



Suggested Scriptures

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

Discussion Questions

- Are you surprised that King Jesus was born in such humble conditions?
- Why is it important that Jesus lived on this earth just like you: as a baby, then as a child and teenager, and finally as an adult?
- How would the characters in the story have felt God's love for them?
- Do you enjoy having guests at your house? How would it have felt in the house where Jesus was born?
- Would you miss celebrating your birthday if you lived in the first century?
- How would you have felt if you were one of the shepherds the angels appeared to?
- What is your favorite part of the Christmas story?





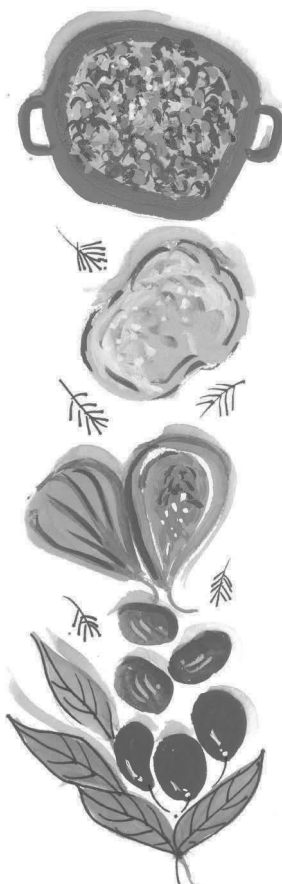
Enjoy a Shepherd's Meal

Shepherds in Israel lived a humble existence, caring for sheep and goats. Their food was simple: bread, cheese, nuts, fruits, and perhaps a lentil stew. Create a simple "Shepherd's Meal" and pretend you are living in first century Judea. Gather crusty bread, cheese, toasted almonds, dried dates, figs, or raisins to enjoy alongside this Savoury Lentil Soup. As you bite the crusty bread or taste the savory soup, think about how those shepherds felt to be the first to worship the Messiah.

Savoury Lentil Soup

Ingredients:

- 4 tbsp./60ml olive oil
- 1 large onion, diced
- 2 large carrots, peeled and diced
- 2 stalks celery, chopped
- 4 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 tsp. ground cumin
- 1 tsp. curry powder
- 8 cups/2 liters chicken or vegetable stock



- 14.5 oz can diced tomatoes/400g tin chopped tomatoes
- 1 ½ cups/284g red lentils, rinsed
- 2 tbsp./30ml lemon juice
- chopped parsley to serve

Method:

Heat olive oil in a large pot. Sauté onion, carrots, and celery over medium heat until onion begins to soften, 5-8 minutes.

Add minced garlic, cumin, and curry powder, frying until fragrant, about one minute.

Pour in the stock, tomatoes with any juice, and rinsed lentils. Bring to the boil. Simmer for 30 minutes until the lentils are soft.

Stir in the lemon juice and adjust seasoning to taste.

Serve with a garnish of chopped parsley.

Serves 4-6.







EARLY CHURCH



A Date for Christ's Nativity

Constantinople, Fourth Century A.D.

The days were short, the weather on the dreary side, the temperatures a chilly 40-50°F (4.5-10°C). What Rome lacked in good weather, it made up for in feasting and merriment. Crowds lined the streets dressed in colorful robes, their spirits soaring from being let out of work and school for a holiday. Women carried home bundles of candles, ready to give as gifts to friends and relatives. Children ran wild in the streets. Slaves changed places with their masters and gave orders to their superiors. Food and wine were abundant. Wreaths and greenery decorated the houses. Extravagance, foolishness, and inappropriate behavior were expected. This was known as the best time of the year.

It might sound like a Christmas celebration, but it was not. This was the annual feast of Saturnalia, celebrating the god of agriculture and time. For hundreds of years, the feast to Saturn had been celebrated by Romans who loved the chance to stop work and indulge themselves. Feasts containing all types of delicious breads, cheeses, baked and roasted meats, dried fruit, honey cakes, and spiced and honeyed wine were organized. Raucous singing in the streets took place. For seven days, from December 17 to 23, the citizens of the Roman Empire forgot their daily troubles and drowned their woes with revelry. Having such a feast to look forward to helped to pass the dull and dreary winter months.

Saturnalia wasn't the only December feast the Romans celebrated. The winter solstice occurred on December 25 when they celebrated "Dies Natalis Solis Invicti," or the birthday of Sol, the Unconquered Sun. This god was so





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important to the Romans that he appeared on their coins for many years and was named as the principal patron of the empire.

Living among all the devoted worshipers of Saturn and the sun god, Sol, was a group of people known as Christians. These followers of the teachings of Jesus Christ had grown in number from several hundred to several million by the fourth century. After Jesus' ascension to heaven around A.D. 30, the Christians organized themselves into what became known as the early church. These men and women believed Christ's return to earth was going to be very soon. With their thoughts focused on the possibility of this world coming quickly to an end, they never thought about commemorating Christ's birthday or even taking note of when it was that Christ was born. Birthdays in the Bible were only ever noted for characters portrayed as harmful to God's people: Pharaoh and King Herod. Commemorating a birthday was a pagan practice and of no interest to those early followers of Christ.

Time marched forward and Christ did not return as soon as the early Christians had thought. Instead



of being rescued quickly from this earth, they found themselves the focus of a brutal and deadly persecution. This persecution swept the Roman Empire and left many Christians martyred for their faith. As more and more beloved and honored men and women died, the Christians started to record the martyrs' dates of death to remember these anniversaries with prayer or worship services. Over time, a list of the death dates of martyrs was collected.

Around the same time that the dates of martyrs' deaths began to be written down, other records show that Christians were remembering the baptism of Christ, the beginning of his ministry, and even his birth with a feast they named Epiphany (meaning manifestation) and celebrated on January 6. This was an addition to the feast of Christ's resurrection, Pascha, which they already celebrated and which we know today as Easter.

The date for Pascha was easy to determine because Christ had died and risen again during the Jewish Passover feast. The date for the Passover feast was based on the phases of the moon and held in the spring of each year. By the early fourth century, the Church had a yearly





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calendar that included celebrations for Christ's death and resurrection (Pascha), Christ's manifestation to men (Epiphany), and the death dates of many Christian martyrs.

In A.D. 313, an unimaginable thing happened: the Roman Emperor, Constantine, appeared to convert to Christianity and published the Edict of Milan, giving religious freedom to Christians. Suddenly, it was not only legal to worship the Christian God, it was actually even encouraged! Christians came out of hiding. Churches could be built in the open. Large crowds could gather in public for worship. Everything was different.

It was during Constantine's reign that December 25 began to be associated with the birth of Christ. In A.D. 345, Julian, the leader of churches in Rome, declared December 25 to be the birthday of Christ and a separate celebration from the Epiphany celebration on January 6. No one knows how the December 25 date was decided upon. Some scholars guess that turning the birthday of the Unconquered Sun into the birthday of the true Son of God

seemed like a natural way to help the pagan Romans embrace the newly endorsed Christian religion.

It certainly was convenient. Other scholars trace the December 25 date from the legend of Christ's death being on the same date as that of his conception, using March 25 for both dates and counting forward nine months for a December 25 birthday. The Eastern church would claim Christ's death and conception to be on April 9 and thus count forward to the January 6 date.

Emperor Constantine split the Roman Empire into two parts: the Western Roman Empire which was governed out of Rome, and the Eastern Roman Empire which was governed out of a new city which Constantine named Constantinople. Not only was the political Empire split in half, but the Christian Church found itself divided in two. Christians in the West followed what would soon become known as the Roman Catholic Church and Christians in the East followed the traditions of what would become the Eastern Orthodox Church. These two groups had many similarities, but there were some differences. One of those differences was the date for Christ's birth.

