



Isaiah's Story



Shalom. My name is Isaiah ben Amoz. My writings—the beginning of the Book of Isaiah—are now a part of sacred scripture. But I never imagined they would be. I simply

had to write for love of the people. I wrote to bring good news in times of trouble, hope in times of despair, and faith in times of doubt.

You see, I lived about 800 years before Jesus' birth. At the time, my people were not living very faithfully. They were forgetting to care about God. It pained me to see many cared more about their own wealth than about justice. Some were obsessed with idols made of gold and silver. They feasted on the finest bread and drank wine by the bowl, even as widows and orphans were left hungry and foreigners living among us were oppressed.

We forgot that we once lived as foreigners in the land of Egypt, where we had prayed to God for freedom and justice. Now, we were the oppressors. My people thought they were faithful because they maintained beautiful temples, offered burnt sacrifices, and lit incense. But without love and justice, those actions were a sham.

The faithlessness of my people broke my heart. I have wept for the love of my people many a night.

In my frustration and sorrow, God purified my soul. When God asked, Whom shall I send to speak my truth? I said, here I am. Send me and I will keep the people in my heart. And God gave me the courage to speak, the poetry to express, and the oracles to warn the people.

I tried to tell them that we were sowing the seeds of destruction when we disobeyed God's commandments, and when we cared about no one else but ourselves. I tried to teach that being faithful means taking care of the least advantaged in the society.

Unfortunately, I did not witness how God eventually redeemed my people. God, however, chose two other writers to continue to write what I had begun. One wrote about my nation, having lost a war, living as exiles in a foreign land. The other wrote after our return.

My message to you is this. Please abide in God's radical love. Our God truly cares about all people, and about justice. Engage in a process of reflection, confession, and repentance. God will forgive, and God's love will surround you and redeem you. The Holy God will never abandon you. Thanks be to God.

Unwrapping Isaiah's Story

Isaiah and the other prophets teach us that we need to love as God loves. Who does God love? Is there anyone God does not love? Is there anything God does not care about?

ACTIVITY 1: My Picture: Here I Am, Lord

Ages

All

Supplies

Voices United

Optional: computer with Internet access

Colouring supplies

Blank paper

Activity

- Sing, or read, "I, the Lord of Sea and Sky" (*Voices United* 509). This song was inspired in part by Isaiah.
- If you have Internet access, you could also listen to this song online. Search YouTube and choose a favourite version.
- On a blank sheet of paper, write (or get someone to write for you) a line or phrase that speaks to you.
- Now, draw a picture inspired by that line/phrase.

ACTIVITY 2: My Prayer: A Prophetic Voice

Ages

6+

Supplies

Writing supplies

Activity

- Name an issue in your community, province, or country that makes you sad. Describe it in a grieving tone. (If you feel like it, use poetic words!)
- Now consider, what might God say to comfort the people? What might provide hope?
- Write a short prayer in response.

ACTIVITY 3: My Action: Purifying My Heart

Ages

12+

Discussion

Isaiah has a mystical vision of being purified by God. An angel touches his mouth with a hot piece of coal and says, "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." Then he hears the voice of the Lord asking, "Whom shall I send?" And he answers, "Here am I; send me!" (Isaiah 6:6–9)

- What would you be able to do if you had your slate wiped clean, with no worries, fears, or concerns to hold you back?
- What is something you could do this week?

Rev. Wan Hur, minister at Ebenezer United Church in Scarborough, ON.

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The Angel's Story



Angeline, whose name means messenger, felt she was failing to live up to her name. She had often delivered messages from the angel superior to the other angels, but they were everyday messages like “It’s time for choir practice” or “Vespers will begin in 10 minutes.” Angeline longed to deliver a vital, world-changing message.

One day, there came the news that God’s beauty and energy were coming to earth—God would become one with the humans and help make earth a better place. There was a lot of talk about how and when it would happen. Angeline wanted to be part of it, but she was too shy to put herself forward.

Then an angel who was very wise came to her, asking her about her inner thoughts. At first, Angeline was frightened, but knowing that the wise angel cared and was someone she could trust, she opened up and everything she had held fearfully inside her poured out—how she wanted to live up to her name, how she wanted to make a difference, and how she felt so terribly inadequate. She shared how, even when she delivered the least important of messages, she would forget everything but her

uncertainty; she would be gripped with fear.

The wise angel asked her whether, during these moments of fear, she thought about the inner beauty of God that resides in everyone. This stopped Angeline in her tracks. No, in those moments of fear, she hadn’t thought of God’s beauty, she hadn’t thought to call on God. Angeline made a promise that from then on she would always think about God and pray to God to see her through her fears. Angeline kept her promise.

Then the day arrived when God gave Angeline a very significant message to deliver. Together with a host of other angels, Angeline was to seek out some shepherds in a field, and then she, and only she, would tell the shepherds about the young woman, the God bearer, who was about to give birth to the Christ child—God-in-the-world.

Angeline allowed the glory of God within her to shine; and the glory inside her continued to shine, spreading to the shepherds and to all around as she delivered the Good News from God.

Even angels have moments of uncertainty, but when you turn to God, you can always find comfort, even in the toughest times, and know that the beauty of God travels with you.

Unwrapping the Angel's Story

Tools to help you unwrap your angelic voice.

ACTIVITY 1: Speaking Your Truth

Ages

12+

Supplies

Research the work of Maggie Kuhn and/or others (especially in your community) who have stood up for social justice; sheets of paper and pens

Discuss

- What is the truth you want to share?
- Which scripture passages encourage you to speak your truth?
- What will give you the confidence to share it?

Activity

Invite people to write on the sheets of paper their truth and three things that they will do to live into that truth. Encourage them to post these sheets where they can see them every day.

ACTIVITY 2: A Song of Faith

Ages

All ages (especially 6+)

Supplies

Pens and paper; musical instruments

Discuss

- If an angel came to you in times of social upheaval and poverty, would you listen?
- Would you sing a song of faith?

We sing of Jesus, a Jew, born to a woman in poverty
in a time of social upheaval and political oppression.

He knew human joy and sorrow.
So filled with the Holy Spirit was he
that in him people experienced the presence of God among them.

We sing praise to God incarnate.

from A Song of Faith

Activity

Compose a modern-day Christmas carol about angels. Share your compositions with your group, your church, or on social media using hashtags #UCCan #AdventUnwrapped.

ACTIVITY 3: Little Angels

Ages

All ages

Supplies

The Littlest Angel by Charles Tazewell either book or online: "A Classic Christmas Book—The Littlest Angel" (<https://youtu.be/AkZj8b7IuZO>); 5 sheets of Bristol board (or large sheets of paper) and markers

Activity

a Read together *The Littlest Angel* by Charles Tazewell or watch and hear it on YouTube.

b Create an angel acrostic. Write the letters A, N, G, E, L on the Bristol board (one letter per sheet) and together devise appropriate phrases.

Example:

Always watching

Never far away

Guiding the lost

Extrremely peaceful

Loving all

ACTIVITY 4: Guided Meditation

Ages

10+

Activity

The leader uses the following words:

Relax your entire body, starting at the top of your head and travelling down through your head, shoulders, arms, spine, abdomen, pelvis, legs, and feet.

Sit quietly for 10 to 20 seconds, letting go of any thoughts as they arise and float through your mind.

Now, imagine a healing light entering the top of your head.*

Imagine it flowing through your body, to and through every part of your body.

Be present to your Spirit...breathe deeply....

Think back to a time when you can remember your first image of an angel.

What was it like?

Was it comforting or scary?

Did you ever have an encounter with an angel?

Has your image of angels changed over time or not?

Are you open to encountering an angel?

Ponder how angels reflect the light of Christ.*

Again, imagine a light entering your body through the top of your head.*

Imagine this light filling your entire body with soothing, healing, and comforting energy.*

See your body filled with light, which gives you power, strength, comfort, and confidence.*

See and feel this light as it flows through your body and out of the bottom of your feet.*

Imagine it connecting you to the earth, to creation, to your place of beginnings.

Imagine it keeping you firmly tied to God's love.

Bask in this warmth. Carry this with you into your day.

Whenever you feel ready, return to the room, open your eyes, and like a cat, stretch your body slowly, or simply make gentle movements with your hands and feet, whichever feels most comfortable to you until your awareness of the room you are in returns.

*Alternatively use "warmth" or "spirit."

Bethe Cameron, O'Leary West Cape Pastoral Charge, P.E.I.

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The Shepherd's Story



A shepherd protects, feeds, and cares for the sheep. This is important work, right? But out here on the Palestinian hills, this isn't how it's viewed by most people. For example, the Pharisees say we don't follow religion. But think about it! We cannot leave our sheep and we are constantly looking for fresh new pastures. This schedule doesn't quite fit with Jewish faith practice—or any other religion's rhythm of worship. So they call us Gentiles, which really implies we are outsiders.

Living out here on the hills we have developed our own culture. We have no possessions and subsist on the barest necessities. We can be a bit rough around the edges. Protecting sheep from poachers makes us distrustful of strangers, so we tend to see the worst in people. Conversely, society doesn't have a very high view of us, so we are pushed aside, forgotten, and judged as inferior.

So imagine our surprise that night when we heard the sound of angel voices. Angels! Many of us didn't even believe in angels! Yet, here they were on the hillside telling us they had a message from God! Some town folks were scandalized that we were the first to hear

the news. Why wasn't the news brought to kings or Pharisees? Why was the news brought to the very people whom kings and Pharisees despised?

After being told the great news, the angels urged us to go to Bethlehem to find the child. Seriously? We tend sheep not children. We protect our stuff, our flocks, and now these angels expected us to risk our sheep being stolen while we went to find a baby. What was God thinking?

But what was really mind blowing was the fact that we went! It was just as the angels said. The child was ordinary and extraordinary all at once. There was such peace and joy in the air around the manger where the baby lay. I spoke to the boy's father, Joseph. He was a gracious host and treated us well. We didn't feel like lowly shepherds that night. When we told him about the angels, he believed us. He made us feel like we were the right people to receive the message from God.

Joseph encouraged us to share our story, his story, and the baby Jesus' story. So as we returned to the hills, we told anyone who would listen. And we never stopped sharing the news. Everywhere we went, we told the story of a miraculous birth and how God had chosen us—those who were once so lowly—to tell the story.

Unwrapping the Shepherd's Story

Are there times when you feel devalued and unimportant? What might you do to remember that you are loved and cherished by God and others? What might you offer to God's ministry now knowing that God wants everyone to be included in God's circle of grace?

God knows your potential. Like the shepherds, you are more than worthy enough to hear the news and share the news, and most importantly, be a part of the greatest story ever.

Listen to the music website: "Libby Roderick sings 'How Could Anyone'" <https://youtu.be/P5EhMNpBAAQ>

ACTIVITY 1: Noticing Our Impact

Ages

All ages (especially 6+)

Supplies

Large salad bowl, pebbles, paper

Discuss

How did the shepherds' actions impact the Nativity story?

Activity

- Half fill a large salad bowl with water.
- Drop a small pebble into the bowl and notice what happens.
- Create an origami boat (search for online instructions).
- Place the boat in the water.
- Notice what happens when a stone is dropped into the water now.
- Wonder about how your actions, both big and small, can have an impact on the world.

ACTIVITY 2: The Path to Healing

Ages

12+

Supplies

Background and current information on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission:

"Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada" (www.trc.ca)

The United Church of Canada
(www.united-church.ca)

Discuss

- Who in our society has been placed on the margins by the judgments of others?
- How does learning about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission help you to understand how people are placed on the margins by the judgment of others?
- Having learned more about the plight of the First Peoples, how will you respond in helping the healing and reconciliation process?

ACTIVITY 3: You Are Unique

Ages

Pre-school and kindergarten

Supplies

Paper, ink pads, markers

Discuss

What are stereotypes? What are some stereotypes about sheep?

Activity

- Using an ink pad, make thumb prints on a sheet of paper.
- Add sheeps' legs and faces to the thumb prints.
- Notice how each thumb-print sheep is unique.
- How do stereotypes impact a group?
- Explore how stereotypes don't allow for individuality.

Beth Cameron, *O'Leary West Cape Pastoral Charge, P.E.I.*

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John the Baptist's Story



(John is seated under a tree beside the River Jordan. He is relaxed, reflective.)

Now the day ends.
Now the poor retreat
to the safety of their
squalid shelters, and

the snakes slither back to their dens. Day after day they come out to me—the pathetic and curious, the furious and frenzied. They are drawn out from the corners of their unhappy lives. Drawn by a spirit of longing they can vaguely remember, but cannot name. Drawn to the prospect of a life worth living. Drawn into the water that washes clean. In the moment they rise up from the water and gasp for breath, I watch their eyes.

There are those whose eyes are clouded still. Their desperate lives have been so crippled by poverty, their families dismembered by violence, that their lives have already left their bodies.

There are eyes that flash with terror. They try to conceal who they really are, what they have done, as if the sacred cannot see what is done in secret.

There are those who rise up from the water with eyes open wide, filled with suddenly remembered memories, memories of who they used to be. Out here, long ago, these people were shaped by the wilderness and defined by life-giving covenant. Out here, they remember and they repent.

There are those with cold, snake-like eyes—the look of treachery and betrayal. Shedding their skin will never be enough. Only those whose hearts are truly open and ready, only those who turn and walk in the way of love and justice can enter the kin-dom of God.

And then there were *those* eyes—unlike any I've ever seen. As he came up out of the Jordan and his eyes met mine, I saw something I have never seen before—hope. Here at last was evidence of the love that can transform life and bestow true joy. Here at last was the hope that empowers you to be fearless.

I may baptize with water and words, but the one whose love is fearless will baptize with spirit and fire!

Unwrapping John the Baptist's Story

Help to prepare the way of the Lord.

ACTIVITY 1: Prepare the Way!

Ages

All ages

Supplies

Encourage each family to bring a special item, story, or treat that reflects their heritage or cultural background and is usually included in their preparations for Christmas; have available *Gifts with Vision* catalogues (www.giftswithvision.ca).

Activity

- Gather together for a Preparation Party and share the items that families have brought.
- Then discuss how John invited people to prepare by providing clothing and food to those in need, and by acting to stop cheating and bullying. Invite people to share contemporary examples of action for social justice, especially in your area.
- Review the UCC's *Gifts with Vision* catalogue (or online at www.giftswithvision.ca). As a community, choose to support an action that reflects John's invitation to prepare.

ACTIVITY 2: Prepare with Food**Ages**

All ages (adult supervision is needed)

Supplies

Oven and frying pan; ingredients for “Bugs ‘n’ Honey” (at right)

Discuss

The Bible tells how John the Baptist survived in the wilderness on a diet of locusts and honey.

Activity

a Explore **entomophagy**, the consumption of insects. Thousands of people eat insects every day. Insects have lower levels of fat and higher levels of protein than beef. Plus, it takes 16 pounds of grain and thousands of gallons of water to produce one pound of beef. If we raised insects instead of cattle, we could cut greenhouse gas emissions between 20 and 60 percent. Discover more, e.g., read “U.N. Urges Eating Insects; 8 Popular Bugs to Try” (<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2013/13/130514-edible-insects-entomophagy-science-food-bugs-beetles/>).

b Bugs ‘n’ Honey**Ingredients**

¼ cup Butter
1 cup Freeze-dried crickets
pinch Salt
1 tsp. Aleppo pepper
2 Tbs. Honey

Method

Heat oven to 200°F.

In a frying pan, melt the butter over a medium heat.

Add the insects and sprinkle salt on top. Stir until the crickets are well coated with butter (about 10 minutes).

Thoroughly mix the pepper into the honey.

When the crickets appear crispy (like bacon), drizzle the peppered honey over them and stir a little more.

Spread them on a lined baking sheet and bake for around 10 minutes.

The crickets should be crunchy, but not too gooey.

ACTIVITY 3: Prepare with Music

Ages

All ages (especially 10+)

Supplies

Sheet music; instruments; rehearsal time; hymn books

Activity

a In Luke 3:3–6, John is in the wilderness using the words of the prophet Isaiah to warn the people to turn from their wrongdoing and to prepare the way of love and justice. The musical *Godspell* sets these words to music in a short, easy-to-learn song that provides a wonderful way to call people to worship during Advent.

On YouTube: “Prepare Ye The Way Of the Lord (Godspell) - Hallelujah Broadway” (<https://youtu.be/qzLrs3eKbXk>)

On YouTube: “GODSPELL (Broadway) - Medley [LIVE @ Letterman]” (https://youtu.be/L52Z_Ybg8yQ)

On YouTube “Godspell Flash Mob in Times Square – Official Video” (<https://youtu.be/AgQOivT42yg>)

b “There’s a Voice in the Wilderness Crying” (*Voices United* 18, *The Hymnary* 244) was written by James Lewis Milligan for the inauguration of The United Church of Canada in 1925. Milligan was a lay preacher in the Methodist Church and from 1922 to 1925 he handled public relations for the three denominations (Methodist, Presbyterian, and Congregational) as they prepared to amalgamate into The United Church of Canada. He was a one-hit wonder as this was the only hymn he wrote. It is a paraphrase of Isaiah’s (and John’s) words, and Milligan hoped it would express the stated goals of the new denomination.

- What do you think? How do these prophetic lyrics relate to the life and witness of The United Church of Canada or your community of faith?
- What is your favourite song based on John the Baptist’s story? Why?

c Write a theme song for John the Baptist. It might be rock or rap; it might be serious or silly! Share it on social media using hashtags #UCCan #AdventUnwrapped.

ACTIVITY 4: John the Superhero**Ages**

All ages (especially 7+)

Supplies

Storyboards; pens and paper

Activity

a If John had a superpower, what would it be? Create a comic strip based on the story of John the Baptist. There are websites that provide templates for comic strips, e.g., “Comic Pages – Printable Paper” (www.printablepaper.net/category/comics) and “DonnaYoung.org Printables and Resources – Printable Comic Strip Layouts” (www.donnayoung.org/art/comics.htm).

b Share your comic strip on social media using hashtags #UCCan #AdventUnwrapped.

ACTIVITY 5: John the Prophet**Ages**

All ages (especially 12+)

Supplies

John the Baptist is considered an important prophet in many religions, including Islam. In the Quran, he is mentioned as one of the 25 Prophets. Ahead of time, do some research and bring the materials for the group to share, including the United Church resource *That We Might Know Each Other*.

Activity

Plan an Advent gathering for Christian and Muslim neighbours, inviting community leaders to share the story of John the Baptist from their various perspectives.

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The Animals' Story



Ya'akov the temple mouse spends most of his days in the temple, but he takes time to visit his family who live in a stable down the road. He is a smart mouse and loves to

hear scripture being read in the temple. He especially likes it when the reading is from the prophet Isaiah. Through Isaiah's words, he learns that there is talk of a messiah coming. Ya'akov likes this idea; the people need hope, and Herod has been so hard on them.

They need some good news!

When Ya'akov visits his family at the stable, he shares with them all that he hears in the temple. One night, while he is visiting, there is a lot of commotion. Then midwives come in and spread fresh hay on the floor. They drag out a manger, empty it, and place mounds of new hay in it. The animals are shooed into the courtyard—that is, all but one little goat plus Ya'akov and his family who are hiding in the corner.

A woman looking very uncomfortable is carried in and laid on the hay. The animals respect her privacy and don't look while she gives birth to a beautiful baby boy. The mother wraps the baby in clean cloth and places him in the manger while she rests.

A few sheep wander back in from the courtyard and cuddle up to the mother, keeping her warm. The father milks the goat and offers the warm milk to the weary mother. The baby stirs and begins to cry, but a few mourning doves who are perched in the rafters come nearer and coo a lullaby to the crying baby.

Ya'akov has watched all that has taken place. He remembers the readings from Isaiah and wonders whether this could be the person Isaiah talked about. Ya'akov can't wait to get back to the temple to hear more from the scriptures. He believes the words they offer tell the people and mice so much about what God is doing!

He may be just a small mouse, but looking at the baby he knows great things can come from even the smallest creature.

Unwrapping the Animals' Story

Often the smallest are overlooked in our world. The animals in our story point to others who are on the margins of our society. There are many people and causes that don't make the headlines, yet they are important and make a difference in our world, e.g., "The Unsung Hero" (<https://youtu.be/uaWA2GbcnJU>).

To learn more about the animals, manger, and stable check out "The Birth of Jesus" (www.whychristmas.com/story/birth.shtml).

ACTIVITY 1: Storytime

Ages

All

Supplies

Read *The True Meaning of Crumbfest* (Acorn Press, 1999) by David Weale, the story of a curious mouse who sets off to discover the truth about Crumbfest, an abundant time of year when bounteous crumbs miraculously appear in the old Prince Edward Island farmhouse in which he lives. It's a heartwarming tale of the magic that happens when the "outside" and the "inside" come together.

Discuss

- What new perspectives on the Christmas story emerge from this re-telling?

ACTIVITY 2: Biblical Accuracy

Ages

12+

Supplies

The story "No Innkeeper, No Donkey—10 Things We Get Wrong about the Christmas Story" (www.christiantoday.com/article/no.innkeeper.no.donkey.10.things.we.get.wrong.about.the.christmas.story/44454.htm)

Discuss

- How accurate do you think this account of the Christmas story might be?
- Does it change your view of the Christmas story?

ACTIVITY 3: The Starfish Story**Ages**

All

Supplies

"The Starfish Story" (at right); art supplies

Discuss and Activity

- Was there a particular thought or feeling that rose up for you as you read "The Starfish Story"?
- Can you express it through art? (e.g., singing, painting, drawing, dancing)

The Starfish Story (author unknown)

A young man is walking near the ocean and sees a beach on which thousands and thousands of starfish have washed ashore.

Farther along, he sees an old man walking slowly and stooping often, picking up one starfish after another and tossing each one gently into the ocean.

"Why are you throwing starfish into the ocean?" the young man asks.

"Because the sun is up and the tide is going out and if I don't throw them farther in, they will die."

"But, old man, don't you realize there are miles and miles of beach and starfish all along it! You can't possibly save them all; you can't save even one tenth of them. In fact, even if you work all day, your efforts won't make any difference at all."

The old man listens calmly and then bends down to pick up another starfish and throws it into the sea. "It made a difference to that one."

ACTIVITY 4: Pick Your Favourite**Ages:**

All

Supplies

Watch: "The Christmas Story"

(<https://youtu.be/kWq60oyrHVQ>)

and

"An Unexpected Christmas"

(<https://youtu.be/TM1XusYVqNY>).

Activity

- Vote on which retelling of the Christmas story you like the best.
- Or make your own retelling and share it on social media with hashtags #UCCan #AdventUnwrapped.

Beth Cameron, O'Leary West Cape Pastoral Charge, P.E.I.

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The Innkeeper's Story

Note to storytellers: The questions in this story are not rhetorical! When retelling, please encourage listeners to respond and take time to engage their ideas.



"Knock, knock!"

"Who's there?"

"Innkeeper."

"Innkeeper who?"

"Exactly."

Exactly! There is no innkeeper in the Bible story of Jesus' birth! I am nowhere to be found!

How does the story go again? Help me! "*While [Joseph and Mary] were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because...*" (Luke 2:6-7). Because?

Now, why was the baby placed in a feed trough? Do you remember? Yes, that's it! Mary laid the baby in a manger, "*...because there was no place for them in the inn*" (Luke 2:7).

There was an inn in the Bible story, so there must have been an innkeeper! But I have not been given a name, and a name is so important. Can you imagine what my name might be?

Hannah the Housekeeper? Ibrahim the Innkeeper?

Thank you, thank you. Now I have a name and a place in this marvellous story, the story of a baby's birth in a stable.

And that baby's name is so important, too. Can you remember all of the names people have given him? That's right: Jesus, which means God-will-save. Then there is the name Emmanuel; it means God-with-us. Those are amazing names for a little baby! They tell us that in Jesus, God was coming close enough to cuddle!

Now I have a name, the baby has a name, and we have a place in the story. So do you! For just as you can picture me at the door of my inn on that cold, starry night, you can picture yourself there, too. You are standing with me on the threshold of a story that will change our lives.

- When God reaches out to do something new, will you welcome it?
- When Good News comes close, will you be ready to hear it?
- When Love comes knocking, will you open the door?

Knock, knock!

Unwrapping the Innkeeper's Story

Placing ourselves in the story!

ACTIVITY 1: Nativity Scenes or Crèche Sets

Ages

All ages (especially Messy Church)

Supplies

Invite people to bring their crèches to display and share over Advent; pictures of different crèche sets; templates and supplies to make your own crèche or Nativity scene

Activity

a Invite each family/individual to display and share their crèches. (Alternatively, take photos of each set and create a PowerPoint presentation.) Share the story of each set: where did it come from and how long has it been in your family? Which piece is a favourite piece and why? If you could add pieces, what would they be? Is an innkeeper included in the scene?

b Display all crèches in the worship space during Advent, adding pieces each week. On Christmas Eve, add the Christ child to each set.

c Working together in small or family groups, create your own crèche set or Nativity scene. Search the Internet for ideas, e.g., “25 DIY Nativity Scenes” (www.babble.com/crafts-activities/25-diy-nativity-scenes/).

A crèche set that is especially fun to make is a set of felt finger puppets. There are several patterns available online. Remember to add an innkeeper puppet!

ACTIVITY 2: Make an Entrance**Ages**

All ages

Supplies

Decorations; innkeeper's costume

Activity

Keeping in mind our story of the innkeeper, take a look at the entrance to your church building or worship space. Imagine what this entrance looks like to newcomers. Does it look welcoming, attractive, and accessible? Decorate the entrance for Advent. Make the entrance look like the door of an inn or a stable for Christmas Eve. Invite one of your Christmas Eve greeters to dress up like an innkeeper!

ACTIVITY 3: Welcoming Those without Shelter**Ages**

All ages (especially 10+)

Supplies

Information about refugees and displaced and homeless people in Canada; access to Internet

Discuss

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)'s annual Global Trends Report: World at War, released on June 18, 2015, stated that the number of people forcibly displaced at the end of 2014 had risen to a staggering 59.5 million. The increase represents the biggest leap ever seen in a single year. Moreover, the report said the situation was likely to worsen. Globally, one in every 122 humans is now either a refugee, internally displaced, or seeking asylum.

Activity

Visit www.united-church.ca to find out what The United Church of Canada is doing and what you can do about:

- Refugees and Migration
- Poverty and Housing
- Right Relationships

ACTIVITY 4: Vote for Your Favourite Videos

Ages

All ages (especially 5+)

Supplies

Access to the Internet; supplies to create your own video

Activity

a Watch these two videos in which the Nativity story is told from the Innkeeper's point of view and vote on which of these videos is your favourite and why.

- "The Innkeeper (Nativity Factor 2011 – 3rd Place)" (<https://youtu.be/Qnr6En4tlDw>)
- "The Inn-Keeper's Tale (Nativity Factor 2011 shortlisted)" (<https://youtu.be/0CZl62Mtkm>)

b Create your own video, post it on YouTube, and share it on social media using hashtags #UCCan #AdventUnwrapped.

ACTIVITY 5: Write a Song

Ages

All ages

Supplies

Access to Internet

Activity

a Listen to these songs written from the Innkeeper's perspective:

- "Lennie Gallant song 'The Innkeeper' with Karen Gallant Picture" (<https://youtu.be/3S1jsatf7q4>)
- "Rest (The Song of the InnKeeper- Official Lyric Video - Jason Gray)" (<https://youtu.be/w6OV7lLY2bs>)
- "I Have No Room – Christmas Song of the Innkeeper" (<https://youtu.be/vVVgbmFSqUE>)

b Write your own lyrics for an innkeeper's song and share them on social media using hashtags #UCCan #AdventUnwrapped.

Activity 6: Storytime

Ages

All ages

Supplies

Storybooks

Activity

Share and enjoy storybooks that help us imagine the birth of Jesus from different cultural viewpoints, e.g.:

- *The Night of Las Posadas* by Tomie dePaola (Latin American) This is the story of the procession of Las Posadas, the tradition in which Mary and Joseph go from door to door seeking shelter on Christmas Eve.
- *Red Parka Mary* by Peter Eyvindson (Canadian) An Aboriginal boy overcomes his fear of the elderly woman living next door, and they exchange Christmas gifts.
- *The Mummer's Song* by Bud Davidge (Canadian) This story celebrates Newfoundland's 200-year-old tradition of opening doors to strangers at Christmastime.
- *A Northern Nativity* by William Kurelek (Canadian) The Christ child is born to all kinds of parents in all kinds of places across Canada.

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The Magus's Story



I'm old, and my eyes can no longer read the stars. There are holes in my cloak and my memories. But there are some things I will never forget. I'll always remember

that spectacular star. We hadn't seen one like it before—and we haven't seen one like it since. It was breathtaking, mesmerizing, and it compelled us to follow. We wanted to try to understand its meaning and the story it wished to share.

I'll always remember that long treacherous journey. There were 12 travellers in our caravan and 20 camels. Oh, the stink of the camels in the relentless heat! We carried hidden gifts with us in case we had to barter for a safe passage through a strange land.

I'll always remember the terror in Herod's eyes and the scribes' quivering voices when they were summoned before him. They spoke of an ancient prophecy—a star, a new king, a descendant of King David. Glad to put Jerusalem behind us, we followed the star to David's town of Bethlehem.

I'll always remember that little family and the peace that seemed to embrace them. Although they were living in an obscure hovel, it wasn't difficult to find them: we stuck out like a camel's hump in Bethlehem, and the people were eager to share the rumours with newcomers—tales told by shepherds who had been captivated by sights in the night sky and the news of a newborn king.

And I'll always remember that child. His family members were poor and vulnerable, yet so loving and gracious. We offered our gifts, hoping they would in some small way honour, protect, and bless the child. Watching him, we knew that we needn't search further or travel farther. The same compelling light that shone from the heavens shone in his eyes. That kind of light is unforgettable.

Unwrapping the Magus's Story

Unravelling the message in the Magi's gifts.

ACTIVITY 1: Special Gifts for Christmas

Ages

All ages (especially Sunday school)

Supplies

Copies of "The Gifts" (at right); paper and pens

Activity

Read "The Gifts" and think about the people in your neighbourhood with whom you could share these gifts in a way that works for our times:

- gold: make a donation to a family in need or an organization that provides shelter for the homeless and assistance to the poor
- frankincense: using the paper and pens, compose a prayer for Christmas Eve or Epiphany naming the people or situations in our world that are close to your heart
- myrrh: visit those in your community who may be in hospital or at home facing serious illness

The Gifts

We don't know how many magi followed the star, but we are told there were three gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Gold is a precious gift fit for a royal child. Frankincense is incense that symbolizes worship or prayer or divine presence. Myrrh is a healing balm or anointing oil that symbolizes Jesus' healing human presence. So each gift signifies a different name for the baby in the manger:

- gold for one who would be called "King"
- perfumed incense for one who would be worshipped as "Son of God"
- anointing myrrh for one who would be known as "the Anointed One" or "the Christ"

ACTIVITY 2: Art Appreciation

Ages

All ages (especially Sunday school and Messy Church)

Supplies

Prints of different images of the Magi (include images from different cultures); access to the Web; art supplies for painting and/or sculpting; used greeting cards with images of the Magi; scissors, glue, and poster board for a collage

Activity

Compare the various Magi images you have found. Then:

a Search online for images of the “Adoration of the Magi” and discover paintings by European masters, such as Botticelli, Da Vinci, De Bray, Durer, Giotto, and Rubens. Look carefully at these famous paintings and discuss the following questions.

- How would you describe each of the Magi? What are they doing in each painting and how do their appearances (nationality, expressions, clothing, head covering, stances) differ from one painting to the next?
- How is the Christ child portrayed in each painting? What is he doing?
- How many other characters are included in each painting? Can you identify them? What are their facial expressions? What do you think they are feeling or thinking?
- What symbols do you notice in each painting (e.g. lily, lamb, chalice, star)?

b On the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops website (<http://www.cccb.ca/site/eng/component/content/article/257-indigenous-peoples/3200-ccb-art-collection>), find the picture “Nativity” by Jackson Beardy (Cree, 1944-, Winnipeg, Manitoba). Before you read the artist's comments on this site, take time to look carefully at Beardy's painting and talk about what you see. For instance, notice that wise animals take the place of the Magi.

c Invite each person to draw, paint, or sculpt a Nativity scene and to include the Magi. Invite them to include themselves in their scenes. Ask:

- Where are you standing in the story?
- What are you doing in your picture: praying, offering a gift, singing a lullaby?
- How will you depict the Christ child?
- What expressions will you draw on the faces of the other characters?

Share pictures of your artwork on social media using hashtags #UCCan #AdventUnwrapped.

d Working in small groups, cut and paste your favourite images of the Magi from the greeting cards. Create a collage to share.

- What catches your attention in these pictures and why?

ACTIVITY 3: Stargazing

Ages

All ages (try this at home)

Supplies

A smartphone or app with SkyView® installed (this activity is best done in the evening)

Discuss

Talk about the star in the Christmas story. Was it a supernova? A comet? A conjunction of planets? Uninterested in natural causes, Matthew points to a supernatural event! He is recalling a prophecy from centuries past: “The oracle of Balaam son of Beor, the oracle of the man whose eye is clear, the oracle of one who hears the words of God.... I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near—a star shall come out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel” (Numbers 24:15–17). The star guides us all to the one who would be called “the bright morning star” (Revelation 22:16) and “light of the world” (John 9:5).

Activity

Find the stars!

- a** SkyView® Free brings stargazing to everyone! Download the app and then point your handheld device at the sky to identify stars, constellations, satellites, the space station, and more!
- b** Spend some time wondering and enjoying the stars! Or have a scavenger hunt for constellations.
- c** Invite a local astronomer or star watcher to share their telescope and the story of the stars with you. Plan an excursion to a planetarium or science centre.

ACTIVITY 4: Storytime

Ages

All ages

Supplies

Storybooks about the Magi and/or story videos.

Activity

a Read together a storybook that focuses on the Magi, e.g.:

- *The Last Straw* by Fredrick H. Thury.
This is the story of the Magi from the camel's point of view! Hoshmakaka, a curmudgeonly old camel, has been chosen for the great responsibility of carrying gifts to the new baby king. Every day in the heat crossing the desert, his pack grows heavier as the crowds of people give him their gifts to carry. Oh, his gout! Oh, his sciatica!

- NOTE: This story easily translates into an all-ages pageant. Also, *The Last Straw* is included in a CBC recording titled *Along the Road to Bethlehem* that includes performances by the Toronto Children's Chorus and tenor Ben Heppner as Hoshmakaka the camel.
- *The Gift of the Magi* by O. Henry. A short story about a young married couple and how they deal with the challenge of buying Christmas gifts for each other with very little money.

b Watch "Wisemen" (<https://youtu.be/mxgmC-doiS8>). Storyteller Garrison Keillor tells his own version of the story of the Magi and explains the real meaning of myrrh!

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The Holy Family's Story

(A skit for four characters that can be paired with readings from Luke 1:39–55.)



Elizabeth and Zechariah: We are old. We are faithful. We have been married for many years and have accepted the blessings we have received, though we have never been blessed with a child.

Mary and Joseph: We are young and full of hope. We aren't married yet, but are excited for the big day.

Zechariah: I am astounded and cannot speak. After all these years, Elizabeth is pregnant.

Joseph: I am hurt and confused! Mary is pregnant but we have not yet married.

Zechariah, Mary, and Joseph: I was visited by an angel!

Elizabeth: I was visited by my young cousin. She is pregnant as well and she is overjoyed.

Mary and Joseph: We are afraid; we must travel far to uncertain destinations.

Elizabeth and Zechariah: We are surrounded by neighbours and relatives who are celebrating with us. They have brought food and are helping us with our newborn.

Mary and Joseph: We don't know where we will stay. Our child will be arriving soon. Hopefully, we can find shelter.

Elizabeth and Zechariah: We took John to be circumcised. We were welcomed, celebrated, listened to, and cared for.

Mary and Joseph: Our child sleeps in a feed bin. We are surrounded by strange men who have come to worship our child. Some are shepherds, some are from faraway lands.

Joseph: I was visited by an angel!

Mary and Joseph: We are running away because we have heard that Herod has planned terrible things. He will take out his wrath on young children because of our child.

Mary, Zechariah, and Joseph: I was visited by an angel!

Elizabeth: We were told that our son would do incredible things.

Mary: We were told that our son would be like no other.

Elizabeth and Zechariah: We are old and established. But we trust in God.

Mary and Joseph: We are young and just starting out. But we trust in God.

Unwrapping the Holy Family's Story

Sharing gifts inspired by the Holy Family's story.

ACTIVITY 1: Thinking Aloud

Ages

12+

Supplies

Pens, paper

Activity

a Imagine you are one of the four parents: Mary, Joseph, Elizabeth, or Zechariah. Write a journal entry or letter to a friend about what you have experienced in learning about the pregnancy and having the child. Explain how you found out, how you are feeling, and what you end up going through.

b Think of a time when something significant changed your life, e.g., a new baby, a move to a new city, ending a relationship, finding a new partner. While reflecting on your emotions at the time of the event and considering what has happened since, write a poem or song celebrating and reflecting on all that the event brought into your life. Perhaps your poem will be to God, or about God at work in your life, or focused on your personal faith journey. Share your poem/song on social media using hashtags #UCCan #AdventUnwrapped.

ACTIVITY 2: Knitting or Crochet Party

Ages

All ages

Supplies

Yarn, knitting needles, and crochet hooks; patterns; cardstock and markers; holiday movies or music

Activity

a Invite those who are experienced to come to a “Knitting/Crocheting Party” to teach beginners how to make squares. The squares can be pieced together to form baby blankets for expectant parents in your community. Or try finger knitting or arm knitting. Check the YouTube video “Arm knit blanket” (<https://youtu.be/cMYRrOG27C0>).

b Create gift cards to go with the blanket.

Note: Before you begin, bless the supplies that will be used, especially the yarn and cards, by asking people to name their hopes and prayers for the people who will receive these gifts. As you create the baby blankets, imagine all the hopes, dreams, and fears that parents might be experiencing as they welcome a new child into the world.

c Watch a holiday movie or play Christmas music while you all work together.

ACTIVITY 3: Storytime**Ages**

All ages

Supplies

Storybook; materials to make your own storybooks

Activity

a Read one of the following stories together:

- *The Nativity* by Julie Vivas
- *Mary* by Brian Wildsmith
- *Father and Son: A Nativity Story* by Geraldine McCaughrean

b Create your own story. Share your version of the Holy Family's story on social media using hashtags #UCCan #AdventUnwrapped.

ACTIVITY 4: Gifts for a King**Ages**

All ages

Supplies

Art supplies—especially materials that enable you to match an existing crèche

Activity

a Modernize a traditional crèche.

b Considering all the challenges that new parents face, think of and craft some practical gifts that you think Mary and Joseph may have appreciated. Create these for a crèche that already exists in the church and add them throughout Advent.

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