

advent[ure]

a journey through the Christmas story

Leader's Guide

A quick search of “definition of journey” on the internet provides this answer: *Noun. 1. An act of traveling from one place to another. 2. A long and often difficult process of personal change and development.*

A simple definition of the word **journey** according to Merriam-Webster is “an act of traveling from one place to another.” The full definition also includes “something suggesting travel or passage from one place to another.” During the four weeks of Advent we will journey through the familiar story we hear, remember, sing about and often see during this holiday—and holy—season.



This Study Encourages the Use of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, laid the foundation for many of our practices in discipleship. The Wesleyan Quadrilateral is our response to those patterns for study and accountability, with intentional focus on four sources of influence:

- **Scripture**, which Wesley recognized as the true authority. Each week, a Scripture passage from the Advent story is the focus of the lesson. Participants are asked to read and reflect on the passage in the days before meeting with the study group for discussion.
- **Tradition**, which Wesley believed supplies us with a historical link to Jesus and the apostles. The study includes descriptions of traditional spiritual practices handed down over the centuries.
- **Reason**, without which Wesley said we cannot understand the essential truths of Scripture. During discussion time within each group, participants are encouraged to share how their own personal story speaks to what they have read and heard on the week's topic.
- **Experience**, which Wesley believed was perhaps the strongest proof of our belief, coming from our own personal feelings of holiness and happiness.

Keeping these sources in mind during the discussion time, guide the conversation by recognizing that the way one thinks, the choices we've made, and each person's situations and circumstances all impact the spiritual experience of each person in the group. After watching a video featuring women considering the Christmas story through the lens of their own journeys, invite participants into a time of conversation and discussion about that week's passage and the journey it represents.



Look for Grace at Work in Each Week's Study

Grace is getting something when we do not deserve it. Grace is a gift of God that we can never fully repay. God offers us grace simply because of God's love for us and desire to be in relationship with us. John Wesley described God's grace as threefold:

- **Prevenient Grace** is the grace that goes before us. It is at work in our lives before we even know we need it. God has a plan for us to know God, and was already at work with a gift of grace through Jesus so that we wouldn't be separated from God because of sin. Grace means even when we miss the mark, when we sin, we can still be in a relationship with God, who loves us even when we make a mistake. God's love is

bigger and stronger than sin.

- Through **Justifying Grace**, we find forgiveness for our sin. Jesus made it possible for our sins to be forgiven. Knowing this helps us make choices that honor God and keep us from sin. The great message of grace is knowing that even when we do sin, God *always* loves us, and grace keeps us in relationship with God.
- **Sanctifying Grace** is the power that leads us on to becoming more and more like Christ. Not only is grace at work before we are aware of it, and not only does claiming it remind us that we have forgiveness for our sins, but it continues to work in our lives. Grace allows us to know Jesus more and become more like him.

Each week, offer an opportunity to consider and share about moments of grace that are experienced in each week's journey during this study.



Try the Suggested Spiritual Practices

Spiritual practices offer a connection to other Christ-followers. Each week, a suggested spiritual practice is described for participants to feel this connection. Try to allow time at each session to guide participants through these descriptions and encourage them to make spiritual practice a part of their faith journey.

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Week 1—Mary Visits Elizabeth

Main Themes: Encouragement and Support

Sometimes you seek encouragement and support, and sometimes it finds its way to you. After Mary's visit from Gabriel, she went with haste to visit her relative, Elizabeth. While Mary and Elizabeth have different experiences of pregnancy, they are able to encourage one other and affirm what God was doing in their lives.

- When does God speak to you from/through other people?
- When are you listening with the Holy Spirit?



Gathering Activity

Provide index cards or paper for participants, and as they gather ask them to remember two experiences of going on a journey—one that was good, and one that was bad. Ask them to draw a line down the middle of the card and at the top on one side write “Good” and on the other side write “Bad.” Then answer the following questions on the card under the appropriate heading:

- Where did they go?
- How long were they there?
- Who were they with?
- Why was it good or bad? What made it that way?

If anyone is comfortable doing so, invite them to share (without throwing anyone under the bus who may be part of the bad experience!)

When everyone has arrived and/or is settled, begin with this opening prayer, or one of your own:

Gracious God, thank you for this time that we have to gather and journey together with you. Help us to open our hearts to hear your voice and be reminded of your love. Be with us now as we open ourselves up to your word and share in the experience of learning more about you and each other. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.



Watch Session 1 Video

Tori spoke of costly discipleship and pain that is experienced within it being more than pain for the sake of pain. Can you recall a time when discipleship has been costly?

She also said, “Mutual trust and mutual vulnerability are not the same as mutual agreements and interests.” What are some of the characteristics of your most rewarding and meaningful relationships? Shared experiences? Similarities? Differences?

There is something special about the strength and confidence we gain from sharing our stories and experiences with each other. While Mary must have received some practical wisdom from Elizabeth, they were both in unusual circumstances. Sometimes it's difficult to see similarities in circumstances that look different on the outside. In reality, we are all on a journey, walking through life and whatever curve balls it throws us. This

connects us more than we often are willing to realize. A college student beginning classes or moving away from home for the first time, a woman entering retirement, a person dealing with the loss of a spouse, starting a new job, feeling all the emotions that come with a child moving away to college or getting married. What are some of the life experiences within your group?

- Who is your Elizabeth?
- To whom are you an Elizabeth?
- Where do you find encouragement, support, confidence and hope?
- Toward which relationships do you run when things are tough?
- When things are to be celebrated?
- When things are normal?
- Do you find it easier to be the one offering support, or the one receiving support in your relationships?
- Who are people in your church and community to whom we as a group can be an Elizabeth during this Advent season and into the New Year?



Holy Listening

In an article from the Upper Room's Daily Reflections in 2014, we are reminded that "Listening deeply to another person places us on sacred ground." <http://daily.upperroom.org/?p=4491>

- Have you ever experienced sacred ground like this?
- When does God speak to you from/through other people? What are some things that have to happen for listening to become holy?
- When are you listening with the Holy Spirit?



Mandated Joy

Do you find that there are times in life when people expect you to react or respond in a certain way? A phrase came to light during the collaboration of this study, mandated joy. Can you recall a moment in life when someone expected you to be happy about a situation that you dreaded? Or when everyone else around you was looking forward to something that you wished would never come?

Who in your life offers space for you to experience dual emotions? (If time allows, take a moment and offer a prayer of thanksgiving over these Elizabeth's and Mary's in our lives.)



Spiritual Practice: Lectio Divina

Lectio Divina is a term that means "holy reading." In our normal approach to Scripture, we are usually reading to gain information. In this practice of holy reading, the aim is to connect with God through meditation using Scripture. When practicing lectio divina, we are called to linger over one passage, phrase, or even one word. As you go deeper into the one passage, phrase or word, the expectation is that God will speak to you through it.

There's no one way to practice Lectio Divina. It can be practiced on your own, or it can be practiced in a group through guided meditation. One guide is found here: http://daily.upperroom.org/?page_id=19

If time allows, the group might benefit from a guided Lectio Divina using Luke 1:46-55, known as the Magnificat or Cantic of Mary. Ask participants to listen for a word or phrase that stands out to them as you slowly read the passage aloud. Invite participants to share their insights.

Wesley Hymn lyrics

The song heard at the end of the video is a hymn written by Charles Wesley based on the Scripture passage of the week. Since it is not widely known, the music was written and the piece recorded by local United Methodists. Here are the lyrics to *God of Israel See*, which would make a beautiful daily prayer for the week:

God of Israel, see
Thy servant in me,
Who humbly approve
Though I cannot conceive, the design of thy love;
With obedience sincere
Thy will I revere,
And expect from thy word
The mystical life of my heavenly Lord.



Grace Moment

Each week, participants are asked to look for signs of God's grace in the story. Remind them of the definitions of prevenient, justifying and sanctifying grace before asking these questions:

- Do you see grace at work in this week's journey?
- What journeys were experienced this week? In the passage? In our personal lives?



Closing

Remind participants to read Luke 2:1-7 and next week's section in the participant guide. Share prayer concerns

Closing Prayer/Benediction: God of grace and peace, thank you for being Emmanuel, God with us. Help us to be supportive encouragers, faithful in the things for which we are responsible, worshipful in all we do, and always seeking after you. In Jesus' ever present name we pray, Amen.

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Week 2—Mary and Joseph go to Bethlehem

Main Theme: Responsibility

We have to live in the world we are born to. Traveling to Bethlehem was a great inconvenience considering Mary is many months pregnant, yet the couple responded to the order to register. When they arrived there was no place to stay, and the time came for the baby to be born.

- Did they go without question because they knew the child would be born in Bethlehem according to prophecy?
- Considering Mary's pregnancy and unwed state, did they welcome the opportunity to leave their home town?
- Is there a difference between responsibility and obligation?



Gathering Activity

Provide index cards or paper for participants, and instruct participants to number it 1-5. Ask them to write down the first thing that comes to mind when you say these words:

1. Vacation
2. Work
3. Family
4. Christmas
5. Responsibility

Please note that you can change or add words that may be relevant to your group.

When everyone has arrived and/or is settled, begin with this opening prayer, or one of your own:

Thank you, God, for each person gathered in this room today. Come, Holy Spirit. Be with us in this place while we listen, learn and share. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.



Watch Session 2 Video

Think of a time when you were faced with an unexpected situation or circumstance—of your own choosing, or perhaps someone else's. Did you respond in the way others expected you to, or did you respond differently? Why?

Can you think of a time or situation when you needed space?

There are some things in life we do out of obligation. We make a promise or agree to do something and are obligated to follow through. Other things in life we do out of responsibility—we're aware of something, we've made a choice and are taking care of something or someone, and following through with it is on us. How many things that you are involved in around this time of year feel like an obligation?

- What are some of the things in life you do out of responsibility?
- What are some things you do out of obligation?

- Responsibilities done with joy are...
- Responsibilities done out of guilt or obligation are...
- How busy are you this season?
- What things that take up your time are things you actually have to do?
- What things do you do out obligation?
- If money, time, expectation and location weren't a factor, what would this season look like for you?



Spiritual Practice: The Daily Examen

The Daily Examen is a technique used to reflect on the day's events in light of God's calling in our lives. In using the Daily Examen, we become more aware of God's presence and discern God's direction. As it is used more often, we are able to see God's hand at work in the entire scope of our lives. One of the most familiar of this discipline is the five-step Ignation Examen. Try using it at the same time every day.

1. Become aware of God's presence.
2. Review the day with gratitude.
3. Pay attention to your emotions.
4. Choose one feature of the day and pray from it.
5. Look toward tomorrow.



Wesley Hymn lyrics

The song heard at the end of the video is a hymn written by Charles Wesley based on the Scripture passage of the week. Since it is not widely known, the music was written and the piece recorded by local United Methodists. Here are the lyrics to *Happy the Place, But Happier Still*, which can be used for meditation in the coming week:

Happy the place, but happier still
 The heart where Christ is born:
 The heart which He vouchsafes to fill
 Need neither sin nor mourn;
 No city could with Bethlehem share
 The honour of His birth,
 But every soul by faith may bear
 The Lord of heaven and earth.



Grace Moment

Each week, participants are asked to look for signs of God's grace in the story. Remind them of the definitions of prevenient, justifying and sanctifying grace before asking these questions:

- Do you see grace at work in this week's journey?
- What journeys were experienced this week? In the passage? In our personal lives?



Closing

Remind participants to read Luke 2:8-20 and next week's section in the participant guide. Share prayer concerns.

Closing Prayer/Benediction: Ever-Present God, thank you for moments of shared space - to listen, learn and discuss. Thank you for always being the light for our path, especially when our journey takes us down uncertain roads. Help us to trust in you. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

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Week 3—The Shepherds Are Called to the Stable

Main Themes: Worship and Affirmation

The story of another impulse trip after an angelic visitation, some lowly men became the first witnesses to the birth of the Messiah. They worshiped him and then went back to work. Everyone was amazed except Mary; the prophecy told to her was coming to pass.

- Why were shepherds the first to see the Messiah?
- From where do you come to worship Jesus?



Gathering Activity

As you gather, share favorite holiday memories. What is your favorite song of the season? Favorite food? Favorite movie? Is it attached to a memory, you just like the tune, you only see, hear or taste it during this time of year, so it's something you look forward to?

When everyone has arrived and/or is settled, begin with this opening prayer, or one of your own:

Loving God, thank you for another opportunity to journey together. Open our hearts to your voice and our ears to the words of those around us. Please open our minds as we consider the shepherd's journey to Jesus and what it can mean for us. We ask these things in the name of Jesus, our Hope, Amen.



Watch Session 2 Video

The arrival of the shepherds is the Magnificat (Mary's Song) come to life. They were lowly, yet they were the ones who not only heard this great news, but then got to see Jesus.

- Where have you seen the Magnificat come to life?
- When have you experienced Emmanuel, God with us [you]?

Because of what the angel said, the shepherds went and saw the child, and because the child was where the angel said he would be, they could believe that what the angel said about the child was also true.

- What increases your faith?

The angel told the shepherds not to be afraid, they were favored.

- What makes you feel favored?
- Who makes you feel favored?
- From where do you come to Jesus?

Scripture tells us the shepherds went back to work. Discuss how things changed for them in light of what they experienced. Did they approach their job and responsibility with new insight? Of all the people in the world they were the ones who had it declared to them that Jesus had been born. How do you think it impacted the way they interacted with other people?



Spiritual Practice: The Labyrinth

The labyrinth as a Christian practice is used as a meditative device to bring one closer to God. There are typically three stages in experiencing a labyrinth:

1. As one enters the labyrinth and moves toward the center, one should experience a time of letting go. Slowly enter the maze as you clear your mind of details, anxieties, hurts and worries of the day. Intentionally quiet your mind from the entrance to the center of the labyrinth.
2. When you have reached the center, stop to seek illumination. Linger there as long as needed to listen, pray and meditate. What is God's message for you?
3. As you leave the center to make your way out, experience union with God and contemplate how you can be put to use as a positive force in the world through the call you have heard.

To practice moving through the labyrinth, print everyone a finger labyrinth. You can find one here: <https://labyrinthociety.org/download-a-labyrinth>



Wesley Hymn lyrics

The song heard at the end of the video is a hymn written by Charles Wesley based on the Scripture passage of the week. Since it is not widely known, the music was written and the piece recorded by local United Methodists. Here are the lyrics to *To Simple Souls Alone*, which could be read in the mornings to start the day this week:

To simple souls alone
The Saviour is made known,
Shepherds who their station keep
See the glory from on high;
Those that negligently sleep
Still in sin and darkness lie.
The poor rejoice to hear
The heavenly messenger;
From the rich and wise conceal'd,
Jesus doth His light impart,
Shows the mystery reveal'd,
Shines in every humble heart.



Grace Moment

Each week, participants are asked to look for signs of God's grace in the story. Remind them of the definitions of prevenient, justifying and sanctifying grace before asking these questions:

- Do you see grace at work in this week's journey?
- What journeys were experienced this week? In the passage? In our personal lives?



Closing

Remind participants to read Matthew 2:1-12 and next week's section in the participant guide. Share prayer concerns.

Closing Prayer/Benediction: God of hope and joy, thank you for your gift of life and love and shared experiences. Go with us as we move from this place worshipping you. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

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Week 4—The Magi Find the Messiah

Main Themes: Gifts and Seeking Jesus

This group of learned men were not Jews, just exceptional men who believed and followed signs to meet the baby who would be King of the Jews. Upon finding him, they offered gifts that spoke of his future identity: gold for a king, incense for a priest, myrrh for a healer.

- How have we twisted gift giving and receiving at Christmas?
- How do you seek Jesus?



Gathering Activity

As you gather, talk about gifts you have received. It doesn't necessarily have to be a Christmas gift—just something that meant a great deal to you. What triggers the memory of these gifts?

When everyone has arrived and/or is settled, begin with this opening prayer, or one of your own:

Holy God, thank you for the opportunity to journey through life together. Thank you for being present in this space. Guide our conversations, speak through the sharing of our experiences as we consider the gifts we offer you in light of the gift of love and life you pour out on us. Come Holy Spirit, Amen.



Watch Session 2 Video

The Shepherds and Magi arrived at different times, but the reality is that they were all seeking Jesus. How do we seek Jesus?

The Magi paid attention to signs and the sky. In Luke 12 we read about Jesus teaching to a crowd that gathered around him. Throughout this chapter he goes back and forth speaking to the crowd and directly to his disciples. In the last verses of the chapter he turns his attention to the crowd again. Verses 54-56 say Jesus also said to the crowds, "When you see a cloud forming in the west, you immediately say, 'It's going to rain.' And indeed it does. And when a south wind blows, you say, 'A heat wave is coming.' And it does. Hypocrites! You know how to interpret conditions on earth and in the sky. How is it that you don't know how to interpret the present time?"

- Do we pay attention to what is happening around us?
- Do we believe and follow signs?
- What are signs of Jesus for you?

Through symbolism the Magi sought out Jesus, who they understood to be King of the Jews. Consider the symbolism of their gifts, gold for a king, incense for a priest, myrrh for a healer. What makes each of these significant?

Think back to your answer to the question in the opening activity (or ask the question now if not everyone had time to do the opening activity), What is the most meaningful gift you ever received? Now answer these questions:

- What gift has Jesus been to you/given to you/offered to you?
- How do the two compare? How often do you think about each of them? Is one more prominent in your life than the other?



Spiritual Practice: Journaling

Journaling as a spiritual practice is more than just a daily record of your life. While you might think of it as recording the past, it can also be looked upon as deepening your joy in the present and preparing for God's promised future. Daily writing opens up new opportunities to praise God. Some things to help you get started:

1. Start with *examination*. Romans 12:3 says we should not think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think, but to think with sober judgment. When you're feeling deep emotions that can be difficult to share aloud, writing them down is a gift to yourself. Be honest about sadness, anger or anxiety. You may end up writing a Psalm!
2. Following examination is *meditation*. Questions that rise up from your examination can now be pondered in light of Scripture. You can probably find a passage to apply to everything you have written. Things you've been puzzled about or maybe unable to move past can now be solved with application of your Scriptural research.
3. The honest expression of examination and the critical thinking of meditation free us to *dream*. Putting thoughts and problems into writing frees us from the feeling of unfinished business. The result should be praise that we are finally able to act.

Give the group a few minutes to write their thoughts if time allows.



Wesley Hymn lyrics

The song heard at the end of the video is a hymn written by Charles Wesley based on the Scripture passage of the week. Since it is not widely known, the music was written and the piece recorded by local United Methodists. Here are the lyrics to *Mine Eyes Have Seen His Orient Star*, which could be used for meditation this week:

Mine eyes have seen His orient star,
 And sweetly drawn I come from far,
 Leaving the world behind;
 His Spirit gently leads me on
 A stranger in a land unknown,
 The new-born King to find.

The word of all-preventing grace
 Marks out the Saviour's natal place;
 And follower of the word,
 I keep His glimmering star in sight,
 Which by its sure unerring light
 Conducts me to my Lord.



Gr: ent

Each week, participants are asked to look for signs of God's grace in the story. Remind them of the definitions of prevenient, justifying and sanctifying grace before asking these questions:

- Do you see grace at work in this week's journey?
- What journeys were experienced this week? In the passage? In our personal lives?

Closing

Thank participants for taking part in the study. Share prayer concerns.

Closing Prayer/Benediction: God of grace and our salvation, thank you for being Emmanuel, God with us. Thank you for the journeys we have considered these past few weeks. Lead each step we take away from this space and draw us closer to you as we live and love in light of who you are. Amen.