

FEARLESS CONVERSATION™

WHY IS JESUS SO RADICAL?

DISCUSSIONS FROM
MATTHEW AND LUKE

LEADER GUIDE

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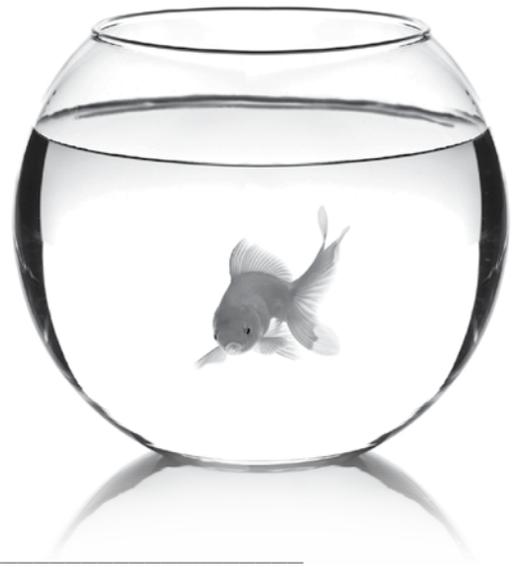
LESSON 1: WHY DID GOD COME AS A BABY?

LEADER PREP

- Read the entire lesson ahead of time. Also read the corresponding pages in the Why Is Jesus So Radical? Participant Guide as there may be additional material provided there that will be helpful to you.
- You'll find "Behind the Scenes" boxes with Bible commentary provided throughout this lesson. They're there to help you gain a better understanding of the Bible. The people in your group will have these too.
- Pray. Lots.

FOR EXTRA IMPACT

Put a goldfish in a glass bowl somewhere in your meeting area. If you don't have or can't easily get a goldfish, that's okay—but it will be more fun if you can bring one along.



Prep Notes:

GREETING

BEHIND THE SCENES

Luke 2:1-20 describes Joseph and Mary's journey to Bethlehem and the birth of Jesus. Certainly it had been difficult for them to endure the stares and overhear the snickers of acquaintances who noticed that Mary had become pregnant prior to the completion of their marriage. Now she and Joseph were forced by the Romans to travel from their home in Nazareth to his ancestral home of Bethlehem. This was a journey of about 70 miles. Although popular renditions of this trip usually show Mary riding a donkey, she and Joseph probably weren't wealthy enough to own one. It's more likely that they had to walk all the way, even though Mary was close to her time to deliver.

The exact date of Jesus' birth is impossible to calculate. According to Luke 2:2, the census occurred when Quirinius was governor of Syria. His first term occurred from 6 to 4 B.C., so Jesus was likely born between those dates. Unfortunately, the date of Jesus' birth was miscalculated when the Christian calendar was created hundreds of years later.

- Welcome everyone and be sure to introduce yourself.
- Be sure everyone has a copy of the participant guide.
- Let everyone know you'll be moving through Lesson 1 today, so they can find that section in their guide to use throughout today's lesson.

Then ask:

Where were you born? Call it out to the group and let's see where everyone is from!

Let people call out the cities or states they were born in—you might help people find new connections to long-lost neighbors and friends. Then say:

Let's get into smaller groups and talk a little more. Get into groups of no more than four, and answer this question.

- **Why does it matter where we are born? Or...does it matter at all? Talk about that in your small group. Be sure you introduce yourselves too!**

Allow about 5 minutes for people to get into small groups (they may need to move their chairs into smaller circles), introduce themselves, and discuss this question. After about 5 minutes have everyone return their attention to you.

Thanks for sharing in your groups and getting to know each other a little better. Today we're going to be grappling with questions related to where and when Jesus was born—so maybe it does matter where you were born!

Now I have a project for you and your group.

Draw everyone's attention to the goldfish you brought. If you weren't able to bring in a goldfish, people will see a picture of one in their participant guides.

Your group needs to get a message to this goldfish. It might be a warning: "Don't jump out of the water! Danger is ahead!" Or it might be assurance: "Food is on the way! Hang on for another hour and we'll have some fish flakes for you." You get to choose the message—and more importantly, you get to decide how to deliver the message. Be creative and have fun deciding how you'll make sure this fishy friend understands your communication. You'll have about 4 minutes.

Let groups talk together and come up with their plans. Then call everyone's attention back to you. Invite groups to share the message they wanted to get to the goldfish and how they decided to communicate that message. This should be a fun time that includes laughter as groups share their creativity. Then continue.

Thanks to you all for being so creative and for sharing your ideas. Obviously, we can't really communicate well to a goldfish. And it might seem silly to even think about how and why we would! But it does relate to our conversation. Today we're digging in to the Bible account of Jesus' birth.

- **How do you think this activity of communicating to a goldfish relates to God communicating with us? Call out what you think to the whole group.**

Allow time for people to respond to this question. Then continue.

GROUNDING

Let's get grounded in God's Word so we can understand more about the extraordinary way that God

communicated with us through Jesus. Today's Bible account is from Luke 2:1-20. The author of this book of the Bible, Luke, related his accounts to what was happening in the world at that time. He calls attention to who the political leaders were and how their actions related to the life of Jesus. Let's read what he's recorded for us.

Read Luke 2:1-20 aloud, or ask for a volunteer from your group to read it aloud. Encourage everyone else to follow along in their own Bibles or in their participant guides.

God's Word: Luke 2:1-20

¹ In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ² (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³ And everyone went to their own town to register.

⁴ 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. ⁵ He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷ 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.

⁸ And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to

them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

¹⁶ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

Before we discuss this, I’d like you to take a moment to reflect.

- **What are the first questions that come to mind? What sort of “jumps out” at you and catches your attention?**

Go ahead and capture those initial thoughts and questions in your participant guide.

Wait at least 1 minute—or even a little longer—so people can jot down their questions or thoughts before moving forward. This should be something that people do on their own—not in discussion groups. When it appears that everyone is ready to move on, continue.

GRAPPLING

We'll get to your personal questions and thoughts in a bit. But let's grapple with a few other questions first. Before we start into this time of discussion, let's remember that together we're creating a safe environment for sharing and conversation. This means we will all respect each other, listen to others before we jump in with our own thoughts, and welcome different opinions because they may bring us to greater understanding. Also, we believe that God is here and is a part of this conversation. We can trust that God can guide the direction we take as we explore the Bible together. Let's invite God to direct our conversation right now.

Pray for the group to be open to hearing each other and to hearing God. Ask God to open hearts to be receptive to each other, and ask God to direct the conversation to the place it needs it to go.

LEADER LEARNING

Trust God and fear not! It's okay for the discussion to get off topic. God may be directing the conversation to an area that will have even greater impact on the lives of those in your group than you could imagine.

Let's start by discussing in our small groups. You'll find two sets of questions on page 11 of your participant guide. Start with just the first one. You'll talk about this for about 5 minutes in your small group, and then we'll hear some reports back to the larger group.

- From this account in Luke 2, what do you learn about the nature of God?

Allow about 5 minutes for discussion, and then have each group share something they feel is significant. Thank everyone for sharing.

Let's talk about the next questions as a large group. As we grapple with these questions, think back to our experiment in communicating to the goldfish.

- What is God communicating to us by coming as a baby? And, what do you think motivated God to do this?

Allow time for different people to share their thoughts with the whole group. Remember to model and encourage listening and respect for others as they share. When several have had a chance to respond, continue.

I'd like us to have a chance to share in our groups about our own observations and questions. Take time now to share anything that seemed especially relevant to you as we read from Luke 2—and also share the questions that popped into your mind. Your group can discuss those questions if you're willing to tackle them.

Allow at least 10 minutes for groups to talk. Give a 1-minute "time to wrap it up!" alert so groups have time to finish their discussions.

I'm curious what you talked about! Does any group want to share an idea or a question that your group found interesting?

Allow a few minutes for different groups to share. Depending on how much time you have left, you can simply let groups report their insights and questions or you can invite the larger group to respond to an insight or question that was shared.

LEADER LEARNING

It's okay to leave some things unresolved. Not every question will have a simple answer (in fact, most won't), but this is a chance to invite people to participate in the process of exploration. If there are questions that

don't have answers, you can encourage people to dig into these more after today's session—these might be great opportunities for continued discussion over coffee later in the week.

BEHIND THE SCENES

It's significant that Jesus' birth was announced first to shepherds for several reasons. First, this is a reminder that Jesus was from the line of David, who was a shepherd. Second, in those days shepherds were not highly thought of. They were considered so unreliable that their testimony was not accepted in the courts, and they were deemed unclean by the orthodox religious establishment. The fact that Jesus' birth was announced first to them indicates that Jesus came to earth for everyone, both "clean" and "unclean." It also foreshadows the common people's acceptance of Christ and the religious leadership's rejection of him. Finally, Jesus described himself as the good shepherd. Love and care were central to his time on earth.

What other reasons can you think of?

Let's discuss one more question as a large group. In studying the Bible, it can be helpful to notice things that are repeated. In these 20 verses, the manger is mentioned three times.

- **What is the significance of the manger?**

Invite people to share their thoughts with the rest of the group. Be sure to thank people for being fearless in their conversation.

BEHIND THE SCENES

While most nativity scenes show baby Jesus in a manger in a stable or similar shelter, the Bible doesn't say what the shelter was like—only that there was a manger. It's possible that this manger was in a courtyard of an inn or other building, in a cave, or in a stable.

GROWING

It's great to have these conversations and really dig into what the Bible says. This helps us move into greater understanding of God, and to grow in our relationship with God. One way we see that growth is through applying what we've discovered to our lives.

In this account in Luke, there are two different kinds of responses. There is the heavenly response we read of in Luke 2:13-14 of the angels praising God. And then there's the response of people.

BEHIND THE SCENES

Luke 2:13 says a "great company of the heavenly host appeared." The Greek word for "company" is *plēthos*, which means multitude. It's the word we get "plethora" from. "Host," or *stratós*, translates to mean "army."

Luke 2:17-20 tells us how different people responded to the birth of Jesus. The shepherds told others about what they'd seen and heard, and they praised God. The people who heard what the shepherds said were amazed. Mary "treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart."

What about you? God came to earth as a baby, placed in a manger, for you. What does this mean to you? How do you respond?

Invite everyone to write their reflections in the space provided in their participant guides. Let them know there is one more question for them there as well—they should go ahead and read and reflect on that question, too.

Allow time for people to adequately reflect and journal; then close with a prayer, thanking God that we can approach him and each other without fear.