

GENERATIONS OF FAITH



Introducing the Good News: The Birth of Jesus According to the Gospels

"Today's cultural preference for historically verifiable information can sometimes lead Christians to forget that when we read the Gospels we are not reading 'history' – in the modern sense. We can forget to look for the religious meaning of what we read. This principle is perhaps the most important in regard to the infancy narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Though they do contain some historical data, those chapters are especially driven by theological interests ... Both narratives summarize and introduce the distinctive theological themes of each Evangelist." – Dr. Phillip A. Cunningham

Out of the 27 books that comprise the New Testament, accounts of the birth of Jesus appear in only two places. This month, our *Generations of Faith* learning will focus on these accounts – the infancy narratives contained in the first two chapters of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. These four chapters are perhaps the most widely known thanks to our celebration of Christmas, whose liturgical origins date back to the fourth century. At the same time, many of our most popular Christmas traditions – from pageants, to carols, to nativity sets – are actually combinations and embellishments of the Gospel accounts of Jesus' birth (neither shepherds nor manger appear in Matthew; both the magi and the inn keeper are missing from Luke...)

As we mine the infancy narratives for both their shared elements and unique insights, our learning will be most productive and meaningful if we keep Dr. Cunningham's wisdom in mind, recognizing that, while "both

infancy narratives build upon the memories of historical events and contain useful historical data," the Gospels were not written to impart historical facts in the modern sense, but to inspire faith in Jesus Christ. What's more, Fr. Raymond Brown (arguably the foremost Catholic biblical scholar in the world and author of over 35 books on the bible) suggests that we bring our outlook of faith to bear on our study, trusting that "divine providence furnished four different Gospels, not a harmonized version," and therefore trusting that **both** the commonalities **and** the differences (dare we say discrepancies) in the infancy narratives can enrich rather than impoverish our faith.

And so, as we begin this month's scholarly excavation into our sacred scriptures, we seek most especially the religious messages encoded in the infancy narratives – we quest for the spiritual insights the Evangelists sought to impart and introduce in their retellings of Jesus' birth. In so doing, we honor both the original and enduring power of these stories. For two thousand years ago, the Evangelists, writing **as** believing Christians **for** believing Christians, shared their post-resurrection faith that the Crucified One who has been raised is in fact God's Son: that the Jesus of history who was born in Bethlehem to Mary and her husband Joseph, is and always has been the Christ of Faith: Emmanuel, Savior, Prince of Peace, Light of the World... For two thousand years, the Evangelists' words have served their purpose – to share the Good News, to invite discipleship, to inspire faith in Jesus Christ.

Pray It Forward: Join Us in Giving the Gift of Prayer

"If petition is asking for our own needs, intercession is asking on behalf of others. It is an ancient form of prayer in the Christian church and Jesus himself prayed on our behalf throughout his ministry and then sent the Spirit as our Helper. When our hearts are attentive to God's mercy and to the voice of God echoing in our depths, intercession comes naturally to us as an act of charity and as the means by which charity increases. We are even encouraged to pray for our enemies, to bless and not to curse them. Prayers of intercession lead necessarily to acts of intercession on behalf of the poor, the needy, the imprisoned, the injured, the outcast and the rejected. If our prayer does not lead us to work for justice, then it was not a prayer in the first place." -Bill Huebsch

During the season of Advent, the Advent Prayer Tree will once again grace our altar at St. Matthew's. In the back of the Church, you'll find blank ornaments. We invite you to choose an ornament, write a short prayer, and add your special gift of prayer to the Advent Prayer Tree on the altar.

Seasons of Faith: Advent – Did You Know?

***The Church's liturgical year begins** with the first Sunday of Advent. Advent begins on the Sunday nearest November 30 and lasts until December 24. ***The liturgical color** for the Advent season is royal purple, the same color used during Lent. ***The word Advent** comes from the word *adventus*, which means "coming." Advent is a time of waiting and preparing for the coming of Christ. During Advent, the Church reflects on the coming of Christ, Prince of Peace, in three ways: 1) the birth of Jesus as babe in the manger; 2) the rebirth of Christ's presence in our hearts; and 3) Christ's promised return to the world in the Second Coming. ***Advent is an active season** in which we ready our hearts and lives for Christ's presence. We do this in many ways, including through prayer and

charitable works. ***The Advent wreath** is a devotion originating among the Lutherans of Eastern Germany hundreds of years ago. The wreath is made of evergreen branches, reminding us that even in the darkest days of the year, there is life. On the wreath are placed four candles - three purple and one pink. Each Sunday, another candle is lit. The gradually increasing light of the candles reminds us that at Christmas, Christ, the true light, came into the world. The pink candle, symbolizing joy, is lit on the third Sunday of Advent, known as *Gaudete* Sunday. *Gaudete* means "rejoice." ***Count down to Christmas** with an online Advent calendar experience or print your own calendar: <https://www.loyolapress.com/our-catholic-faith/liturgical-year/advent/calendars>

Catholicism 101: A brief history of Christmas

The first celebration of Christmas in Rome has been dated at around 330. In fact, it wasn't until the fourth century that the Church instituted a feast to commemorate Jesus' birth. Called in Latin the *dies natalis Christi* (the natal or "birth" day of Christ,) this feast spread to Egypt by the beginning of the fifth century, to England by the end of the sixth century, and by the eighth century it had spread all the way to Scandinavia. However, it wasn't until the eleventh century that the term *Christmas* was first heard, derived from the phrase "Christ's Mass." When we go to Mass on December 25 to celebrate Jesus' birth - or for the Vigil Masses on December 24 - we are technically celebrating the Solemnity of the Nativity of the Lord. (By the way, December 25 is probably not the literal day on which Jesus was born. The actual day of Jesus' birth is not mentioned in the Bible.) Christmas itself is much longer than one day. In the Church's liturgical year, Christmas is a whole season, beginning on December 24 at the Vigil and lasting until the Sunday after Epiphany, traditionally celebrated on January 6.

The celebration of Christmas commemorates an event – the birth of Jesus – and also communicates Church doctrine: "The doctrine of the Incarnation states a fundamental Christian belief that God's divine nature assumed a human nature. In other words, the unseen God became human. Both human and divine natures come together in the person of Jesus Christ. This became known as the 'holy exchange,' which tells us that the divine became a human being so that humans could become divine." –from *Companion to the Calendar: A Guide to the Saints, Seasons, and Holidays of the Year*

"To become a child in relation to God is the condition for entering the kingdom. For this, we must humble ourselves and become little. Even more: to become 'children of God' we must be 'born from above' or 'born of God.' Only when Christ is formed in us will the mystery of Christmas be fulfilled in us." –*Catechism of the Catholic Church, 525-6*

We recommend... Awesome Advent Reads for All Ages

The Birth of Jesus: Two Gospel Accounts, facilitated by Philip Cunningham: www.bc.edu/birhofjesus
Brought to you free of charge by Boston College's School of Theology and Ministry, this self-paced, online mini-course will guide you through the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke, paying special attention to each Evangelist's unique insights into the spiritual meaning of Jesus' birth.

The Birth of Jesus According to the Gospels, by Joseph F. Kelly
Topping out at just over 100 pages, Professor Kelly's book is accessible, educational, engaging – and travels well! As the publisher notes, the reader can expect to: encounter the stories of Jesus' birth in their gospel contexts; see the distinctive approaches taken by Matthew and Luke; look beyond the literal level of the stories to what it means that Jesus is Emmanuel, "God with us," who came to live in the family of a carpenter and his wife Mary; and recognize the infancy narratives as an invitation to meet Jesus Christ.

Nativity, by Cynthia Rylant
A visually beautiful, scripture-centered retelling of the infancy narrative found in the Gospel of Luke, chapter two. However, much like the Gospel infancy narratives are meant to lead us toward the public life and ministry of Jesus, *Nativity* doesn't end with the babe in the manger, but instead with the grown-up Jesus preaching the beatitudes...

Leo's Gift, by Susan Blackaby and Joellyn Cicciarelli, illustrated by Carrie Schuler
The publisher's description puts it best: "Gloriously illustrated and filled with heart and hope, *Leo's Gift* is a perfect way for parents, children and siblings to read together. Leo will inspire kids everywhere to explore their passions, believe in themselves, and learn that not all gifts come wrapped in a box." We recommend this book for older children (7ish to 12ish.)

A Birthday Party for Jesus, by Susan Jones, illustrated by Lee Holland
This sweet story does an outstanding job of teaching young children that Jesus truly is the reason for the Christmas season. It's central message – love is the whole reason that Jesus was born, and love is the greatest gift we can give at Christmas – is a wonderful starting point for helping children to cultivate habits of active care and kindness during Advent, Christmas, and all year round!

Living the Lectionary

December 3, 2017

1st Sunday of Advent

Gospel: Mark 13:33-37

Adults: At this time, how faithful do you feel you are to God's plan for you?

Kids: What good thing might God be asking you to do right now?

December 10, 2017

2nd Sunday of Advent

Gospel: Mark 1:1-8

Adults: With whom could you be more patient this week, as God has been patient with you?

Kids: With whom can you be more patient?

December 17, 2017

3rd Sunday of Advent

Gospel: John 1:6-8, 19-28

Adults: What work of justice could you do this week to bring someone joy?

Kids: What could you do for someone this week to make them happy?

December 24, 2017

4th Sunday of Advent

Gospel: Luke 1:26-38

Adults: When have you followed the example of Mary and said, "Let it be done to me as you say"?

Kids: Is there something hard you need to do this week? What might make it easier?

DECEMBER 25, 2017

**SOLEMNITY OF THE
NATIVITY OF THE LORD**

ALL: The God-child is born. How will you celebrate his birth? What can you say or do to share the light of Christ with your family, friends, classmates, co-workers, neighbors, ... the world?

December 31, 2017

Feast of the Holy Family

Gospel: Luke 2:22-40

Adults: How do your family members know you are a compassionate person?

Kids: What family member needs your compassion and kindness right now?

From RCL Benzinger
<http://rcllectionary.com>