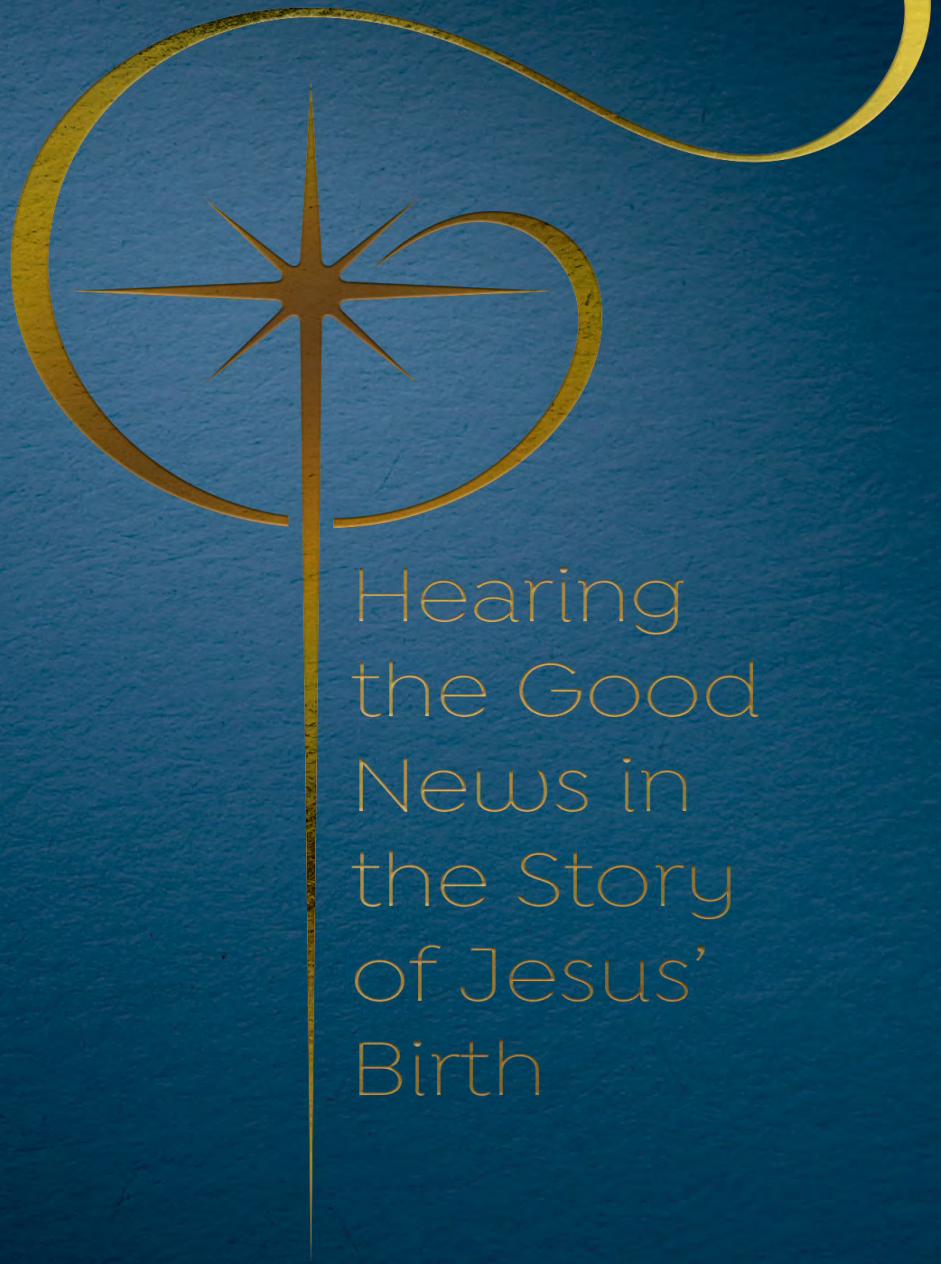


# Advent



Hearing  
the Good  
News in  
the Story  
of Jesus'  
Birth

NATHAN BROWN

“Feeling jaded, weary, unsure that you can face Christmas this year? This is a must read—perhaps as daily readings for December, but once you start, it is so inspiring, provoking, relevant and unique that you may want to read it all in one sitting.”

—**Dr Peter Roennfeldt**, author, *Following Jesus*

“It is not easy to bring freshness to the story of Jesus’ birth. Every year we relive the scenario; our children play their bit parts in the nativity play and the carols reverberate in our heads as we’ve walked through the crowded shopping malls. But Nathan Brown is a storyteller and, in his hands, this magnificent story comes to life. We enter the places, notice the presence of all the characters and feel the impact of the words as the gospels record it, as if for the first time. This is a beautiful collection. You will be drawn into the heart of incarnation—with all its earthiness, danger, inclusivity and glory.”

—**Tim Costello**, AO, Director of Ethical Voice, Executive Director of Micah Australia, Senior Fellow of Centre for Public Christianity

“The Christmas story feels so familiar—the stable, the manger, the shepherds, the wise men—that meaning easily gets lost as we recite each part. Advent pulls together all the well known elements we love and invites us to refocus our attention back to the heart of Christmas to rediscover the beautiful richness of this age-old story.”

—**Lyndelle Peterson**, pastor and national ministry leader

“At last, a re-telling of the story of Jesus’ birth that peels away 2000 years of added Christmas schmaltz to focus on what was really happening. Advent unwraps God’s gift of Jesus to reveal the depth and meaning of Jesus’ birth for then and for now.”

—**Dr Bruce Manners**, author, *The Command*

“Advent is like hearing a new bell sounding for Christmas. Nathan Brown has a way of pointing out the details and joining the dots to make the big picture meaningful again. Reconnecting with this peace and hope has never been more important.”

—**Joanna Darby**, artist, teacher, author and activist

“I am genuinely excited to be adding Advent to my mix of Christmas traditions, to enjoy the rich depth that Nathan Brown brings with his insights into the story, the cultural context of the time and his own travels to the places in which this beautiful story unfolds. I know so many others will embrace this book as something they want to make a part of their journey in getting to know Jesus and the story of His birth.”

—**Joshua Stothers**, pastor and podcaster, *Burn the Haystack*

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## *Invitation*

It is easy to be cynical about Christmas. It is easy to be distracted by the cultural expectations and excesses of the season. It is easy to be busy with events and to-do lists, and to be stressed about the arrangements and dynamics of family gatherings. It is easy to think we have heard the story of Jesus' birth countless times before or to dismiss it as if it were merely another fairy story we tell to children.

I have experienced many of these things and have had more than a few “Bah, humbug” moments in responses to the familial, social, commercial and even religious expectations of a looming Christmas.

But, in my experience, something invariably happens as most of these pressures begin to subside. We arrive at the few days before Christmas and we slow our pace a little or, even amid these many other things, we take a few moments to get back to the story itself—and we begin to feel something of the wonder, humility, glory and good news of the story of the birth of Jesus. It might come with re-telling the story in some way, listening to or singing favourite Christmas carols, or whatever your family or faith traditions might be.

This book is an invitation to extend your focus on the story of Jesus' birth in this season. In the traditional Christian calendar, the four weeks leading up to Christmas were known as the season of Advent. It was a time to re-read and re-tell the stories surrounding His coming into the world and to reflect on different aspects and implications of this story.

Adapting that tradition, this book was written with 31 reflections that can be read daily throughout the month of December. Of course, you can choose to read it however you wish, but I invite you to see if taking regular time to reflect on this story might change your experience of this season. Or you might choose to make some other time to think about this remarkable story, which is no less true or important at any other time of the year.

If you have not previously spent much time with the story of Jesus and His birth, I invite you to spend this time considering the deeper significance and claims that surround this seemingly simple story. Despite all the cultural and historical additions and distractions, there must be reasons why so many people throughout history and even today have continued to re-tell and celebrate this story. I invite you to give it a hearing and an opportunity to catch your imagination.

If you know the story well, I invite you to re-hear the story, to think about it in some different ways or even to simply enjoy reflecting on it again. I have had the idea for this book for a number of years, which has prompted me to read and think about the story myself in some new ways. I have also had the privilege of visiting Bethlehem and some of the other places in the stories three times in the past few years and this has enhanced how I read and re-tell these stories. I hope I have brought the best of these reflections, study and experiences to this task of again telling the story of the birth of Jesus.

As a background to these reflections, I invite you to re-read the original stories of Jesus' birth: Matthew Chapters 1 and 2; Luke Chapters 1 and 2; and John Chapter 1. You will find these at the beginning of the New Testament in any edition of the Bible—although a contemporary translation of the Bible is easier reading—or you can find these freely online at various Bible websites.

To go deeper, pick one of the gospel stories of Jesus and read it through completely during this time. Luke's gospel is most referenced in these reflections, so reading through his account will give a fuller picture of Jesus' story and more insight into who He was, what He taught and what He did. I also encourage you to look up and read the verses around any of the Bible verses that are quoted or referenced if they catch your interest—there is always more to discover.

And once you have spent time with this book, I invite you to share it with someone else, whether in the form of the book itself or simply by sharing in a conversation about what you have learnt or appreciated. The best stories

are worth re-telling, the best news is worth sharing.

As you read this book, I invite you to hear—or hear again—the good news in the story of Jesus' birth.

*In the silence of a midwinter dusk there is far off  
in the deeps of it somewhere a sound so faint  
that for all you can tell it may be only the sound  
of the silence itself. You hold your breath to  
listen. . . .*

*For a second you catch a whiff in the air of some  
fragrance that reminds you of a place you have  
never been and a time you have no words for.  
You are aware of the beating of your heart.*

*The extraordinary thing that is about to happen  
is matched only by the extraordinary moment  
just before it happens. Advent is the name of  
that moment.*

—Frederick Buechner, “Advent,” *Whistling in the Dark: A Doubter’s Dictionary*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1993, page 3

## *(Good) News*

Something happened.

Something significant happened—but in a way that seems so unlikely.

Yet something happened that was so significant that, every time we write the date, we remind each other that this thing happened a few more than 2000 years ago.

Something happened that was so significant that every year we pause and sing songs about it, share gifts with each other and re-tell the story.

Something happened in a particular place and time: in Bethlehem in the ancient land of Israel around the time of the empire-wide census decreed by Caesar Augustus—“the first census taken when Quirinius was governor of Syria” (Luke 2:2)—and nearing the end of the frenzied reign of Herod the Great, the Rome-supported king of the Jewish nation whose massive building projects were markedly more successful than his family relationships.

While the date of the Roman census is not clear historically, Herod’s death is commonly dated to 4 BC and no later than 1 BC. The Bible records some key events as following the birth of Jesus: the arrival of the magi in Jerusalem, their search for Jesus in Bethlehem, the escape of Joseph, Mary and Jesus to Egypt, and Herod’s massacre of all the children in Bethlehem under the age of two years old (see Matthew 2:1–18). If we factor in time for these events, it seems likely that Jesus was born between 6 and 4 BC. It might even have been a year or so earlier, with the news of Herod’s death the all-clear signal allowing Joseph and Mary and their family to return from their refugee period in Egypt (see Matthew 2:19, 20).

So it seems that the monk who set the dates for the BC/AD divide might have been out by a few years. But in a remarkable twist of history, it was Jesus rather than Augustus, Quirinius or Herod—or any of the other powerful men and great leaders of their age—around whom the axis of



history revolved. Something happened that truly changed the world.

The story is told in only two of Jesus' "official" biographies—the New Testament gospels. Matthew and Luke told the story of the birth of Jesus in ways that reflect their research interests and intended readerships. Matthew began with the Jewish genealogies and history, while Luke cited the Roman political leadership with its census and political administration. By contrast—in what is believed to be the first gospel to have been written—Mark seemed impatient to jump straight into the beginning of the ministry of Jesus. In the last of the gospels, John began with a poetic, philosophical and even cosmic meditation on light and darkness, Word and flesh, creation and life, but he still emphasised the historical reality of the One who became human and lived among humanity (see John 1:14), who had a particular history that had been experienced and witnessed.

Beyond the Bible, Jesus would become one of the most attested figures of ancient history. More is known of His life, His teachings and His death than is known about any of the powerful figures of that time, including those Luke used as markers: Augustus, Quirinius and Herod. Even if they debate some of the details and argue about their implications, no serious historian dismisses the reality of someone called Jesus of Nazareth, who lived in those places at that time. He was believed by many then and countless since to have been Someone significant—historically and spiritually. Something happened.

That such historical attention would be given to such an apparently inauspicious birth is notable. Of course, some of those who have come to be regarded among the great people of history were born in humble circumstances. Part of our interest in such stories of human achievement is how these people overcame their beginnings and aspired to the achievements for which they became known. Sometimes the date of their birth might come to be remembered and marked in retrospect, perhaps with a yearly festival in their city of birth. More often and quite understandably, their date of birth remains simply a historical fact and their later achievements receive more attention.

It is surprising that we know of Jesus' birth at all. A baby born to a poor, out-of-town couple in a small shepherd village in the Judean hills would not expect the fanfare accorded to children born in the homes of the powerful and wealthy. Given the limited record-keeping of the period, the time, place and circumstances of the birth of many people who would reach some kind of fame or notoriety is unknown. In one sense, the birth of Jesus might be considered one of those historical events that we look back on only after we see what He grew up to become.

But the story of Jesus' birth as told in the two gospels does not allow for that to be all there is to it. They assert that His birth was predicted, anticipated, announced, celebrated and noticed even in the halls of power and the courts of the temple. They urge that something significant happened in the fact of His birth in itself.

In Luke's telling of what happened that night in Bethlehem, there was an announcement of the birth of Jesus—only everything about it seemed unlikely, implausible and misdirected. An angel—a heavenly being sent as a messenger from God!—appeared to a group of shepherds, poor farm labourers employed to guard flocks of sheep overnight, to tell them that something had happened. And not just *something*, something big, something significant, something that would change the world, something that we might still be singing songs about and re-telling the story of more than 2000 years later: “I bring you *good news* that will bring great joy to all people” (Luke 2:10).

Something happened. Something real happened. Something significant happened. That's what makes it *news*.

Something overwhelmingly good happened. That's what makes it *good news*.

## <sup>2</sup> *Anticipated*

Many of us remember our anticipation of Christmas when we were children—and we can be reminded of this by observing our children or grandchildren, nephews and nieces today. Excitement builds through the various traditions that different families maintain. The marking of an Advent calendar, whether in a traditional format or a more commercial product, counts down the days to Christmas. At different dates and events, some kind of Christmas decorations or lights might be put up. Carols will begin to be sung—or heard on the instore music playlists and advertising jingles some weeks or even months earlier. Whether from a faith perspective or simply that of preparing for a family gathering with gifts and good food, the Christmas season fosters anticipation.

Apart from simply re-telling the story of Jesus' birth in the various ways that we do that, practising this sense of anticipation is perhaps one of the most authentic ways in which we mark the Christmas season. We can get a feel of this in the stories of Jesus' birth told by the gospel writers.

Matthew recited a brief history of the Jewish people, urging that these generations were all leading to this point in history. He also punctuated his storytelling with references and quotations from historical Hebrew prophecies about the birth of a coming Saviour. Luke told stories of startling angel appearances and unexpected pregnancies, with the sense that something was afoot that would have greater significance than the usual small-town birth. Of course, both gospels were written from a later vantage point, but even at the time of writing their stories retained a sense of expectation—as they do for us today.

But expectation was also in the spirit of the times that surrounded the birth of Jesus. For centuries after their return from exile in Babylon, the Jewish nation had been subjected to a series of conquerors and oppressors, with the Roman Empire the most recent and the most brutal. It had been

about 400 years since the nation had received the prophecies of Malachi that close out the Bible's Old Testament. From this lapse in the Hebrew scriptures, it seems that most of those years had passed without authentic prophetic voices. But there were many pretenders who preyed on the people's hopes and fears. Historians report a succession of self-styled messiahs who had come and gone, often sparking violent uprising and even more violent repression. The people were looking for a leader who would set them free—but barely knew what this might mean.

Amid this cultural and political climate, there were those who continued to study their scriptures, to pray and to anticipate. They could answer the questions about a Messiah to come, a new king to be born. When the magi—or wise men—arrived in Jerusalem, Herod asked the religious leaders to direct their search. It seems they soon had the correct answer about where the Messiah was to be born from the Hebrew prophet Micah: “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they said, “for this is what the prophet wrote” (Matthew 2:5).

When Jesus' cousin John began preaching, the questions from the religious leaders about who he was carried this same weight (see John 1:19–23). There was something in the air, an anticipation that could not help but foster hope, even after generations of silence, oppression and disappointment. And while there were more misunderstandings and disappointments to come, those who followed Jesus came to recognise that He was who and what they had been anticipating. Writing a few decades later, Paul, one of the students of those same religious leaders, would reflect on this anticipation: “But when the right time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman” (Galatians 4:4). In hindsight, it seemed to make sense to people like Paul.

But, despite the pervading sense of anticipation at the time of Jesus' birth, few were looking in the right places or anticipating in the right ways. An ageing priest and his barren wife were unlikely parents of one who would be a “voice shouting in the wilderness” (John 1:23) to proclaim the coming of the Messiah. A widow prophetess and an elderly scholar were the only

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