

Come, Follow Me: Advent

Grace in the Life of a Disciple



Adult
Discussion
Guide



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A project of the
South Carolina Annual Conference
of The United Methodist Church

Introduction to the Adult Discussion Guide

What do we mean by “Adult Discussion Guide?” How will adults learn from these sermons? Several principles are at work here:

- Group sessions follow the preaching of individual sermons. In some situations, especially because of the fullness of the Advent-Christmas season, sessions may take place after preaching the entire group of sermons.
- Group participants heard or experienced those sermons in worship, in a recording, or in written form.
- Adults learn in ways different from children and youth. Adults will be responsible for learning and expressing their insights with others.

In a small-group setting, the following pattern for teaching and learning works well:

- Welcome everyone and begin with a prayer for trust and learning. (3-5 minutes)
- Review the sermon. (3-5 minutes)
- Teaching/discussing the concepts (30 minutes)
 - Ask if anything in the sermon seemed new or different.
 - Invite the participants to raise questions that they had about the sermon.
 - Use the discussion questions for deeper conversation.
- Each learning session includes a spiritual practice. Teach and discuss this spiritual discipline. All of the practices are intended for the growth of Christian discipleship. (10-20 minutes)
- Invite group to name what they learned. (5 minutes)
- End the session with prayer. Group members may wish to name prayer concerns prior to this prayer. (5-10 minutes)



First Sunday of Advent “While We Wait, We Work”

Scripture: Isaiah 64:1-9 and Mark 13:24-37

Key Scripture

“From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him.” – Isaiah 64:4

“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father...Therefore, keep awake – for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn.” – Mark 13:32, 35

Takeaways

- God’s prevenient grace pervades both of these scriptures. Prevenient or preparing grace is a simple way to describe the ways in which God is at work in history, in the world and in our lives before any were aware of God’s activity.
- We are called to watch and wait but God has been at work for a long time watching and waiting. There is a sense that God has held off the apocalyptic realities with hopes that more people will wait (Isaiah) or “stay awake” (Mark).
- God is acting on our behalf before we have even been aware of God’s presence. That is part of our definition or understanding of prevenient grace.

Questions for Discussion or Conversation

- How do you see the theme of waiting connect with your life during Advent? Why are these such good scriptures to study in the season of Advent?
- The Millerites of the 19th century got it exactly wrong regarding the second coming of Christ. What do you think led to such a misjudgment? How do the scriptures urge us to think and believe differently?
- When have you been dead wrong about something you thought you were absolutely sure about? How did you react? Where was God in the midst of that?
- Where do you see God’s grace at work in these scriptures?
- Where do you see God’s grace at work in the life of your church? In your life?
- While we wait, we work. What kind of Kingdom work are you doing while we’re waiting?



Spiritual Practice

The days during Advent and Christmas are full and sometimes overscheduled. Instead of learning or adding new spiritual practices, we offer suggestions to build on your current practices.

This week, while we wait, take time to work at your prayers by watching or reading your usual news coverage. As you look at the news each day, pray for something or someone in one of the stories that jumps out at you concerning the world, the nation and the state.



Second Sunday of Advent “The Voice in a Spiritual Wilderness”

Scripture: Isaiah 40:1-11 and Mark 1:1-8

Key Scripture

“A voice cries out: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’” Isaiah 40:3

Takeaways

- A spiritual wilderness represents anything that separates or distances a person from God.
- We can be agents of God’s prevenient grace when we help clear the path in the wilderness for others.
- We do not need to be someone’s savior – that is Christ’s job – but we can help prepare the way for Christ to work on someone’s heart by speaking words of comfort and courage, by listening and receiving the wilderness experience of others, and through invitational prayer.

Questions for Discussion or Conversation

- Have you ever had a wilderness experience in nature? In what ways was it frightening? How does relate to a spiritual wilderness experience?
- What are some experiences that would cause someone to find themselves separated from God? How does someone end up in a spiritual wilderness?
- Who paved a way in your heart so that Christ can transform you? Were they mentors, family members, pastors or strangers? How did their words, actions or relationship with you help pave a way for Christ?
- What are some practical ways that we can help others in their spiritual wilderness? What are some ways that we can be a voice of comfort, strength, and courage?

Spiritual Practice

Sometimes we forget about the important people who helped pave the way for Christ in our lives. Take time this week to reach out to that person and let them know how important they are in your faith story. They may not even know how their actions made pathways for Christ to transform your life. Pray with gratitude for that person.

Think of someone who may be especially lonely or distanced from God and church community and telephone them. The sound of your voice over the phone may be a cry of comfort in the wilderness. Pray for that person throughout the week.



Third Sunday of Advent

"Preaching Good News in Bad Times"

Scripture: Isaiah 64:1-4,8-11 and John 1:6-8,19-28

Key Scripture

*"O Lord, you are our Father, we are the clay,
and you are the potter." Isaiah 64:8*

Takeaways

- God wants justice among all people and throughout creation.
- The message of the Bible is for those who are oppressed, brokenhearted, downtrodden.
- The spirit of God anoints us to reach out to others who are oppressed.
- God gives us power and encouragement to love all people and to do deeds of justice.

Questions for Discussion or Conversation

- What questions do you have about Isaiah 64 and the understanding of the development of this biblical book – First Isaiah (Chapters 1-39), Second Isaiah (Chapters 40-55), and Third Isaiah (Chapters 56-66)?
- The sermon includes several examples of contemporary injustice. Where do you see injustice happening in the world today?
- How have you witnessed or experienced injustice?
- When and where have you seen people work for justice?
- How is God anointing you with power to do the works of God?
- As you follow Christ, what is God calling you to do?

Spiritual Practice

Dag Hammarskjöld (1905-1961) was the second secretary-general in the history of the United Nations. He understood that forum to be a place to work for justice among all nations. Hammarskjöld died in a plane crash while en route to negotiate a peace settlement in what is now Zambia. In his posthumously published journal titled "Markings," Hammarskjöld left a 12-word prayer (1953 entry) that concerns gratitude, thanksgiving, justice and hope. This week, spend time learning and praying this prayer:

*"For all that has been – Thanks!
To all that shall be – Yes!"*



As you slowly pray the first six words, remember how God has acted in history – the history of Israel, the history of the world, the history of your congregation, your own life.

As you pray the second half of the pray, reflect on God's unfolding dream for the world. Invite God to give you glimpses of the divine dream.

To explore this prayer further, you may wish to read "[Three Prayers You'll Want to Pray](#)," by George Donigian. In addition to Hammarskjöld's prayer, Donigian discusses the full version of The Serenity Prayer and The Lord's Prayer.



Fourth Sunday of Advent

"The Favor of God"

Scripture: 2 Samuel 7:1-11,16 and Luke 1:26-38

Key Scripture

"And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women." Luke 1:28 (KJV)

Takeaways

- God's presence is revealed in unexpected ways.
- Submission to the call upon our lives can be unsettling.
- Revolution seldom, if ever, is a smooth transition.
- God surprises the world by whom God calls.

Questions for Discussion or Conversation

- How does the absence of rituals and traditions affect your loyalty to Christ and church?
- What is encouragement for you in an unfamiliar role?
- How do you recognize the call upon your life?
- Has your faith led you into an uncomfortable role or roles?
- Talk about how you feel about change – whether in culture, church or elsewhere.
- How have you felt affirmed in the body of Christ? How do you affirm others?
- The sermon speaks of "revolution." Sometimes it is hard to remember that the mission and ministry of Jesus initiated a cosmic cultural change. What does revolution mean to you? How can you associate revolution with Christ?
- When you speak of faith, what is most important for you to affirm?

Spiritual Practice

Extending hospitality within the community. We are called to be in community with one another. Mary visited Elizabeth, and this story serves as an example of how strength is garnered through sharing our time and telling our stories.

- Each day this week, call at least one person who has been absent from the gathered congregation.



- Begin to develop a relationship with a community group – a grief support group, a community center, the church's sick and shut-in list, or a support group for a local school.
- Set up a meeting through Zoom or other social networking platform to check on others and to catch up while discussing the impact of God's love on the lives of participants.

With each opportunity, let your light shine so that others know more of your compassionate love for them and for Christ. You need not verbalize your faith. Strive to be an inviting spirit.



Christmas Eve "Shepherds in a Hurry"

Scripture: Luke 2:1-20

Key Scripture

"So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them." – Luke 2:16-18

Takeaways

- The birth of Jesus is an invitation for all to enter and to become a witness to the incarnation.
- As we grow in faith, we write our own stories of faith. These stories of faith become our personal Christmas songs.
- We need to be where God is birthing love, grace, peace and hope.

Questions for Discussion or Conversation

- What Christian tradition is most meaningful for you at Christmas?
- What questions do you have about Luke 2:1-20?
- With which person or group in Luke 2:1-20 do you most identify?
- Which person or group seems farthest from you?
- Where have you experienced closeness to God this Christmas?
- Where have you experienced distance from God this Christmas?

Spiritual Practice

Spend time offering prayers of devotion and love to Christ. Your prayers may take the form of thanksgiving and gratitude, or adoration and praise. You may use words from scripture, for example, Luke 1:46-47 or Luke 2:14, or you may use other prayers. Here is an example:

*Loving God, I love and adore you. Your creation inspires awe.
The depth of your love and the gift of Christ overwhelm me.
Your grace sustains me. How I praise you!*

Pray such prayers of devotion and praise and allow yourself to open to God's love.



First Sunday of Christmas “Fulfillment of Divine Promise”

Scripture: Luke 2:22-40

Key Scripture

“...for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”— Luke 2:30-32

Takeaways

- In Simeon and Anna, we see the lifelong reality of faith and hope: We wait in faith for God’s love and compassion to be known to all people.
- Discipleship is a lifelong journey.
- God fulfills the promises made in scripture.
- One theme in this series is, “While we wait, we work.” During this time after Christmas, pray and be ready to receive nudges and visions from God.
- God’s sanctifying grace is made known in our lives through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Questions for Discussion or Conversation

- What is the longest you have had to wait for something? What feelings did you have? What made it worth the wait?
- Where do you see God’s grace at work in this Scripture? In your life?
- When do rituals become more than just “rituals?” What rituals are important in your life?
- How do we know who God has created us to be?
- What programs or small groups does your church provide for growth in discipleship?
- What response does God ask or require from us?

Spiritual Practice

We are approaching the end of the year and the start of a new year. This week’s spiritual discipline is prayerful writing. This week we invite you to respond to these questions:

- What increased your sense of gratitude during the year gone by?
- How will you pray during the next year? What will be your special prayer focus?



As a prayer practice, sit quietly with paper and pen or pencil, or sit quietly with computer or digital device. Invite the Holy Spirit to inspire your prayer intentions for the coming year. After quiet reflection, list or describe the people or events or interactions that evoked gratitude in you. Keep that list and add to it each day this week.

After your prayer of gratitude, invite the Holy Spirit to inspire your prayers during the next year. Beyond your personal concerns and those of your family or church, for whom or what will you focus your prayers? You may be inspired to pray about cancer or teachers and students or world hunger as a focus throughout the year. You may be inspired to follow a prayer guide or you may wish to pray for the nations of the world.

An ecumenical prayer calendar specifies different nations as prayer concerns for each week of the year. To learn more about this prayer endeavor, go to the World Council of Churches' [Ecumenical Prayer Cycle](#). Write your prayer plan and add to or refine this plan.

Remember that whatever you write is for your eyes only. Be free to express all that inspired gratitude and to plan a part of your prayer life for the next year.



Second Sunday of Christmas "Come, Follow Me Home"

Scripture: Jeremiah 31:7-14 and John 1:18-25

Key Scripture

*"See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north,
and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth,
among them the blind and the lame,
those with child and those in labor, together;
a great company, they shall return here.
With weeping they shall come,
and with consolations I will lead them back,
I will let them walk by brooks of water,
in a straight path in which they shall not stumble;
for I have become a father to Israel,
and Ephraim is my firstborn – Jeremiah 31:8-9*

*"I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,
'Make straight the way of the Lord.'" – John 1:23*

Takeaway

- Homecoming is a grace-filled invitation always available to God's people, though it may take different forms at different times.

Questions for Discussion or Conversation

- When you hear the word "home" or "homecoming," what is the first thing that comes to mind?
- In Jeremiah 31:9, God beckons the Israelites home to a New Israel as "firstborn children." What does that mean to you? Are there times when you have felt "re-adopted" by God's grace?
- Jeremiah 31:8 says women, children, and people with disabilities will be among the first in line when God calls "the faithful remnant" back to Israel. Who are some of the folks you believe God would call to be first in line to the Promised Land in our present day?
- Can you relate to people who are forced to leave their homes forever? Why or why not?
- Have you ever thought about scripture through the eyes of an immigrant? Or scripture as written by immigrants?
- In Jeremiah 10-12, God uses agricultural metaphors to describe the flourishing of the Israelites once they journey back to Israel. What does flourishing look like for you? Do you identify with the imagery presented?



- What are the things in the world that make you homesick for the Kin-dom of God, or the New Nation that God is preparing for those in exile?
- Do you see parallels of grace between Jeremiah's vision of God and the Gospel stories of Jesus' life? Where do you see similarities? Where do you see differences?
- What is some of the work we can do to fill the world with grace and make it more "homey" like the Kin-dom of God in Jeremiah's vision?

Spiritual Practice

A monk known as Brother Lawrence (1614-1691) spoke about practicing the presence of God at all times and in places. Brother Lawrence said:

"God does not ask much of us, merely a thought of Him from time to time, a little act of adoration, sometimes to ask for His grace, sometimes to offer Him your sufferings, at other times to thank Him for the graces, past and present, He has bestowed on you, in the midst of your troubles to take solace in Him as often as you can. Lift up your heart to Him during your meals and in company; the least little remembrance will always be the most pleasing to Him. One need not cry out very loudly; He is nearer to us than we think." – The Practice of the Presence of God)

Begin this week to offer prayers during your activities that you do not normally connect with prayer – while watching television or reading a novel, while making a bed or visiting the optometrist, while picking up the mail or walking the dog.

- Television or novel – "Thank you for this time of entertainment."
- Bed – "Thank you for watching over all who sleep."
- Optometrist – "Give me visions of your reign of justice and love on Earth."
- Mail – "Guide my thoughts and my talk with others."
- Dog – "Thank you for this companion."

Your life offers many opportunities for prayers of gratitude and prayers for others. Enjoy these opportunities!





This "Come, Follow Me: Advent – Grace in the Life of a Disciple" Adult Discussion Guide was developed and written by a team from the South Carolina Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church.

It is intended for use with the "Come, Follow Me: Advent – Grace in the Life of a Disciple" Sermon Series, also produced by the South Carolina Conference.

We extend our appreciation to all involved for their work.

Both the Sermon Series and the Adult Discussion Guide can be downloaded at umcsc.org/comefollowme.

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