



2020 Advent Devotional Guide

Wilson United Methodist Church
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Currently worshipping on Sundays at 8:45 am

- Off-site and in-person (*with restrictions*) at the Flying W Ranch located at 3330 Chuckwaggon Rd. 80919
- Online at www.wilsonumc.org/live



WEEK 1: Sunday, November 29

Hope: The Lord is with You (Luke 1:1-25)

Purpose:

To reflect on the role of critical thinking *and* sense of hope in our faith for the purpose of discipling other persons.

Scripture Focus: Luke 1:1-25

Introduction:

Picture someone you want to disciple in the Christian faith. It could be your child, your parent, a brother/sister, or friend. It could be a person you're mentoring at work. Luke's Gospel is written as a discipleship document to help Theophilus know the truth of what he has been taught. Luke is passing on to Theophilus what has been carefully researched and studied. Yet the first story of the Gospel is one of celebration and optimism. Christians call it *hope!* In the purpose and initial content of this Gospel, the careful reflection and sense of hope of the Christian faith are brought together. Luke, at his own expense of time, energy, critical thinking, and emotional investment, is discipling Theophilus. He discipled Theophilus, we might say, with hope! Do you have your potential disciple in mind? Someone you hope will deepen and broaden in the Christian faith? Let this lesson encourage you both to *think* through the faith and to *seek God* to be renewed in your hope of the faith as we begin Advent.

Questions:

1. Advent is a season of preparation that begins four Sundays before Christmas. Why do you think it is important to embrace Advent and not just skip ahead to Christmas Day?
2. What would you say you are *certain* about? Are you *certain* about your faith? Why or why not?
3. Have you ever prayed diligently and fervently for years about something that seemed God's will? How did the prayers resolve?
4. Christianity has three supreme virtues: Faith, hope, and love. Faith and love are naturally connected with being a Christian. Why do you think *hope* is also found in this triad?

Read Luke 1:1-25 together.

Ask these questions about the passage:

- What stands out to you?
- What are the key phrases, statements, ideas, themes, or words?
- Why might Zechariah have doubted?
- Re-read Luke 1:1-4. Imagine you are Theophilus. What would it be like to receive a book with an introduction to *you* like this?

- Notice the pronouns in the story once the angel engages Zechariah. First, the focus is on Zechariah (angel appears to *him*; *his* prayer is answered; *his* wife will bear *him* a son; *he* is to call the baby John). Next the pronouns shift to John the Baptist (*he* will be a joy and delight; many will rejoice because of *his* birth; *he* will be great in God’s sight; *he* will be filled with the Spirit). But after the message, Zechariah places the focus back on himself again (How can *I* be sure? *I* am an old man! *My* wife is old, too!). Is this shift in pronouns important? Why or why not?

Some things to consider & discuss

- Luke is not willing for Theophilus to sort through his spiritual/religious life without help. So he writes this Gospel at personal cost of time, money, and emotional effort. How are you investing in the spiritual life of another person? How does hope play a role in this effort?
- Luke’s introduction establishes the credibility of the faith by stating that many people have drawn up accounts of the story of Jesus and that Luke himself has “carefully investigated everything from the beginning,” too. Most of us have been taught by others in the Christian faith—by our parents, friends, or other relatives. How have you investigated the story of Jesus and the credibility of your claims for *yourself*?
- What would it have been like to be *Zechariah*—carrying this message home to Elizabeth?
- What would it have been like to be *Elizabeth*—hearing this message after her husband has been away serving in the temple?
- After becoming pregnant, Elizabeth stayed hidden in seclusion for five months. Why might she have done so?
- The typical practice of unhealthy shame is to *hide*. Elizabeth’s shame at not bearing a child possibly kept her in seclusion even after she was pregnant, which was actually a source of joy and provided reason to hope. Describe a time in your life when your willingness to hope because of God’s grace/favor overcame a desire to hide.
- The child promised to Zechariah and Elizabeth is John the Baptist. Part of John’s role is to “make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (v. 17). How does this story help prepare us for the Lord’s birth and the Lord’s return?

Respond:

1. What have you learned from this lesson?
2. How will you respond?
3. What do you feel challenged to do as a result?
4. How will you follow up on your progress next week? What is a shared goal your group can set and work toward?

WEEK 2: Sunday, December 6

Peace: Have no Fear (Luke 1:26-38)

Purpose:

To identify with Mary and the difficult call of God on her life in order to draw strength from her example.

Scripture Focus: Luke 1:26-38

Introduction:

We all need heroes in the faith—someone you look (or looked) up to. Think about 2-3 of your personal heroes in the faith. Did Mary the mother of Jesus come to mind? In the Protestant church, we can sometimes neglect the beautiful expression of discipleship and faith that Mary shows. Faced with a very difficult path for her life, Mary accepted God's plan instead of her own or others'.

Opening Questions:

1. This Advent season, how have you been preparing for Christmas? How have you been preparing for Christ's return?
2. Have you ever faced scorn or shame for following the will of God? Describe the experience.
3. When have you sensed the Lord was leading or speaking to you, and your response was fear?

Read Luke 1:26-38 together.

Ask these questions about the passage:

- What stands out to you?
- What are the key phrases, statements, ideas, themes, or words?
- Why might Mary have been distressed?
- Both Zechariah and Mary respond with similar questions to the angel's announcement. Compare Luke 1:18 with 1:34. What differences exist between these responses? What similarities?

Some things to consider & discuss

- Mary famously responds to Gabriel's announcement by proclaiming that she is the Lord's slave (from the Greek word *doulos*). What do you think about being God's slave?
- Mary's future is marked with a difficult path because God favored her. In his book, *Jesus Mean and Wild*, Mark Galli writes, "Jesus loves you and has a difficult plan for your life" in contrast to the more common, "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life." How does Mary's story challenge the notion that following God leads to an enjoyable/better life?

- Our culture often trumpets individual “rights.” Mary acknowledges that she has no rights before God. How does being a Christian challenge the notion of “rights”? How can Christians affirm the value of every person while acknowledging that we must give up our “rights”?
- Compare Luke 1:35 with Acts 1:8. Just like the Holy Spirit came upon Mary in power, so has He come upon the church with power. What connections might exist between Mary as a model disciple in this passage and our contemporary expressions of discipleship?
- Mary affirmed that the Lord’s plan was the best plan: “May it be to me what you have said” (Luke 1:38). Have you ever faced a time when you needed to acknowledge the Lord’s plan was best even if it wasn’t the easiest? Even if it wasn’t your plan?
- Mary was most likely 12 or 13 years old at the time of this announcement because she was engaged but not yet married. Obviously, this is a different culture than the contemporary western world. However, does it challenge us to have high expectations for our teenagers and adolescents? How can we believe in and support and expect more from our younger generations?
- Once Mary found out she was pregnant, there were preparations to make. We are still anticipating the universal reign and rule of her son that Gabriel foretold. Advent gives us focused time of preparation. Take time to pray together, asking how the Lord would have you prepare for his return.

Respond:

1. What have you learned from this lesson?
2. How will you respond?
3. What do you feel challenged to do as a result?
4. How will you follow up on your progress next week? What is a shared goal your group can set and work toward?

WEEK 3: Sunday, December 13

Joy: Finding God's Way (Luke 1:39-56)

Purpose:

To become a people of joy who can sing, celebrate, and worship in this hope in spite of life's circumstances!

Scripture Focus: Luke 1:39-56

Introduction:

Mary faced difficulties in life. She was pregnant without being married. She was more property than person. She, seemingly, had little social safety and so traveled roughly 80 miles to be with an aging cousin. Yet, in spite of these challenges, Mary *sang*. She sang because her spirit was rejoicing. Have you ever tried to sing when you have been broken and discouraged? Mary helps us to grow in our own faith so that we can emulate her spirit of rejoicing.

Opening Questions:

1. How has the season of Advent been displayed in your life? How have you been preparing for Christ's return as you prepare to celebrate his birth?
2. Think about a difficult time in your life where you sought the comfort and counsel of a mentor. As we will read, this is what Mary does with Elizabeth. How did the one you sought out respond? What difference did it make in your life?

Read Luke 1:39-56 together.

Ask these questions about the passage:

- What stands out to you?
- What are the key phrases, statements, ideas, themes, or words?
- Mary's song has been called "terrifying" by C.S. Lewis. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said this of the song: "It is at once the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung." What about the song would elicit such strong words? Read the song slowly. How might this song make you feel if you were in power? If you were powerless?

Some things to consider & discuss

- Mary's joyful song is also a song of *hope*, a song that blends her desire for God's justice with anticipation and finally expectation that it is coming. Mary is hopeful of God's justice and the words are captured in this revolutionary song. Think of a time that a song made a difference in your life. How does music capture our feelings and desires in a way that spoken words do not?
- Why might Luke have included this song for disciples of Jesus? What would he want us to feel? To know?

- Mary is part of the poor in her culture. She has no property. She receives sideways looks and glares because of her pregnancy. She has been righteous, yet she is scrutinized. How do faithful followers of Jesus today identify with the poor? How do faithful followers face scrutiny for righteous living?
- John Wesley said that we can rejoice with Mary because God has also regarded our lowly estate. While we may or may not be materially poor, we can rejoice that God has regarded us in our lowly estate of sin and misery. When was the last time you were filled with joy because God wasn't counting your sins against you, that you, like Mary, have not been forgotten by God?
- Mary went to an older relative for care and support in a difficult season. How can the church create opportunities for mutual support and care?
- Mary's courage in this song is grounded in the mightiness of God. She calls God her mighty warrior (v. 51). Where are we asking God to be mighty? What does the might and power of God look like as we remember his power and love displayed in the birth of Jesus?

Respond:

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WEEK 4: Sunday, December 20

Love: That Changes the World (Luke 2:1-20)

Purpose:

To identify with the situation Joseph, Mary, and the shepherds found themselves in to see how the birth of Jesus continues to shape and form our own lives in response to power, fear of the Lord, and God's personal work in your life.

Scripture Focus: Luke 2:1-20

Introduction:

Have you ever read a really good book where the characters came so alive that you could imagine them in your head, even having a little mental movie play as you read the story? Luke is a master at providing depth for even minor characters in this Gospel. In this Gospel, we have major political players, minor social outcasts, powerless citizens, and a baby. Yet each character has depth and intrigue—each is a kind of opposite to what we might assume. The Baby is the real King; Caesar is more truly the means to God's ends; the outcast shepherds are really the insiders; and the woman who might be the afterthought thinks deepest of all. What an upside down story! And do you know what turned it all upside? *God's love*. Let God's love help you see the characters of this story not only in a new way, but your entire life—its characters, its plot, and setting—in a new way, as well.

Opening Questions:

1. How has the season of Advent been displayed in your life? How have you been preparing for Christ's return as you prepare to celebrate his birth?
2. Think about a very difficult trip you made over a long distance. What made it difficult? Why did you make the trip?
3. Without mentioning names, have you ever known someone who thought they were vital to a family's, business's, or organization's success? What attitudes describe this kind of person? How were they effective or ineffective in their family, business, or organization?

Read Luke 2:1-20 together.

Ask these questions about the passage:

- What stands out to you?
- What are the key phrases, statements, ideas, themes, or words?
- Who are the key characters of the passage and what do we know about them?

Some things to consider & discuss

- Caesar has issued a decree for a census for the purposes of taxation. This forces Mary and Joseph to travel long distances at an inopportune time. What would

Joseph have been feeling at this decision and requirement? What would Mary have been feeling?

- Caesar's words have caused people to move. He shows a display of power. But behind the scenes God is arranging for Jesus to be born in the town of David. Discuss how you have seen God move behind the scenes in your life. What hope can we take that while political powers might be carrying out their will that God is still operating and even accomplishing His will?
- The shepherds were the bottom of the social system, yet God entrusted the announcement of Jesus' birth to them. How does this challenge the way we see people?
- Luke tells us that the shepherds returned to the fields glorifying and praising God (v. 20). On the surface, their role hadn't changed but certainly their demeanor was new. How can we exhibit a similar spirit? How can we fill our daily lives and work with the glory and praise of God? What might happen if we did?
- In Mary's song, we saw that Mary affirmed that the Lord's plan was the best plan: "May it be to me what you have said." As the plan has unfolded—her travel, the birth, the shepherds, etc.—what do you now think is Mary's response?
- Earlier, Mary sang in response to the word of the Lord; now she ponders. How do both of these actions—singing/praising and pondering—shape our own worship/response to the word of the Lord?
- Once again, fear comes up in this story, as an angel instructs the shepherds not to be afraid (v. 10). Earlier, Zechariah was told not to be afraid (Luke 1:12-13) and so was Mary (Luke 1:30). What might we learn about the fact that various people respond to God and God's representatives in fear? How might this challenge us if we have *never* been afraid?
- The shepherds returned to work not simply as shepherds. Instead, they were prophets who spoke the truth about Jesus (v. 17) and priests who engaged in worship (v. 20). How does your life lead others in truth and/or worship through your regular daily activities?
- This is the final Sunday before Christmas. Just as there is little time for preparations for gifts, meals, parties, etc., so is there little time to prepare for the birth of Jesus spiritually. How can you finish the Advent season well? How can this sense of urgency prepare you not just for Jesus' birth, but for his second coming, as well?

Respond:

1. What have you learned from this lesson?
2. How will you respond?
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