



The Good News of Joy to the World

*An Advent Bible study
on the Gospel According to Luke, chapters 1 & 2.*

Introduction

Advent is a season observed in Christian traditions around the world as a time of expectant waiting and preparation for the commemoration of the nativity of Jesus at Christmas, as well as Christ's second coming. Advent is a version of the Latin word meaning "coming."

Practices associated with Advent include keeping an Advent calendar, lighting an Advent wreath, increased attention to prayer, and displaying Christmas decorations. Celebration is a common theme of these practices.

We celebrate the good news of the birth of Jesus Christ, the light of the world, who was born on Christmas day for the sake of humanity. Luke, in beginning this gospel account, sounds a note of joy: the angel promises Zechariah "joy and gladness" in foretelling the birth of John the Baptist. And this gospel ends, after the disciples encounter the risen Christ: "And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God."

Week 1: Prepare the way

Scripture reading: Luke 1:16–17

This passage reports on the characteristics of the forerunner of the Messiah, who is identified as John, the son of Zechariah. John was set apart for the special service of God. As part of a vow of consecration to God, John was forbidden from birth to drink wine to allow the Holy Spirit to work in him. John the Baptist, as he became known, was to encourage people to turn away from sin and return to God in readiness for the coming of the Christ. The account here emphasizes the work of the Holy Spirit in fulfilling God's saving promise.

Interpreting the text

- Discuss some reasons why Zechariah might be part of the preparation for Christ's coming.
- According to this passage from Luke, what is the role of the Holy Spirit in preparing people for the Lord?
- Why did Zechariah, a priest, doubt the angel's message? (Consider the ancient Jewish context and their understanding of medical science at that time.)

A message for today

- How can the way for the Christ be prepared today?
- To what extent should faith and modern reason work simultaneously in this post-modern era?
- List some things that may hinder good preparation for Advent. Suggest some possible solutions.

Week 2: The birth of Jesus

Scripture reading: Luke 2:10–14

This passage reports on the greatest event in history: the birth of the Christ child. The Jewish people had long been awaiting a Saviour. Jesus' birth brings joy to the whole world, a message accepting of all people regardless of their race, nationality, culture, gender, religious affiliation, or political orientation. The announcement came to the shepherds in order to demonstrate hope especially for people on the margins of society.

Interpreting the text

- What was the status of shepherds in that time and place?
- Historically, what kind of saviour were the Jewish people expecting?
- Research the title "Messiah" and discuss the significance (in Jesus' time and today) of giving Jesus this title at his birth.

A message for today

- What is the value of the birth of Jesus today?
- How relevant is the Advent season to you?
- Is it necessary to celebrate during the Advent season? Explain why or why not.

Week 3: Joy to the world

Scripture reading: Luke 2:10–11

The angels proclaim the good news of the birth of Jesus, which will bring great joy to the world. This account suggests that the Saviour comes with a humble heart, enough to reconcile and bring justice to the Jews and Gentiles.

Interpreting the text

- What do you know about the socio-cultural relationship between the Jews and the Gentiles at the time of Jesus' birth?
- Consider the phrase "the good news" from both the Jewish and Gentile perspectives.
- What is the significance of the Messiah's birthplace being the town of David?

A message for today

- What does "good news" entail for people in today's world?
- What does the phrase "Joy to the world" mean today?
- How is joy expressed in your family and church in relation to knowing Jesus Christ? Give some examples.

Week 4: Overcome hardship

Scripture reading: Luke 1:12–13

This passage describes Zechariah’s encounter with an angel during his priestly functions (burning incense and offering prayers) in the temple. Zechariah and his family were known for their personal holiness; however, they shared the pain of not having children. Culturally, this would have been interpreted as not having the blessings of God. Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth were both too old to have a baby. It was during the time of prayer in the temple that Zechariah received an entirely unexpected message that he and his wife were to have child and name him John.

Interpreting the text

- How did priests like Zechariah interpret their encounters with angels?
- To what extent did the angel’s message influence the recipient, and others?
- The name John is said to mean either “God is gracious” or “God is favoured.” In relation to Zechariah’s historical setting, why was the name John chosen?

A message for today

- How can joy be defined in the midst of hardships today?
- List some hardships you and your community face, and possible ways of responding.
- Do supernatural events violate natural laws? Explain your views.

Week 5: Value life

Scripture reading: Luke 1:46–48

This is the beginning of the Magnificat, the song in which Mary glorifies God for considering her to be a part of the good news story and for fulfilling it through her. We learn that God pays attention to the humble, oppressed, poor, marginalized, and despised people in society. Mary sings passionately, due to a shift of her status from despised to the most blessed.

Interpreting the text

- What was the position of women in the Jewish society of the time?
- List some other categories of people who were considered outcasts in that context.
- According to the Gospel of Luke, Mary was a descendant of King David. How does that influence your understanding of her being chosen as the mother of Jesus?

A message for today

- Does God value human life?
- Is it true that some humans are superior to others? Explain.
- Identify groups of people who are stigmatized and discriminated against in societies today. Suggest solutions.

All Christians are mandated to celebrate the season of Advent, regardless of circumstances, race, nationality, gender, cultural or religious affiliation, or political orientation. The birth of Jesus is the full demonstration of the *agape* love of God for the salvation of humanity.

—Rev. Dr. Peggy Mulambya-Kabonde (*Gender and Theology Specialist*), *The United Church of Zambia Synod Headquarters*