



# ADVENT



## Small Groups

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### INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

You're probably bad at waiting. Most of us are. And everything in our world makes it worse. Fast food. Overnight delivery. 5G downloads. We want it all, and we want it now.

Advent helps us wait. It's the season before Christmas that reminds us that God's people must wait on God's saving work. Ancient Israelites waited a long time for the Messiah to come. And we are waiting for Jesus to return and to make all things new.

Advent reminds us that God is worth waiting for. He keeps his promises. And when he does, it is different and better than we could have expected.

Advent begins this year with our special Celebration of Advent worship event on December 3 and continues for four Sundays culminating on Christmas Eve.

## HOW TO USE THE FACILITATOR GUIDE

This is meant to be a resource to help you guide your group through a Bible-based discussion and into your prayer response time. You'll begin with a brief introduction to the topic, followed by a warmup question, often somewhat related to the topic of the study ahead. From there you'll read Scripture together, explore questions in an open conversation (remembering to practice good listening and encourage dialogue), and close with a time of prayer with each other. We end with prayer prompts that may help you tie these passages to the needs or desires of your group, and to bless what the Lord has done in your time together.

**There are likely more questions and, at times, Scripture, than your group will have time for.**

This is by design. We would rather you have more questions than you need than too few. We advise that the facilitator review the lesson ahead of the meeting and choose a few questions they'd most like to ask, so that you can skip over some questions for the sake of time. Remember, you're meeting routinely, so there will be time to circle back on these conversations again.

Please allot appropriate time for prayer at the end of your meeting. Prayer is an essential and irreplaceable part of small group. We'd rather you abbreviate the discussion and move on to prayer rather than have a long discussion and speed through prayer. That doesn't mean you can't pray efficiently (Mat 6:7), but we believe that God hears and responds to our prayers, and that we are knitted together when we pray with each other.

If you have any questions or comments, please contact Dan Kidd at [dkidd@ualc.org](mailto:dkidd@ualc.org).  
For more small group resources, including facilitator training, visit [ualc.org/smallgroups](http://ualc.org/smallgroups)

Special thanks to our authors: Elaine Pierce, and Kathy Carr.

# CELEBRATION OF ADVENT

## Isaiah 40:1-5

### FACILITATORS:

### WEEK 1

In today's discussion we will be giving some context for the passage in Isaiah (specifically how this passage is the first prophecy to Judah after they'd been defeated and exiled by the Babylonians). You may read from the Isaiah 39 (a portion of which is included below) or simply paraphrase if that's best.

We also plan to read a brief passage from each of the 4 Gospels where they quote from Isaiah 40:1-5. You might want to have those verses bookmarked ahead of time, or prepare the group to read separately from them when the time comes.

### INTRODUCTION FOR THE GROUP:

We live in a time and place of speed and hurry. We are conditioned to expect things to happen instantaneously. We can have a full meal delivered to our doorstep in 30 minutes, or, if we want to drive-thru instead, we can have food in our hands by the time we reach the other side of the restaurant. You could purchase your winter wardrobe this morning and have waiting on your porch for you by daybreak tomorrow. We can skip lines, or leaving the house altogether, and we can send out digital Christmas cards across the globe with the push of a few buttons. We are trained to be allergic to waiting.

But the season of Advent is a sober reminder for all of us that waiting is a natural and necessary part of life. There are, and always will be, things that we long for—things we want to be true about ourselves, our circumstances, or about the world around us—that simply are not yet realized. During Advent, we are able to join in the stories of the Bible, as these characters long for the coming of the saving Messiah, King Jesus.

In today's passage, we will hear from a prophet who anticipated the Kingdom work of Jesus centuries before he was born. As we read from Isaiah 40 together, we will see how the Lord promises good things ahead, things worth waiting for, and assures us that we can trust that Jesus will come again.

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### OPENING QUESTION:

- Do you or your family have an Advent or Christmas season tradition? What is it and how did it come about?
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## OPENING PRAYER:

Pray something like: *Lord, we come to you as a people too often impatient, and we are eager for your Kingdom. Use this time we have together to encounter you, to learn from you, and grow in the gifts of faith, hope, and patience as we take hold of the gift of this Advent season together. Amen.*

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## SCRIPTURE:

Have someone read Isaiah 40:1-5.

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## DISCUSSION:

- What from this passage stands out to you? What did you hear that was new or intriguing to you?
  - Allow a variety of answers. Consider sharing something that stands out to you to set the tone of the discussion. As you listen to your group's answers, pay attention to what stood out to them so that you can emphasize those portions in your ongoing discussion.

This passage in Isaiah 40 is the beginning of what some scholars identify as "Second Isaiah". Which is to say Chapter 40 begins the portion of the book where Isaiah is prophesying to Jerusalem who had by then been defeated by the Babylonians and were in exile. Isaiah 39 concludes,

*<sup>5</sup> Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, "Hear the word of the Lord Almighty: <sup>6</sup> The time will surely come when everything in your palace, and all that your predecessors have stored up until this day, will be carried off to Babylon. Nothing will be left, says the Lord. <sup>7</sup> And some of your descendants, your own flesh and blood who will be born to you, will be taken away, and they will become eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon."*

*<sup>8</sup> "The word of the Lord you have spoken is good," Hezekiah replied. For he thought, "There will be peace and security in my lifetime."*

Hezekiah was mistaken; he would not live to see either Babylon defeat Israel or their eventual return from exile.

- Knowing that this passage is the first thing Isaiah prophesied to the people of Israel after their defeat and exile, how do you imagine you would have received this word from Isaiah?
  - Receive all answers. Consider the range of emotions they would be experiencing, and the degrees by which they might believe and welcome this prophesy, or disbelief and reject it.
- What do you think the Lord meant by saying "her [Jerusalem's] hard service has been completed" and "her sins have been paid for?"
  - This is the Lord's redemptive response to Judah, who had been handed over to her enemies for her idolatry and rejecting the law of the Lord (Amos 2:4-5). God is promising, through Isaiah, to restore

Jerusalem after the exile and forgive her of these sins—set her anew with a clean slate.

- How do you imagine the people in exile would have responded to the promise that the multitude of sins for which they were guilty would be forgiven?

Whether or not you've read this passage in the book of Isaiah, you may still ring familiar.

Have individuals read each of these passages: Matthew 3:1-3, Mark 1:2-4, Luke 3:2-6, John 1:19-23

- Why do you think that each of the 4 Gospels includes these words within the first 3 chapters of their books?
  - Clearly they believe that John the Baptist is a part of the prophecy from Isaiah 40 and they want to validate John's ministry by making that explicit. Additionally, they are tying the pronouncement of the birth of Jesus to the promises God made in this passage.

In the time of Isaiah's prophecy, decades passed from when the Lord promised to deliver the people out of exile and when they finally returned to Jerusalem. And even when they returned, many of God's people over the centuries became disenchanted that the Lord had not yet restored Israel in the earth-shattering, triumphant way that was described by the prophets. Which is why the evangelists (that is, those who wrote the Gospels) emphasized that Jesus was would be the fulfilment of those long-awaited prophesies.

In much the same way, we experience the incredible gifts of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection; but we also continue to await Jesus' return.

- How can might the content of Isaiah's prophesy, and the length of time it took for this prophecy to be fulfilled, help us as Christians awaiting Jesus' return?
  - We can trust that God works within his own timing, but the Lord is faithful to fulfill his promises. And because of what Jesus has done it is clear it was worth the wait, and so we can have faith that what Jesus will do is worth waiting for.
- Have you ever had to wait on the Lord for him to act? What was that like?
- What part of the Kingdom of Jesus are you most eager to see fulfilled?

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## PRAYER AND MINISTRY:

Consider taking some time to share with the group things that you would like the Lord to preserve, change or reconcile. Share about how you feel about waiting on the Lord to act on these things. After sharing, take time to pray for each individual who shared, that the Lord would hear their prayers, act in his will and time, and that the Holy Spirit would provide us with the patience and faith to trust God.

# SONG OF ZECHARIAH

Luke 1:67-79

## FACILITATORS:

## WEEK 2

This lesson will shift around in Luke chapter 1, so it will be helpful for each participant to have a Bible in order to follow along.

The primary text for today's discussion is Zechariah's song from Luke 1:67-79, but you may want to read (or have someone read) Luke 1:19-20 and vv.57-66, or you might consider summarizing them for the group before reading your central passage.

## INTRODUCTION FOR THE GROUP:

In today's discussion we will hear an advent song, sung by Zechariah, found in the first chapter of Luke's Gospel. Zechariah was married to Elizabeth, the cousin of Mary, Jesus' mother. According to Luke 1:5, Zechariah belonged to the priestly division of Abijah (a descendant of Aaron), and Elizabeth was also of Aaron's priestly line. Before Mary was visited by Gabriel, Zechariah was serving in the temple of the Lord, and apparently praying for a child, as Elizabeth was barren and in old age (Luke 1:7-8).

## OPENING QUESTION:

- What is an example of a time you knew some *really, really, really* good news (or juicy bit of gossip), and you had been told you couldn't tell anyone? Describe your experience.
- Can you think of a time when you were overcome with fear, and just could not bring yourself find relief or hope? Share your experience with the group.

## OPENING PRAYER:

Pray something like: *Lord Jesus, we need you to illuminate the thoughts of our hearts and minds. We need you, and your presence. Will you come meet with us? We pray you will inspire us by the power of your Holy Spirit, the way you have mysteriously done for ages past. Give us ears to hear, eyes to see, and hearts to believe. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

## SCRIPTURE:

Facilitator, consider reading or summarizing Luke 1:19-20 and vv57-66. Note that the angel, Gabriel, tells Zechariah he will not be able to speak because he didn't believe Gabriel's announcement of that Elizabeth would have a son. You might connect the dot that Sarah (wife of Abraham) too doubted that the Lord would give her a child in her old age.

Have someone read Luke 1:67-79. Thank them for reading.

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## DISCUSSION:

- Have you ever tried to speak on someone's behalf, and had it fall flat; either where you didn't communicate the message effectively or they didn't receive the message well?
  - Receive all answers.
- How is Zechariah's ability to prophesy a demonstration of God's grace?
  - Even though Zechariah was doubtful of the Lord's promise at first, he came to have faith and to be a prophet, filled with the Holy Spirit, pronouncing the upcoming salvation of God for his people and blessing his son, John who would himself prophesy of Jesus.
- How would you characterize Zechariah's song in vv. 68-75? What details stand out to you from these verses?
  - Be prepared to share one or two instances of Zechariah's praises and proclamations about the character and work of the Lord that stand out to you personally.
- What among Zechariah's praises to the Lord most resonates with you? How so?
  - Guide the group to consider some of the practical and personal ways in which the Lord has been our redeemer, savior, protector, deliverer, merciful, trustworthy, a source of strength, who enables us to serve him in holiness and righteousness.
- Have you, or someone you know, ever been bound by fear and unable to praise God? How might God move us out of fear and into praising him?
  - You might ask your group that, if they are going to share about someone else, they do so respecting their dignity and perhaps not sharing a name and avoiding gossip.

Even though Zechariah thought the finished work of Jesus (that God's people were eagerly awaiting) was decades from being realized, Zechariah's hopes for what was to come are founded upon what the Lord had already done in the history of God's people (as we hear in this song).

- How does remembering and praising the Lord for the work he has already done help us to prepare for the return of Jesus we are waiting for?



Have someone re-read vv. 76-79.

- In Zechariah's blessing over John, in what ways does he specify that John "will go on before the Lord?"
  - John will be a prophet, preparing the way for Jesus, giving the knowledge of the forgiveness of sins and the "rising sun" who would shine into darkness, the shadow of death, and light the path of peace. John would teach his crowds to repent of and reconcile their sins against God and others.

Think about how God has found you, perhaps even rescued you from 'living in darkness' or 'the shadow of death'. Now think about the words, 'because of the tender mercy of our God'.

*Invite your group to take a couple of minutes of quiet, prayerful contemplation over these words: "because of the tender mercy of our God."*

- What images, thoughts or even emotions came to mind?
- How does Jesus fulfill the proclamation that his light will "guide our feet into the path of peace?"
  - Receive all answers.
  - You may notice that the character of Jesus gives us something to emulate, that his teachings instruct of the ways of the Kingdom, and the Holy Spirit transforms us into people free to live in way the Lord intends for us, individually and a local and global Church.
- How have you experienced this promise about Jesus in your life? In what ways has the Lord disciplined you in the path of *shalom* (peace)?
  - Receive all answers.

Zechariah was not chosen to be one of the very first new testament characters to declare the Gospel of peace because he was a good person or deserving of that honor. In spite of his unbelief, God enabled him by the power of the Holy Spirit to sing one of the most known songs of praise in the world, in all of history. Considering that God's word always comes to pass, Zechariah's song instructs our hearts this advent season to meditate on and look with joyful anticipation to the truth that Christ has come, and will come again.

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## **PRAYER AND MINISTRY:**

As you transition into prayer and ministry time, take another few moments to silently, prayerfully meditate on the ways the Lord has been good and faithful in your life and in the lives of those around you. Consider how the Lord has been working in your life, lighting the path for your feet. Share with the group any highlights God brings to mind, and share with one another what needs you have now that you would like the Lord to respond to.

Close with a prayer like this: Lord Jesus, we need your grace. Just like Zechariah, we need your Holy Spirit to shake the unbelief off our hearts and loose our tongues to give you the praise you deserve. Help us God. Help us to honor you with our wills, our words and our ways. We praise you Jesus. You are the Son of the Most High, and we praise and thank you for coming to us in humility and tenderness because of your love for us. We believe! Help us overcome our unbelief to the praise of your glory. In Jesus' name. Amen

# SONG OF MARY

## Luke 1:46-56

### FACILITATORS:

### WEEK 3

In today's passage we're covering the song of Mary (also known as the Magnificat). You'll be discussing with your group how Mary responds to the incredible news that she would be the mother of God made flesh; the Emmanuel. We will invite the group to imagine what it would be like to be Mary in the scenario. While we can make some educated guesses about Mary based on the text and historical Christian tradition, the Bible doesn't give us a great deal of information about Mary's age, family life, etc., and so we will be using our imaginations to find ourselves in the story with her.

### INTRODUCTION FOR THE GROUP:

This week we continue in our study on Songs of Advent by hearing the song of Mary, Jesus' mother. This song gives us a special glimpse into the inner life and faith of Mary, and how fitting it is that the Lord chose her to be Jesus' mother.

As we've said in previous weeks, a major theme of Advent is waiting in eager anticipation for what is promised and will be, but isn't realized yet.

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### OPENING QUESTION:

- Do you ever find yourself with a song you can't get out of your head? Is it a song you like or not? How do you finally 'move on'?
- What's your favorite genre of music? Christian? Country? Classical? Emo? Rap? Oldies?

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### OPENING PRAYER:

Pray something like: *Lord, as we hear together the prophetic song of Mary, we seek to hear your voice, and to encounter you. Lead us to share in Mary's praise and rejoicing over you, and make our hearts to be your humble servants in all the things you intend for us.*

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### SCRIPTURE:

Have someone read Luke 1:46-56. Remember to thank them for reading.

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## DISCUSSION:

- What do you tell us about Mary, mother of Jesus?
  - Receive all answers. Church history tells us that she was a young Jewish teenage girl, quite possibly in her early teens. She must have come from a devout family, given her response to the visit from the angel. We know she was betrothed to Joseph, and that he could easily break the engagement if she was pregnant out of wedlock.
- What was the world like for the Jewish people who lived when and where Mary did?
  - They were living under Roman occupation—treated as second-class citizens by the Romans. We know from Matthew's Gospel that Herod the Great, king of Judea, had ordered the slaughtering of newborn Jewish boys trying to prevent the prophesied messiah from usurping him.

Let's consider together Mary's reaction to the angel's news. (see Luke 1:26-37).

Luke doesn't tell us Mary's inner thoughts. We only have her question, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" and then her acceptance of the news, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said."

- What do you imagine she might have felt hearing this pronouncement? How do you imagine you might have responded?
- Why do you think Mary responded the way that she did?
  - This might be an opportunity for you to encourage someone in your group or our church community who you know to be peace-seeking and not quarrelsome.
- What does Mary praise God for in her song?
  - All generations will call me blessed
  - God has done great things for me
  - He is merciful toward those who fear him
  - He has performed mighty deeds
  - He brings down rulers
  - He lifts up the humble
  - He fills the hungry
  - He sends the rich away empty
  - He has helped his servant Israel
- What contrast do you see in the types of people Mary sings about in vv. 51-53?
- Why, for Mary, is the scattering of proud, the toppling of rulers, and the sending away of the rich good news of the Lord's work?

- How does Jesus fulfill the proclamations of Mary's song?
- Which part of Mary's song do you appreciate or resonate with the most? Why?
- How might we guard ourselves from suffering the fate of the proud, the rich, or the ruler described in Mary's song?
- How might we come to be the humble servant?

Mary accepted the angel's news without knowing that Joseph would also receive a visit from an angel. She was obedient to God without knowing if she would be raising a baby as an outcast, disgraced single mother. She trusts God without knowing the future.

- What are you trusting God for that you don't have an answer to yet?
- How can Mary's song grant us God's perspective in these situations?

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### **PRAYER AND MINISTRY:**

Spend time as a group sharing concerns and asking God to give you a heart like Mary's. Perhaps sharing in groups of two or three will allow a depth of sharing that isn't possible with a larger group. Pray for one another accordingly.

# SONGS OF THE ANGELS

Luke 2:8-20

## FACILITATORS:

## WEEK 4

A good portion of this discussion will invite your group to use their imaginations to consider what it might have been like to be a character in different portions of this story, or how they might have behaved beyond the text. This is intended to help us engage with the story and experience this incredible event along with them, and to help us consider how we, today, are actors in God's ongoing story of spreading in word and deed Jesus' Gospel with the world.

To assist with this, you might encourage your Scripture reader to read slowly and clearly, or perhaps have them read the story twice. You might also invite your group to close their eyes as they hear the passage and attempt to enter the story as a character.

## INTRODUCTION FOR THE GROUP:

This week we conclude our series of Songs of Advent with a song of proclamation from the angels to the "lowly" shepherds attending their flock outside of the town of Bethlehem. Together we will hear about and discuss how the Lord uses surprising means for his purposes. We will also consider together what incredible news is that these angels shared that night.

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## OPENING QUESTION:

- Have you ever seen or experienced a memorable pregnancy or birth announcement? What stood out to you about it?
- When you have really great news to share, who is the first person you're most likely to share it with?

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## OPENING PRAYER:

Pray something like: *Father, we thank you for Jesus. Thank you for the good news we will hear today, that you came to be with us, among us, one of us so that we would be reconciled and redeemed. We pray that you would meet us in your word and our discussion today and that we would encounter the remarkable peace you offer us. Amen*

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## SCRIPTURE:

Have someone read Luke 2:8-20. Remember to thank them for reading.

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## DISCUSSION:

- What from this story stands out to you? What did you hear that was new or intriguing to you?
- Why do you think the angel of the Lord appeared to shepherds in their fields at nighttime? Why were they the first audience of Jesus' birth announcement?
  - In 1 Samuel, when Samuel seeks to find a new king to replace Saul, he finds David as a shepherd in Bethlehem. According to the story, David is the least likely among Jesse's sons to be thought to be a king, but the Lord tells Samuel David is God's choice.
  - This theme of shepherds being socially lowly and unremarkable, paired with the location of Bethlehem means to emphasize again how unassuming and countercultural Jesus' kingship is.
- What were the shepherds reaction to the angels? What do you imagine you would have felt if you were among them? What would have been your reaction?
  - Receive all answers.

The angel began by telling them not to be afraid, and then, accompanied by a "great company of heavenly hosts" shared good news that would "cause great joy for all people."

- How is the birth announcement of Jesus good news for all people? Is there anyone for whom Jesus' birth announcement isn't good news?
  - Consider discussing with your group how God becoming a human and bringing about his Kingdom, defeating sin, death, and the devil is in fact great news for everyone, while simultaneously Jesus' birth is the very thing King Herod had many children killed for. How does this help us understand the ways the Gospel is received (or rejected)?
- In what ways has Jesus' birth brought glory to God and peace to those who receive his favor?
- Do you think this good news about the birth of Jesus was something that the shepherds were eager to hear?
  - We have no information about at all about the theology, political position, or individual hopes of these characters. We know they lived in a time of Roman occupation, and that shepherding isn't necessarily an envied occupation, but aside from that we can only wonder broadly about what they longed for. That said, their response (which we will speak about shortly) indicates that they recognized that this was, in fact, news good enough to share immediately.

- After the angels returned into heaven, how did the shepherds respond to their announcement? What does this tell us about them and how they received the announcement?
  - Clearly they were convinced and animated enough by the events of the night that they ignored any concerns that they might seem crazy or dishonest and went to share with Bethlehem what they'd seen and heard.

We're told in v. 9 But "Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart."

- Why do you think it might mean for Mary to treasure and ponder these things in her heart?
- Have you ever received something from the Lord that you treasured and/or pondered in your heart? What is that like?

Our passage concludes, *"The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told."*

- How do you imagine this event affected these shepherds? How might it have influenced their relationship with the Lord?

Of all the possible people in the world to share and entrust the proclamation of the birth of God into the world, the Lord chose a private audience of a group of shepherds in a field outside of Bethlehem.

- What does this tell us about how the Lord intends to spread his gospel? What might this tell us about how he chooses to use his people, like us, for his work?

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## PRAYER AND MINISTRY:

As we celebrate these final days and hours of this Advent series, we're reminded that though we are still awaiting Jesus' return and the Kingdom coming in full, we can rest assured that this is worth the wait. And, in the meantime, the birth, life, and Kingdom of Jesus is incredible news worth sharing.

Pray with your group that as you celebrate Christmas this week, that each of you would encounter the generosity and power of the Lord, that you would hear the Gospel fresh again and be moved to praise the Lord and be glad. Pray also for occasions, conviction, and the help of the Spirit to share the incredible news of Jesus with whomever may hear and receive it.

If anyone among you would like prayer for an individual need, take time to pray for them.