The background of the cover is a dark, close-up photograph of a Christmas tree. In the center, a large, glowing starburst ornament with many thin, pointed rays is suspended. To its right, a lit red candle stands vertically, its flame bright yellow and blue. Above the candle, a red, pinecone-shaped ornament hangs. The overall lighting is warm and festive, with the candle providing a primary light source.

Sally Welch

SHARING THE CHRISTMAS STORY

From reading to
living the gospel

BRF ADVENT BOOK



15 The Chambers, Vineyard
Abingdon OX14 3FE
brf.org.uk

Bible Reading Fellowship (BRF) is a charity (233280)
and company limited by guarantee (301324),
registered in England and Wales

ISBN 978 1 80039 106 2
First published 2022
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0
All rights reserved

Text © Sally Welch 2022
This edition © Bible Reading Fellowship 2022
Cover image © iStock.com/golero; inside star illustration by Alison Beek

Acknowledgements

Unless otherwise stated, scripture quotations are taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version (Anglicised edition) copyright © 1979, 1984, 2011 by Biblica. Used by permission of Hodder & Stoughton Publishers, an Hachette UK company. All rights reserved. 'NIV' is a registered trademark of Biblica. UK trademark number 1448790. Scripture quotations marked with the following abbreviations are taken from the version shown. NRSV: The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, Anglicised Edition, copyright © 1989, 1995 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA. Used by permission. All rights reserved. ISV: The Holy Bible: International Standard Version. Release 2.0, Build 2015.02.09. Copyright © 1995–2014 by ISV Foundation. All rights reserved internationally. Used by permission of Davidson Press, LLC. KJV: the Authorised Version of the Bible (The King James Bible), the rights in which are vested in the Crown, reproduced by permission of the Crown's Patentee, Cambridge University Press.

Benediction (p. 126) © Christian Aid 2021. Used by permission.

Every effort has been made to trace and contact copyright owners for material used in this resource. We apologise for any inadvertent omissions or errors, and would ask those concerned to contact us so that full acknowledgement can be made in the future.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

SHARING THE CHRISTMAS STORY

From reading to
living the gospel

Sally Welch



To Jan Fielden,
with thanks for all her support and friendship

Photocopying for churches

Please report to CLA Church Licence any photocopy you make from this publication.
Your church administrator or secretary will know who manages your CLA Church Licence.

The information you need to provide to your CLA Church Licence administrator is as follows:

Title, Author, Publisher and ISBN

If your church doesn't hold a CLA Church Licence, information about obtaining one can be found at uk.ccli.com

Contents

Introduction	6
Week 1 Promise	11
Week 2 Light.....	31
Week 3 Mystery.....	59
Week 4 Love	87
Week 5 Peace	115
Week 6 Hope	141

Introduction

One hundred years ago, in 1922, at a church in south London, the Fellowship of St Matthew was begun in response to a congregation's eagerness for informed and helpful support in building a habit of daily Bible reading. In 1926, it became known as the Bible Reading Fellowship (BRF) as its influence spread and more and more church communities subscribed to the notes and prayers which were offered.

Today, BRF resources people and groups as they grow in faith, encouraging them to deepen their relationship with God and to share the good news of Jesus Christ with others.

These Advent reflections are written in response to BRF's vision of 'Sharing the Story', by looking at the events surrounding the birth of the Messiah. They will take you on a journey through familiar and unfamiliar parts of the Bible, reading and reflecting on our Christian faith.

This journey does not involve a traditional, chronological approach. Rather, each week it explores one of the themes of Advent and Christmas. Beginning with God's *promises*, shared with us by the prophets throughout the Old Testament, we see how the incarnation is the fulfilment of all those promises. The *light* of the world has descended from heaven to live among us, and we explore the nature of that light and all that it has brought to those who live in the darkness of fear, sickness or mourning. Our explorations will not take us far, however, before we engage in the *mystery* of the overshadowing of Mary by the Holy Spirit, and the wonderful complexity of Jesus Christ, fully divine and fully human. However, the *love* which surrounds us, offering us healing and comfort, support and encouragement, is made real at the moment of the birth of Jesus – someone we can trust in and depend upon when the challenges of life threaten to overwhelm us.

In Week 5, the issues which surround the nature of *peace* are engaged with, as we not only recognise the gap between the 'now' and the 'not yet' but also celebrate the gift of peace which Christ's life, death and resurrection make available to us. Finally, we look forward in *hope* to all that Christ's birth brings to humanity and the final reconciliation which will take place in heaven and on earth.

Each of these themes is explored through a daily focal point, beginning with a closer look at some of the *prophecies* given in both Old and New Testaments. While the nativity story is, obviously, the story of a birth, it is also a story of *journeys* – to and from towns and cities, friends and relatives, distant lands and hostile powers. Although the story has the birth of Christ at its centre, there are also other *babies* – both named, such as John, and unnamed, such as those slaughtered by Herod. The story is punctuated by many *signs* of change, announcements of the birth of the Messiah, and these too are explored. Thousands of *poems* and *stories* have been woven around Christ's birth, and on Fridays and Saturdays we look at biblical examples of these. Finally, at the end of each week, we look at *conversations* which take place – with friends, with relatives, with God and with our innermost hearts.

The birth of Christ is a golden point in the overarching narrative of God's relationship with his children. By looking both back and forward as we move towards this point we can truly appreciate the anticipation with which this event was greeted, the nature of its happening and the transformation which was its result. Then we can turn and share with our neighbour our joy and hope in the future of God's kingdom.

Sharing the Christmas story as an individual

Every week in Advent you will be introduced to a different component of the nativity, gradually building a picture of all that the birth of Christ means to humanity and the world. A short Bible passage is followed by a reflection, a prayer and some questions to help you reflect for yourself on the passage.

You might like to read the passage out loud, slowly and carefully, allowing time to let the words sink in, pausing at the end of each sentence. You might take one sentence or word which stands out for you and learn it by heart, holding it in your thoughts throughout the day, perhaps journalling what it has come to mean for you by the evening.

At the end of each week there is a suggestion for a creative prayer and further questions, which can be used by both groups and individuals.

Sharing the Christmas story as a group

The readings and reflections in this book have been set out so that a rhythm of daily study and prayer can be established. In this way a habit of daily encounter with God, which will build us up in our faith and encourage us on our journey, can be formed, renewed or reinforced. I have also tried to encourage the habit of theological reflection by including questions to think about at the end of each day's reflection. These questions can be used by individuals, but also as a group to reflect on the theme of the week.

The readings and reflections in this book can be used in different ways by all sorts of groups. They can form the basis for a weekly Advent group or provide topics of discussion at Advent lunches or suppers. They can be used as conversation starters for groups that already meet, such as midweek fellowship groups, Mothers' Union meetings or men's breakfasts.

If a new group is beginning and is meeting in person, it is a good idea to include refreshments with each meeting – some groups find an evening meal with discussion round the table very popular, while others feel that drinks and biscuits or cake are more appropriate. This kind of hospitality can break down barriers and introduce people to each other in a relaxed way, which in turn will lead to a livelier, more fruitful discussion.

If you are leading a group, remember that everyone will need their own copy of the book well before the beginning of Advent.

Suggestions for group meetings

The group leader may or may not also be the group host. Either or both of these roles may be fixed for the whole of Advent or rotate among the group.

If the group leader and host are different people, they should liaise beforehand to ensure arrangements are in place, the time and date are fixed and refreshments are available.

Introduction

Make sure each person has a copy of the book and that spares are available for those who do not. Introduce newcomers to the group, and make them feel welcome. Remind everyone that they do not have to contribute to the discussion if they don't want to, but that conversation will be livelier if they do!

Opening prayer

Use a prayer within the traditions of the group; this will help put people at ease, and those who are familiar with the traditions will lend confidence to those who are not. A song or hymn can be sung.

Discussion

If the group is large, split into twos or threes to discuss reactions to the week's reflections. Allow time for each person to share, if they wish. If discussion is slow to start, suggest that each person offers one word or sentence that sums up their reaction.

Forum

As one group, try to discern some themes that are common to most people. If it helps, write these down and circulate them among the group.

Reflection

Study the group questions, and spend some time in silence so that individuals can reflect on the theme personally. Come together to discuss the questions. Again, if the group is large, it is helpful to split into smaller groups.

Plenary

The leader draws together the themes arising from the discussion and sees whether they mirror those from the week's reflections. Again, these can be noted for later distribution.

Prayer

It can be helpful to begin your prayer time with silence, in order to meditate on the results of the discussion. Suggestions for creative prayer can be found at the end of every week – these can be used in a group or as an individual. This can be followed by open prayer. Be flexible, allowing time for each person to contribute if they wish.

Closing prayer



Week 1 | Thursday 1 December–Sunday 4 December

Promise

In these first few days of Advent we look at the promises of the season. Promises are powerful things – they take looking forward seriously and make claims for the future that can be depended upon. Human promises might be more fragile, but those made by God to human beings are certain – lives can be built upon the foundation of God’s promises. Some of those that are explored are reminders of promises made long ago by God which have almost faded from human memory – but are still being honoured by God. Others are minted new for this season, so that we are able to join in with Mary to celebrate the imminent arrival of the Messiah as we prepare ourselves for the transformation of the world.

| Thursday 1 December

Signs

Isaiah 11:1–5

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.
The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him –
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and of might,
the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord –
and he will delight in the fear of the Lord.
He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,
or decide by what he hears with his ears;
but with righteousness he will judge the needy,
with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.
He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth;
with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.
Righteousness will be his belt
and faithfulness the sash around his waist.



Reflection

For 40 years the Assyrian armies had ravaged the lands of the people of Israel. They captured the inhabitants of the plains and hills of the fertile northern kingdoms and transported them back to their own territories as slaves. Others had their farms and settlements ransacked, their means of livelihood destroyed. It seemed as if God had forsaken his chosen people. Alone and abandoned, they were left to suffer at the hands of harsh rulers, their own kings defeated and scattered.

Living through these tragic events, surrounded by pain and suffering, it would not be surprising if the prophet Isaiah was loud in his lamentation. How hard it is to peer out into the night and see anything but darkness, devoid of hope or light! Isaiah presents us with the image of a mighty tree, grown tall and strong through years of sunlight and rain, enduring storms and gales but now defeated not by the actions of nature but by a greedy and rapacious humanity, which seeks only to exploit everything it can and destroy that which remains. Nothing is left of seasons of growth but the stump, bare and useless, a symbol of all that has been lost. All that can be done is gaze at the tree rings, tale bearers of winds and sunshine, markers of the events of many years. All that can be done is remember and grieve for lost times.

But the story is not over; the tale is not complete. As the prophet looks in mourning at the sad remains of a mighty nation, he sees signs of hope: 'A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse' (v. 1). Barely visible among the wreckage, a sapling is slowly emerging. It is fragile and thin, a direct contrast to the mighty tree from which it comes, but still it is gaining in strength. The roots of the tree were not destroyed when it was felled; they remain deep underground, providing nutrients and support for new growth. This branch will be filled with the Spirit of God, we are promised. A new way of living and being will be demonstrated in the life of this small, humble product of a former mighty age.

For those of us who live in the northern hemisphere, the season of Advent does indeed take place in darkness. The days are short and cold. Summer is a distant memory, and spring is many months away. It can be hard to look forward in hope – easier to settle ourselves disconsolately on the tree stumps of our hopes and dreams and look back in regret at golden seasons long past.

But this is not the work of Advent; this is not the task which we are set by Isaiah as he accompanies us on our journey to the birth of the Redeemer. It is not for us to linger in a place of nostalgia and sadness. The past is not for inhabiting but learning from, not for seeking to reconstruct but for use as foundation stones for new and better.

Isaiah reminds us of the promises of God to his children that he will never forsake us. He holds out to us the hope of a Redeemer, one who will see with the eyes of God and not of a corrupt and broken humanity; one who will hear those who speak truth and not be confounded by the lies of the false. We are offered righteousness and justice, strength and support, a hope and a future.

And so we turn to embrace this season of watching and waiting, of quiet preparation. We look again at our roots and reassure ourselves of their sturdiness. We hold fast to the promises of God and wait for signs of a new beginning. We trust that beneath the cold dark soil of today there hides the green shoot of tomorrow, still tender and frail but offering new life to all who will accept it.



Questions

- What are the 'stumps' of your life – the good things which perhaps happen no more, the new ventures which failed to materialise? Give them space by naming them, then put them aside in thanks for what they have brought you, while recognising that their place in your life has ended.
- What are the 'shoots' of your life – the early beginnings of adventures in mind or body? How might you nurture them?



Prayer

Advent is patience. It's how God has made us a people of promise, in a world of impatience.

Stanley Hauerwas (1940-)

Lord, give me patience in times of darkness. Help me to remember that, although it seems as if nothing is happening, beneath the surface of the earth a new shoot is growing. Release me from expectation this Advent, so that I may experience this watching and waiting with my whole heart as I look for your coming. Amen

| Friday 2 December

Poems

Luke 1:46–55

And Mary said:

'My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me –
holy is his name.

His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.

He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost
thoughts.

He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.

He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
to Abraham and his descendants forever,
just as he promised our ancestors.'



Reflection

So here they are, two ordinary women in extraordinary situations. One of them has lived a long life and a good one. She has been faithful in her religious and domestic life. But although this has brought the reward of stability and love, the satisfaction of knowing she has done her duty to God, her husband and her community, she still lacks that most precious gift of all – a child – and she suffers for this. For her and her husband, the time of hope is past and she must live with her dearest longing unfulfilled.

But then extraordinary things happen: her husband is struck dumb, and she is with child. What a swirl of disbelief, of joy, of hardly dared hoped-for happiness she must be living in! How many times a day must her feelings change – from excitement to anxiety and then once again to pure joy at her changed circumstances?

Then, in the sixth month of this emotional roller coaster, she has a visitor – her cousin Mary. Mary, another ordinary person, but young, very young. She is not yet married, but she is pregnant, and overwhelmed by this news has hurried to share it with her older, wiser cousin. An angel has visited her and told her she will be the God-bearer – and her life will never be the same again.

And as Mary hurries over the hills and plains to give and receive comfort and company, in her head is a song. It is not a song of fear or anxiety. It is not a song of self-concerned preoccupation about how her life has been changed. It is not the song of an oppressed people, suffering under the reign of their conquerors, forced to live under Roman occupation. It is not a song which will be sung to the mighty and the powerful.

Mary sings a song of praise for her creator, the one who loves her and her people so much that he has come down to live among them, to show them how to live. Mary sings a song of thanksgiving for her life

and for the life of the one she carries. Mary sings a song of prophecy, looking forward to a time when wrongs will be righted, when the good will triumph, the poor will suffer no more and mercy will flow down from the hills to flood the plains with righteousness.

Prior to Mary's visit, Elizabeth had shut herself away: 'After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and remained in seclusion for five months. "The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favour and taken away my disgrace among the people"' (Luke 1:24-25). She recognised that God had done a wonderful thing, and perhaps she needed time to reflect on this and prepare for the birth. But Mary breaks in on her isolation, just as her song breaks into the perceived status quo of occupied Israel. Things will forever after be different. The news of God breaking into the world is broken between two women in a nondescript town in an occupied country. The established order is turned upside down.

This does not happen in one time or place. Mary speaks in the aorist tense, the past tense. She is acknowledging the action of God through the ages, the God who has been on the side of the oppressed and downtrodden since the time of their slavery in Egypt, the one who has been making and keeping promises since the time of Abraham. What has happened in the past will become the template for the future, and Mary is part of the path which leads towards the redemption of all people.

When we sing this song – whether as a frozen few gathered in the pews of a tiny rural church on a winter's evening or as hundreds of people joined together in glorious praise in a magnificent cathedral – we echo Mary's prayer of thanksgiving and rejoicing in the first stage of God's plan for his children. We celebrate all that has been achieved and look forward to all that will come. And we wait for the redemption of the world.



Questions

- Which part of Mary's song resonates with you most?
- Which part do you find most challenging?



Prayer

*Heavenly Father, help me to join in with Mary's song. Give me the courage to hope in a better future and the strength to work for it.
Amen*



Enabling all ages to grow in faith



Anna Chaplaincy
Living Faith
Messy Church
Parenting for Faith

BRF is a Christian charity that resources individuals and churches. Our vision is to enable people of all ages to grow in faith and understanding of the Bible and to see more people equipped to exercise their gifts in leadership and ministry.

To find out more about our work, visit

brf.org.uk



Join Sally Welch in exploring two questions:
what is the Christmas story really about,
and how do we share it?

Through each week of Advent, a different aspect of the Christmas story is examined: **promise, light, mystery, love, peace** and **hope**. Within each week, the days are focused on the ways in which the Christmas story is shared: **prophecies, journeys, babies, signs, poems, stories** and **conversations**. Each day offers a Bible passage, followed by a reflection, questions and a prayer. Suggestions for group study and creative prayer activities are also included.



Sally Welch is diocesan canon of Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford, and co-director of the Centre for Christian Pilgrimage. Previously she was a parish priest of 20 years' standing, having ministered in both urban and rural settings in the diocese of Oxford. Sally is a committed pilgrim and has walked many pilgrim routes in the UK and Europe.

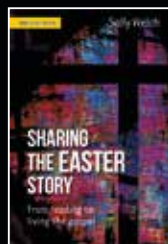
Praise for *Sharing the Easter Story*:

'Imbued with biblical insight, this book delves into the failings, the forgivings and the foibles of the way we are and the way we behave. Into the glorious muddle of our lives, we search for God and find God. In Sally Welch we have a delightful, experienced pastoral guide.'

Gordon Giles, author of *At Home in Lent*

'Sally has woven a beautiful golden cord, binding together scriptural truth and wisdom, profound contemporary relevance and insightful personal experience. Written with warmth, love and understanding, this is a genuine treasure.'

Margaret Silf, author of *Lighted Windows*



Cover image © iStock.com/golero



brf.org.uk