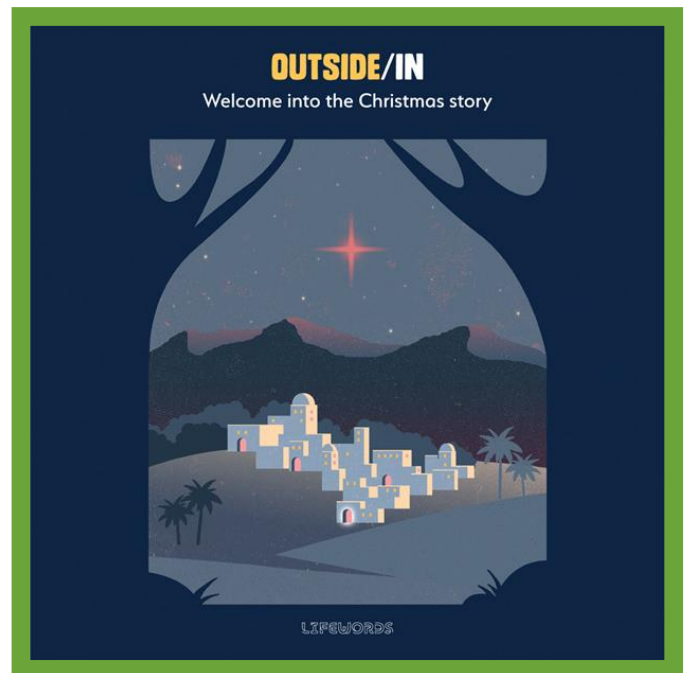


Christmas – a story of unexpected welcome

The Christmas story turns expectations upside down. It's a story where the everyday becomes more significant, where the weak and vulnerable are included, where the forgotten, are valued and where outsiders are welcomed into the story.

The story starts with Mary, an ordinary young girl, expecting to marry Joseph and perhaps full of hopes and dreams. But the arrival of the angel turns that upside down – Mary is to become the mother of God's son!



No-one expected much from shepherds. Badly paid, badly treated, they are working all night in the hills outside Bethlehem. But when the angels appear and share the good news of Jesus' birth, they become the very first people to worship Jesus.

Not much seems to happen in Bethlehem. All the important things happen down the road in Jerusalem. But tonight that changes. Tonight the son of God arrives in this little village.

The scholars from the East are the first people to find that this story is the opposite of what they expect. Looking for the new king, they go to big city Jerusalem, and head for the palace to talk to the important people. But they soon find out that Jesus' birth is quite different! It's happening in a small village, to ordinary people, and the first people who know are poor and unimportant.

Christmas – a story of unexpected welcome

The Christmas story is perhaps the best example of the ‘upside down’ kingdom of God, which challenges all our expectations. The poor become visible, the obscure are made central, the frightened are made brave.

As we prepare for this Christmas, let’s remember the story of expectations turned upside down.

Study Questions

Here are some questions to help you draw out the themes of ‘OUTSIDE/IN’. They can be used in groups, or offer an opportunity for personal reflection.

1. Teenage mother, fatherless child

- As you reflect on Mary’s part in the Christmas story, why do you think it would have been so scandalous?
- Can you think of a time when your church has defied expectations by accepting and loving someone that society pushes away?

2. The broken hearted, with shattered dreams

- What do you think Joseph’s dreams had been? Why was he heartbroken?
- Can you think of a time in your life when God has led you away from the path you expected and onto a different path?
- How, as a church community, can we encourage and show love to each other when life becomes tough and disappointing?

3. The overlooked and excluded, working to make ends meet

- How could your church ensure that Christmas can be celebrated together by everyone this year? Perhaps those who, like the shepherds, will be working very long hours this winter to provide for their families?

4. Hopeful travellers, looking for answers

- What did the scholars expect to find at the end of their journey? How did they have to change their expectations?
- Before you came to know Jesus, what were your expectations? Were they right, or have you changed them?

Further Reflections

For me: Am I open to God doing something unexpected in my life this Christmas? Perhaps this year you are feeling weak, or unimportant? The Christmas story tells us that you are exactly the kind of person that God uses to write his amazing story!

For my church: Are we open to the unexpected this Christmas? Or, like the scholars from the East, do we come expecting the predictable?

Can we look out for those on the edge of church and enable them to be welcomed? They may be older, disabled, struggling with mental ill- health, or any number of other reasons for feeling on the outside. But the Christmas story is about those on the outside unexpectedly taking centre stage. What can your church do to make that happen this year?

As we prepare for this Christmas, let's live the story of expectations turned upside down.

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