

Our Spirit Waits: Small Groups Resources for Advent & Christmas 2023

By Diana Hynson

First Sunday of Advent, Year B (December 3, 2023) – Our Spirit Waits: Our Shocking Hope

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

Gathering Time (5-10 minutes). In pairs or groups of three, have participants answer, “In what ways do you take time to actively look for and notice the work of God in your life and in the world?”

Group Dialogue (Approximately 30 minutes). Read [Isaiah 64:1-9](#) and [Mark 13:24-37](#).

- Both the Isaiah and Mark passages use dramatic imagery concerning the coming or presence of God: the heavens torn open, quaking mountains (Isaiah 64:1, NRSV), boiling hot water (64:2), total darkness and stars falling from heaven (Mark 13:1-2). Describe how you can (or cannot) relate to this imagery. How do you sense the presence of God in your own life?
- The Isaiah passage is a lament. The people are offering a corporate confession for having sinned and fallen away. They describe their behavior and feelings as “like one unclean” who “fade like a leaf” (64:6). What do you think is the purpose and power in corporate confession in your own worship? Do you take time in your own devotional life to “truly and earnestly repent of your sins”? Does it make a difference?
- Isaiah also uses the image of God as potter and humankind as the clay (64:8). In what ways has your relationship with God formed you into the person you are today? How would you say you are different in Spirit than you were five years ago, ten years ago, and in your youth?
- At the close of the Isaiah passage, he says “Do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people” (64:9). If we took this seriously, in the realm of our divided churches, community, and nation, what would that look like? What might be different? Better? How would you have to change or adapt to truly believe and act as if “we are all [God’s] people”?
- Mark 13 speaks about watchfulness, especially since no one knows the specific time of the return of Christ. Do you believe the Second Coming could occur in your lifetime? If not, what is the import of this command to watchfulness? What do you watch for? For what do you get ready during Advent?
- “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away” (Mark 13:31) What are the most compelling gospel messages that for you will not ever pass away? How do those words from God guide and shape you?

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:

Gracious and forgiving God, meet us in our frailty and forgive us our transgressions. We are grateful for your constancy in the midst of our divisions and conflicts. Speak the word to us that endures, so that we may share it in gratitude. Open our eyes and ears to your presence as we prepare to receive again your precious Son. Amen.

Second Sunday of Advent, Year B (December 10, 2023) – Our Spirit Waits: Our Just Peace

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

Gathering Time (5-10 minutes). Play the aria "Comfort Ye My People" (or from YouTube, [Jerry Hadley - Comfort ye my people -Messiah - Handel - YouTube](#)). In pairs or groups of three, have participants describe in a few sentences the image of the "way of the LORD" in the desert land of the Israelites. What would that look like in your own community?

Group Dialogue (Approximately 30 minutes). Read [Isaiah 40:1-11](#) and [Mark 1:1-8](#).

- Isaiah speaks words of comfort and hope to a people who are in exile from their own land. How can you understand and appreciate this good news in a position of relative comfort and safety? What are the barren and "exile" places in your own life? Does this passage bring comfort there? If so, why and how?
- Read aloud Isaiah 40:11. If you can, use a picture of the Good Shepherd (such as Kathrine Brown's image "Jesus and the Lamb" ([katherine brown artist jesus and the lamb - Bing images](#))). Ask: "Can you visualize yourself as a lamb in Jesus' care? Are you able to be vulnerable enough to be cared for and held in the arms of God?" If this is difficult, spend a few minutes discussing what it means and what it takes to entrust yourself to one another and to God.
- Mark 1:2-3 likens Isaiah's messenger to John the Baptizer—the one crying out in the wilderness. Who today raises the prophetic voice from the "wilderness" to call the community to repent, reform, or reclaim the good news? What does that wilderness look like today? What sort of resistance does that modern-day prophet encounter?
- John looked (and seemed) a bit wild to his contemporaries, yet the "whole Judean countryside" flocked to him and confessed their sins. What do you think made him such a compelling person? Can you imagine who today would have such compelling and legitimate power? What does it take for you to trust a call to repent and follow?
- Take a look at the promises made by or on behalf of a person being baptized ([United Methodist Hymnal, pp 34-35](#), or see below). Ask: "Are these promises you actively remember? Act upon? In

what ways do you embrace the vow concerning justice? In what ways do you fulfill the promise to nurture others as a congregational member?"

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:

God of the wilderness and of the way of peace: We confess that we too often pray for solace, but not for strength; for pardon, but not renewal. We are grateful for your guidance, your comfort, and your grace. Inspire and move us to hear your prophetic word, to do justice, and to fulfill our baptismal vows. In the name of Christ. Amen

THE BAPTISMAL COVENANT I

RENUNCIATION OF SIN AND PROFESSION OF FAITH

On behalf of the whole Church, I ask you:

Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness,
reject the evil powers of this world,
and repent of your sin? **I do.**

Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you
to resist evil, injustice, and oppression
in whatever forms they present themselves? **I do.**

Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior,
put your whole trust in his grace,
and promise to serve him as your Lord,
in union with the Church which Christ has opened
to people of all ages, nations, and races? **I do.**

The pastor addresses parents or other sponsors of candidates not able to answer for themselves:

Will you nurture these children (persons)
in Christ's holy Church,
that by your teaching and example they may be guided
to accept God's grace for themselves,
to profess their faith openly,
and to lead a Christian life? **I will.**

The pastor addresses candidates who can answer for themselves:

According to the grace given to you,
will you remain faithful members of Christ's holy Church
and serve as Christ's representatives in the world? **I will.**

The pastor addresses the sponsors:

Will you who sponsor these candidates
support and encourage them in their Christian life? **I will.**

The pastor addresses the congregation, and the congregation responds:

Do you, as Christ's body, the Church, reaffirm both your rejection of sin and your commitment to Christ?
We do.

Will you nurture one another in the Christian faith and life
and include these persons now before you in your care?

With God's help, we will proclaim the good news and live according to the example of Christ. We will surround these persons with a community of love and forgiveness, that they may grow in their trust of God, and be found faithful in their service to others.

We will pray for them, that they may be true disciples who walk in the way that leads to life

Third Sunday of Advent, Year B (December 17, 2023) – Our Spirit Waits: Our Fierce Joy

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

Gathering Time (5-10 minutes). In pairs or groups of three, have participants answer: “What can you remember about your baptism? Who was present? What did you wear? What does it mean to you?”

Group Dialogue (Approximately 30 minutes). Read [Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11](#) and [John 1:6-8, 19-28](#).

- Divide the group into two smaller groups; have one half examine Isaiah 61:1-4, and the other verses 8-11. Look for all the images of restoration, renewal, and encouragement. Together, describe why the images work (then and now) and what portrait emerges for a community under God. Ask, “Where in this portrait do you see yourself?”
- Isaiah 61:1 speaks about the anointed one, and John 1:19-28 about one who, in effect, anoints. Can you think of any contemporary instances of this sort of action? Who, in the church or world, is an “anointed one” and who anoints? What import did that function (or functionary) have in the biblical contexts? What does it have today?
- The Old Testament passage was spoken to a broken, beleaguered people who were held in exile for many years in a foreign land. Given the state of the world, much of which is in some sort of chaos, can you imagine who or what could stand to deliver a message of restoration? Would it be believed? In what way can an individual address the chaos and offer a beacon of hope or encouragement in the midst of disarray?
- Describe the traits of John the Baptizer (John 1:6-8). John was called to witness to the “light,” referring here to the Christ to come. *Witness* here has both a judicial and religious dimension, sufficient for evidence in a trial, which suggests the seriousness and weight of his claim. In what ways do you witness? Is it serious or compelling enough to be convicting “evidence”? How might you grow to be an even better witness?
- We are all called to live in the light. Who do you know who testifies to the light? Who are the faithful witnesses you have seen in action? How are you a witness to the light?

- John baptized with water in the tradition of the Jews' practice of ritual cleansing (see, for example, Leviticus 15 or Matthew 15:1-2). Advent, as a season of preparation, is a time for spiritual cleansing. What attitudes, behaviors, or beliefs might you need to amend to be ready to receive the Son? The Son receives us as we are, but what can you do to ensure that your spirit is in continual renewal?

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:

God of the prophets and Father of the Light: we struggle in the darkness to find the light and live in the light. We are grateful for the faithful witnesses who led the way with courage and encouragement. Inspire us to claim our baptismal vows and speak our word of truth in the world. In the name of Christ, the Anointed, Amen.

Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year B (December 24, 2023) – Our Spirit Waits: Love that Transforms Us / Our Wondrous Light

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

Gathering Time (5-10 minutes). In pairs or groups of three, have participants consider: "Advent is a time of waiting and preparation. What have you been waiting for? Preparing for? How much of this time has been spent in seasonal stuff and how much in focusing on Christ as the reason for the season?"

Group Dialogue (Approximately 30 minutes). Read [2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16](#), [Luke 1:26-38](#), and [Luke 1:46b-55](#).

- After years of turmoil, when David was "settled in his house" and "at rest from all his enemies around him" (2 Samuel 7:1), he and Nathan decided to give God a permanent home, too, but God objected rather pointedly. The traveling, portable tabernacle was good enough for now; thank you, very much. How do you envision the sort of "home" God has within your life? Is it a place essentially outside yourself where the "God stuff" resides? A portable place in your mind where God is tucked when convenient and pulled out when needed? A firm, unmovable spot in your heart and mind where you are constantly mindful of that presence? Something else? How do you move with God, and God with you?
- In this 2 Samuel passage, God reiterates the covenant promises to David and his people: a permanent land, peace, longevity, and steadfast Godly love. Peace in the Middle East has not been stable or permanent for a very long time. How do you interpret God's promises and rely on the word of God when you see that they seem not to be fulfilled? What do you think is God's response when we fail to keep our promises to God?
- Gabriel said many marvelous things to Mary. He started with "Greetings favored one! The Lord is with you." He ended with "For nothing will be impossible with God." (Luke 1:28, 37). Our understanding of grace declares that God says this to all of us if we could just hear it. In what ways do you see with assurance that God holds you in favor? That God is with you? That God

interacts with you? (If this seems difficult or impossible to conceive, perhaps a prayer partner might work with you to build up such assurance.) Have you seen evidence that “nothing is impossible with God”? How do you see yourself as God’s partner to make good and faithful things happen?

- When Mary, barely more than a child, was visited by Gabriel, she was initially perplexed by what he said (and no wonder!). He told her what must have seemed utterly fantastic: a birth (though she’s a virgin) of a son of God Most High, who would have a throne like unto David and an eternal kingdom. But almost immediately (assuming the conversation was as brief as reported), Mary said, “OK. As you wish” (Luke 1:26-38). Imagine yourself in that setting. Could you come to a point of obedience with a fantastic work of God so quickly (or at all)? Do you see yourself questioning? Arguing? Debating? Refusing?
- Mary obviously caught on quickly, especially with reinforcement from Elizabeth (1:39-45). She sings what we call the Magnificat (1:47-55). Play a musical version of this song (such as this one from St. Luke’s Central Music: [My Soul Magnifies the Lord - YouTube](#)). List all the elements of acclamation. Then, in groups of two or three, write your own psalm of praise, based on what you see here, but also from your own experience of God.

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:

Covenantal God of our foremothers and forefathers: we regret that we often fail to keep our promises or accept your guidance. We are grateful that you are faithful to your promises. Renew a spirit within us that we may carry you and your will at all times and all places. Bring us— at this celebration of birth—to a newborn dedication to discipleship. We ask this in the name of our Messiah, Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

First Sunday after Christmas Day, Year B (December 31, 2023) – Our Spirit Waits: Watchnight

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

Gathering Time (5-10 minutes). In pairs or groups of three, have participants consider their Christmas celebration. Christmas day is past, and in much of the community, Christmas (which began with retailers weeks ago) is over. Today is actually the seventh day of Christmastide. Are you still celebrating the birth of Christ, or are you ready to be done? If over-indulging in goodies and more-than-usual social activity has been the norm of late, how might you celebrate the Christ child in a quieter, more contemplative way?

Group Dialogue (Approximately 30 minutes). Read [Isaiah 61:10-62:3](#), [Galatians 4:4-7](#), and [Luke 2:22-40](#).

- The wedding finery mentioned in Isaiah 61:10 (garland and jewels) is a metaphor for the finest gifts of God (salvation and righteousness). The wedding as a joyous occasion is a metaphor for the much longed-for restoration of the community of exiles. What metaphors can you use to portray how you feel about the gifts of God to you?

- Consider the notion of vindication. All the passages speak in some way to the restoration and/or vindication of Israel. What is the sense of vindication in reference to Israel as a people of God and the way we may think of vindication today?
- Galatians 4:4-7 reminds us that we are no longer slaves, but children; as children, then heirs—because in the fullness of time, God’s promise came to fruition. Do you see yourself as a child and an heir? What does that mean to you in the context of day-to-day life? Have you had an experience of vindication or restoration “in the fullness of time”? What is it like to be patient; waiting (and hopefully, working) until the fullness of time?
- Simeon (Luke 2:25-32) was apparently not an invited participant in Jesus’ presentation, but the Spirit guided him to the Temple, where he announced the holy purpose of Jesus. Have you ever felt that you were part of a holy moment? What was that like? Have you ever had an “aha moment” of insight when some purpose or direction from God (or a trusted person of faith) became clear? Have you experienced the “light for revelation” in any other way?
- Simeon also described this baby’s life as one filled with opposition and pain (Luke 2:33-35). What must it have been like for new parents to feel the weight of responsibility for what was to come from Jesus’ life? Has God called you to a special task? How did it feel to embark upon it? What sort of support did you need and what did you get? How does your faith enable or empower you to act in spite of risk, opposition, or pain?
- Anna, a prophet and righteous widow, (Luke 2:36-38) reiterated, even legitimized, Simeon’s claim of Jesus as redeemer. What “elders” in your church help support ministry, encourage participation, or otherwise advance the goals of the church? How can you cultivate an openness both to the voice of experience as well as to the voice of the “holy children” in your congregation?
- What are the gifts of the Christmas season that you will take with you into the season of “business as usual”?

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:

Holy, Saving God, we confess that we have focused during Advent on many things besides the “reason for the season.” We have overextended, overindulged, and under-appreciated. Yet, we are the continual recipients of your gifts and grace, for which we are humbly grateful. Return our focus to the gifts of salvation and restoration and enliven us to be full partners in redemption. In the name of Christ, the light of revelation to the world. Amen.

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