

John's Gospel was probably the last to be written (90-100 CE). It uses its own structure and changes the order of events that is common to Matthew, Mark and Luke to weave together its own telling. It is full of contrasts between light and darkness, life and death, truth and falsehood, heaven above and the earth below. John also tends to have Jesus delivering sermons and it is in this gospel that the 'I am' sayings appear.

Our journey began with us reflecting on our expectations about the content of the Carol, Nativity and Christmas services we will attend later this month.

As we've explored the four gospels it is clear that what we expect from our traditional Christmas is a merging of Luke and Matthew, with John standing alone and Mark left to one side.

All of the gospels were written to share the story of Jesus. Each does it in their own way. Each shares the truth of the insight into the nature of God that Jesus of Nazareth gave them. Each constructs their telling to emphasise what they found important. Each gives us a different perspective. Each shares the good news, the gospel, of Jesus Christ.

So as our journey closes hear the echoes of the carol:

*O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant,
O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem:
Come and behold him, Born the King of angels:
O come let us adore him, Christ the Lord.*

ACT: On the table are a nativity set and a central candle. Reflect on the beginnings of the gospels we have explored. Which characters are from which gospel? What is their significance? Feel free to hold them or move them around. Focus on the candle flame and the words from John's gospel:

*What has come into being in him was life,
and the life was the light of all people.*

When you are ready leave the worship space.
Feel free to sit, away from the tables, for a while if you'd like.



Vision4Life
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PRAYER STATIONS: *Gospel Beginnings*



This Advent we are going to share, and offer to the community around us, a series of prayer stations reflecting on how each of the four Gospels begin to tell the story of Jesus.

Station 2 *The Gospel According to John*

Mark begins with Jesus' ministry, Matthew with his family tree, Luke with a dedication, and John? Well John shares a poem placing Jesus with God at Creation and introduces the themes of Word and Light as part of his telling of the Jesus story.

Read the Bible passage:

John 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹ The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵ (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.' ") ¹⁶ From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

... praising God and saying,¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!”

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.”¹⁶ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.¹⁷ When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child;¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.¹⁹ But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

²¹ After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

The song of the angels recalls that of Isaiah in the Temple (Isaiah 6:3) though now it is Jesus rather than the Temple that realizes God’s glory and enables it to be reflected on earth.

The story now comes full circle and the angel’s instruction to Mary is fulfilled with the child being named Jesus.

Within the Bible there are many images of sheep and shepherd. Take the Good Shepherd, the Lost Sheep as two obvious examples. Think about these, and other images, as you reflect on the exclusion experienced by real shepherds.

ACT: Take a ball of cotton wool, add a dab of glue, and stick it on to the sheep outline.

CHOICE

You can now either complete the journey at **Station 2** following or follow the path of Matthew’s Gospel at stations M1-M4 on page 6.

As we prepare for Christmas, with all of our expectations formed by carols and nativity services, let us reflect on the Scripture that is the source of those expectations.

It is generally accepted that Mark’s Gospel was the first to be written. Matthew and Luke develop Mark’s telling and John’s Gospel, the last to be written, is distinctive from the other three.

We will begin by reflecting on Mark’s Gospel, the path will split and you can choose to follow Matthew or Luke first, then the other and the path will merge and end with John’s Gospel.

A prayer station is a space created to aid reflection. Around the church there are numbered spaces for you to visit in turn. For each there will be a visual image, a reading from the Bible (NRSV), and an action to undertake.

The prayer stations will each focus on how each Gospel begins their telling of the Jesus story. They will use different styles and ways of praying, and include different symbolic actions as you reflect and journey through the stories.

Prayer is a very individual thing. We each understand it and do it differently, so some of these stations will be more or less tuned to your personality and prayer life. Please try each of them, but do not worry if you spend more time at some and less at others.

If any of them make you feel uncomfortable please don’t worry. For instance: if you’d rather not write something down just reflect on the word and when you are ready move on.

Please keep any conversation to a minimum.

Prayer is how we draw closer to God, how we share our concerns, our hopes, how we take our focus away from ourselves and put it on God.

So as you journey through the beginnings of the Gospels may God bless that journey as you read, reflect, act and pray!

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Station 1 *The Gospel According to Mark*

Mark's is the shortest Gospel and the first to be written, probably around 70 CE - forty years after Jesus' death.

What are your expectations about the content of the Carol, Nativity and Christmas services you will attend later this month? What are the most important events and characters?

Read the Bible passage:

Mark 1:1 The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. ²As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; ³the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,' "

⁴ John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶ Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸ I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

¹² And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³ He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Luke's inclusion of the census is most likely a device to illustrate the contrast between an earthly ruler's arbitrary commands and the rule that Jesus will embody. There is no evidence outside of Luke for such a census and as Herod died in 4 BCE and Quirinius was not governor of Syria until 6–7 CE it is historically incorrect. The truth Luke is pointing to is that however much control the Roman Emperor thinks they have, as someone who took the title 'Son of God', the real control rests with God and with God's Messiah.

Despite all of Caesar's wealth, property, and armies the real power in the world lies in the beating heart of a baby sleeping in a livestock trough. A defenceless baby is filled with the potential of God's kingdom. A teenage girl is entrusted to care, instruct, and love a child born to live out God's promise of Emmanuel, God is with us.

ACT: On the table is a doll and some bands of cloth. Take a piece of cloth and wrap it around the doll.

Station L6 *Shepherds, Angels and Jesus is named*

In Matthew we have wise men visiting the infant Jesus but in Luke the theme of God's radical inclusion of those excluded by society is expressed in shepherds being visited by angels and directed towards the new born Messiah.

Read the Bible passage:

Luke 2:8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹ to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, ...

The Song of Zechariah or the Benedictus falls into two parts. The first is a song of thanks for the coming of the Messiah fulfilling the hopes of the Jewish nation for deliverance from Roman rule. The second is addressed to John outlining his role as prophet and preparer of the way for the Messiah.

“By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

ACT: On the table is a map of the world. Think of countries, communities, or people you know, that need light to shine and peace to be found.

Take a post-it note, write a name or a phrase on it, and stick it on the map in the appropriate place.

Station L5 *The Birth of Jesus*

Luke has a census of the known world get the family to Bethlehem, Jesus’ lineage to David is affirmed, and he is born in a manger ‘because there was no place for them in the inn.’

Read the Bible passage:

Luke ² In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ² This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴ Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵ He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Mark 1:14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵ and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

What happened to Christmas?!

Mark is much more interested in what Jesus said and did than in when and where he was born. In these fourteen verses we are introduced to John the Baptist, Jesus is baptised, tempted in the wilderness, and begins his ministry.

The passage begins and ends with ‘good news’ which is another way of saying ‘gospel’. *Reread verses 14-15.*

The gospel of Jesus Christ is the gospel of God. It is something that is happening now, it concerns God’s kingdom, it asks us to turn back to God, and trust in this new way of life.

God’s kingdom is a theme in Jesus’ teaching that expresses a vision for life where justice, peace, love, compassion, equality, and relationship are the lived reality for all people.

ACT: On the table are the letters that make up the word KINGDOM. Within one of the letters write down your prayer, your hope, for how the kingdom would be made real in your life and in the life of the world.

CHOICE

You can now either follow the path of Matthew or Luke’s Gospel. Either first follow M1-M4 or L1-L6 on page 13, and then the other.

There is no consensus about the exact order that Matthew and Luke were written in. It is likely that Matthew was written in 70-100 CE and Luke 80-90 CE and that a theorised source called ‘Q’ was used by each to expand Mark’s telling.

My personal preference is that Luke used both Matthew and Mark as sources, so that is the order we will follow.

Station M1 *Matthew - The Genealogy of Jesus*

Mark begins by jumping straight into Jesus' ministry, that was what was important to him. Matthew begins with Jesus' family tree – who Jesus was related to was important to him.

Luke includes a slightly different list at the end of chapter 3, giving it less priority than Matthew, so we'll compare the two here. We'll also abridge the passages to highlight key parts:

Read the Bible passage:

Matthew 1:1 An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.
² Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, ³ and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by *Tamar*, and Salmon the father of Boaz by *Rahab*, and Boaz the father of Obed by *Ruth*, and Obed the father of Jesse, ⁶ and Jesse the father of King David.
And David was the father of Solomon by the *wife of Uriah*, ⁷ and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, ... and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.
¹² And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel, ... and Matthan the father of Jacob, ¹⁶ and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.
¹⁷ So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.

Matthew structures the genealogy into three groups of fourteen. In Hebrew culture 7 is the perfect number, so 14 is perfection doubled. Also if you delve into Hebrew numerology it is the numerical value for David – the idealised king of Israel.

In *italics* are five women Matthew makes a point of including.

⁶³ He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And all of them were amazed. ⁶⁴ Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. ⁶⁵ Fear came over all their neighbours, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. ⁶⁶ All who heard them pondered them and said, "What then will this child become?" For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

⁶⁷ Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy: ⁶⁸ "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them. ⁶⁹ He has raised up a mighty saviour for us in the house of his servant David, ⁷⁰ as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, ⁷¹ that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. ⁷² Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, ⁷³ the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us ⁷⁴ that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. ⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, ⁷⁷ to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. ⁷⁸ By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, ⁷⁹ to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

⁸⁰ The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

After some arguments about the child's name Zechariah finds his voice and shares the Benedictus. Afterwards the new born John vanishes into the wilderness, clearing the stage for Jesus' birth before returning in 3: 1-20 and then being imprisoned before Jesus' baptism is mentioned in 3: 21-22.

Mary visits her relative and stays with her until just before John the Baptist is born. Her song, her Magnificat, sees the wonder of God's action in her pregnancy as an illustration of the nature of God's whole work for the people of Israel. Mary's lowliness is exalted, she praises God, and sees the work of God in humbling the proud and defeating the powerful. There are clear parallels between this and Zechariah's song that follows, and with the song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2:1–10 when she celebrates the birth of Samuel.

ACT: On the table are a large copy of the NRSV text of the Magnificat and several smaller copies from other translations. Read through a few of the translations.

In the space around the NRSV copy draw something to illustrate the text or write a word or phrase to do so.

Station L4 *John is born and Zechariah sings*

For nine months Zechariah hasn't spoken a word because of his unbelief in the angel's message, even though the truth of that message grows in his wife's womb. When he declares to the community that the child is to be called John his tongue is freed and he sings God's praise.

Read the Bible passage:

Luke 1:57 Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son.⁵⁸ Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

⁵⁹ On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father.⁶⁰ But his mother said, "No; he is to be called John."⁶¹ They said to her, "None of your relatives has this name."⁶² Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him.

Read the Bible passage:

Luke 3:23 Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his work. He was the son (as was thought) of Joseph son of Heli,²⁴ son of Matthat, ... son of Nathan, son of David,³² son of Jesse, son of Obed, son of Boaz, ... son of Perez, son of Judah,³⁴ son of Jacob, son of Isaac, son of Abraham, son of Terah, ... son of Shem, son of Noah, son of Lamech,³⁷ son of Methuselah, son of Enoch, son of Jared, ...³⁸ son of Enos, son of Seth, son of Adam, son of God.

Matthew starts with Abraham and ends with Jesus. Luke starts with Jesus and goes back to Adam. Matthew traces Jesus' line to David through Solomon, Luke through Nathan. Luke notes 77 generations – again the number 7 – which symbolises the forgiveness of all sins.

How Matthew and Luke construct their genealogies tell us something of the priorities of their Gospels. More on Luke later, but for Matthew Jesus as Messiah and with a line going back to Abraham through David is key.

Also is the list of women. For them to be listed at all is remarkable in such a male-dominated culture but also that apart from Mary they are non-Jews and with colourful stories. Tamar who pretended to be a prostitute to get pregnant by her father-in-law. Rahab who was a prostitute and assisted the Israeli spies in Jericho. Ruth the Moabite who compromised Boaz on the threshing floor. Finally Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah who King David had killed so he could marry her.

Family trees are important. They are our connections with history, our inheritance both genetic, cultural, financial, they are part of what makes us who we are.

ACT: Take a piece of twig. Hold it in your hand and think about your family tree. Your parents, grandparents, children or grandchildren. Hold all of those lives before God. Place the twig in the centre of the table to create the shape of a tree.

Station M2 *The Birth of Jesus the Messiah*

Matthew begins by establishing Jesus' heritage, his relationship to David and Abraham, but now we're told about a pregnant teenager and a fiancé's struggle to do the right thing.

Read the Bible passage:

Matthew 1:18 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰ But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ²² All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³ "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."

²⁴ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵ but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

A man finds out that his wife-to-be is pregnant, and he's not the father. He decides to quietly leave her but in a dream he hears a message from God that the child will reveal God to the people. Joseph changes his mind and stands by Mary.

Dreams can come to us in our sleep and while we are awake. They can be our subconscious at play or the inspiration of God speaking to us. To hear we need to listen, and to better know the difference we need to share them.

What could God be saying to you? What has God said to you?

Station L3 *Mary visits Elizabeth and sings*

Mary heads in to the hill country to visit Elizabeth and is greeted with overwhelming blessing. John leaps in his mother's womb with joy, clearly showing which baby is foremost, and Mary sings her song of praise to God.

Read the Bible passage:

Luke 1:39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰ where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴² and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³ And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴ For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

⁴⁶ And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, ⁴⁸ for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; ⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. ⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. ⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. ⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; ⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. ⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, ⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

⁵⁶ And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

Read the Bible passage:

Luke 1:26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you."

²⁹ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God.

³¹ And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

³⁴ Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" ³⁵ The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶ And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸ Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

A priest in the Temple, a holy man in a holy place, hears God's message and disbelieves; a young girl in a rural backwater hears and responds "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

John is to be a remarkable child but Jesus is to be more so.

ACT: On the table there is some scented oil. Smell it.

Read through the passages again and reflect on the messages from God that the characters receive.

ACT: On the table is a cross and candle, use them as a focus to help you pray. Watch the candle flame, trace the twists and turns of the Celtic knots, repeat the phrase 'Emmanuel, God is with us' quietly or in your mind, and listen for God.

When you are ready move on to the next station.

Station M3 *The Visit of the Wise Men*

A star leads magi to Judea, a king fears for his legacy, a prophecy is remembered, a bargain is made, weary travellers are overjoyed, gifts offered, and a dream leads to a change of direction.

Read the Bible passage:

Matthew 2:1 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ² asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.

⁵ They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ⁶ 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.' "

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." ⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was.

Matthew 2:10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

The magi travel from the east mirroring Isaiah 60:3-6 and make the obvious decision to look for the 'child who has been born king of the Jews' in the palace of the current king. With no new-born in the palace their arrival is met with fear and words from the prophet Micah (chapter 5:2) point the travellers towards Bethlehem. Before they leave Herod meets them in secret and tries to give the impression that finding out there is a usurper to his rule is the best news he's ever had.

The magi leave Herod, follow the star, reach Bethlehem (note the family are already here – no census that makes them leave Nazareth as in Luke), they offer their gifts (as there are three that's why we assume three wise men), again a dream offers insight, and they return home.

The present King of the Jews is dismayed by the news of Jesus' birth, but foreigners follow a star a great distance to offer their devotion. The wise men offered gold, frankincense, and myrrh. They followed a star a great distance. They endured hardship and gave gifts of great value.

The final verse of 'In the Bleak Midwinter':

*What can I give Him, Poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb.
If I were a Wise Man, I would do my part;
Yet what I can I give Him – Give my heart.*

ACT: What can you give? Take a sheet of A4 and write on the centre of it a word or phrase. What could you offer as a gift to the good news of Jesus? Follow the instructions to make a star with your words inside. Add the star to the pile on the table.

... wisdom of the righteous to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." ¹⁸ Zechariah said to the angel, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." ¹⁹ The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. ²⁰ But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur."

²¹ Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. ²² When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. ²³ When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

²⁴ After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, ²⁵ "This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favourably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people."

In the central place of Jewish religion, the Holy of Holies in the Temple, a priest (a representative of God on earth) hears a message from God but doesn't believe it. In a cloud of incense, symbolising the people's prayers to God, an angel speaks words of hope. Zechariah, a priest devoted to God and Scripture, hears words that were received with joy by Abraham and Sarah but fails to believe.

Zechariah and Elizabeth's child will be filled with the Holy Spirit, just like the prophets of old (Isaiah 61: 1), he would be like Elijah, and he would turn people back to God.

In Matthew's Gospel dreams are received and responded to. Joseph remains with Mary and leaves for Egypt, the wise men travel home another way. In Luke Zechariah receives a vision from God, fails to believe, and is struck dumb.

Station L2 *Births of John the Baptist and Jesus Foretold*

An elderly priest is struck dumb when he doesn't believe an angel telling him his barren wife will become pregnant. Six months into that pregnancy the angel returns to tell a teenage girl she too will have a son.

Luke's 'orderly account' has a plan to it. The pieces are being put in place for the Jesus story to be told.

Read the Bible passage:

Luke 1:5 In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶ Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. ⁷ But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

⁸ Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, ⁹ he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. ¹⁰ Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. ¹¹ Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. ¹³ But the angel said to him,

"Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. ¹⁴ You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. ¹⁶ He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the ...

Station M4 *Escape to Egypt, massacre, and return*

Another dream sends the family to Egypt (the setting of the Exodus story), Herod commits mass murder, but after its safe the family return and make home in Nazareth.

Read the Bible passage:

Matthew 2:13 Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." ¹⁴ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, ¹⁵ and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."

¹⁶ When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. ¹⁷ Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: ¹⁸ "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."

¹⁹ When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ²⁰ "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead."

²¹ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. ²² But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. ²³ There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazorean."

One of Matthew's themes for his telling of the Jesus story is to portray Jesus as a second and greater Moses. Moses led the people of Israel out of Egypt after the warm welcome they received centuries ago when Joseph (coat of many colours) had saved Egypt from famine, had become a life of slavery and oppression. Moses was given the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai by God (look for references to Jesus later in Matthew going up mountains – most notable the Sermon on the Mount) and gave structure to the Jewish faith.

Matthew uses the image of Moses to describe the importance of Jesus. The family flee to Egypt so that they can return, so they can complete their own Exodus. The quote in verse 15 is from Hosea 11:1 which is a clear reference to the Exodus. Herod the ruler in Jesus' time mirrors the murderous actions of Pharaoh that occurred at Moses' birth (Exodus 1: 15-22) and the Final Plague (Exodus 11: 1-10).

The beginning of Matthew's Gospel ends with the family in Nazareth. The quote "He will be called a Nazorean." is not found in the Old Testament but clearly this title and location is known to the community Matthew was writing for.

Matthew continues with the preaching of John the Baptist and Jesus' baptism and wilderness experience in chapter 3.

ACT: The foundation of the Jewish faith is the Ten Commandments and Jesus' summary is found in the Golden Rule. Copies of these are on the table. Reflect on these for a time.

When you are ready move on to the next station.

CHOICE

You can now either complete the journey at **Station 2** on page 23 or follow the path of Luke's Gospel at stations L1-L6 which follow.

Station L1 *Luke - Dedication to Theophilus*

Mark begins by jumping straight into Jesus' ministry, Matthew with Jesus' family tree, and Luke with a dedication to his sponsor. Each opening highlights the priorities of each Gospel – so what are Luke's?

Read the Bible passage:

Luke 1:1 Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us,² just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word,³ I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus,⁴ so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.

Luke acknowledges that other accounts of the Jesus story exist but after his investigations he has decided that there is need for another one – his. Luke also divides his telling into two books, the Gospel and the book of Acts. His 'orderly account' is for general publication but it is first intended for Theophilus who may be a real person (a Roman official being introduced to Christianity, or an influential Christian patron of the author) or it may be a literary device to address every reader as the name Theophilus means 'lover of God'.

Luke is interested in an 'orderly account' based on the testimony of 'eyewitnesses and servants of the word' so that the truth may be known.

ACT: On the table are some wooden blocks. Take one and hold it in your hand. Look at it and roll it in your hand.

Luke is interested in order and structure. He wants to write something that will clearly represent the truth.

Take your wooden block and use it to build something on the table. Make sure the structure is stable and solid.