

God with us

Katharine Smith *reflects on*
2 Samuel 7:1-11. 16 and Luke 1:26-38

David, having settled in Jerusalem, his own city, decides he should build a fine house for God. But God has other ideas and, through the prophet Nathan, lets David know that it's not appropriate and never has been. "I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle." God has been with them, guiding and protecting them and bringing them to the homeland they were promised.

Perhaps this is a timely reminder for us, that God does not live in our church buildings. God cannot be confined like that. God is gloriously free, living alongside us, guiding and protecting us and leading us to our true home in the promised kingdom of eternal life.

Mary meets God's angel in her own home and he tells her that God is asking her to allow her body to be, for now, the home of God's Son. God surrenders freedom in order to become like us, limited in time and space, cared for by an ordinary woman who says "yes" to God.

Where will we meet God this Christmas? In our home? In the supermarket? Will God speak through a prophet or an angel, a minister or our neighbour? And will we be ready to say, like Mary, "let it be with me according to your word"? 🙏



Lord Jesus, you surrendered the glorious freedom of the kingdom of heaven to come and live alongside us in human form. Help us to surrender whatever keeps us from following you in humble obedience to your call of love. Amen.

The Advent calendar

by Lisa Tulfer

When the first printed Advent calendars appeared in the 1900s, they consisted of twenty-four pictures. Although chocolate has become synonymous with Advent calendars since the 1950s, many still contain pictures. These images can be sacred or secular but, either way, they offer an iconography of the season, a library of images associated with the principal celebration of winter in much of Europe and North America.

Winter scenes, snowmen, skates, sleighs, Santa, Christmas trees, baubles, presents, puddings and snowflakes tell the story of the secular winter festival, while stars, shepherds and their sheep, angels, the Magi, camels, the ox and ass, the Bible, and (behind today's final window) the iconic stable at Bethlehem, provide a visual re-telling of the story of Christ's birth.

For those raised with these images, they shape the concept of the Christmas story, alongside the words of familiar carols and the readings from Isaiah, Luke and John. 🙏

Christmas Eve in Portugal

by Caroline Hodgson

For a while in my teens my family and I lived in Porto, in northern Portugal. One year we were privileged to be invited to take part in a traditional Portuguese Christmas Eve. That's when the main event happens, at least in terms of feasting and giving gifts. We were treated to a meal of bacalhau (salt cod) and a pudding that resembled compressed spaghetti. Elsewhere in the world that might not be many people's

idea of a Christmas meal, but it was tastier than it sounds!

On a traditional Portuguese Christmas Eve shoes (as opposed to stockings) are laid out for the baby Jesus (as opposed to Father Christmas), and a nativity scene is created, although Jesus isn't added until the following day. Most families go to midnight mass (Missa do Galo), in which people queue up to kiss the baby Jesus.

I was too young to really appreciate what a privileged insight this was into Portuguese culture, although now I am grateful for the experience. 🙏

“Take time to be aware that in the very midst of our busy preparations for the celebration of Christ's birth in ancient Bethlehem, Christ is reborn in the Bethlehems of our homes and daily lives.”

Edward Hays (1931-2016), author, artist and storyteller