



# TOGETHER

[NewarkandSouthwellMethodist.org.uk](http://NewarkandSouthwellMethodist.org.uk)

## Is there a perfect Christmas?

by Rev Peter Bates

There have been some years when I 've wanted a perfect Christmas. We never seem to manage it do we? I realise there isn't a perfect Christmas and yet sometimes in the back of our minds we still strive for it. I remind myself of the couple who set this whole thing in motion. The couple in question lived in Nazareth and they decided that they would travel down to Bethlehem. They didn't book in advance and they were delayed because Mary was heavily pregnant. The journey itself must have been a struggle but when they got to Bethlehem, they were hoping for somewhere to stay. There was nowhere that had any room for them. Mary must have been frustrated and exhausted and Joseph must have felt awful that he had put his wife through the long journey and had nothing to offer her. Eventually, a kind inn keeper offered them shelter in his stable. It was the bare minimum but they were grateful. In the night Jesus was born and this lifted the gloom. Their child had been delivered safely, but then unexpectedly shepherds appeared with wonderful tales of angels singing in the sky and announcing his birth.

Whatever we face, however much goes wrong with our planned Christmas, nothing can compare with the struggle that Mary and Joseph had on that first Christmas Eve. The important thing for them was that the baby was born. So often we miss the point in our celebrations because we concentrate on the detail of the plans we have made. When what is really important is that Christ is born afresh in our hearts. That the wonder and majesty of Christmas is not in the tinsel and presents but in the awesome truth that God came down to our world, became flesh like each one of us, and was weak and helpless, and knew what it was like to be dependent on others.

How we celebrate Christmas is up to us, we have our own family traditions, we wear silly jumpers, we eat too much, we listen to our favourite Christmas songs and sing our much-loved Carols. We watch too much tv, and give ourselves an excuse to relax. We spend time with the ones we love and have opportunities to see family and friends. However, for others we know this is a painful time of year where loved ones are missed, or loneliness creeps in. We also know others who are ill and needing medical treatment, worry and concern may be the overarching emotions that they and their loved ones feel.

God is with each one of us in the situations that we face, he was there with Mary and Joseph in their struggle to Bethlehem and God the Father was there sharing in the delight with the young couple as they celebrated the birth of a son. God with us.

**May you know God's love, joy and peace this Christmas.**

## Online Circuit Service

**This week (19th December) our online circuit service will be led by Rev Nathan Falla.**

Find it on the 'Newark and Southwell Methodist Circuit' YouTube Channel (<https://www.youtube.com/NewarkSouthwellMethodistCircuit>) why not invite a friend to watch it with you and share the link with them on your social media or by email! (Also available to watch back at any time).

## Songs

The angel Gabriel from heaven came - StF 187 - [LINK](#)

Tell out my soul - StF 186 [LINK](#)

When a young unmarried couple - StF 220 - [LINK](#)

O little town of Bethlehem - StF 213 - [LINK](#)

## Discussion Questions

1. What surprises you in the Christmas story?
2. What for you is the most vulnerable or fragile part of the story?
3. How might you be changed by an encounter with the Christmas story this year?
4. What does obedience look like for you, where may you need to say "Here I am, a servant of the Lord"?
5. How might you live out the hope, peace, joy and love that Jesus offers to all?

## Radio Service

**BBC Radio 4** (Also [online](#).)

08:10am - 19th December 2021

**'Forgiveness and the Incarnation'**

Forgiveness and the Incarnation: A service for the fourth Sunday in Advent with the Chapel Choir of Methodist College, Belfast.

# Unexpected Encounters

Sunday 19th December Sermon | Luke 1:26-45 & 2:1-19 | Rev Nathan Falla

**D**o you have a story that you love? A story that no matter how many times you hear it, see it or read it, it never ceases to amaze you? This is me every time I hear, see or read the story of the first Christmas. I never cease to be amazed about the people involved in the story; the obedience of Mary, the response of Joseph, the birth of Jesus in the most inhospitable place, the visit of the shepherds – the least and the lowest of society.

Throughout the whole story, a story of great vulnerability we see God working in the most unexpected places and through the most unexpected people. There is a lovely version of the nativity on YouTube called An Unexpected Christmas, as God discusses the plan with the angels and one of the angels has the reoccurring refrain "they won't be expecting that." Sometimes you hear a story and you know that it cannot be true because it is so farfetched, however the nativity I believe is not like this. It is because it is so unexpected that it can't be made up and through it all God's love is revealed!

It was very risky for God to choose an unmarried teenage girl to be the bearer of the Saviour of the World. Yes, I know that Mary was engaged to Joseph, and this was pretty much binding; however, society would have thought that Joseph had got impatient and both parties would not be seen in a good light. I am amazed that Mary takes the huge risk, she does not really understand how she is going to become pregnant, she really does not know how Joseph will react or what her family will say. Yet her obedience is remarkable as she utters words of faith and trust: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:38).

I am equally amazed that God chose such a vulnerable and fragile way to enter the world. What would have happened if Joseph was not so understanding and didn't stand by Mary? It could have ended up so differently. However, God used angels, messengers to ensure that the story did progress and all turned out OK.

Mary's response to God with complete trust and obedience, makes me wonder how do you and I respond to God? When God asks us to do something that we may not fully understand, do we want the full picture before we say "yes", or are we prepared to journey in faith and trust? Not really knowing what may happen, but knowing that God is with us, and with God, all things are possible. God uses the vulnerable, and he calls you and me in all of our fragility and vulnerability, yes it may be unexpected, yes we may be called to do unexpected things, but we are not on our own. God can do extraordinary, unexpected things with very ordinary people like you and me.

The song that Mary sings when she stays with Elizabeth known as the Magnificat, demonstrates something of the radical nature of the Kingdom of God. A kingdom where the powerful are brought down and the humble are lifted up, where the hungry are fed and the rich are sent away empty. A kingdom of mercy, truth, love and grace. Are we prepared to live out this unexpected kingdom, to live in the hope, peace, joy and love of the Christ-child?

In the birth at Bethlehem, we see the amazing humility of Jesus as he is born in the unexpected space of the place where animals are fed, and his first bed is a manger. There is nothing sanitary about childbirth at the best of times, it involves mess; bodily fluids, the placenta, and blood, and that is not taking into consideration the surroundings. The surroundings of the stable or the cave would not have been conducive to childbirth; the smell, the conditions, the sounds from the animals, but this is where Jesus was born. There is nothing expected about this, it is astounding. God enters the mess of the childbirth, the mess of the cave, the mess of our world. God does not remain detached but comes to us, that we may know love.

The Magnificat spoke about the humble being lifted up, and in the visit of the shepherds we have exactly this. Shepherds really did not have a good reputation, they were on the hillside looking after sheep because they really were not desirable at all. You could not have more humbler first visitors than the shepherds, but these are the first people who are told that the good news that will bring great joy is for all people. The shepherds were not expecting to encounter the angels on the hillside, and they were certainly not expecting to go and see a baby born and his parents.

Equally, Mary was not expecting visitors, no wonder Luke records the words "But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:19). There was much to think about; the 9 months of pregnancy would have brought a gradual realisation that yes she was pregnant, but now Jesus was here in her arms, the shepherds have visited, what will all this mean? What will Jesus grow up and become?

For us as we encounter the Christmas story again this year, in all that we are facing, in all the continued uncertainty, are we going to be changed by the story? Are we going to be changed in maybe an unexpected encounter as we hear or see something different? Are we going to be obedient like Mary was – taking maybe the first or the next step to walk in faith and trust? Are we going to accept the greatest gift of God's love and be open to that love changing and transforming our lives? Are we going to see God in the mess of our world, bringing hope, peace, joy and love for all people?

## Prayers

Lord, we lift our hearts in praise to you, seeking to learn from the example of Mary, glad that you are Saviour and that you remember us, your lowly servants.

We praise you for calling humans to do your work in your world, for choosing ordinary people to do extraordinary deeds.

We praise you for your holy name, known to generations, and we praise you for the mercy you show to those who honour you.

We praise you for the workings of justice, when the mighty and proud have been brought down, when the lowly and hungry have been lifted and fed, and the rich made to realise the emptiness of material things.

We praise you for the promises you kept and we place our trust in you for the continuing promises which you make to all the descendants of Abraham, to all who follow you and seek to obey your commands.

We hold before you the shame we feel for our faults, knowing that so often we fail to respond to your calling. Often our excuses seem to be good ones, but when we think of someone like Mary – willing to risk her life and reputation – we become more aware of the conditions we attach to our willingness to serve. You call us each in different ways, according to our abilities and potential. Forgive us when we identify with the mighty and proud rather than the lowly and hungry. Forgive us and call us once again to do your will.

As we move closer to the celebration of your birth, help us to accept you as Mary did – wholeheartedly, willing to expect and accept the unexpected, prepared to trust your way rather than the ways of the world – that we may continue as children of Abraham and followers of Christ, for ever. Amen.

Liz Gibson | Candles & Conifers

### EMAIL PRAYER CHAIN

*If you would like to join a prayer chain and receive prayer requests or to submit a prayer request (with permission of the recipient) please get in touch with Colin Beckett [colin1244@gmail.com](mailto:colin1244@gmail.com). It is for those of any church or none!*



## Online Circuit Service

**On 25th December our online circuit service will be led by Andrew Trowbridge.**

Find it on the 'Newark and Southwell Methodist Circuit' YouTube Channel (<https://www.youtube.com/NewarkSouthwellMethodistCircuit>) why not invite a friend to watch it with you and share the link with them on your social media or by email! (Also available to watch back at any time).

## Songs

Advent candles tell their story - StF 165 [LINK](#)

See him lying on a bed of straw - StF 216 [LINK](#)

Born in the night - StF 193 - [LINK](#)

O come all ye faithful - StF 212 - [LINK](#)

## Discussion Questions

1. What difference (if any) would it have made if Joseph had managed to book a comfortable room in a hotel in Bethlehem?
2. What is the significance of the fact that the first recorded visitors to Christ's birthplace were a group of simple shepherds?
3. Jesus challenges our concept of kingship. Does the fact that He was born in an occupied land, to relatively poor parents and brought up as a carpenter help or hinder our understanding of Him?
4. Christmas challenges us to think of people less fortunate than ourselves. Consider three ways in which you might translate those thoughts into actions in the coming year.

## Radio Service

**BBC Radio 4** (Also [online](#).)

08:10am - 26th December 2021

**'A Gospel Christmas Celebration'**

The Revd Lucy Winkett leads a Christmas Gospel Celebration with Mel Giedroyc reading favourites for Boxing Day, and all those Christmas tunes you love - sung with a Gospel beat by Soul Sanctuary Gospel Choir. Producer: Andrew Earis.

# How can we hope to find Jesus today?

Christmas Day Sermon | passage | Andrew Trowbridge

Inside our church buildings at Christmas it seems relatively easy to find Jesus – there are the familiar words of the carols, the readings of the Christmas stories – accounts of the birth of Jesus – five candles lit on the Advent ring and we singing the final verse of O come all ye faithful – all things which point to Jesus.

But outside those walls it's somehow different. We live in a world where we know bad things happen – it is estimated that worldwide 150 million people are without proper shelter – 800 million go hungry each day – a third of the world population without access to safe drinking water – it is estimated that 22,000 children die each day from poverty (UNICEF) that's only a few thousand fewer than the population of Newark – 37 million people living with AIDS across the world – many of them children. That's before we even mention the coronavirus pandemic which has claimed in excess of 5 million lives. Happy Christmas everybody.

A line from a poem asks the question "How can we hope to find Jesus today?"

We could possibly be forgiven for shrugging our shoulders and convincing ourselves that Jesus cannot possibly be found in a world where such awful things happen. Yet we come together at Christmas to celebrate the birth of an infant in a stable 2000 years ago so maybe we need to search a bit more for him now.

There is a tendency to think that the world has never been this bad – that in days gone by the world was a much better place. I suggest that if you think that then you read different history books to the ones I read.

The 20th century blighted by the carnage of two world wars; children sent down mines, up chimneys and working seven days a week in factories in the 19th century. Human beings crammed on to ships in Africa and taken to the other side of the world to provide slave labour mostly in the 18th century; the religious wars and the plague of the 17th century; the atrocities committed in the name of Christianity in the Reformation in the 16th century. I could go on.

But then if you really want to read of some awful events pick up your Bible. The Palestine that Jesus was born into was no panacea – Herod the Great was described as a Jewish king but in actual fact he was of Arab descent and not a Jew at all – the only way he had got where he did was by ingratiating himself with Rome. He was a great builder – expanding the Temple in Jerusalem and building the harbour at Caesarea. But amongst all that he murdered his wife, his mother-in-law and two sons

Caesar Augustus, who was not exactly an angel himself, is reputed to have said he would rather be Herod's pig than his son. Near death Herod had 100 prominent citizens rounded up and killed so there would be no celebration of his demise. Although historically there is no tangible evidence for the slaughter of the innocents – it would have been entirely consistent with the character of Herod that he would round up and have killed all the infants of around two years old because he feared one of them was going to threaten his position. Under Herod the Jews suffered hunger, deprivation, oppression and humiliation. So where was God in all that?

Well, the Christmas story says that in some mysterious way he was in a feeding trough in a room meant for animals in the company of an unmarried couple and all because the man had omitted to book a room. The Lord of the universe hidden in the simple and ordinary. That of course ran totally contrary to the beliefs of the day concerning deities. The Romans knew where gods were, they were with the political and military power of Caesar Augustus in Rome. The Greeks knew where

gods were, they were with the philosophers and the wise in Athens. The Jews knew where God was, temporarily absent from the carnage of this world but waiting in the wings to return in triumph to throw out these hated Roman occupiers to make them once more free and prosperous and to restore Jewish dignity to what it had been under King David.

And that is the slightly odd thing about Christmas – Immanuel, God with us, comes into the world in circumstances where nobody would expect to find him – mothered by a young girl who is betrothed to a simple tradesman from a small town up in the hills.

There is a famous verse from Isaiah which is believed to refer to the coming Messiah – it says In 11:1 “A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse” – Jesse the father of King David – the prophet envisages David’s reign as a tree which has been cut down and from the stump that is left a shoot arises.

Henri Nouwen (Catholic priest and theologian writes about that verse) he says, “Our salvation comes from something small, tender and vulnerable, something hardly noticeable. God, who is the creator of the universe comes to us in smallness, weakness and hiddenness. I find this a hopeful message. Somehow I keep expecting loud and impressive events to convince me and others of God’s saving power; but over and over again I am reminded that spectacles, power plays and big events are the ways of the world. Our temptation is to be distracted by them and made blind to the “shoot that shall sprout from the stump.”

When I have no eyes for the small signs of God’s presence—the smile of a baby, the carefree play of children, the words of encouragement and gestures of love offered by friends – I will always remain tempted to despair. The small child of Bethlehem, the unknown man of Nazareth, the rejected preacher, the naked man on the cross, he asks for my full attention. The work of salvation takes place in the midst of a world that continues to shout, scream, and overwhelm us with its claims and promises. But the promise is hidden in the shoot that sprouts from the stump, a shoot that hardly anyone notices.”

First and foremost this is what the Christmas story is trying to say – the Saviour of the world is not present in the special the spectacular, the ecstatic. He is present in a father who forgot to book a room, and a mother with a crying baby and dirty nappies to contend with - He is present in that baby wrapped in swaddling clothes. God is present in Jesus not as wisdom and not as power, but as the spirit of self-giving love - and wherever that spirit is now in our world, God is.

Where is God in this world? Extraordinary spirit in an ordinary place. And it really has the power to change things, to change us. That’s where God is in this world - the extra-ordinary spirit of Jesus still present and powerful in very ordinary places. And the danger is that we will miss it, pass it by, fail to embrace and live it because we, like those long ago, look for God elsewhere, in political panaceas, in miracles of technical know-how, in special exotic experiences, hoping that these will lift from us the burden of life in this ordinary world. With its stories and songs Christmas calls us once again to let it in, to give into it, this nudge running counter to our natural inclinations, the nudge of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

In the ordinary of family and neighbours and friends we can meet with Jesus this Christmas time and beyond – there is no need to look further. I started out by posing the question from the poem – How can we hope to find Jesus today?

Extraordinary God is found in the most ordinary of places – just be careful not to miss Him.

## Prayers

Loving God we thank you for this day and all it speaks of – your promise of old to send a Messiah to your people, the fulfilment of the promise through the sending of your Son, the realisation of those long years of expectation, the glad tidings proclaimed by the angels, the wonder and mystery of that first Christmas.

We thank you for this season’s power to move, inspire and challenge, to gladden the hardest of hearts and most broken of spirits, to stir our minds and to capture our imagination.

Above all we thank you for the truth behind this day – the message that you have come to us,

that you love us, that you shared our humanity, and that you want us to share in your everlasting life.

But even as we celebrate your birth we know that in so many ways we have fallen short of your expectations.

Our actions, our words and our thoughts have let us down and as a consequence we have let you down.

We seek your forgiveness Lord and ask that you would open our hearts to your life-giving Spirit so that we may live more truly as your people.

Loving God, accept our praise, hear our confession, receive our thanksgiving, bless our celebrations, and may the wonder of the Gospel come alive in our hearts today, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

Adapted from words by Nick Fawcett in Prayers for all seasons  
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It is for those of any church or none!

## New Circuit Plan

The Circuit Plan, detailing the Sunday services across the circuit and more, is now available at your church or online:

[newarkandsouthwellmethodist.org](http://newarkandsouthwellmethodist.org)

NEWARK & SOUTHWELL  
Methodist Church

NEWS CHURCHES BIBLE CHURCH WHO'S WHO CONTACT

NEWS > CIRCUIT PLAN DEC 21 - JAN 22

Circuit Plan Dec 21 - Jan 22  
Dear Sisters and Brethren,

Believe it or not we will soon be in the season of Advent, counting down the Sundays by lighting the Advent wreath. The observant amongst you will have noticed that the First Sunday of Advent was actually on the September-November plan as Advent is nearly as early as it can be!

Looking at the plan you can see the various services that will take place to help us in our Advent preparation, and the details for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day services are on the back page. The first Sunday of Christmas this year falls on leaving day and the vast majority of churches have chosen not to have services. There will however be a service at Charles Street at 10.30am, and this will also be live streamed on YouTube.

Also looking at the plan you will see that Haze Community is now included as the church families at Barnegate and Hoptonville have merged to form a new church family effective from 1st November. The plan clearly indicates where the services take place Sunday by Sunday as both buildings continue to be used for the time being. Southwell have also moved their morning service time to 10.30am.

January will see Covenant Services taking place throughout the circuit, with the invitation to once more renew or make for the first time the commitment to follow God revealed in Jesus Christ. Covenant reminds us of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ and to truly be open to God calling us, leading us and transforming us. The plan concludes just before the start of Lent, before we prepare to remember

### 'Zoom' Opportunities

If you're feeling isolated, are not ready to be face to face yet, or can't, but are happy to meet on Zoom, there is a weekly coffee time at 3pm on a Monday run by Charles Street but open to all, email Mel Watson for more details: [mellwatson42@gmail.com](mailto:mellwatson42@gmail.com).

There is also still a weekly Zoom fellowship called 'The Gathering' which is part of Southwell Methodist Church and run by Philip and Francine Holmes. You'd be most welcome, contact Philip to connect: [philipholmes8100@gmail.com](mailto:philipholmes8100@gmail.com).

### Christmas Eve and Christmas Day in-person Services across the Circuit

#### Christmas Eve | Friday 24<sup>th</sup> December

- 3pm Sutton-on-Trent United Crib Service at All Saints
- 3pm Elston Christingle led by Revd Peter Hibberts
- 4pm Southwell Christmas Celebration (Local Arrangement)
- 5.30pm North Muskham Christingle led by Revd Peter Hibberts
- 7pm Hope Community Christmas Eve Communion at Barnbygate (joint with Charles Street) led by Revd Nathan Falla
- 7.30pm Balderton Christmas Eve Communion led by Revd Peter Bates

#### Christmas Day | Saturday 25<sup>th</sup> December

- 9.30am Charles Street Christmas Celebration led by Revd Nathan Falla
- 9.30am Collingham Christmas Service led by Revd Peter Bates
- 10am Balderton Christmas Day Service led by Andrew Trowbridge
- 10.30am Hope Community Christmas Celebration at Hawtonville led by Revd Nathan Falla
- 10.30am North End Christmas Celebration led by Revd Peter Bates
- 11am Carlton Parish Church United Christmas Service

Full details of Christmas Eve and Christmas Day Services can be found online -

<https://www.newarkandsouthwellmethodist.org.uk/newsroom/christmas-across-circuit.html>

### In-person worship across the circuit in the next four weeks...

December 2021 - February 2022		19th Dec 4th of Advent	26th Dec 1st of Christmas	2nd Jan 2nd of Christmas Covenant	9th Jan 1st in Ordinary Time
Balderton	10:30 am	Bates Carols / 3pm		Bates CS / HC	A Trowbridge
Charles Street	10:30 am	Hardy	Falla JS	LA	Falla CS / HC
	6:00 pm	Falla Carols		Hibberts	Adams
Collingham	10:45 am	Bates Carols / 4.30pm	United Service at Parish Church	Hart	K Trowbridge
Elston	10:45 am				Castle
Hope Community	10:30 am	Falla at H'ville / Ch / 3.30pm	At Charles Street JS	Falla CS / at B'gate	Ward at H'ville
Long Bennington	10:30 am	Bates		Hardy	Bates CS / US
North End	6:00 pm	Bates Carols		Morley	Bates CS
North Muskham	10:30 am				Hibberts CS / HC
	2:00 pm	Hart Café		Falla Café	
Southwell	10:30 am	Hibberts		Hibberts CS / HC	Pearce
	Other	Adams Carols / 4pm		Bates 4pm	Hibberts PicC / 2pm
Sutton-on-Trent	10:30 am			Morley US	LA Breakfast 9am
	Other	United at All Saints Carols / 4pm			
<b>Lectionary Readings (Year C)</b>		Micah 5:2-5a C: Luke 1:46b-55 or Psalm 80:1-7 Hebrews 10:5-10 Luke 1:39-45 (46-55)	1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26 Psalm 148 Colossians 3:12-17 Luke 2:41-52	Jeremiah 31:7-14 Psalm 147:12-20 Ephesians 1:3-14 John 1:(1-9) 10-18 or Sirach Ecclesiasticus 24:1-12 C: Wisdom of Solomon 10:15-21	Isaiah 43:1-7 Psalm 29 Acts 8:14-17 Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

For full plan, visit the Circuit Website:

<https://www.newarkandsouthwellmethodist.org.uk/newsroom/circuit-plan-dec-21-jan-22.html>

May the joy of the angels, the eagerness of the shepherds, the perseverance of the wise men, the obedience of Joseph and Mary and the peace of the Christ-child be yours this Christmas; and the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, be among you and remain with you always. Amen.

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year  
from Newark and Southwell Methodist Circuit!