



SESSION 1 of 4

Annunciation

MEETING AIM

To communicate that God can do the impossible, even in messy situations.

BIBLE PASSAGE

Luke 1:26-38; Matthew 1:18-21

BACKGROUND

Since we hear this story every year, it's easy to lose sight of how extraordinary it is. Leaving aside the whole mind-boggling concept of God taking on human form, he chooses to enter the world in a staggeringly messy way. Gabriel visits a down-at-the-heel town (John 1:46) to announce to an unmarried teenage girl that she will give birth to the Son of God, while another angel has to appear to her fiancé to convince him not to break off their engagement. Why on earth does God go about this in such a complicated way? The truth is, he often does things we don't fully understand. But he is at work in our mess. And "nothing is impossible with God" (Luke 1:37).

10 GATHERING TIME

You will need: refreshments; matches
Enjoy some snacks and drinks with your young people, and take a few minutes to catch up with them. While this is happening, you could have one or two matchstick puzzles set up. You can find some example puzzles and solutions at matchstickpuzzles.blogspot.com. Perhaps offer a small prize to anyone who can solve one of the puzzles. The idea is to illustrate that life is often confusing and sometimes utterly baffling. But this doesn't mean that God has left us to it.

10 INTRO ACTIVITY

You will need: flour; small sweets; bowls; plates; a floor covering; wet wipes
Fill two or three large bowls with flour. Embed a handful of small sweets (eg Smarties or Skittles) in each bowl. Pack the flour down so that it is flat on top, then invert each bowl onto a plate. This activity is likely to be messy, so cover the floor with a sheet or tarpaulin.

Ask for as many volunteers as you have bowls of flour (or if you have a smaller group, you could divide into small teams and take it in turns to play). Remove each bowl, leaving a heap of flour on each plate. On 'go', the players should try to remove as

many sweets as they can from the flour and drop them into their bowl, using only their teeth. The player (or team) who removes the most sweets in a minute wins. Provide wet wipes to help the players clean their faces afterwards.

You could finish by mentioning that life can be extremely messy, but there is often a lot of good stuff within the mess.

10 BIBLE EXPLORATION

You will need: Bibles; pens; paper
Divide the young people into pairs or groups of three. Explain that the bits of the Bible you're about to read show us a couple at risk of breaking up. When a celebrity couple has a falling out, people often take sides about who is right or wrong and decide which 'team' they're on. Are you Team Mary or Team Joseph?

Give out the Bibles and have your groups read Luke 1:26-38 and Matthew 1:18-21. Challenge each group to decide whether they're Team Mary or Team Joseph. Have them write down a few ideas on:

- Why this situation is so hard for Mary or Joseph
- What each one says and does, and why they behave this way
- What this all says about the kind of people they are

Be on hand to offer suggestions to any groups who seem to be struggling. For example, it might help to point out that having a baby outside of marriage would have been a huge scandal at this point in time, and that an engagement was slightly different back then from how it is now. Joseph would have effectively had to 'divorce' Mary to break it off.

Afterwards, take some feedback from each group. Try to get a range of perspectives.

10 CHATTING TOGETHER

Following on from 'Bible exploration', discuss these questions:

- What made this situation so hard for Mary and Joseph?
- What's the good news in it all?
- Why do you think God chose to bring Jesus into the world in such a messy way?
- In Luke 1:37, Gabriel says: "Nothing is impossible with God." What do you think of that?
- Can you think of any other examples (from the Bible or your own experience) of God doing impossible things in a complicated situation?

Finish by emphasising that we don't always understand why God acts the way he does, but that he is with us in our messy lives and can do amazing things.

15 CREATIVE RESPONSE

You will need: A3 paper; magazines and newspapers; scissors; glue; pens; masking tape

Before the session, use the masking tape to create a cross shape in the middle of each sheet of A3 paper. Let the young people work on their own or in pairs for this activity. Give out the prepared sheets of paper and make the other materials available. Encourage the young people to create an 'impossible collage' by sticking down a collection of images that represent seemingly impossible situations. These might be global, national or local events in the news, or more personal problems.

Towards the end of the 15 minutes, ask everyone to remove their masking tape, tearing through their collage and revealing a cross at the centre. Display the finished pictures in your meeting room as a reminder that God is with us, even in messy, complicated, impossible-seeming situations.

5 PRAYER

You will need: paper; pens; contents of paper recycling bin

Give out pens and paper. Encourage the young people to write or draw something that represents a problem they need God's help with. What messy situations do they want to see God at work in?

Empty out a paper recycling bin in the middle of the room. Have the young people screw up their finished papers and throw them onto the pile, committing their mess to God. End with a short prayer, thanking God that nothing is impossible for him, and asking him to bring good out of your messy lives.

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SESSION 2 of 4

Jesus' birth

MEETING AIM

To investigate how Jesus identifies with the poor and marginalised.

BIBLE PASSAGE

Luke 2:1-7

BACKGROUND

A heavily pregnant young woman and her fiancé have to make a long and potentially dangerous journey to fulfil the whims of an oppressive government. Somehow, God's purposes are fulfilled in the midst of it all.

For those of us caught up in similar upheavals it's comforting to see how God works not only in spite of human decisions but through them to bring about his plans. The story of Jesus being born in an animal shed, as the child of parents who have been forced to move to a new town, should prompt us to reflect on the poor and marginalised around us, and how God would have us serve them.

10 GATHERING TOGETHER

Take some time to eat, drink and chat with your young people. You could also play a few rounds of 'Good news, bad news'. The first player thinks of a piece of good news (eg "We're going to the beach."). The next player thinks of a reason why this is bad news (eg "It's raining."). The third player finds another reason why this is good news (eg "There will be fewer people on the beach, so more space for us."). Continue for as long as the young people's interest holds.

10 INTRO ACTIVITY

You will need: foam balls

Ask the young people to stand at one end of the room or an outdoor playing area. Equip the leaders (and one or two volunteers, if needs be) with foam balls. On the word 'Go!' the young people must attempt to reach the opposite end of the room without being hit below the waist by the foam balls as they are thrown by the leaders. Anyone hit by a ball is out of the game and joins the leaders for the next round. The last player left in the game wins.

For an extra complication, divide the players into pairs and insist that they join hands with their partner as they move from

one end to the other. Failing to do so will result in disqualification.

15 BIBLE EXPLORATION

You will need: Bibles; nativity story images; felt-tip pens; paper

Before the session, gather a few different images of the Nativity: some cutesy, some understated and some classic works of art. You should find plenty of images on the internet. For a little extra edge, include one or two more provocative images. For instance, try searching for 'refugee Jesus'. Show the group the images you have collected and ask them which they think is the closest to how the birth of Jesus would really have been.

Next, give out the Bibles and have the group read Luke 2:1-7. Let the young people draw their own pictures of how they think the Nativity story would have looked. Encourage the young people to think about what the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, and giving birth where the animals lived, would have been like. Compare the finished pictures with the images you showed earlier.

10 CHATTING TOGETHER

Following on from the 'Bible exploration' section, use the following questions as a starting point for discussion:

- How did Jesus end up being born where the animals lived? What was the sequence of events that led to that?
- Why is Bethlehem significant? (Check out Micah 5:2 if you're not sure. This suggests that Jesus fulfils a prophecy of a great leader coming from Bethlehem.)
- This must have been a scary and confusing experience for Mary and Joseph: a strange order from a hostile government, a long and dangerous journey, and giving birth in difficult surroundings. What comfort is there for us here when our own lives seem scary and confusing?
- If Jesus was born into poverty, how should that affect our attitude toward any poor people around us?

10 CREATIVE RESPONSE

You will need: a football; written or printed Bible references; a Bible

Before the session, write or type out the following Bible references onto slips of paper: Romans 8:28, Genesis 50:20, James 1:2-4, Romans 5:3-5, 2 Corinthians 1:3-4, John 9:1-3, Isaiah 53:4, Romans 8:38-39, Isaiah 43:2, Joshua 1:9, Isaiah 61:1-3 and Galatians 6:2.

All of these verses relate to how God might be at work in confusing situations. Either tape these references onto a football or, if possible, write them directly onto an old ball.

Gather the young people into a circle. Throw the ball to one of them. Ask them to read out the Bible reference closest to their left thumb. Ask someone else to look this reference up in the Bible and read it out. Briefly discuss how God might be at work in situations we find scary or confusing in the light of this verse. Repeat with different group members and different Bible verses.

5 PRAYER

Invite the young people to make themselves comfortable and close their eyes. Allow plenty of time for the following reflection:

Ask the young people to think about a situation they will face in the next week or two that they are expecting to find hard. Ask them to picture this situation in their mind. Next, ask them to imagine that Jesus is with them in this situation. He could be walking, standing or sitting, depending on whatever they're doing. What do they want to say to Jesus? And what would Jesus say to them? Finally, how does having Jesus there change the situation? Do things go differently? Or does it all just feel easier to handle with Jesus there?

Finish with a short, spoken prayer, thanking Jesus for walking with us and for understanding how scary and confusing life can be.

The Christmas story has a poor, marginalised and probably confused family at its heart. This would be an excellent time of year for your group to take action to help the poor in your community. Give some thought to how you might best do this.

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SESSION 3 of 4

The shepherds

MEETING AIM

To challenge the young people to take a closer look at what God is doing.

BIBLE PASSAGE

Luke 2:8-20

BACKGROUND

How wonderful that God allows such ordinary people to be the first witnesses of the birth of his Son. It's always a huge encouragement that God seems so keen to involve ordinary, unremarkable people in his plans. This can be a scary experience, though. It's probably the spectacle of an angel appearing to them that scares the shepherds (Luke 2:9-10), but taking a close look at God's plans can be scary in itself. It's possible that he might ask us to get involved instead of just looking. May we be just as courageous as the shepherds; just as ready to hurry off and see what God is doing.

5 GATHERING TIME

Take this opportunity to catch up with your young people. As you chat and enjoy refreshments, ask them what they would do if they had no fear. If fear didn't hold them back, what would they attempt? Would they try an extreme experience like a parachute jump? Would they tell someone they know exactly what they think of them? Or would they do something that other people might think of as normal, but which a phobia usually prevents them from doing?

10 INTRO ACTIVITY

You will need: sheep soft toys

Before the session, collect together eight or nine sheep soft toys. Parents of small children in your church may be able to help you. Failing that, use other soft toys and just ask the young people to imagine they are sheep!

Divide the young people into three small teams (or choose three volunteers to play), and send each team to a different corner of the room. Place the sheep in the centre. Explain that this session will focus on the shepherds in the nativity story, so you're all going to start by putting yourselves in the place of the shepherds. Challenge the teams to round up the sheep into their corner of the room.

On the word 'Go!' one player from each team runs to the middle of the room, collects a sheep and brings it back to his or her team's corner, tagging the next player. The next player does the same and so on, until there are no sheep left in the middle. The next player must now collect a sheep from an opposing team's corner instead. The first team to collect four sheep wins. If this seems too easy, ask them to collect five sheep.

10 BIBLE EXPLORATION

You will need: Bibles; tea towels; string; scissors

If you have a large group, divide them into smaller groups (of four or five) for this activity. Give out Bibles and as many tea towels as you can find. If possible, give a tea towel to each group member.

Explain that you'll be trying to think like shepherds during this activity. Dressing the part is a good start, so ask the young people to begin by putting their tea towels on their heads, in classic nativity-play style. Give out lengths of string to help them tie the tea towels in place.

Now ask the young people to read Luke 2:8-20. Encourage them to think like shepherds, putting themselves in the shepherds' place. Ask them to comment on what they see, hear, smell and feel at different points in the story. The text suggests that the shepherds are scared (v9-10), so what are they scared of? And why are they in such a hurry to go and see what's happening in Bethlehem (v15-16)?

10 CHATTING TOGETHER

If they haven't already done so, invite the young people to take off their tea towels. It's now time to step back from the shepherds' point of view and be slightly more objective. Talk over some why questions with the group:

- Why do you think God chose to make these shepherds the first witnesses to his Son's birth? These were seriously ordinary, down-to-earth people. Why would God choose them?
- Why should that matter to us?
- Why were the shepherds so quick to run off to Bethlehem?
- Why might they have chosen not to go?
- Why might we sometimes hold back from taking a look at what God is doing? Might we be afraid of what we may see?

15 CREATIVE RESPONSE

You will need: parental permission and sufficient insurance

As a group, take a short walk around your neighbourhood. As you walk, talk together about what you can see and what you think God is doing in your community. Where do you think God wants you to go? What do you think he wants to show you?

Before the session, you'll need to make sure you have permission from parents and carers to take the young people out of the building, and that your church insurance covers you to do so.

10 PRAYER

You will need: olive oil

Explain that however good God's plans are it's sometimes scary to look too closely at them. If we take a close look at God's plans there is always a chance that those plans will demand something from us. We might find ourselves getting involved in God's plans instead of just watching from the sidelines. Let's pray that God will give us the same courage he gave the shepherds, so that we'll be just as eager as they were to see what he is doing in the world.

Go to each of your young people and use the olive oil to anoint them as a mark of their commitment to God (unless they want to opt out). Make small oil marks on their forehead, their feet and their eyelids, praying for courage and asking God to make them ready to go wherever he leads them and to see whatever he wants to show them.

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SESSION 4 of 4

The wise men

MEETING AIM

To reflect on the importance of worshipping Jesus wholeheartedly.

BIBLE PASSAGE

Matthew 2:1-12

BACKGROUND

Once again, the Christmas story features God revealing himself to some surprising people. In this case we're left with the slightly uncomfortable image of a group of pagan astrologers setting an example in worshipping Jesus as the Son of God. In this session we'll highlight the importance of worshipping God wholeheartedly, and the possibility that he might reveal himself to anyone who is seeking him.

10 GATHERING TIME

As ever, start the session by chatting to your young people and sharing refreshments with them. Chat about wise people as part of your conversation. Dr Watson describes Sherlock Holmes as "the best and the wisest man whom I have ever known". Who is the wisest person you have ever known? What makes them wise?

10 INTRO ACTIVITY

You will need: Bibles; small prizes

If you have a large group, divide your young people into small teams for this activity. Challenge them to solve a few riddles. Give a small prize (eg a lollipop) to the first person to answer each riddle correctly, or keep a note of which team has answered the most riddles correctly and give them a prize to share at the end.

Use some of the riddles below or find your own:

- A man shaves several times a day, yet he still has a beard. Who is this man? (*A barber*)
- What begins with a T, ends with a T, and has T in it? (*A teapot*)
- What can travel around the world while staying in a corner? (*A stamp*)
- Which word in the dictionary is spelt incorrectly? (*Incorrectly*)
- What's always coming but never arrives? (*Tomorrow*)
- I can be written, I can be spoken, I can be

exposed, I can be broken. What am I? (*The news*)

- What coat is best put on wet? (*Paint*)
- Two men had lunch together and ordered iced teas to drink. One man had five iced teas during lunch while the other man had only one. All of the drinks were poisoned. The man who had only one drink died but the man who had five drinks survived. How can that be? (*The poison was in the ice. The man who drank five iced teas never let his ice melt.*)

Finish by pointing out that 'wisdom' can mean a few different things. But perhaps the best definition can be found in Proverbs 1:7.

10 BIBLE EXPLORATION

You will need: Bibles; a flip chart; pens; Post-it notes

If you have a large group, divide the young people into two smaller groups for this activity. Set up a flip chart in a prominent position. Divide the paper into two columns: one titled 'Herod' and the other 'Wise men'. Divide each column into four rows: 'Background', 'Think', 'Say' and 'Do'.

Invite the young people to read Matthew 2:1-12. Help them fill in the 'Background' row on the flip chart. For example, you could mention that Herod was King of Judea, and that the wise men were astrologers, probably from Persia.

Next, ask them to jot down some thoughts on what Herod and the wise men think, say and do in Matthew 2. Encourage them to write down their thoughts on Post-its and stick them in the appropriate boxes on the flip chart. After a few minutes, let the group review what's written on the flip chart. How does the behaviour of the wise men compare to Herod's?

It might be worth pointing out that we're referring to 'wise men' because the magi were almost certainly male. This is not meant to suggest that women cannot be wise, any more than that they cannot be shepherds.

10 CHATTING TOGETHER

You will need: three wrapped boxes; marker pens

Before the session, wrap three boxes (shoeboxes are ideal), preferably in shiny wrapping paper. Label one box 'Gold', another 'Frankincense' and the third 'Myrrh'. Chat as a group about what each of these gifts represents and why the wise men brought them to Jesus. Try to bring out the ideas that:

- Gold represents Jesus' kingship
- Frankincense would usually be burnt as an offering to a god. It shows that the wise men realise Jesus is God in human form

- Myrrh was used for embalming dead bodies. It points to the sacrifice Jesus would make later in his life

The wise men tell Herod they have come to worship Jesus (v2). Discuss what their gifts tell us about the important aspects of worshipping him. The young people can either write their ideas on the boxes or just talk and use the boxes as a visual aid.

15 CREATIVE RESPONSE

You will need: card; pens; glue; ribbon; scissors

Before the session, find a box template and print it onto card. Make enough copies for each of your young people to have one.

Encourage everyone to think about what they could give to Jesus as an act of worship. What do they have that is precious to them (for example time, skills or energy)? Make pens, glue and ribbon available. Let each of the young people write their ideas inside their box then assemble it, using the glue to hold it together. They can use the pens and ribbon to decorate their boxes.

Either collect the boxes and commit them to God in prayer as an act of worship, or let each of the young people keep their box as a reminder of the importance of worshipping Jesus wholeheartedly.

5 PRAYER

You will need: stars; pens; Blu Tack

Before the session, cut out lots of star shapes from card. They don't have to be huge, but should be big enough to write a name on.

Emphasise that the wise men were searching for God. People in Israel might not have liked their background – they were pagans who looked for messages from God in the stars – but their hearts were in the right place. They went in search of God and eventually found him. So let's pray for people we know who are searching for God. Let's ask God to reveal himself to them even if we think they're looking in the wrong places.

Give out the stars. Invite everyone to write the names of people they know who are searching for God on them. (They can use as many stars as they like.) Let the young people stick their stars to a wall. Then finish with a short prayer, thanking God for revealing himself through Jesus and asking that he will do the same for all your friends.

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