



“This is the Story...”

Written by Talashia Keim Yoder and Daniel Yoder. Artwork by Christa and Jonathan Reuel.  
Song lyrics and music by Jonathan Reuel.

## **Week 26: Comfort to Jerusalem**

Isaiah 40

**Intro Video:** <https://youtu.be/RDeIj4I67Kq>

**Review the big story:** God created the cosmos and humans and called it all good. We were created to live in harmony, but sometimes we miss the mark. All of humanity missed the mark, and they had to live with the consequences, but God stuck with them and continued to love them. Then God called a family to be a blessing to the whole earth. Like the humans before them, the generations of this family often missed the mark, but God was faithful. When the people became slaves in Egypt, God raised up Moses to be their leader. God performed many signs and wonders, and delivered them from slavery. In the wilderness, they learned to be a people of God, trusting in God’s provision, living out God’s commandments, and wrestling with the law in shalom community. As they prepared to go into the promised land, they were given the *shema*, words of love to keep with their whole beings. Through miraculous works, God brought the people into the promised land. Once there, they had to learn again how to be God’s people. They missed the mark a lot, and God sent judges to guide them. Ordinary people showed creativity and steadfast love in the way they continued the story of the people of God. When the people demanded a king, God sent prophets like Samuel to try to keep the people faithful to God. Kings Saul, David and Solomon continued to miss the mark, and the kingdom divided into the north (Israel) and south (Judah). God stuck with the people through leaders and prophets, and continued to call the people back to God, even as first the northern, and then the southern kingdom fell to invading powers. Some of the people were sent into exile, and some were left in the ruins of the kingdom. Through prophets and everyday people, God continued to stick with the scattered people and to reveal that God is so much bigger than they imagined. The people were finally able to return to Jerusalem and to rebuild the temple.

- **Key verses:** Isaiah 40:3; Isaiah 40:21-23; Isaiah 40:31

**Tell the story:** Isaiah 40 is written by a prophet who is with the people in Babylonian exile. The prophet brings comfort to the people, telling them that restoration is coming. Imagine. The people are far from everything they know and love, not able to be with their community. In this poem, the prophet reminds them that God is way bigger than all of this. God is the one who made matter, who lovingly created. God always has been and always will be. And God never gives up on God’s people. You may recognize some of the words in this reading from songs we sing during Advent. People later understood this and many other prophetic texts to be foretelling the coming Messiah. So we read it during Advent, knowing that Jesus is the comfort that comes to the people. Jesus is the glory of God revealed.

- Read Isaiah 40.
- Read page 138 in the *Shine On* story Bible

## Prime the pump:

- **Things to notice:**

- Isaiah 40 is a poem. This is not unusual in this book of the Bible - in fact, most of the book is written in poetry! Why do you think this is?
- Do any words from this scripture sound familiar to you? Notice all the phrases that ring a bell. You may even want to list out all the songs and commonly quoted verses that come from Isaiah 40. How do the meanings of these quotes and songs change when you think of them in the context of the whole poem - and of exile?

- **Background information:**

- Isaiah 40 begins the second half of Isaiah, and from here on the writings are thought to be by a different prophet (or multiple prophets) living in the Babylonian exile. It would not have been considered dishonest or odd for a disciple/follower of a prophet to continue to prophesy under that prophet's name.
- Isaiah 40:3-4 makes a different kind of sense when you look at the terrain between Babylonia and Judah. Check out a topographic map if you're intrigued.
- The NRSV translates a word in verse 6 as "constancy." The Hebrew word here is *hesed*, a word we know well by this point!
- In verse 17, NRSV translates a word as "emptiness." But the Hebrew is *tohu*. It's an allusion back to Genesis 1:2!
- The final verse of this chapter is familiar to many of us. The first half of it more literally translates "grow new pinions like the eagles" - as in, molt and grow new feathers. It's less about growing something totally new and more about renewal. (*Alter, Robert. 2019. The Hebrew Bible, vol. 2: Prophets. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, pg. 752.*)

- **Conversation starters:**

- It is tempting to read prophetic texts like Isaiah as predictors of things that are going to happen to us here and now. But this text was written in a specific time and place, and it is a commentary on what was happening in that moment. The people of God had REALLY missed the mark, and had to deal with major consequences. Read this passage in the context of people who have been exiled from their homes and place of worship. How is this poem an example of God sticking with the people?
- There are a lot of metaphors here! If metaphors make sense in your household, find all the metaphors and discover what the prophet is trying to tell us about who God is and how God relates with the world.

**Microsong:** "Comfort to Jerusalem" (Listen: <https://youtu.be/DE9vEvCkzzY>)

Comfort to Jerusalem, your warfare's finally over. God is coming, the nations are nothing but space where the Spirit hovers. God gathers the people like a shepherd with sheep and carries the young ones gently. Those who wait and hope in God will run and not get weary.

**Sing the big song:** (Listen: <https://youtu.be/WxkbTZtNQGM>)

This is the story of how it all began. God made matter, and chaos shattered.  
Eve and Adam, they tried to hide. The world got violent and God replied with a mark and flood  
and a rainbow sign, God's love written on skin and sky,  
*And then God called a family to be a blessing to the earth, ohhh oohhh*  
A mother and her favorite son wrestle for the blessing, another son becomes a slave, the land is  
saved from famine.  
God's family grows. Egypt oppresses. They groan to God and God sends Moses.  
*Ten strange signs say "Please release them!" By the sea God saves them. Oh Ohhhh*  
The people complain and God rains bread. Daily food and ten new rules.  
Five sisters come and ask for land. God says "Yes, amend the law!"  
*Moses says, "In your new life across the Jordan, love God with your whole heart and with all your  
being, and your strength, now listen: God is One, only God. God is One, only God!"*  
Cross over Jordan, stories and stones. Circuits and shouts and the walls come down.  
God sends judges like Deborah and the land has rest.  
Ruth's worth more than seven sons; Redeem the lost with steadfast love.  
Corruption in the temple and God sends Samuel.  
God gives them a prophet, they ask for a king.  
Does God need a temple? A wise king forgets.  
And when a bully rules the land, a nation tears apart and loses David's heart...  
A widow's gift and a prophet's cry. God brings life in desperate times.  
Josiah reads this misplaced scroll. He turns to God wholeheartedly like David did. In his time.  
God gives Jeremiah a picture of God's ruined family...  
Is there any hope left, is there any hope left, is there any hope left for you, Jerusalem?  
Any hope? Any hope left? Is there any hope left for you?  
By the streams of Babylon, how can we sing when you are gone, Jerusalem...  
I'm in a valley of human bones. These bones are Israel, God's breath is hope.  
Haman plans death for Esther's exiles. She risks her life so they might survive.  
Finally God's family rebuilds the temple in Jerusalem. God plunges them into a sea of joy and  
celebration of Only God. God is One, Only God.  
Comfort to Jerusalem, your warfare finally ceases.  
*God loves every one of us, it's true. And God loves the universe.*

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## **Week 27: Abraham to Jesus**

Matthew 1:1-17

**Intro Video:** <https://youtu.be/aNocCZEXVWI>

**Review the big story:** God created the cosmos and humans and called it all good. We were created to live in harmony, but sometimes we miss the mark. All of humanity missed the mark, and they had to live with the consequences, but God stuck with them and continued to love them. Then God called a family to be a blessing to the whole earth. Like the humans before them, the generations of this family often missed the mark, but God was faithful. When the people became slaves in Egypt, God raised up Moses to be their leader. God performed many signs and wonders, and delivered them from slavery. In the wilderness, they learned to be a people of God, trusting in God’s provision, living out God’s commandments, and wrestling with the law in shalom community. As they prepared to go into the promised land, they were given the *shema*, words of love to keep with their whole beings. Through miraculous works, God brought the people into the promised land. Once there, they had to learn again how to be God’s people. They missed the mark a lot, and God sent judges to guide them. Ordinary people showed creativity and steadfast love in the way they continued the story of the people of God. When the people demanded a king, God sent prophets like Samuel to try to keep the people faithful to God. Kings Saul, David and Solomon continued to miss the mark, and the kingdom divided into the north (Israel) and south (Judah). God stuck with the people through leaders and prophets, and continued to call the people back to God, even as first the northern, and then the southern kingdom fell to invading powers. Some of the people were sent into exile, and some were left in the ruins of the kingdom. Through prophets and everyday people, God continued to stick with the scattered people and to reveal that God is so much bigger than they imagined. The people were finally able to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. Through all the turmoil, prophets like Isaiah brought comfort to the people.

- **Key verses:** Matthew 1:1; 1:17

**Tell the story:** About 500 years after the return from exile, the ways of Judaism were well-established. Now Rome is the ruling power in Israel. The people of God are still crying out, waiting for the Messiah, the great Liberator, to come. In the very first verse of what is now our New Testament, we learn that the promised Messiah has arrived. This week’s scripture is a genealogy. We often skip right over this, but since we know the big story, this genealogy is going to tell us all kinds of interesting things about Jesus - and about God.

- Read Matthew 1:1-17

### **Prime the pump:**

This genealogy sets up who Jesus is by telling who has come before him. So this week, we are going to look closely at it, and place each person in the genealogy in their spot in the big story. There are lots of surprises here - and this genealogy is unusual in that it features women - non-Israelite women, at that! You may want to place these ancestors in a timeline. Or maybe you’ll write or print out the big song and insert each of them into it!

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## Things to Notice:

- *Jesus*: the Hebrew name “Yeshua,” a form of “Joshua,” which means “YHWH is help/salvation.”
- *Messiah*: In Greek, this is “Christos,” which we also translate as “Christ” or “Anointed One.”
- *Son of David, Son of Abraham*: This is Jesus’ pedigree - he is a descendant of the great king of Israel. Traditional Jewish belief was that the Messiah would descend from David for a reign of kings that would never end. And he’s a true Israelite, because Abraham is seen as the father of Judaism.
- Notice that here we have three sets of fourteens. We are back to numerology! Three is a holy, complete number. Seven is perfection - and fourteen is double perfection.

## The First 14 Generations

- *Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah*: You know these guys! And you know the messiness of their stories.
- *Judah, father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar*: This is a very messy story, which you can find in Genesis 38. In a nutshell, Tamar was an outsider, and these twin boys were conceived with her father-in-law, Judah, in a great example of a woman getting creative and being declared in the right.
- *Hezron*: He is briefly mentioned as the son of Judah whose descendants would lead the tribe of Judah.
- *Aram*: Also called Ram, we don’t know much about this one.
- *Aminadab*: He was a Levite (the priestly tribe). He was also the father-in-law of Aaron, brother of Moses.
- *Nahshon*: In the wilderness, he was the leader of the tribe of Judah. Jewish midrash (which plays with the story), says that he initiated the Red Sea crossing, walking in until it was over his head before the sea parted. ([Chabad.org https://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/2199147/jewish/Nachshon-ben-Aminadav-The-Man-Who-Jumped-Into-the-Sea.htm](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/2199147/jewish/Nachshon-ben-Aminadav-The-Man-Who-Jumped-Into-the-Sea.htm))
- *Salmon*: He must have been a young man at the “battle of Jericho,” because he married Rahab.
- *Rahab*: The second woman mentioned in this genealogy, Rahab is described in Joshua 6 as a Canaanite prostitute who offers hospitality and protection for Joshua’s spies.
- *Boaz and Ruth*: You know this story! We have another outsider here, another story with potential scandal, a story of creativity, a story of steadfast love.
- *Obed*: We don’t know much besides his place in genealogies.
- *Jesse*: He’s famous mostly for being the father of David and the metaphorical branch of the tree from which Jesus comes.

## The Second 14 Generations

- *King David*: You know his story!
- *Bathsheba*: We didn’t tell her story, but she was a faithful woman who was treated unfairly by King David. She comes in a messy and uncomfortable part of David’s story. She may be an Israelite, but since she’s married to a Hittite, some think she was a foreigner.
- *Solomon*: You know him, too! The flawed, wise, prolific, temple-building, third (and final) king of the kingdom of Israel when it was united.
- *Rehoboam*: You know this story. A rather unsavory character in this genealogy.
- *Abijah*: He reigned for three years, and tried unsuccessfully to reunite the kingdom.
- *Asa*: Asa was considered to be a righteous king, who tried to return the people to the worship of YHWH. You can read his story in 2 Chronicles 14-16.

- *Jehoshaphat*: Another king considered righteous, who instituted reforms throughout the southern kingdom. He also formed an alliance with the northern kingdom of Israel.
- *Joram*: He only reigned for eight years, and was regarded as a weak king.
- *Uzziah*: You can find his interesting story in 2 Chronicles 26. He made Judah powerful, but got a little too proud, which led to his downfall. Interestingly, he was the grandson, not son, of Joram. It's possible that his father, Amaziah, was left out to make the number of generations an even 14.
- *Jotham*: Continued the nation-strengthening work of his father.
- *Ahaz*: Accepted military help from the Assyrians, and brought their gods and rituals into the temple in Jerusalem.
- *Hezekiah*: He enacted reforms that undid some of the idol-worship of his father. He was king during the fall of the northern kingdom, and took that as a warning to fortify Judah.
- *Manasseh*: He reversed the reforms of his father, and brought back polytheism (worship of many gods).
- *Amon (or Amos)*: He was such a bad king that the people revolted and killed him two years into his reign.
- *Josiah*: You know his story!

### **The Third 14 Generations**

- *Jechoniah*: Actually Josiah's grandson, he reigned just three months before being exiled to Babylon. So now we have gotten to Babylonian exile! This is when the wait for the Messiah begins.
- *Salathiel*: The second king-in-exile.
- *Zerubbabel*: He led the people back to Jerusalem, began construction of the temple, and was appointed governor by King Darius.
- *Abiud, Eliakim, Azor, Zadok, Achim, Eliud, Eleazar, Matthan*: We don't know much about these people! They would have lived in what's known as the "intertestamental" or "second temple" times.
- *Jacob the father of Joseph*: Wait a minute, here. We have seen this parent-child name pairing before...
- *Joseph the husband of Mary*: Joseph here is defined by his wife(!).
- *Mary, of whom Jesus was born*: So this is the genealogy of Joseph...but it's to Mary that Jesus is born.
- *...who is called the Messiah*: The writer of Matthew restates the Messiah claim.

### **Put it Together:**

- This is fascinating. We begin and end with a claim of Jesus as Messiah, but our notion of what that means gets flipped upside down in what comes between those claims.
  - It looks like Jesus is being proven Messiah through this royal, thoroughly Jewish lineage. It's the ultimate insider lineage.
  - We get clues along the way that there's a twist here. The women are the clues. Look back - what do they have in common?
  - If we've been tracking these women, verse 16 will come as less of a surprise. There is this great, royal heritage...and the twist at the end is that Jesus is adopted into it. We're reading along, thinking, "This genealogy matters! It proves who he is!" and then we get to the end and realize it isn't even Jesus' genealogy by birth.

**Microsong:** “Abraham to Jesus” (Listen: <https://youtu.be/yhLZyaswS1k>)  
Matthew lists these generations, Abraham to Jesus.

**Sing the big song:** (Listen: <https://youtu.be/Seri5x3Himq>)

This is the story of how it all began. God made matter, and chaos shattered.  
Eve and Adam, they tried to hide. The world got violent and God replied with a mark and flood  
and a rainbow sign, God’s love written on skin and sky,  
*And then God called a family to be a blessing to the earth, ohhh ohhhh*  
A mother and her favorite son wrestle for the blessing, another son becomes a slave, the land is  
saved from famine.  
God’s family grows. Egypt oppresses. They groan to God and God sends Moses. *Ten strange  
signs say “Please release them!” By the sea God saves them.* Ohh ohhh.  
The people complain and God rains bread. Daily food and ten new rules.  
Five sisters come and ask for land. God says “Yes, amend the law!”  
*Moses says, “In your new life across the Jordan, love God with your whole heart and with all your  
being, and your strength, now listen: God is One, only God. God is One, only God!”*  
Cross over Jordan, stories and stones. Circuits and shouts and the walls come down.  
God sends judges like Deborah and the land has rest.  
Ruth’s worth more than seven sons; Redeem the lost with steadfast love.  
Corruption in the temple, then God sends Samuel.  
God gives them a prophet, They ask for a king  
Does God need a temple? A wise king forgets  
And when a bully rules the land, the nation tears apart and loses David’s heart...  
A widow’s gift and a prophet’s cry. God brings life in desperate times.  
Josiah reads this misplaced scroll. He turns to God wholeheartedly like David did. In his time.  
God gives Jeremiah a picture of God’s ruined family...  
Is there any hope left, is there any hope left, is there any hope left for you, Jerusalem?  
Any hope? Any hope left? Is there any hope left for you?  
By the streams of Babylon, how can we sing when you are gone, Jerusalem...  
I’m in a valley of human bones. These bones are Israel; God’s breath is hope.  
Haman plans death for Esther’s exiles. She risks her life so they might survive.  
Finally God’s family rebuilds the temple in Jerusalem. God plunges them into a sea of joy and  
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## **Week 28: God Looked at Me**

Luke 1:26-56

**Intro Video:** <https://youtu.be/dZ5sua54sYY>

**Review the big story:** God created the cosmos and humans and called it all good. We were created to live in harmony, but sometimes we miss the mark. All of humanity missed the mark, and they had to live with the consequences, but God stuck with them and continued to love them. Then God called a family to be a blessing to the whole earth. Like the humans before them, the generations of this family often missed the mark, but God was faithful. When the people became slaves in Egypt, God raised up Moses to be their leader. God performed many signs and wonders, and delivered them from slavery. In the wilderness, they learned to be a people of God, trusting in God’s provision, living out God’s commandments, and wrestling with the law in shalom community. As they prepared to go into the promised land, they were given the *shema*, words of love to keep with their whole beings. Through miraculous works, God brought the people into the promised land. Once there, they had to learn again how to be God’s people. They missed the mark a lot, and God sent judges to guide them. Ordinary people showed creativity and steadfast love in the way they continued the story of the people of God. When the people demanded a king, God sent prophets like Samuel to try to keep the people faithful to God. Kings Saul, David and Solomon continued to miss the mark, and the kingdom divided into the north (Israel) and south (Judah). God stuck with the people through leaders and prophets, and continued to call the people back to God, even as first the northern, and then the southern kingdom fell to invading powers. Some of the people were sent into exile, and some were left in the ruins of the kingdom. Through prophets and everyday people, God continued to stick with the scattered people and to reveal that God is so much bigger than they imagined. The people were finally able to return to Jerusalem and to rebuild the temple. Through all the turmoil, prophets like Isaiah brought comfort to the people. Now we’re in what we call the “second temple times,” when Rome is the power in charge and when the people of God begin to wait for a Messiah.

- **Key verses:** Luke 1:31; 38; 46-47

**Tell the story:** An angel came to a young woman named Mary, and told her that she would have a son, a very special son who would be the Son of God. Mary responded with, “Let it be,” and went to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who also was miraculously pregnant. Mary sang a song about the justice and joy of God.

- Read Luke 1:26-56
- Read page 161 in the Shine On story Bible

## Prime the pump:

- **Things to notice:**

- This story invites us to imagine and empathize. If you choose to do that, try it multiple times with different personalities for Mary. She's often portrayed as meek and mild, but notice what happens if you imagine her as strong, thoughtful but direct with the angel.
- Verse 29 says "in the sixth month." The sixth month of what? Of Elizabeth's pregnancy. Imagine. Time is being measured by gestation.
- Notice what Mary does in verse 39. For a woman of her time to have freedom of travel is a big deal!
- If you have heard this story a lot, the wonder of it may have worn off. Read it with fresh eyes. It's full of mystery, of the supernatural. An angel, a virgin conception, overshadowing by the Holy Spirit, an unborn child leaping for joy...
- Mary's song is political. Read it and really notice what it's proclaiming.
- Mary went to Elizabeth in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy and left three months later. Do the math.
- Get out your map and notice where these things happen. Where is Nazareth in relationship to Judah? And how did Joseph's people, from Judah, end up in Nazareth?

- **Background information:**

- This passage is *full* of allusions to Old Testament scripture. Here are just a few:
  - "The Lord is with you" (vs 28) is a conventional greeting. Find it elsewhere: Judges 6:12; 2 Samuel 7:3; 2 Chronicles 15:2.
  - All of verse 32-33 mirrors 2 Samuel 7:13-16, the promise made to David.
  - "Son of God" sometimes refers to humans (like Adam), but also refers to divinities (see Psalm 29:1).
  - "Nothing will be impossible with God" (verse 37) - this phrase has been said several other times, including in Genesis 18:14 about Sarah being pregnant with Isaac.
- Mary's Song, the canticle of verses 46-55, is similar to Hannah's prayer (1 Samuel 2), and also has similarities to other songs sung by women like Miriam and Deborah. All of these are highly political songs.

- **Conversation starters:**

- The name we translate as Jesus was a really common name of the time and culture. It means "the Lord saves," and variants of it include Joshua and Hosea. How does it feel/sound to think of this extraordinary baby having such an ordinary name?
- There is an arch to this story. Fear and confusion, then acceptance, and then, when Mary gets to Elizabeth, the emotion turns to joy. Wonder: Why did Mary go "with haste" to Elizabeth? What was it about this woman-to-woman relationship that brought Mary to her song?
- Scholars think that Luke/Acts (they go together) was written primarily for a Gentile audience, and there is a complicated relationship with Judaism here. But the commentary of *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* encourages the reader to consider that Jesus' care for the poor, the sick, the sinners, etc, are not in contrast to his Jewish context, but rather grow out of his identity as a Jew. (Levine, Amy-Jill and Marc Zvi Brettler, Eds, 2017. *The Jewish Annotated New Testament, 2nd Edition*. New York: Oxford University Press, pg 107.) He is calling all the people of God to realize who they really are and who God really is. Read and discuss the passage with this in mind.

**Microsong:** "God Looked at Me" (Listen: <https://youtu.be/UCOxHCavtBc>)

The angel says, "You'll have a son, and God will give him David's throne." Mary says, "God looked at me now I'm the luckiest person around. God scatters the proud, brings the tyrants down, helps the victim, lets the hungry feast. And beyond that, God does exactly what God promised to . . . from Abraham till now."

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Eve and Adam, they tried to hide. The world got violent and God replied with a mark and flood  
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*And then God called a family to be a blessing to the earth, oh ohhhh*

A mother and her favorite son wrestle for the blessing, another son becomes a slave, the land is  
saved from famine.

God's family grows. Egypt oppresses. They groan to God and God sends Moses.

*Ten strange signs say "Please release them!" By the sea God saves them. Oh ohhh.*

The people complain and God rains bread. Daily food and ten new rules.

Five sisters come and ask for land. God says "Yes, amend the law!"

*Moses says, "In your new life across the Jordan, love God with your whole heart and with all your  
being, and your strength, now listen: God is One, only God! God is One, only God!"*

Cross over Jordan, stories and stones. Circuits and shouts and the walls come down.

God sends judges like Deborah and the land has rest.

Ruth's worth more than seven sons; Redeem the lost with steadfast love.

Corruption in the temple and God sends Samuel.

God gives them a prophet, they ask for a king. Does God need a temple? A wise king forgets.

And when a bully rules the land, the nation tears apart and loses David's heart...

A widow's gift and a prophet's cry. God brings life in desperate times.

Josiah reads this misplaced scroll. He turns to God wholeheartedly like David did. In his time.

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By the streams of Babylon, how can we sing when you are gone, Jerusalem...

I'm in a valley of human bones. These bones are Israel, God's breath is hope.

Haman plans death for Esther's exiles. She risks her life so they might survive.

Finally God's family rebuilds the temple in Jerusalem. God plunges them into a sea of joy and  
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## **Week 29: A Grueling Journey**

Luke 2:1-5

**Intro Video:** [https://youtu.be/C\\_FO\\_0ja7RI](https://youtu.be/C_FO_0ja7RI)

**Review the big story:** God created the cosmos and humans and called it all good. We were created to live in harmony, but sometimes we miss the mark. All of humanity missed the mark, and they had to live with the consequences, but God stuck with them and continued to love them. Then God called a family to be a blessing to the whole earth. Like the humans before them, the generations of this family often missed the mark, but God was faithful. When the people became slaves in Egypt, God raised up Moses to be their leader. God performed many signs and wonders, and delivered them from slavery. In the wilderness, they learned to be a people of God, trusting in God’s provision, living out God’s commandments, and wrestling with the law in shalom community. As they prepared to go into the promised land, they were given the shema, words of love to keep with their whole beings. Through miraculous works, God brought the people into the promised land. Once there, they had to learn again how to be God’s people. They missed the mark a lot, and God sent judges to guide them. Ordinary people showed creativity and steadfast love in the way they continued the story of the people of God. When the people demanded a king, God sent prophets like Samuel to try to keep the people faithful to God. Kings Saul, David and Solomon continued to miss the mark, and the kingdom divided into the north (Israel) and south (Judah). God stuck with the people through leaders and prophets, and continued to call the people back to God, even as first the northern, and then the southern kingdom fell to invading powers. Some of the people were sent into exile, and some were left in the ruins of the kingdom. Through prophets and everyday people, God continued to stick with the scattered people and to reveal that God is so much bigger than they imagined. The people were finally able to return to Jerusalem and to rebuild the temple. Through all the turmoil, prophets like Isaiah brought comfort to the people. As we begin the story of the New Testament, Rome is the power in charge and the people of God are waiting for a Messiah. This Messiah is announced, first with a surprising genealogy, then through an angel to Mary. Mary responded with deep joy and courage to the angel’s request.

- **Key verse:** Luke 2:4

**Tell the story:** Mary is pregnant with God’s child, and Joseph has decided to stick by her (see Matthew 1:18-25 for his story). Now a census is being taken, and Mary and Joseph must travel to be registered. We often speed through this part of the story, but there are some intriguing things to unpack!

- Read Luke 2:1-5

## Prime the pump:

- **Things to notice:**
  - There's a lot of "fulfillment of the scriptures" going on in the story of Jesus' birth. Even this traveling story is a fulfillment - read Psalm 87:5-6.
  - Read verse 4 in light of what we learned last week through studying the genealogy. Why is this verse so specific?
  - Wait a minute. Where's the donkey??? Every tradition has inserted assumptions and additions to this beloved story. It's okay to do that! And it's good to recognize those additions as our own way of doing midrash, playing with and interpreting the story.
- **Background information:**
  - Emperor Augustus ruled from 27 BCE-14 CE. His time was one of peace, and he was called "god," "son of god," "savior" and "father" by the people. So right away here, we have a challenge. Which "son of god" are the readers of Luke going to follow? (*Levine, Amy-Jill and Marc Zvi Brettler, Eds, 2017. The Jewish Annotated New Testament, 2nd Edition. New York: Oxford University Press, pg 113.*)
  - There's no corresponding evidence of this particular census. This doesn't mean it didn't happen, but regardless, it serves an important purpose in the story. Registration wasn't viewed positively in Jewish thought, and Mary and Joseph's obedience to it is intriguing. And it's all about the money - a census was taken to determine taxes. So there's something political going on in this piece of the story.
  - If you're interested in the Roman politics, look up the figures in this story - Augustus, Quirinius, and Herod the Great (not mentioned here, but another figure in this time period).
- **Conversation starters:**
  - Get out your map! Trace this journey. How long is it? How long would it have taken to travel? This site (<http://www.photorientalist.org/exhibitions/palestines-nativity-trail-a-journey-through-history/>) is one place to explore the journey.
  - We don't know exactly what this journey looked like. It's likely that Mary and Joseph were part of a caravan of people. They probably walked most or all of the way. Mary was heavily pregnant. Do your own imagining and playing with this story.
  - Women were registered under men as property in Roman censuses. So why did heavily pregnant Mary even go along?
  - Journeys are a major biblical theme. Think about the journeys we already have talked about in the big story. This is already the second journey in the story of Jesus' birth, and there are more to come. If this intrigues you, talk about and explore this theme.

**Microsong:** "A Grueling Journey" (Listen: [https://youtu.be/g5DKSv\\_JJwU](https://youtu.be/g5DKSv_JJwU))

About that time, Caesar Augustus orders a census that somehow means that Joseph has to travel up to Bethlehem from Nazareth. Mary, now a pregnant fiancé, makes the grueling journey. Maybe she was glad to get away. . .

**Sing the big song:** (Listen: <https://youtu.be/LriwWgdQ1d8>)

This is the story of how it all began. God made matter, and chaos shattered.  
Eve and Adam, they tried to hide. The world got violent and God replied with a mark and flood  
and a rainbow sign, God's love written on skin and sky,  
*Then God called a family to be a blessing to the earth, ohh ohhh*  
A mother and her favorite son wrestle for the blessing, another son becomes a slave, the land is  
saved from famine.  
God's family grows. Egypt oppresses. They groan to God, God sends Moses.  
*Ten strange signs say "Please release them!" By the sea God saves them. Ohh ohhh.*  
The people complain. God rains bread. Daily food and ten new rules.  
Five sisters come and ask for land. God says "Yes, amend the law!"  
*Moses says, "In your new life across the Jordan, love God with your whole heart and with all your  
being, and your strength, now listen: God is One, only God! God is One, only God!"*  
Cross over Jordan, stories and stones. Circuits and shouts and the walls come down.  
God sends judges like Deborah and the land has rest.  
Ruth's worth more than seven sons; Redeem the lost with steadfast love.  
Corruption in the temple, and God sends Samuel.  
God gives them a prophet, they ask for a king. Does God need a temple? A wise king forgets.  
And when a bully rules the land, the nation tears apart and loses David's heart.....  
A widow's gift and a prophet's cry. God brings life in desperate times.  
Josiah reads this misplaced scroll. He turns to God wholeheartedly like David did. In his time.  
God gives Jeremiah a picture of God's ruined family...  
Is there any hope left, is there any hope left, is there any hope left for you, Jerusalem?  
Any hope? Any hope left? Is there any hope left for you?  
By the streams of Babylon, how can we sing when you are gone, Jerusalem...  
I'm in a valley of human bones. These bones are Israel, God's breath is hope.  
Haman plans death for Esther's exiles. She risks her life so they might survive.  
Finally God's family rebuilds the temple in Jerusalem. God plunges them into a sea of joy and  
celebration of Only God. God is One, Only God.  
Comfort to Jerusalem, your warfare finally ceases.  
Matthew lists these generations, Abraham to Jesus.  
The angel says "You'll have a son and God will give him David's throne." Mary says "God looked  
at me now I'm the luckiest person around."  
Mary, now a pregnant fiancé, makes a grueling journey.  
*God loves every one of us, it's true, and God loves the universe.*

**Go do your household project!**