

# What child is this?

## Week 5

*Shelley Frew and Lisa Scheffler, authors*

### ***Descent***

*Down he came from up,  
and in from out,  
and here from there.  
A long leap,  
an incandescent fall  
from magnificent  
to naked, frail, small,  
through space,  
between stars,  
into our chill night air,  
shrunk, in infant grace,  
to our damp, cramped  
earthy place  
among all  
the shivering sheep.*

*And now, after all,  
there he lies,  
fast asleep.*

*By Luci Shaw, 2006<sup>1</sup>*

When is the last time you felt genuine awe in an ordinary day? What makes you stop and stare? The rustling leaves of fall with all their colorful hues or lightning spreading like a web across the sky? A sunset after the rain or the full moon rising? The sight of a newborn baby? A beautiful song that resonates in your chest and crescendos until it fills the room?

If we are paying attention, God embeds his splendor into our lives, and gives us the opportunity to turn our hearts towards him in gratitude and wonder.

You'd think that during "the most wonderful time of the year" we'd be more aware of God's majesty. But, our society can encourage frenetic lives, especially at this time of year. In a year that's been full of stressors, all the chaos and uncertainty can strain our souls. As much as we believe that Jesus is the reason for the season, we can easily get swept down a river of busyness

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<sup>1</sup> Luci Shaw, *Accompanied by Angels: Poems of the Incarnation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006).

and anxiety that leaves little room to experience the true joy of Christmas. So, this week, as you count down to Christmas Day, leave yourself some time to mull over the radical gift of grace found in Jesus and spend time with the Savior and Light of the world.

Slow down, take some quiet moments all to yourself, and allow the reality of Jesus' birth to fill you with awe and wonder.

## Day 1 | Christ is born!

*Lisa Scheffler, author*

During this Advent season, we've witnessed messages from angels, followed the shepherds to the manger and journeyed with Magi who came from afar. Now it's time to focus on Jesus' arrival. This week, we'll read through the story of his birth as Luke's Gospel describes it and also consider the coming of Christ as it is depicted by the Gospel of John. One will give us a factual account of the night Jesus was born, while the other considers the mind-blowing implications of the incarnation.

Today let's begin with the simple, but amazing story of a young, pregnant mother, her betrothed, and the child who was ready to be born.

### **Luke 2:1–7**

*In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. <sup>2</sup> (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) <sup>3</sup> And everyone went to their own town to register.*

*<sup>4</sup> So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. <sup>5</sup> He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.*

*<sup>6</sup> While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, <sup>7</sup> and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.*

Of all the Gospel writers, Luke includes more historical references in his account of Jesus' life. It's as if he wants to locate the supernatural in-breaking of God in a time and place his readers can understand. Luke tells us who the emperor and governor were when Jesus was born and what decree sent the young couple to Bethlehem. Of course, we know from our study of the Magi's story that it was prophesied that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, and God used human rulers to make it so. While humanity might believe itself in charge of its destiny, God is the one who is in control. He sent a star to guide the Magi and orchestrated a census to ensure that Jesus would be born in the city of David.

Somewhere a practical woman is reading this and wondering why, if God could orchestrate a census, he couldn't reserve a room for poor Mary. But that was not his plan. God allowed his son to be born in a place usually reserved for animals. He communicated more strongly than words ever could that he was coming for all people.

During his time on earth Jesus demonstrated an unimaginable humility that both began with and was reflected in his birth. Jesus grew up alongside ordinary people. In his ministry, he walked miles of dusty roads, slept outside, or in homes where he was welcomed. The Creator of the universe owned nothing during his time on earth. One would expect a deity to demand to be served. Not Jesus. He would later tell his disciples, that he “did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

The Apostle Paul explains the beauty and mystery of Jesus’ incarnation and insists that, as his followers, we imitate Jesus.

*In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:*

*Who, being in very nature God,  
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;  
rather, he made himself nothing  
by taking the very nature of a servant,  
being made in human likeness.  
And being found in appearance as a man,  
he humbled himself  
by becoming obedient to death—  
even death on a cross!*

(Philippians 2:5–8)

Reflect on the words of Scripture we’ve read today until you can feel at least a hint of real astonishment. Jesus Christ, second Person of the Trinity, eternal God, and Lord of all came into this world as a helpless baby born in the humblest of circumstances, so he could live and walk among us. He made himself nothing, took on the nature of a servant, and died on a cross so that he could rescue you and me.

What kind of love does it take to be willing to do what Jesus has done? Can you imagine it?

He has that kind of love for you.

Meditate on that truth today, and praise God for all that he has done, is doing, and will do for you through Jesus. Then consider what Paul demands of us: “In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset of Christ.” We are called to humble ourselves and serve others. It’s one way we can demonstrate our love for the One who saved us.

*Spend some time in prayer and praise God for the miracle of the incarnation. Rest in his vast love for you.*

*How can you serve others this Christmas and demonstrate to them the love and humility of the Lord, who chose to be born in a stable and laid in a manger? Can you help a family member? Neighbor? Co-worker?*

## Day 2 | The Word

*Shelley Frew, author*

We're just a few days from Christmas, and we're looking forward to celebrating Jesus' birth. Yesterday we focused on verses from Luke's Gospel. John, where we'll read from today, takes a very different approach to Jesus' introduction. The mood entering John's account reflects beauty and majesty, harkening all the way back to the creation of the cosmos. While the other Gospel writers started their stories of Jesus at a historical point in Christ's life, John invites the reader to the beginning of history — the moment of creation.

Rich with symbolism and meaning, the prologue to this Gospel reads almost like poetic literature. For the rest of the week, we'll look at selections from the first eighteen verses of the book as we focus on the way John introduces Christ. We'll consider two ways that John references Jesus in the first few verses of his Gospel: as the Word and the Light.

## John 1:1–5

*<sup>1</sup>In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup>He was with God in the beginning. <sup>3</sup>Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. <sup>4</sup>In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. <sup>5</sup>The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*

John draws us back in time, back to the beginning of the world, to the beginning of the magnificent story of scripture. Jesus, the Word, participated with God as the agent of creation. The Greek word for *word*, **logos**, means “speaking, a message or words” and would've connected immediately with John's audience as a common word in Jewish wisdom literature and Greek philosophical teaching.<sup>2</sup> Here, John calls Jesus the Logos — the message of God's hope, speaking to a world of people alienated from him and fractured by sin. The Logos has always existed together as God with the Father and the Holy Spirit in eternal, intimate community. The Word is and always has been the second member of the Trinity. What a powerful picture of Jesus.

As if challenging our thinking by referring to Jesus as the eternal Word weren't enough, John offers us another image to ponder: Jesus is the Light. Over 2,000 years ago, the original Light slipped nearly unnoticed into the world as part of a rescue mission to remedy humanity's eternal darkness. So monumental was the arrival of this Light that history broke into two parts: before the Light and after the Light.

It's a myth perpetuated by the world that light and darkness are equally and eternally embattled with one another in a cliff-hanger where the winner conquers the other by a razor-thin margin. The light of Jesus does more than barely win out over the darkness. Jesus dominates. Christ's light drives out the dark, causing it to flee. With Christ's death and resurrection, the light triumphs in our lives now because of our relationship with Jesus Christ. We can live with confidence because of his victorious light, not needing to fear that the shadows will overpower and absorb us.

This Christmas meditate on the gift of Jesus. Creator. Word. God. Light. Now is the time to come to know Jesus. Right now, acknowledge your smallness before our God. He alone is good and

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<sup>2</sup> Edwin A. Blum, “John,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton; Victor Books, 1985), 271.

perfect and true. Thank him for his forgiveness and for giving you the light to guide your way.

*How could being reminded that Jesus is the Light who cannot be overcome by darkness give hope to someone who is suffering this Christmas? Is there someone you can share this message with this week? Maybe you need to hear it yourself.*

## Day 3| The Light in the darkness

*Shelley Frew, author*

We're all aware that Christmas surrounds the astounding birth of the promised Jewish Messiah, who chose to step into history. He developed as all human babies do, only he was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of a virgin.

Yesterday, we saw John introduce Jesus as the Word and the Light. Today, we'll consider what the Light's arrival means for the world.

### **John 1:9–13**

*<sup>9</sup> The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. <sup>10</sup> He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. <sup>11</sup> He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. <sup>12</sup> Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—<sup>13</sup> children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.*

Few people were prepared for Jesus when he arrived. Fewer still expected him to enter God's grand story in the form of a helpless newborn. No one could begin to imagine how the Messiah would exceed all human expectations and do so in the most creative and unlikely way. Yet, God's plan accomplished infinitely more than rescuing the Jewish people from political oppression, because it focused on humanity's desperate need. Many of his own people, the Jews, whom he had loved and guided from their inception to the day he arrived, rejected him. Perhaps they wanted a Messiah who was only for them. Yet God's love for humanity is so vast that he came to rescue anyone who would receive him.

Christianity is all about the rescue of the helpless — people who are stumbling around because they are hopelessly lost in the dark. Other religions are focused on teaching us how to save ourselves. They want to teach you how to either assemble your own flashlight, so you can find your own way, or try to convince you that you can generate your own light from within. The Bible teaches us that God had to send the light to us because there was no way we could escape the darkness on our own.

As pastor and author Timothy Keller says: "Imagine you see a drowning woman. It doesn't help her at all if you throw her a manual on how to swim. You don't throw her some teaching — you throw her a rope. And Jesus is not so much a teacher as he is a rescuer. Because that's what we

most need. Nothing in who we are or what we do saves us.”<sup>3</sup>

Why would God, who enjoys a perfect, loving community within the Trinity, choose embodied living, within space and time, among a people who had turned their backs on him? Why would he stage a rescue mission for people who are convinced they don’t need him? Because he loves us and has acted to save us.

His incarnation accomplished many things, but the motive of his bold mission to be conceived by the Spirit, grow in a virgin’s womb, and be birthed in a shelter for animals is love for us. Within the Trinity, God experiences perfect love and communion. He created us out of his good pleasure. His love for us is rooted in that good pleasure that springs forth out of his nature. 1 John 4:8–9 tells us that God is love and that his love was revealed to us when he sent his one and only Son that we may find life in him.

*How the truth that we are completely saved by God’s grace difficult for us to accept? Why should it be a relief?*

*What does God’s great love mean for you today? Wherever you are, whatever you are experiencing at the moment, reflect on what it means that you are loved by the eternal Creator and Sustainer of the universe.*

## Day 4 | Dwelling among us

*Shelley Frew, author*

Jesus is why we celebrate Christmas. Somewhere between a jolly, white-bearded man, and stockings hung by the chimney with care, it’s easy to lose sight of the real miracle in which we rejoice. Christmas is about the gift God gave us over 2,000 years ago— Jesus. With so many competing messages at Christmas, I wonder if sometimes we can lose the awe of the incarnation.

Today, our focus is the incarnation: God remaining God, yet taking on full humanity. We’ve come to the peak of John’s prologue, to the miraculous point when John reflects on Jesus choosing to be conceived by the Spirit, to grow in Mary’s womb, and to be born as a human being.

### **John 1:14**

*<sup>14</sup> The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

One important truth is found in this verse is embedded in the phrase: “he made his dwelling among us.” John says this in an unusual way; he writes in Greek that Jesus “tabernacled” among us. John is using this precise language to remind the readers of the Old Testament tabernacle. At one time, this was the place where God was present and dwelt among his people. Exodus 40:34–35 describes an experience of God’s presence: *Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the*

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<sup>3</sup> Timothy Keller, *Galatians for You: For Reading, for Feeding, for Leading*, (Purcellville, VA: The Good Book Company, 2013).

*cloud settled on it and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.* God's unmediated presence would be lethal to sinful human beings — even to Moses whom God called “friend.” But in Christ, God has truly come in the flesh to dwell among his people. As Matthew's Gospel tells us, he is *Immanuel*, God with us.

Jesus is God and in every way a human being. Christ-followers everywhere affirm the humanity of Christ, but do we really believe he fully embraced the human experience, even fierce temptation of every kind? Robert Webber wonders this too as he writes: “We carry around a glib portrait of Jesus, I fear. We think of him breezing through life, doing good, teaching truth, dying for us, and rising for us like a divine robot — no feeling, no struggle, hooked up to a divine energy that made his life a breeze.”<sup>4</sup> But the Bible tells us that Jesus participated in this world, in every way you and I do. He had friends, family, and neighbors. He worked hard and had times of leisure. He slept, ate, worshipped, laughed and cried.

Can you imagine, the one who created all life and matter learning to dress himself and put on his shoes? Hebrews 5:8 tells us that although he was God's Son, he learned obedience through the things he suffered. It's easy sometimes to minimize Christ's humanity because he was God. Yet, he fully embodied the human experience, except for sin. Even on good days, life this side of eternity is fraught with troubles, and Jesus knew that full well when he came to earth in order to rescue us.

*Do you find yourself emphasizing Christ's deity or his humanity? Why do you think that is?*

*What comfort or hope do you find in Christ's humanity? Reflect on that in prayer today.*

## Day 5 | Reflect, Connect, Respond

*Lisa Scheffler, author*

Throughout this season of Advent, we've been anticipating the arrival of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Today is Christmas Day! How has the Holy Spirit used this season to draw you closer to God and grow you to be more like Jesus? Reflect on that today.

Since it's Christmas Day, consider reading this devotional with anyone you're spending the day with — in person or virtually. Take some time to worship Jesus with others today!

### Reflect

Read [Luke 2:1-16](#) and [John 1:1-14](#) and think about the following.

What do the circumstances of Jesus' birth say about the character of God?

How do John's descriptions of Jesus as the Word-made-flesh and the Light help you understand the Savior more?

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<sup>4</sup> Robert E. Webber, *The Divine Embrace: Recovering the Passionate Spiritual Life* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books, 2006), 174.

## Connect

*The people walking in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
on those living in the land of deep darkness  
a light has dawned.*

*Isaiah 9:2*

Nothing could stop the Light. He has come, and the darkness fled. Evil is not and will never be the ultimate victor. Though sin and death have not been banished once and for all, the resurrection promises us that they will be. The Light shines into the dark night, and, though some choose to hide their eyes and shrink back from it, others walk into its glorious warmth and truly see for the first time.

God's plan to save humanity was coming to fruition as the Word became flesh so he could dwell among us (John 1:14). Jesus changed everything. The God who created humanity and animated it with his breath became one of those whom he created. Jesus was completely human in every way, but without sin, and he knows firsthand our every joy and sorrow. But he never ceased to be divine.

When we allow the pages of the Gospels to show us Jesus, we are seeing God. The compassion for the hurting, the wisdom for life, the grief at unbelief, and the anger at injustice give us a tangible understanding of our Creator. How wonderful and merciful is our God? Powerful and good, tender and strong.

We pray that you have grown closer to him during this Advent season. That his joy has filled your heart and will pour out of you and into the lives of others as you celebrate his birth. May his grace become ever more real to you and may you be filled to overflowing with his love.

Merry Christmas!

## Respond

*How can we show our love for Jesus? What can we do to encourage those around us to grow closer to Jesus?*