

Advent Journey

A Storytelling Exploration of the Birth of Jesus

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Welcome to Advent Journey, an audiotope that is intended to be a resource for persons who want to enter deeply into Luke's story of Jesus' birth. The tape is designed as a four week series of storytelling sessions.

This tape is interactive and is designed to be used with this study guide and with the book, *Story Journey*. It is essential that you stop the tape and do the exercises that are outlined. If you just sit down and listen to the tape without doing the exercises, you will get relatively little out of the experience.

These tapes can be used by a person working alone, with a partner or in a group. In any case, you will want a Bible and a notebook or journal in which to write your own stories and reflections. If you are working with these tapes in a group, you will also want a chalkboard or a flip chart on which to outline the stories and note and compare the insights that emerge from the discussions. In a group context, it is best to meet in a room that has movable chairs so that you can move easily from sharing in the whole group to telling stories in groups of two or three. Having copies of the book, *Story Journey*, for each member of the group will be helpful in deepening the resources for your growth as storytellers.

Session I. The Birth (Luke 2:1-7)

The first step in the journey into the story is the mastery of the story's words. There are several ways of learning the story: saying it back and forth either in response to a leader or in pairs, studying the story aloud and then sharing it with a partner, or simply mastering the story by yourself. After listening to the story, learn it in one of these ways.

In exploring the meaning of the story in its original context, read aloud Luke 1, the story of the birth of Samuel (I Samuel 1:1-2:10), and the conception and birth of Isaac (Genesis 18:1-15;21:1-8). Identify the connections between the three stories.

There are several documentary records from the ancient world that reflect the practice of enrollments. This is a translation of a restored papyrus fragment from ancient Egypt that contains an edict of Gaius Vibius Maximus who was governor of Egypt in 104 A.D.:

Gaius Vibius Maximus, Praefect of Egypt, saith: The enrollment by household being at hand, it is necessary to notify all who for any cause soever are outside their homes to return to their domestic hearths, that they may also accomplish the customary dispensation of enrolment and continue steadfastly in the husbandry that belongeth to them.

According to Ulrich Wilcken, who restored this text, this and other related documents from the ancient world show that these enrollments were conducted every 14 years in order to fix the poll-tax and other personal dues. (Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, p. 271)

Other data from ancient texts related to the enrollment is from Josephus, a contemporary of Luke. Josephus was a general in the Jewish army in the early days of the

Jewish war (66-70 A.D.) who was captured and cooperated with the Romans. He became a principal interpreter of Judaism to the Roman world. In his book, *The Jewish War*, Josephus describes the last days of the fortress at Masada. In his description he describes the head of the Sicarii who occupied the fortress, Eleazar, as follows:

He was a descendant of the Judas who, as we have previously stated, induced multitudes of Jews to refuse to enroll themselves, when Quirinius was sent as censor to Judaea. For in those days the Sicarii clubbed together against those who consented to submit to Rome and in every way treated them as enemies, plundering their property, rounding up their cattle, and setting fire to their habitations; protesting that such persons were no other than aliens, who so ignobly sacrificed the hard-won freedoms of the Jews. (Josephus, *The Jewish War*, Book VII, 253-255)

For historical information about the manger, look up the article, "Manger," in the Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Vol. III, p. 257.

The purpose in sharing our own experiences of births is both to find points of emotional connection with Jesus' story and to allow Jesus' story to be a context for hearing our own birth narratives. A way of exploring the connections with Jesus' story is to tell and hear these stories next to each other.

As a closing, tell the story in the group. It might be told by the leader or by a person who volunteers to tell it to everyone. But, in addition to telling it to each other, the invitation implicit in the story is to share it with others.

Session II. The Announcement to the Shepherds (Luke 2:8-14)

Begin the session by sharing any experiences in the group of telling the story. Depending on the group, these experiences may be limited to remembering or telling the story to oneself. Or there may be several experiences to share. But, in whatever ways, this is a time to celebrate the birth of the story in the life of the community.

The recording of Greg Marshall telling the story in Russian was made at St. Gertrude's Lutheran Church in Riga, the capital of Latvia, during the network's storytelling trip to the Soviet Union this past summer.

The significance of the shepherds in the story is clarified by a section from the Talmud. The traditions in the Talmud are notoriously difficult to date. It is certain that this tradition, which is written in the typical Talmudic style of ascription to earlier rabbis, is considerably later than the New Testament. But it probably reflects the general social status of shepherds in the 1st century:

Abba Gorion of Zaidan says in the name of Abba Guria: A man should not teach his son to be an ass-driver or a camel-driver, or a barber or a sailor, or a herdsman or a shopkeeper, for their craft is the craft of robbers. R. Judah says in his name, Ass-drivers are most of them wicked, camel-drivers are most of them proper folk, sailors are most of them saintly, the best among physicians is destined for Gehenna, and the most seemly among butchers is a partner of Amalek. (*The Talmud*, Nashim, Kiddushin 4.14.)

In addition to the status of the shepherds, also note how physicians were evaluated in this tradition, right up there with the camel-drivers and butchers.

Session III. The Shepherds' Announcement (Luke 2:15-20)

The beginning of the session today is sharing the stories of telling and hearing good news. This is an opportunity to celebrate and enjoy the way in which good news permeates our lives.

In the exploration of the meaning of this story in its original context, the key is to give vitality and energy to the account of the shepherds' discovery and the three responses to their announcement.

For this session, it is suggested that the leader or someone in the group bring a blanket, preferably a baby blanket, to pass around the group. If you prefer, it would be fine for everyone in the group who chooses to bring a blanket that has special associations for them. The telling of the stories associated with blankets is a way of connecting with the amazement and joy of the shepherds' discovery and announcement.

The opportunity of this week is to extend the shepherds' announcement of the good news through giving precious gifts to others.

Session IV. The story as a whole (Luke 2:1-20)

In the telling and hearing of Luke's story, we relive and make present again the event of Jesus' birth which took place long ago. Who are the people with whom we experience the first Christmas when we tell and hear this story? What are the places into which Luke's story takes us? Make a list of these people and places in Luke's story. It will be helpful for each person to make their own list. The second suggestion is to make a list of the people and places of your typical Christmas celebration.

The exploration of the comparison between the original Christmas and our Christmas is a way of making the story present now. Storytelling happens in many ways. Each Christmas we tell the story about the meaning of Christmas through our celebration. The invitation of the story is to allow the people and places in our world now who are like the people and places in Luke's story to be a greater part of our Christmas. Both as individuals and as a group, explore the ways in which you might tell the story more faithfully in your celebration of Christmas this year.