



# advent[ure]

*a journey through the Christmas story*

## About This Study

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. Read and reflect on the passage in the days before meeting with the group.
- **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, you are encouraged to share how your own personal story speaks to 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.

The way you think, the choices you’ve made, and your own situations and circumstances all impact your spiritual experience. Be ready to share within your group as you discuss each 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 want to 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 wants us to know Jesus more and become more like him.

Each week, be prepared to share about moments of grace experienced in each week’s journey.

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## **Week 1—Mary Visits Elizabeth**

*Main Themes: Encouragement and Support*

Read Luke 1:26-45.

After Mary's visit from Gabriel, she went with haste to visit her relative, Elizabeth. Sometimes you should seek encouragement and support, and sometimes it finds its way to you. While Mary and Elizabeth have different experiences of pregnancy, they are able to encourage each other and affirm for each other 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?

Other Suggested Reading:

Luke 1:5-25 (John the Baptists' birth foretold)

Luke 1:46-56 Mary's response of worship

Luke 1:57- 80 Birth of John the Baptist

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A quick google search of the word encouragement provides the following definition: the action of giving someone support, confidence or hope. The conversation between Mary and Elizabeth we read about in Luke embodies all three parts of this definition—and both women. We aren't really told why Mary decides to go to Elizabeth, but we can make a few assumptions, the most obvious being that Gabriel told Mary that Elizabeth was pregnant. It makes sense that Mary would reach out to someone with this news that was quite literally life-altering. Seeing that Elizabeth was in fact pregnant had to be affirmation that what Gabriel told Mary was true.

But in another way, it's startling that Mary chose Elizabeth. Wouldn't the most natural person to go to be her mother, or a best friend? This is big news. Is a distant relative in a faraway town your first choice? Maybe it would be, if you had just been told in an indescribable way that a distant female relative, old and unable to have children, was six months pregnant. Maybe she would definitely be the first person to run to!

Scripture does not tell us how Elizabeth learned of her own pregnancy. With Zachariah being mute during this time, we can't help but wonder who Elizabeth had reached out to for support. Did Mary go to Elizabeth seeking support and encouragement, or offering it? Many times in life it is in the reaching out that we find ourselves

receiving the very thing we are offering. How many times after a mission trip, or big outreach event have you heard—or even said—“I signed up to help, but I’m the one who got the bigger blessing out of it.”

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, the fact that we are all on a journey, walking through life and whatever curve balls it throws at us, 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, 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—the list could go on and on.

Imagine the hope stirred in Elizabeth when Mary visited her as the child leapt in her womb, and as she recognized the holiness wrapped up in their visit! Hebrews 6 talks about God’s promise to Abraham. Consider the hope we read about in the Christmas story in light of Hebrews 6:17-19a: “Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged. We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.” This hope is an anchor for our souls.

- What is it that anchors your soul?
- What anchors your peace of mind?
- 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?

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## **Week 2—Mary and Joseph go to Bethlehem**

*Main Theme: Responsibility*

Read Luke 2:1-7

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?

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What things in life are inconvenient? Think about the last unexpected thing you did. How big an inconvenience was it? Did it drastically impact your plans or did it make things better? Many times it's easy to catch ourselves being inconvenienced by the things we don't want to do or aren't excited to do, but unexpected things that have a favorable result are fun and can even open new doors that produce positive emotions. These are often called surprises. Nothing in Scripture says that Mary or Joseph were frustrated by the timing of this. We have put an assumption on it that she was uncomfortable (a fair and realistic assumption), and they were terribly inconvenienced. Or maybe Mary was glad to get out of town.

In our limited understanding of Biblical times we too often make Mary already past her due date, miserable and exhausted as she travels to Bethlehem. Sure, the three days of travel may have worn her out, but she had recently returned from a first trimester trip to visit Elizabeth. We also tend to tie a nice glittery ribbon around the Christmas story: Mary and Joseph adhere to the decree and travel to Bethlehem. Although there was no room in the inn, they were offered the stable and welcomed by all the adorable animals in the stable. We don't want to think about the fact that Mary's condition by cultural standards called for her execution. Joseph was supporting her (Matthew 2:18-25 tells us how he received the news), choosing to respond in a way which was different than he would have been taught was acceptable. While it makes sense that they probably welcomed this "babymoon,"

in the back of their minds, in the midst of all the inconveniences had to be Gabriel's words to Mary "Rejoice, favored one! The Lord is with you."

There are things in life we do out of obligation. We make a promise or agree to do something and are obligated through by word to follow through. Other things in life we do out of responsibility. We're aware of something, we've made a choice at some point in life 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?

Take a moment to think about it. List all the things you feel responsible for. (Note the word feel - not are, are not, should be, etc.) How many of these things are inconvenient? How many of these drain you of energy? How many fill you with joy? Which do you look forward to the most?

A google search of the phrase "causes of stress during holiday season" produced more than 50 million results. Fifty million! Articles and websites providing insight to the causes, coping skills to get through the season, ways to avoid it all together, and more are all at our fingertips because this time of year can be chaotic. Typically it's one of two extremes—ridiculously busy or heart-achingly lonely. A stroll around social media is a reminder that people are busy, and that we're silently measuring ourselves against what other people are doing or buying, or where they're going.

- How busy are you during the holiday season?
- What things take up your time that are things you actually have to do?
- What things are you pressured to do—expectations or obligations you feel like you can't avoid?
- If money, time, expectation or location weren't factors, what would this season look like for you?

Romans 8:31 says "... if God is for us who can be against us?"

- When have you felt overwhelmed?
- What gets you through the overwhelmed, unexpected and inconvenient moments?

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## **Week 3—The Shepherds Are Called to the Stable**

*Main Themes: Worship and Affirmation*

Read Luke 2:8-20

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?

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What leads you to worship? Does your everyday routine have to be interrupted, or does it fit right in? The shepherds were doing what they do each and every day, except something different happened. They were suddenly given an opportunity to worship. An invitation to worship happened in front of their eyes...right where they were, in the middle of their everyday lives.

Romans 12:1-2 is often used to teach how worship can be a lifestyle rather than an experience. Consider the way Eugene Peterson's paraphrase puts it in *The Message*:

*So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.*

The shepherds didn't have to go to church to have the opportunity to worship—it met them face to face. Of

course it took them by surprise, but let's be honest. How often do we react with surprise when we encounter God? Should it always catch us off guard? What is our response when it happens? Do we just go back to what we were doing, act like it never happened—or do we respond with praise?

One has to wonder with what kind of doubt they approached the manger. With what kind of doubt did they leave their flocks, or figure out what to do with their flocks, and approach Bethlehem? But then, with what kind of confidence did they return? If the shepherds had just been traveling through town and seen a baby with his parents, or heard the cry of a newborn, they may have thought, “oh, cute baby!” but would they have really paid attention to it? They approached the manger with anticipation and the expectation to because of what the angel had told them.

In going to see the child, the shepherds also experienced affirmation that what the angel said to them was real. Think back to the scripture and consider what Luke 2:12 says “...this is a sign for you: You will find a newborn baby wrapped snugly and lying in a manger.” It was after this declaration that the heavenly hosts appeared praising God. After the angels departed, we read in verse 15 that the Shepherds said “let's go right now... and confirm what the Lord has said to us.”

You don't have to keep up with the Joneses to worship God. Shepherds had tough jobs. They were often looked down on, yet these are the ones God chose to reveal the news of Jesus' birth - Emmanuel, God with us. Not only did they get this news, they received an invitation to see the Messiah face to face. It's like the difference between a super cute baby announcement you get in the mail (or on Facebook) with a picture and details, and an invitation to come visit and hold that newborn baby. It is a special enough thing to receive the news of the birth, but to be invited to see him, with landmarks of where to find him and how to recognize him, must have made them feel special and significant. Jesus' presence in our lives reminds us of our value.

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## **Week 4—The Magi Find the Messiah**

*Main Themes: Gifts and Seeking Jesus*

Read Matthew 2:1-12

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?

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### *What calls you to worship Jesus?*

Each week during this study we have considered people who had a calling, compulsion or prompting to go and they all went. Last session we talked about the shepherds' journey to Jesus. While it took the Magi longer than the shepherds to get to him, both worshiped him. While the shepherds offered the gift of presence, the wisemen offered tangible gifts.

Up until now, our Scripture references have been from Luke. The Scripture reference for the journey we are considering this week is from Matthew. Matthew's gospel begins with a genealogy - who Jesus is matters to Matthew and the Jewish community. The purpose is to present clear evidence that Jesus is Messiah, Savior.<sup>1</sup> Matthew is writing to a Jewish audience about people who aren't Jews. They were learned men - smart. They knew the stories and the prophecies. They could have said, "if he is what it appears he is we will meet him eventually," but they acted. They went to find him.

## *How do you seek Jesus?*

The Magi paid attention to signs and the sky. Do we pay attention to what is happening around us? 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.

*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?”*

We pay a good bit of attention to the sky, mostly for weather purposes, Instagram posts, or to decide what to wear or not wear. Today, being able to determine the seriousness of a weather situation and its implications on our plans might be based on the tone of voice being broadcast by the meteorologist, how long a television show had been interrupted, or how many alerts we’ve received on our phones. In Biblical times people paid attention for themselves. For us the Magi recognizing a sign in the sky that caused them to travel in order to see what it represented is a big deal, but if it was that big of a celestial event, why didn’t others see it? One has to wonder, did others see it and just not respond?

Too often today we expect everything to fall in our laps. Instant gratification and over-commitment rule our schedules and decision-making. We are so busy, unless it is convenient we are not interested. There are many things that distract us. The enemy will try to throw us off course. Other people (and their agendas) will try to get in our way. Herod was threatened by the true King and thought the Magi would help him know where to find the child. The Magi never stopped paying attention to the signs that led them to Jesus in the first place. Even after their encounter with Jesus they returned home by another route and not by way of Herod. What are some of the things that distract you from worshipping Jesus?

We honor people in different ways.—spending time with them, showing them respect, serving them in various ways, speaking highly of them, and often giving gifts. When the Magi found Jesus, they offered gifts of gold, incense, and myrrh. Some believe these gifts were prophetic: gold for a king, incense for a priest, myrrh for a healer. Others believe these learned men were responding culturally in a way they knew to be appropriate. They were visiting a King, and these gifts were highly valued where they came from<sup>2</sup>.

The Magi sought Jesus out, responding to the sign of his birth. They looked for him, found him and offered him gifts. What gifts do you offer Jesus? Do you offer them for Jesus’ sake or your own? Do you offer them out of a response of worship or obligation? Through Jesus we receive the ultimate gift, not of obligation but of love. Even before his birth, the promise and hope of the gift of his presence was declared. Consider what the angel said to Joseph in Matthew 1:18-23:

*This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. When Mary his mother was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Joseph her husband was a righteous man. Because he didn’t want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly. As he was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” Now all of this took place so that what the Lord had spoken through the prophet would be fulfilled:*

*Look! A virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son,  
And they will call him, Emmanuel.[Is.7:14] (Emmanuel means “God with us.”)*

Through Jesus we have salvation and the gift of God’s presence. Is this a gift that sits on the shelf of your mind or heart, only to be considered when it crosses your mind, or when you need something? Or is this gift at the forefront of all you do, the filter of love through which all actions, words, thoughts are considered?

<sup>1</sup>NIV Archeological Study Bible. The Zondervan Corporation, Grand Rapids, ©2005 p 1556. <sup>2</sup><http://biblehub.com/commentaries/matthew/2-11.htm>