



## First Sunday of Advent — The Desert

In this Advent season, the desert reminds us of our need for preparation for the coming of Jesus. Some deserts are soft and sandy; most in this region are hard and rocky. All are dry and mostly barren. There are three important deserts in or near the Holy Land: 1) The Sinai of Egypt, southwest of Gaza and Israel, recalling the stories of Moses and the Israelites in the Book of Exodus; 2) The Negev, northeast of the Sinai and south of Jerusalem, recalling the Covenant between Abraham and Abimelech at the well of Beer Sheva (Genesis 21:25-34); and 3) The Judean, south and southeast of Jerusalem, on the far side of the Mount of Olives.

It was in the Judean desert, a day's walk from the Old City of Jerusalem, that Jesus was tempted by the devil (Mark 1:12-13) after his baptism in the River Jordan (vv. 9-11). Bethlehem, where Jesus was born (Matthew 1+2; Luke 1+2), and Qumran, where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found in 1947, are also in the Judean Desert. It was in these deserts that our ancestors encountered the coming of God among them. Advent begins with the desert experience.

This information comes to you courtesy of St. George's College, one of more than 30 institutions of education, rehabilitation and healthcare of the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem, which includes Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon ([www.j-diocese.org](http://www.j-diocese.org)). St. George's College, a continuing education center of the Anglican Communion, offers educational pilgrimages ([www.sgcjerusalem.org](http://www.sgcjerusalem.org)).



## Second Sunday of Advent — John the Baptist

John the Baptist is well known to most Christians from stories in the New Testament and from art. He was a desert figure reminiscent of Elijah (Mark:1-18). John baptized Jesus in the River Jordan (Mark 1:9-11), which runs between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea, east of Jerusalem. There are several different locations on the river today where this is remembered. The Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem recently received a parcel of land for a baptismal site church along the River Jordan as a gift from the Royal Family of Jordan. The land is near an archeological site of an ancient Christian town.

John's demise was told in the famous story of Herod's birthday party, when Herod rewarded a dancer with her request for John's head (Mark 6:14-29). The Jewish writer Josephus Flavius places this event at Herod's palace at Machearus in present-day Jordan. John's skull is reputed to be in the Great Mosque in Damascus, Syria. John also has a tomb in Samaria in the West Bank, north of Jerusalem. He is known in the Orthodox Church as the *prodromos* or 'forerunner' who points the way forward. He calls us to prepare ourselves for the arrival of Jesus.

This information comes to you courtesy of St. George's College, one of more than 30 institutions of education, rehabilitation and healthcare of the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem, which includes Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon ([www.j-diocese.org](http://www.j-diocese.org)). St. George's College, a continuing education center of the Anglican Communion, offers educational pilgrimages ([www.sgcjerusalem.org](http://www.sgcjerusalem.org)).





## Third Sunday of Advent — The Mount of Olives

The Mount of Olives sits on the east side of the walled Old City in Jerusalem, stands slightly higher than the Temple Mount and has always been a place of expectation. For the Jews, the Messiah will come from the east passing over the Mount of Olives into Jerusalem. Since early times, Christians have expected Jesus' second coming (the 'parousia') from the same direction.

In the Gospels, Jesus often stays in Bethany, close to the Mount of Olives (Mark 14:3-9). He sits on the Mount with his three disciples Peter, James and John, looking over Jerusalem before his passion (Mark 13:3). Today, the Church of Dominus Flevit ('the Lord wept') sits midway up on the Mount of Olives and commemorates Jesus weeping over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41-44). The Church of All Nations sits at the base of the Mount of Olives and recalls his agony, betrayal and arrest (Mark 14:32-50). In Advent, the Mount of Olives brings Jesus to mind and our focus to the coming of the Christ-child.



This information comes to you courtesy of St. George's College, one of more than 30 institutions of education, rehabilitation and healthcare of the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem, which includes Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon ([www.j-diocese.org](http://www.j-diocese.org)). St. George's College, a continuing education center of the Anglican Communion, offers educational pilgrimages ([www.sgcjerusalem.org](http://www.sgcjerusalem.org)).



## Fourth Sunday of Advent — The Coming of God

This season evokes thoughts of the Christmas story, especially Luke's account of the journey of Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, city of David's birth and anointing. Bethlehem was three days travel by donkey or on foot from Nazareth. The name 'Bethlehem' means 'house of meat' in Arabic and 'house of bread' in Hebrew.

There is a 14-pointed star under the altar in the cave in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem that marks the traditional spot of Jesus' birth. The 14 points correspond to the number 14, which is associated with the name of David in Hebrew and symbolizes the three lots of 14 generations at the beginning of Matthew's gospel. The star affirms the theology of Jesus as the 'anointed one' of God. Advent prepares us spiritually for God's coming in Jesus.



This information comes to you courtesy of St. George's College, one of more than 30 institutions of education, rehabilitation and healthcare of the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem, which includes Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon ([www.j-diocese.org](http://www.j-diocese.org)). St. George's College, a continuing education center of the Anglican Communion, offers educational pilgrimages ([www.sgcjerusalem.org](http://www.sgcjerusalem.org)).



## Christmas Eve

The Christmas icon in the Orthodox Church is that of the Incarnation, the birth of Jesus. One of the most beautiful frescoes of that icon is found at St. Gabriel's Church in Nazareth. That icon remembers Jesus being born in a cave, with Jesus lying in a stone watering trough, which is called a manger, quite a foreign concept to the western mind. In the icon, Mary is hovering over the manger and Joseph is sitting a few feet away, his eyes peering in the opposite direction of Mary and the manger. His face expresses utter bewilderment: "What mess have I gotten myself into this time?" it seems to say.

The icon not only tells the story not only of the birth, which includes the handmaids washing the new born baby, but also of the arrival of the shepherds and the wise men. The drama of the Christmas story is told in that one icon.

For the Orthodox Christian, the Christmas icon welcomes the believer into the mystery of nativity of our Lord. On this Christmas, as we explore that mystery, maybe a good starting point for us in that icon is Joseph in his bewilderment.

This information comes to you courtesy of St. George's College, one of more than 30 institutions of education, rehabilitation and healthcare of the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem, which includes Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon ([www.j-diocese.org](http://www.j-diocese.org)). St. George's College, a continuing education center of the Anglican Communion, offers educational pilgrimages ([www.sgcjerusalem.org](http://www.sgcjerusalem.org)).



## Christmas Day

If the great Prologue of John is about anything, it is about hospitality. God becoming flesh in the person of Jesus. For our Jewish and Muslim neighbors in Jerusalem, such a concept of God is inconceivable. But at the very core of the Christian story, this outrageous claim is what we celebrate: the Word becoming flesh and inhabiting with us.

Inhabiting: what a wonderful word. At the Roman Catholic Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth, the façade is quite impressive. There are three distinct tiers to tell the nativity story. The top tier is the Angel Gabriel making his announcement to Mary. The second tier contains the writers of the four gospels, and under the gospel writers, the inscription: "The word became flesh and inhabited in us." In the bottom tier, humanity is represented by the fish of the sea.

On this day, we celebrate God choosing to inhabit with us. There really is only one Christmas present that matters today; the mystery of the Word becoming flesh and inhabiting with us so we can have a glimpse into God's nature.

This information comes to you courtesy of St. George's College, one of more than 30 institutions of education, rehabilitation and healthcare of the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem, which includes Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon ([www.j-diocese.org](http://www.j-diocese.org)). St. George's College, a continuing education center of the Anglican Communion, offers educational pilgrimages ([www.sgcjerusalem.org](http://www.sgcjerusalem.org)).





## First Sunday of Christmas

On the first Sunday after Christmas, the Church jumps 12 years in Jesus' life to Jerusalem and the festival of the Passover. Between the birth of Jesus and his appearance at the Passover, Luke mentions briefly two events: the circumcision and the *purification* or *presentation*.

Today, the Church looks to Jesus when he was 12 years old in the temple in Jerusalem (Luke 2:41-52). While many of us concentrate on Jesus being separated from his parents when they returned to Nazareth, the important point of the Gospel is in verses 46-47: "After three days, they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking questions."

This introduction to the 12-year-old Jesus in the temple, sitting, listening, and asking questions, is a precursor to the Jesus who continued throughout his earthly ministry to ask the critical questions of the law. "I have not come to abolish the law and the prophets, but to give a new understanding to the law and the prophets." Throughout his life, Jesus asks questions that lead to a radically new understanding of the law.

This information comes to you courtesy of St. George's College, one of more than 30 institutions of education, rehabilitation and healthcare of the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem, which includes Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon ([www.j-diocese.org](http://www.j-diocese.org)). St. George's College, a continuing education center of the Anglican Communion, offers educational pilgrimages ([www.sgcjerusalem.org](http://www.sgcjerusalem.org)).



## Second Sunday of Christmas

In the Prologue of John (John 1:1-18), John makes the most incredible confession of faith: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us." For the Semitic mind in the first century, this was an outrageous claim.

For the Jews in the first century — and today — the Word is central to God's nature. The Word of God was God's creative force. In Genesis, we remember that in the beginning, God created by speaking. God says; "let there be light, and there was light." That creative word at creation is the same as the "Word" in John's Prologue. But, John was writing to the Hellenistic community, not to a Semitic mind. John relates the creative word to the pre-eternal Jesus: Jesus becoming flesh and living amongst us since Creation.

The Prologue of John is the unique confession that God took upon God's nature human flesh. John says that God comes and dwells with us, or the great Hebrew expression of "tenting" as the Hebrews did in the desert when they left Egypt.

God comes and lives/tents with us.

This information comes to you courtesy of St. George's College, one of more than 30 institutions of education, rehabilitation and healthcare of the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem, which includes Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon ([www.j-diocese.org](http://www.j-diocese.org)). St. George's College, a continuing education center of the Anglican Communion, offers educational pilgrimages ([www.sgcjerusalem.org](http://www.sgcjerusalem.org)).





## Epiphany

On Christmas Eve, we reflected on the Incarnation icon in the Orthodox Church, and we remembered the fresco at St. Gabriel's Church in Nazareth. That icon in "one click of the camera" captured the birth of Jesus, the handmaids, the shepherds and, of course, Mary and Joseph. Today the last scene is "written" into that icon, the wise men and the offering of gifts.

In the Gospel for the Epiphany, Matthew (2:1-12) presents the complicated political landscape into which Jesus was born. Herod was the King, but in Matthew 2:2, a dilemma is presented to Herod when the wise men tell Herod that they have come to see the child "born King of the Jews." Herod's response is that he is frightened; his power is being challenged.

Herod has reason to be frightened. For this baby presented an alternative understanding of Kingship to the people of the Judah. Throughout Jesus' life, the tension of kingship would exist between the secular/religious authorities and the followers of the Shepherd (2:6). Today, this tension still exists between the "authorities" and the followers of Jesus.



This information comes to you courtesy of St. George's College, one of more than 30 institutions of education, rehabilitation and healthcare of the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem, which includes Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon ([www.j-diocese.org](http://www.j-diocese.org)). St. George's College, a continuing education center of the Anglican Communion, offers educational pilgrimages ([www.sgcjerusalem.org](http://www.sgcjerusalem.org)).