



God with Us

 illuminate

Episode two

Episode two
The King is Born



How to use these studies

The study in front of you now is adapted from the 2014 Illuminate material. It is designed to be used by youth & young adult groups, small groups, or families to journey together through the Gospel story over the course of a year.

Illuminate Camp is based on a practice of 'storying', recapturing the stories behind the Bible texts we have heard so many times. It is an inherently community-based practice, involving reading the narratives together and participating in discussion as a group. The aim is to hear the stories as if it was the first time; to try and put aside the years of knowledge you have accumulated and hear them fresh.

To get the most out of these studies, we recommend the following process:

- Get a group of friends to journey through these stories together. These studies are also ideal for family groups. (While it is possible to do these studies solo, we cannot oversell how much better they will be if you do them as a group)
- As a group, read aloud the original Bible texts, based on the references below.
- As a group, read aloud the Illuminate re-write.
 - ◇ As you hear the story, make notes of things that stand out to you and questions that you have.
- If possible, read the original texts again, perhaps in a different translation.
- Discuss the stories as a group. Use the supplied questions as a guide, but don't be afraid to follow the discussion. Explore the stories wildly, asking every question that comes to mind.
- Pray together. Included in each study is a small Experience station that can be used as a guide for prayer and reflection, either as a group or individually.

We hope that you find this material as encouraging and stimulating as we did on camp. If you were on camp to hear these stories, we hope you find something new this time through. The Gospel stories are rich and complex, and no two times reading them are ever the same.



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Episode 2: The King is Born

Intro

This episode is all about power. Who has it, who doesn't, and how those with it use it.

It begins with the story of a census being carried out to register the inhabitants of the Empire. All Roman subjects had to return to their own towns to register. This meant anybody travelling on business had to return home, regardless of the state of their affairs. Same goes for anybody living outside their ancestral towns. This was a huge disruption to the normal pattern of life in the Empire, but did the Romans care? Not a bit. They said jump, everybody had to jump.

Fast forward a bit to the second portion of our story and we read the miserably tragic events of the Slaughter in Bethlehem. Here we have a different, but connected, figure of power: Herod the Great. One of his defining characteristics was the lengths to which he would go to hold on to power. In this narrative, when presented with a threat to his political dominance, he reacts by coldly executing a whole town's worth of two-year-olds.

And then, in the middle of it all, there is a peasant family and their infant child who just happens to be God Himself in human flesh. If anybody has power, it's God, and yet he makes himself so extremely vulnerable, places himself entirely under the protection of a peasant family in an impoverished province within an oppressive militaristic Empire.

Jesus lays aside his own power and relies entirely on the courage of his human parents. Could he have done it differently; some method that wouldn't have looked so risky, wouldn't have come so close to failure so many times? Sure. But he doesn't. And choices like that mean something.

God has faith in us, just like we have faith in him. He always chooses to work with us, despite his own power, despite the fact that he could do it better, quicker. His power doesn't make him a cruel ruler, or a bully. He gives us opportunity to use our own small bits of power for him.

Access a video version of this introduction at vic.youthvision.org.au/GodWithUs

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Bible References

Luke 2:1-21; Matthew 2:1-18.



Story

After the wedding of Joseph and Mary—an event the entire town celebrated together—life in Nazareth settled back into its normal rhythms. Then one day, weeks after the wedding, a group of riders was sighted making its way through the fields towards the town. The riders tore through the village gate, spraying the town elders there with dust, and yanked on the reigns of their mounts until the horses stood, panting, in the village square.

The men sat on their tall horses, man and beast adorned with plates of armour and strips of studded leather, and each of the riders had a square red-lacquered shield slung over his shoulder and their hands rested on the pommels of their swords. Their leader had a plume of red feathers over the crown of his polished iron helmet and a casual sneer written on his face. The horses trampled the sparse turf of the village square, kicking clods of dirt into the air as the Nazarenes emerged from their houses into the cold winter air.

The Roman soldier with the feathered plume yanked on his reigns to still his horse and reached into the saddle bags behind his knees. He extracted a scroll of parchment wrapped around an intricately carved wooden rod. He unfurled the sheepskin and cleared his throat.

“By the order of Imperator Caesar Augustus, Son of the Divine, a census is to be taken of the entire Roman Empire. All men must return immediately to the town of their birth to register.” The soldier closed the scroll and slipped it back into his saddlebag, all the while ignoring the angry murmurs from the Nazarenes. The other soldiers, however, remained ready for anything at a moment’s notice. “You heard me,” the men’s leader snapped. “On your way.”

The soldiers flicked their reigns and trotted through the crowd along the town’s main road and out into the farmland beyond. The Nazarenes watched them go contemptuously before returning to their work.

The town bustled over the next few days as the people made their preparations, some for short journeys, some for long sojourns. For many of the local farmers, this journey would mean they would not return until late in the planting season, and come Summer there would be less on the table for their families. Joseph packed bags for Mary and himself with the grim satisfaction that at least he could take his work with him.

The two of them set out with a complement of other Nazarenes travelling south. After a week they arrived inside the small walled city of Bethlehem. Almost every house was bursting with people. Joseph and Mary squeezed along the packed streets until they reached the familiar door of Joseph’s parents’ house. Joseph knocked and the two of them were welcomed into the warm single room beyond. Sitting on the floor around the table were all of Joseph’s brothers and their families, as well as his parents. They all greeted Joseph and Mary warmly.

Days passed in peace amongst childhood streets. The census was carried out by surly Roman officials, and eventually the town began to drain of people. But Mary and Joseph found themselves effectively stuck in the town, because Mary was getting closer and closer to having her baby.

Most of Joseph’s family were still in Bethlehem on the night Mary went into labour. It was late at night when Joseph’s mother pushed her sons and husband out into the cold night and slammed the door behind them, leaving them to pace restlessly and listen to Mary’s pained cries. Joseph leaned against the stone wall of the house and chewed his knuckle.



Finally, after an eternity of waiting, Mary's cries were replaced by those of a much smaller set of lungs. Joseph stood bolt upright and pushed open the door, his father and brothers right behind him. Inside, Mary was attended to by Joseph's sisters-in-law while his mother held a squawking bundle of bright red skin wrapped in a thick blanket. She silently handed the child over. Joseph looked down into the scrunched up little eyes of his son and smiled.

"Hello Jesus," he whispered.

That night the child slept in the soft cud of the manger carved into the floor of the living room. But the family's sleep was interrupted by a group of men who smelled strongly of animals. They explained that a host of angels had told them to find this house, so Joseph let them inside. The group of men and boys entered reverently, as if they were entering the Synagogue, or even the Temple, and arranged themselves around the sleeping infant in the manger. The youngest boy reached out slowly and touched his knuckle to the baby's cheek.

The man who had knocked on the door looked at Joseph in amazement. "You know this boy is the Messiah, don't you? That's what the angels said."

Joseph glanced at Mary. "We do," he replied softly. Long after the shepherds left, shouting their praises into the cold night air, Mary lay awake thinking of all that she had seen and heard.



Years passed in a happy blur. Joseph and Mary settled in Bethlehem, choosing not to return to their home in Nazareth. Joseph found work in his home town that supported himself and his young family, and every day when he came home from his labour, his little boy had gotten a little bigger.

Elsewhere in the country, in the capital city of Jerusalem, a group of men appeared in the streets. They wore expensive robes and led a train of animals and servants through the narrow winding streets, drawing second looks everywhere they went with their exotic clothes and foreign complexions. They made their way to the palace of King Herod, the puppet ruler of Jerusalem.

The foreigners entered the palace to a warm welcome. While they were dining in Herod's immense hall, the king asked what brought the travellers to Judea.

"Some years ago," said the travellers' leader, "a star appeared in the skies above our homeland. It was bright and new. Such signs often signal the birth of a great person—a king or general—so we came to find this new life and bring him gifts." The traveller looked around him. "So tell us, where is the King of Kings?"

Herod paled. "There is no child here," he spluttered. "My children are all grown."

The traveller regarded Herod silently. If he saw the danger in the king's eyes, he didn't show it. "Ah," he said softly. "Might there be another, then? We have read some of your country's writings; perhaps the child could be the saviour your men of God promised?"

Herod stood sharply and stormed out of the room. He sent runners to the Temple to rouse the chief priests. When they arrived, Herod sat on his throne and scowled at them.

"Where," he demanded, "is the Messiah to be born?"

The chief priests looked at one another, each silently urging another to be speaker for them all. Finally, after a few elbows made their persuasive points, one priest told the king, "The city of David, sire. Bethlehem."



Herod practically leapt off his throne and through the crowd of priests, making his way back into the dining hall. He smiled broadly at the travellers.

The next day, the travellers left Jerusalem with Herod's blessing. But as he watched them go, his smile faded. He leaned over to the captain of his personal guard. "Get as many men as you can," he said softly. "Take them to Bethlehem. Find every boy under the age of two. And kill them all."

The travellers arrived in Bethlehem late at night. The star they had followed to this distant land now reappeared over the city of David, guiding them to a house in which a scrawny two year old was refusing to go to bed.

A frustrated young mother opened the door when they knocked, and her face changed immediately when she saw the travellers' robes.

The men entered the house and knelt before the confused child. They handed gifts to the parents; a heavy bag of gold, a pot of rich smelling incense, and a jar of pungent myrrh. Then, after praising the boy, they left the house, taking their servants and animals with them. Mary watched them walk along the street congratulating each other, and added these things to her strange and ponderous memories.

That night, Mary awoke to find Joseph standing by a window, staring out into the silent streets. She rose quietly so as to not wake the child on the other side of the room, and joined her husband by the sill. She wrapped a hand around his waist and he draped his arm over her shoulder.

"I had a vision," Joseph whispered quietly. "A dream of blood and fire, flooding these streets." He rubbed his eyes with his fingers. "Herod will try and find us, Mary, and he'll do anything he needs to to see Jesus dead."

Mary's face contorted with misery. "Why?" she asked softly.

"Fear. Jealousy. Greed." Joseph sighed. "We have to leave. Wake the boy."

Soldiers appeared in the town square. They carried swords and torches, and had their faces covered with thick black cloth. They kicked open doors and stormed into houses. Whenever they found a boy matching the age they were given, they dragged him from his house into the street, out of sight of the mothers who clawed at the covered faces of the burly men. The city filled with the sounds of crying and, in the middle of the town, a fire crackled, consuming the bodies of the murdered children.

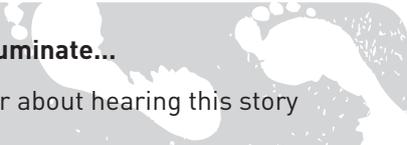
Under the cover of night, Mary, Joseph and Jesus escaped the city in an ox-cart. They travelled south and west, away from the city, away from Judea, away from Herod. They found refuge in Egypt, and there they waited for time to take its toll and remove Herod from the throne.





Questions

- Which part of the story stood out to you? What made that stand out?
- Who did you relate to in the story? What was it about them you related to?
- Is there anything about this story that you hadn't considered before?
- What do we learn about the character of the Roman Empire from this story?
- Jesus wasn't born in a stable, he would have been born in a family home, most likely his grandparents' or his aunt and uncle's. Does this change the importance or the value of the story for you in any way?
- How did the story of the Slaughter make you feel?
- Mary and Joseph had to flee their home country under threat of death. How do we treat refugees who come to our country under similar circumstances? How should we treat them?
- How can we extend God's compassion to people who have lost children in tragic circumstances?
- What kinds of things can we do to stand up against people who abuse the power they have over others? How does God want us to treat those people we might see as corrupt or even evil.



If you were a camper on Illuminate...

- What do you remember about hearing this story on camp?
- Compare that to your response hearing it now. How is your reaction different? Did you notice the same things? New things?

Experience

You will need:

- Paper and pens

Spend some time writing down places and people in the world that are suffering due to certain people abusing their power. As you do, reflect on the following (either printed out for participants to read, or spoken by the group leader):

We all have power over other people in our world, the power to affect their lives in positive or negative ways, directly or indirectly.

By keeping our minds fixed on God and His stories, and asking for His influence in our lives, we can make sure to use the power we have to make positive changes in the world.

Pray together for the places and people you have written down, that God will be present in those stories and cause those who are abusing their power to see the effect they have on others around them through God's eyes.



Developed by Youth Vision Victoria & Tasmania and the Illuminate team.

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Youth Vision is the youth and young adult ministry arm of the Conference of Churches of Christ in Victoria and Tasmania.

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