story they have explored today. Encourage them to talk with God, but also to use the quiet to listen to what he might be saying to them.

After a few moments, round the session up with a prayer, thanking God for the example of Jesus, the true king. Ask him to help you follow Jesus' example and to grow to be more like him.

Encourage the young people to stick the crown up somewhere in their room so that they can continue using it to chat with God over the coming days.