

Journey CHURCH

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Because of Bethlehem Viewer Guide Session 1: God Has a Face

Discussion Questions:

Take a few minutes with your group members to discuss what you just watched.

- What part of the teaching has the most impact on you?

Preparing for Christmas

- At the beginning of the video, Max acknowledged some of the Christmas traditions he looks forward to each year, such as sleigh bells, carolers, and the holiday classic, *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. These are just a few examples of traditions that typically lead up to Christmas Day and help us experience the Christmas spirit. Briefly describe one or two traditions that help you to enjoy the season and prepare for Christmas each year.
- What do you enjoy most about the tradition you described? How does it contribute to making it feel like Christmas each year?
- What might be gained and what might be lost if you experience none of these traditions before the day itself? In other words, no holiday decorations, no cards, no special meals or entertainment until Christmas Day. Would you feel more or less prepared to celebrate and enjoy Christmas? Why?
- For centuries, Christians throughout the world have used the season of Advent to prepare themselves spiritually for Christmas. The word *advent* comes from the Latin word *adventus* and simply means “coming” or “arrival.” Beginning each year on the fourth Sunday before Christmas, Advent commemorates the First Advent – Jesus’ birth – and also anticipates the Second Advent – Christ’s return. Although we tend to think of Advent as a season of celebration, it was originally conceived primarily as a season of preparation – a time for prayer and self-reflection.
- How would you characterize your experience of Advent over the years? For example, is it a tradition you grew up with or is it new to you?
- What, if anything, changes in your perspective when you think of Advent primarily as a season of preparation rather than celebration? Overall, would you say it makes Advent more or less appealing to you? Share the reasons for your response.

God with Us

- Advent is a season of preparation because it is also a season of *anticipation* – a glorious gift is coming soon and we want to be ready to receive it! In the prologue to his gospel, the apostle John

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proclaims the miraculous truth of the incarnation, the gift of God with us in human form in John 1:14, 18 NRSV.

Because God became human, we can see and know God in the person of Jesus. We can also rely on the fact God knows us. He understands how we feel because he has faced what we face, including weakness, testing, and suffering. Author C. S. Lewis elaborates on the vital importance of this truth:

God could, had he pleased, have been incarnate in a man of iron nerves, the Stoic sort who lets no sigh escape him. Of his great humility he chose to be incarnate in a man of delicate sensibilities who wept at the grave of Lazarus and sweated blood in Gethsemane ... He has faced all that the weakest of us face, has shared not only the strength of our nature but every weakness of it except sin. If he had been incarnate in a man of immense natural courage, that would have been for many of us the same as his not being incarnate at all.

- Lewis contrast two options for the kind of man Jesus could have chosen to become – an invincible man of iron nerves, or vulnerable man of delicate sensibilities. Has Jesus chosen to be the invincible man, how do you imagine it might have undermined the miracle of the incarnation or diminished its power?
- Briefly recall a recent or past experience of weakness, testing, or suffering. As you were going through it, which aspect of Christ's nature would you say you were most aware of and drawn to – his divinity (power) or his humanity (vulnerability)? For example, did you find yourself praying more than Jesus would intervene and change your situation, or that Jesus would be with you and comfort you?
- Max described the Christmas story as one that actually has particular relevance for those who find themselves in a season of sadness, lost hope, or disappointment. We see this especially in Mary's experience. Although she eagerly anticipated the arrival of her child, nothing leading up to the birth of Jesus would have met Mary's hope and expectations. She hoped for a joyous celebration with family, but her unwelcomed reality was a scandalous pregnancy, an imposed census, an untimely trip, and lowly accommodations with sheep and cattle.
 - As you anticipate these weeks leading up to Christmas, what hopes and expectations are you aware of?
- Word that describe Mary's unwelcome reality included *scandalous, imposed, untimely, and lowly*. What words would you use to describe any unwelcome realities you may be facing this holiday season? Or in what ways, if any, might this be a difficult time for you?

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- In spite of, and out of, Mary's chaos and hardships, Christ came. The season leading up to the first Christmas wasn't what she hoped for, but it was a miracle in the making. At the most unexpected time and place, Mary saw the face of God. Describing how God triumphed in Mary's story Max writes, "The manger dares us to believe the best is yet to be. And it hopes and the unwelcome realities you face, how do you respond to the idea that, like Mary, your circumstances could be a miracle in the making, an occasion in which you may soon see the face of God? What might the manger be daring you to believe?"