

First Sunday of Advent, Year C (December 1, 2024): Come, Let Us Adore Him – Preparations

Fellowship – Snacks or a Meal (10 minutes with snacks; longer, obviously, if there is a meal).

Gathering Time (5-10 minutes).

To jumpstart conversation, go around the group and have people name a particular trick, habit, or “pet peeve” about preparing for a major event, occasion, or celebration. Then, invite folks to huddle in pairs or threes to say more about what they had shared. [For example, “When I was a teenager, I dreaded having special company over for dinner, because inevitably, my mother would prepare an elaborate feast that required the use of just about every single appliance, cookware, and utensil that we owned...and I was usually the ‘human dishwasher.’”]

Group Dialogue (Approximately 30 minutes). Read [Jeremiah 33:14-16](#); [Luke 21:25-36](#)

- What words or phrases from the two lectionary selections catch your attention? Why? [nations confused; fear and foreboding; justice and righteousness; days are surely coming...] Do you hear any resonance between what is expressed in the Jeremiah and Luke passages and what we hear in wider culture and society today? [divisive politics; the fear and foreboding of war; confusion in an age of disinformation; the “average Christian” may not know what to make of “end times” ...]
- When flustered by the fullness, busyness, and messiness of everyday life, what helps keep you grounded? What helps direct you to hope? [counsel from trusted friends; an embrace of a loved one; clear sense of self, values, and commitments; prayer...]
- Do you think it is okay to *not* have hope? Why or why not? [false hope or cheap hope can be harmful, especially for people whose backs are pressed against walls...]
- Jeremiah 33:14-16 is in a section that biblical scholars refer to as the “Book of Comfort.” It doesn’t offer a recipe for hope; instead, it stokes the imagination for what the future could be. It envisions a day when Israel and Judah will have rulers (kings) who are “just” and “righteous” (33:15) and priests who will care and mediate and intercede for the people (v. 17). Today, what visions dare we have:
 - for our political leaders?
 - for our religious leaders?
 - for the young “prophets” in our churches and communities?
- The exhortation in Luke 21:34 reads: ““Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down.” How will you commit to *being on guard* in this season of Advent? [e.g., take up the practice of “paying attention” as a daily spiritual discipline.]

Prayer (10 minutes). Share prayer requests and respond appropriately.

Sending Forth (2 minutes). End with the following prayer, a similar prayer, or the Lord’s Prayer:

Perfecting God, when our lives spill over in fullness, busyness, and messiness; when we are overwhelmed with fear and foreboding thoughts; when we struggle in yearning for things to be better, brighter, fairer for our communities, our nation, and world, help us pay attention, live in anticipation, and see glimpses of you breaking into our lives in places and moments we least expect. Amen.

Mai-Anh Le Tran is associate professor of religious education and practical theology at [Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary](#). An ordained elder of the California-Nevada Annual Conference, she regularly contributes to the ministries of local churches, districts, conferences, and denominational agencies. She is the author of [Reset the Heart: Unlearning Violence, Relearning Hope](#) (Abingdon, 2017).

Second Sunday of Advent, Year C (December 8, 2024): Come, Let Us Adore Him – Passion

Fellowship – Snacks or a Meal (10 minutes with snacks; longer, obviously, if there is a meal).

Gathering Time (5-10 minutes).

For this week's lessons, which are dedicated to the theme of "passion," consider starting with a game of trivia about the human senses. It could be as simple as asking the question, "How many human senses are there?" Beyond the commonly known five (hearing, vision, smell, taste, touch) and the intriguing notion of the "sixth sense," science has introduced us to others, such as the sense of balance, sense of time, sense of parts of our body, and so on.

Alternatively, have the trivia be about which body parts are associated with which emotions in cultures around the world. For example, which body part is associated with love and anger in some indigenous languages of Central Australia? Answer: the throat. For more information, see [Friday essay: my belly is angry, my throat is in love — how body parts express emotions in Indigenous languages \(theconversation.com\)](#).

Group Dialogue (Approximately 30 minutes). Read [Malachi 3:1-4](#); [Luke 3:1-6](#)

- The lectionary texts for this week offer some vivid sense-filled language and metaphors. Which grab your attention? [e.g., from Malachi, "refiner's fire," "fuller's soap" [cleaner's soap], "purifier of silver"; from the Gospel of Luke, "voice crying out in the wilderness"; "all flesh shall see"]
 - Take some time to explore what each metaphor could mean. [e.g., imagine the grueling work of a silversmith]
- Human beings pay attention and make sense-filled meaning through myriad complex ways. Sometimes, the most impactful act of attention can occur in ways we don't anticipate. Has your body ever picked up on external stimuli or signals in ways you didn't expect? [e.g., you lose your voice after a period of extreme stress; you have an inkling that something is about to happen....]
- The Preaching Notes for this week draw our attention to a character, John the Baptist, who knew how to stimulate his audiences' senses with animated words and actions (use of water for

baptism). He is someone who “doesn’t hold back...who believes with every fiber of his being,” yet who also comes with “rough edges” that might rub some people the wrong way.

- What strikes you about John the Baptist as “messenger”? What do you learn from his way of life and ministry? [e.g., he doesn’t fit into an expected mold; he confronts and provokes; his approach might be off-putting; at times, a confronting jolt is what we need to shake up the system]
 - Who might be some of the “John the Baptists” in your midst today? How do you find yourself responding to them? [e.g., the young people who are “nones” (not religious) or “done” with church might be challenging our status quo]
- Consider the notion of “cleanliness” as metaphoric for “being saved” (or “holiness” and “saintliness”). How might that be problematic if misused today? [We must be careful about implicit biases; the language of “clean” and “dirty” has been used to discriminate against people.]
 - With all the complexities and nuances that we have just begun to probe, consider these invitations to put faith into action:
 - How might we be like John the Baptist, someone who invited others to repentance and forgiveness with every fiber of his being? What will help us to lean into our faith so completely that it ripples out from within us to transform the relationships and communities of which we are a part?
 - How do we activate the fullness of our senses to perceive the work of God breaking in and transforming our lives in ways we hadn’t anticipated?

Prayer (10 minutes). Share prayer requests and respond appropriately.

Sending Forth (2 minutes). End with the following prayer, a similar prayer, or the Lord’s Prayer.

Refiner's fire
Focus our hearts' desires
That we may become holy and wholly yours
That we may sense you more fully in all that we are
That we may manifest your Good News in all that we do.

(As adapted from the lyrics of Brian Doerksen’s worship song, *Refiner’s Fire*.)

Resources: <https://www.emotionlanguageaustralia.com/>; <https://theconversation.com/friday-essay-my-belly-is-angry-my-throat-is-in-love-how-body-parts-express-emotions-in-indigenous-languages-156962>)

Mai-Anh Le Tran is associate professor of religious education and practical theology at [Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary](#). An ordained elder of the California-Nevada Annual Conference, she regularly contributes to the ministries of local churches, districts, conferences, and denominational agencies. She is the author of [Reset the Heart: Unlearning Violence, Relearning Hope](#) (Abingdon, 2017).

Third Sunday of Advent, Year C (December 15, 2024): Come, Let Us Adore Him – Presence

Fellowship – Snacks or a Meal (10 minutes with snacks; longer, obviously, if there is a meal).

Gathering Time (5-10 minutes).

Not many may know that the third Sunday of Advent is also known as Gaudete Sunday in Western Christianity, though most may recognize the interruption of “pink” for “joy” in the order of Advent candles. Over a decade ago, Marie Kondo became an international cultural icon with her “KonMari Method” of tidying and her trademark advice, “Choose what sparks joy!” (See <https://konmari.com/about-the-konmari-method/>). Invite participants to share the ways in which they might have tried out some version of that method in their own personal or professional lives—including ways in which the effort may have “flopped” for them.

Group Dialogue (Approximately 30 minutes). Read [Zephaniah 3:14-20](#); [Luke 3:7-18](#).

- What does “joy” mean for you? [For example, good health; family and friends; inner confidence and peace; gratitude for all that we have; anything that helps us to look forward to the future]
 - In what aspects of our personal and professional lives is “joy” a key criterion for determining what we will choose to hang on or let go? [e.g., in committed relationships; in professional interactions; in where we choose to live and work]
- A successful CEO suggests that it is a mistake to assume that “joy” or “happiness” is the condition for achieving professional success; in his view, there is a difference between “doing what you love” and “doing what makes you happy.” What do you think?
- Isaiah 12:3 is a beautiful verse, “With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation” (NRSV). The CEB translates it as “springs of salvation.” It is luscious imagery that invites us to consider how “salvation” harmonizes humans with the earthly elements around us. What does this imagery evoke for you regarding the experience of “joy”? When have you experienced that kind of “joy” in your life? [For example, deep joy is more than momentary happiness; joy springs from within one’s inner resiliency, whereas happiness may be contingent upon external conditions. Like a wellspring, joy can be a rush of soothing, nourishing waters. We often spend more time on momentary happiness rather than looking into replenishing the deeper sources of our joy.]
- The Preaching Notes draw our attention to the daunting beginning of our Gospel reading for this week—John’s famous exclamation, “You brood of vipers!” (Lk. 3:7) As it turns out, this impassioned preaching convicts the crowds, and they ask, “What then should we do?” (v. 10). Luke’s account indicates that John has responses to three different groups: the crowd (v. 11), the tax collectors (v. 13), and the soldiers (v. 14). What do you make of John’s exhortations? [New Testament commentaries remind us that “coats” in verse 11 refer to “tunics” worn close to the body; John is directing people toward acts of deep communal sharing. As for the tax collectors and soldiers, the imperative is that they do not misuse their power and exploit the people for their own advantage. Essentially, they are challenged to act against the very socio-political systems that are set up to serve the interests of the few at the expense of the people. As the *Discipleship Study Bible* notes suggest, acts of faith and repentance are deeply

interpersonal, social, and public. “Salvation” is a collective endeavor and a communal experience. It is more radical than doing things that give us personal, private joy.]

- What might John the Baptist’s exhortation be to *you* today? What acts of repentance are required of us, so that *all* may experience the refreshing springs of salvation? [Note how we are sometimes quicker to assume that other people need repentance, not us.]

Prayer (10 minutes). Share prayer requests and respond appropriately.

Sending Forth (2 minutes). End with the following prayer, a similar prayer, or the Lord’s Prayer. (You may consider substituting the plural pronouns “we” and “us.”)

I lift up my eyes.
What do I see?
The great divide...
bond and free.
Exploited and exploiting,
displaced and established,
the powerful and the powerless,
entangled and fragile!

Let my spirit be lifted Lord,
let my soul behold your beauty,
the bounty of your resources,
the over-flowing of your unfailing love.
Let me know they are mine too,
Lord, let me hope.

Source:

“Crossroads and Constant Spring,” 299. In *Liturgies from Below: Praying with People at the Ends of the World*, edited by Cláudio Carvalhaes, 299. Nashville: Abingdon, 2020.

Mai-Anh Le Tran is associate professor of religious education and practical theology at [Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary](#). An ordained elder of the California-Nevada Annual Conference, she regularly contributes to the ministries of local churches, districts, conferences, and denominational agencies. She is the author of [Reset the Heart: Unlearning Violence, Relearning Hope](#) (Abingdon, 2017).

Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year C (December 22, 2024): Come, Let Us Adore Him – Promise

Fellowship – Snacks or a Meal (10 minutes with snacks; longer, obviously, if there is a meal).

Gathering Time (5-10 minutes).

Although Christians exhort one another to linger patiently within Advent, with just days before Christmas, no doubt many households are in high gear for preparation, decoration, and last-minute shopping and gift-wrapping. Invite participants to share their favorite “family Christian tradition”—from food, to rituals, to décor. For some, the tradition might be to “boycott” commercialism! For others, Christmas might be a time to remember loved ones who have passed. For those with intercultural or transnational roots, there may be a mixing of cultural traditions with Christian traditions. [e.g., French-speaking families in Quebec may be getting ready for *réveillon*, the late-night meal partaken on Christmas Eve, with festivities lasting through Christmas morning.]

Group Dialogue (Approximately 30 minutes). Read [Micah 5:2-5a](#); [Luke 1:39-45, \(46-55\)](#)

- For the fourth Sunday of Advent, which falls just three days before Christmas, our Worship and Preaching Planning Notes invite us to contemplate the promise of “almost”—we’re “almost there.” How do you typically deal with waiting? [e.g., depends on what you’re waiting for? can’t stand the anxiety? tendency to try to “beat others to the punch”? you like to savor the suspense, especially in anticipation of a surprise prepared by a loved one?]
- The Gospel reading draws our attention to the encounter between Mary and Elizabeth, two expectant women who were also bearing the weight of the world on their shoulders. The text describes Elizabeth’s fetus leaping in her womb upon hearing Mary’s greeting. As Catholic theologian Susan Abraham once shared in conversation, it is a moment in which two wombs touched each other. It speaks to the power of women’s bodies kinesthetically and spiritually in touch with one another. Have you had similar experiences, or have you heard stories shared by women you know? [My mother shared that when she was pregnant with me, she felt that my little kicks were a way for me to communicate with her.]
- Mary and her prophetic “song of praise,” known as the Magnificat (vv. 46-55), deserve deeper exploration. Of the many things that have been written about Mary from Jewish and Christian perspectives, consider what we could learn this week from the long traditions of Marian devotions in Latin America. Put simply, “official Church theologies” typically emphasize Mary’s virginity and obedience. In contrast, in liberation theologies, Mary is revered and loved for her identification with the suffering of the people. As Jeanette Rodriguez, a scholar specializing in Latinx health, wellness, and justice-oriented therapy, writes that in Latin American lived theologies and spirituality, Mary represents “a yearning, a hope transcending circumstances, and an experience of accompaniment within a world that often rejects and marginalizes” (“Mary, Mother of Jesus: Consolatrice of the Americas”).
 - What has been your theological understanding of Mary and how did you come to this understanding? [From sermons? Bible studies? your own theological reflection? from song lyrics? popular films?] How is the source of our understanding as important, if not more, than what we know?

- Which characteristics of Mary and her life do you find most compelling and why? [e.g., obedience; endurance; suffering; ponderings about the fate of her son Jesus]
- What do you find puzzling about how Mary is presented in the Gospels? [e.g., What does it mean that she was a “virgin”? What does biblical scholarship say about her life after Jesus’ death? How is Mary understood theologically around the world? Each of these questions points to a vast field of biblical and theological research you can explore together.]
- The Preaching Notes for this week invite us to consider that it is *not just* Mary who is being addressed as “favored one.” The community of Bethlehem of Ephrathah is also beckoned. And so are *we* and the communities in which we live and serve today.
 - How are *you* called to bear the promise of God’s grace and deliverance in the world today?
 - How is *your community* (your church, your town, your networks of influence) called to stand with those whom the world rejects and marginalizes?

Source: Rodriguez, Jeanette. “Mary, Mother of Jesus: Consolatrice of the Americas.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Latin American Christianity*. Oxford University Press, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199860357.013.32>.

Prayer (10 minutes). Share prayer requests and respond appropriately.

Sending Forth (2 minutes). End with the following prayer, a similar prayer, or the Lord’s Prayer.

Given that “Mary’s song” is at the heart of our readings this week, consider closing your time by singing or listening to a rendition of the Magnificat set to music. The website Hymnary.org points to several hymn selections in Spanish and English, such as “Canto de María” (Mi alma glorifica al Señor) by Alejandro Meja in *Oramos Cantando* (We Pray in Song, #86). A sample is available here: <https://youtu.be/UzAJkdUIE18?si=BkrXid0TILPljQQH>.

Mai-Anh Le Tran is associate professor of religious education and practical theology at [Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary](#). An ordained elder of the California-Nevada Annual Conference, she regularly contributes to the ministries of local churches, districts, conferences, and denominational agencies. She is the author of [Reset the Heart: Unlearning Violence, Relearning Hope](#) (Abingdon, 2017).

First Sunday after Christmas, Year C (December 29, 2024): Come, Let Us Adore Him – Home

Fellowship – Snacks or a Meal (10 minutes with snacks; longer, obviously, if there is a meal).

Gathering Time (5-10 minutes).

Perhaps for some, the Sunday after Christmas is a bit of a lull time. For dedicated participants who continue to gather for study and reflection, invite them to share how the young people (their children, their friends' children, nieces/nephews/grandchildren) with whom they had gathered over the holidays responded to the gifts exchanged and received. Did the twelve-year-old niece get what she wanted? Was there a ridiculously long wish list for "Santa"? Was there a three-year-old who got enthralled by the boxes and paper wrappings? Or a teenager who gave you a knowing smile that said, "Nice try..."? Were there melodramas over who got what or who didn't get what?

Group Dialogue (Approximately 30 minutes). Read [1 Samuel 2:18-20](#); [Luke 2:41-52](#).

- The lectionary selections for this week draw our attention to the stories of two precocious young boys—little Samuel and little Jesus, who are both described as being remarkable in “stature” and “favor” with God and with people (1Sam 2:26; Lk 2:52). The passage in 1Samuel depicts Elkanah and Hannah’s annual trip to the temple to see their son Samuel. The passage in Luke recounts Joseph, Mary, and Jesus’ annual trip to Jerusalem for the festival of Passover.
 - What memories do you have from childhood that are connected to a trip, a journey, or a special holiday away from home?
- Focusing on Samuel: the text says he is “lent” to God as a child by his mother Hannah, as an expression of thanksgiving and gratitude (1Sam 1:27-28). As soon as he is weaned, Samuel is dedicated to the service of God, apprenticing under supervision of the priest Eli.
 - What do you think of such an act of dedication? [shows absolute faith? too “extreme”?] Do you think it takes away from the child’s agency and choice? [Children are deep theological thinkers if we adults would learn to listen carefully.]
 - If you have a young child, would you make a similar dedication of your child to the service of God?
 - What do you think might be the equivalent gesture in our time today—to dedicate one’s child to the service of God? [to commit to supporting their wholistic faith formation, spiritual well-being, and sense of vocation from a young age]
- Focusing on Jesus: Biblical scholarship points out that Luke’s story of the twelve-year-old Jesus in the temple foreshadows his vocation as teacher later in life and his unique sense of calling and purpose. The NRSV suggests the alternative translation for Luke 2:49b is to “be about my Father’s interests.”
 - What do you think of Jesus’ seemingly clear sense of vocation (a sense of identity and purpose) at such a young age?
 - Do you know children who exude a strong sense of who they are and what they aspire to become in life? What do you think are the key factors in contributing to such strong and wholesome sense of vocation in children? [e.g., positive role modeling; safe and

- supportive community and environment; Christian education that nurtures curiosity, critical thinking, and wonder]
 - What factors might impede or diminish children’s sense of vocation? [forced faith; rote learning; gaps of resources; unsafe holding environments]
- The psycho-social-economic-physical-spiritual well-being of our children can flourish only within a wholistic ecology—a more extensive and inclusive notion of “home.” This requires the interconnection and collaboration among the social and cultural systems that share responsibility for nurturing them—the family system as broadly defined, the surrounding community, social organizations and civic agencies such as schools, clubs, law enforcement, legal system. The *church* also needs to understand its crucial role within this ecosystem and its responsibility in supporting the wholistic flourishing of children, and not just those within our congregations, but also those within the wider community.
 - How do you think your church is stepping up to such responsibility? When it comes to nurturing children’s sense of identity and formation, what do churches typically pay attention to, and what do we often neglect? [For example, we tend to focus on fun and games in church; we assume that faith is only “taught in Sunday school”; we underestimate children’s capacity to perceive their world and ask hard questions.]
 - In what areas could we do better?
- In different ways, and perhaps even in imperfect ways, Hannah and Elkanah, Mary and Joseph serve as examples of modeling lives of faith for their children. How do they inspire your own commitments to children (any children, not just your own)? How do they demonstrate that we can *learn from children* how to live out our faith? [Mary must ponder deeply the words the twelve-year-old Jesus speaks to her. His response to her shows a mature sense of identity and purpose that she might not have realized he had.]

Prayer (10 minutes). Share prayer requests and respond appropriately.

Sending Forth (2 minutes). End with the following prayer, a similar prayer, or the Lord’s Prayer:

Loving God, whose constant presence both comforts and challenges us,
 As we set our hearts on the promise of another year,
 and lay before you our worries and troubles concerning
 the busy-ness of making home and keeping kin,
 Give us grace to speak and act consistently,
 that we may model a faith that is truly a blessing for our children,
 and give us grace for the times we fall short.
 Amen.

(Adapted from “Blessing Our Children,” by Thomas Rawls, in *Raising Faithful Kids: This is the Stuff of Faith*, edited by Denise Janssen, Carmichael D. Crutchfield, Virginia A. Lee, and Jessica Young Brown, 12-13; with reference to 1 Sam 1:16)

Subscribe to receive the Discipleship Email Newsletters at <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/subscribe>.

Mai-Anh Le Tran is associate professor of religious education and practical theology at [Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary](#). An ordained elder of the California-Nevada Annual Conference, she regularly contributes to the ministries of local churches, districts, conferences, and denominational agencies. She is the author of [*Reset the Heart: Unlearning Violence, Relearning Hope*](#) (Abingdon, 2017).