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People, Look East: A Study Pack on Advent Hymns

SESSION 1

Today's Advent Hymn: "Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gates"

Goal for the Session

Participants will identify Advent themes from the hymn "Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gates" and write a prayer to use during this Advent season.

Preparing for the Session

- Make a plan for distributing the Participant Handouts. Here are three suggestions:
  - e-mail all three Participant Handouts at once so that those who miss a session can have the material to view on their own;
  - e-mail the Participant Handout for each session during the week before that session. This has the advantage of making clear which session is under consideration; or
  - make hard copies of the *following* session to distribute at the *end* of the current session (otherwise group members may get distracted from the present session and start scanning the material for the following week).
- This first session does not assume participants have received the Participant Handout prior to the session. Make enough hard copies for everyone to have a copy. In addition, make copies of the Reflection Questions found in the appendix of this Leader's Guide to distribute at the end of the session for home use.
- If your group has an Advent practice, such as lighting of candles, feel free to incorporate that into the sessions.
- Decide how you will hear the hymns each week. Hymns are meant to be sung of course, and hopefully your group will sing each hymn through during each session. If this is not something your group will do, decide if you will play a recording of the hymn while they read the words or if they will read the words together.
- Read through the Participant Handout before the session and feel free to change activities according to the needs of your group.
- Prepare a brief presentation about the authors of today's hymn for activity 6, unless you have

Session at a Glance

OPENING
- Pray together
- Introduction to the study

EXPLORING
- Read Psalm 24
- Read the Participant Handout
- Sing the hymn
- Read "Hymn Background"

RESPONDING
- Write a prayer

CLOSING
- Pray together
- Sing the final verse
- Prepare for next week

additional time for participants to read it. See the second Teaching Alternative in that case.

Materials Needed

- Bibles
- Newsprint or board
- Marker
- Copies of the Participant Handout
- Index cards
- Pens
- Copies of Questions for Reflection

Teaching Tips

- Despite the increased accessibility of music, or perhaps because of it, adults sing less than ever. As people sing less their range shortens and many feel uncomfortable singing because they have not practiced and do not have the quality of voice they would like to have. Encourage them to sing anyway. Singing in groups is a practice of our ancient ancestors, most of whom did not possess operatic voices either. Perhaps this practice during the study will stimulate new interest in singing among your participants.
- Some may find the Participant Handouts to be a little too detailed. Explain that the author follows a long, historic tradition of using sacred music and text to articulate deep, theological ideas through song. Many of our modern songs are so simple that not much is learned. This study seeks to unpack some of the complex thoughts of original hymn writers about the significance of Advent. Encourage them to quietly and slowly read the Handouts during the week and gather what is most meaningful to them.
- Having said that, it can be difficult to remain focused on serious and complex theological issues during a Christmas season that has been taken over by consumerist culture. Many Christians today associate Christmas only with joyful celebration and parties. Yet, Advent, like the season of Lent, is a time of deep reflection about God's actions in the world. Three of the four hymns studied in this series are fairly dense and not necessarily joyful in the giddy sense. The third week's carol may provide some lighter relief. If this is all too serious for your group, feel free to balance the heaviness with some lighter, melodic Christmas carols and compare the moods and themes.

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Pray Together

Say this prayer or one of your choosing:

> Holy God,
> We gather on this first Sunday in Advent,
> Eager to learn your promises
> Hungry for words of hope
> Open to hear your word.
> Speak to us through hymns of old
> So that we might serve you better today.
> **Amen.**

2. Introduction to the Study

Distribute copies of the Participant Handout, Bibles, the songbook used by your church, and pens.

Inform participants that for each of the four Sundays in Advent we will study an Advent hymn and learn about its history and message. Briefly discuss the difference between an Advent hymn and a Christmas hymn. See if there is a separate section for each in your church hymnal.

As a group locate each of the hymns to be studied in the following order. Note that the second and third hymns will be studied in the same week:

- Lift Up Your Heads, ye Mighty Gates
- O Splendor of God's Glory Bright
- Savior of the Nations, Come
- People, Look East
- Wake, Awake, for Night is Flying *or* Sleepers, Wake! A Voice Astounds Us

Tell the group that during the study they have an "extra credit" assignment to prepare and present during the final session. They are to learn the history of an Advent hymn not studied during these four weeks and prepare a brief presentation about it for the final week.

Finally, inform people that the author of this study is a modern day text writer. She has prepared in depth information about each hymn and its writer(s). Encourage participants to not get bogged down in details that do not interest them, but rather to search for Advent themes and information that helps them in their Advent reflections. Encourage them to read the handouts during the week prior to the session for better discussion. A list of Reflection Questions about each hymn will be given at the end of each session along with the Participant Handout for the following week.

Exploring (20 minutes)

3. Read Psalm 24

Read Psalm 24 responsively. Have the left side of the room read the odd verses and the right side the even verses.

4. Read the Participant Handout

Allow five minutes for participants to read the first two sections of the Participant Handout following the "Introduction to the Study." (The sections are "Biblical Background to today's Hymn" and "Other Entrances").

Briefly discuss what the author says is the Advent theme found in Psalm 24. An answer may be that just as the people of Israel awaited the Ark of the Covenant, so later they awaited God's Messiah. Today we also wait.

5. Sing the Hymn

Sing through all the verses of this hymn in your songbook.

6. Read "Hymn Background"

Again, allow a few minutes for participants to read this section of the Participant Handout. At this point, you may also read the brief summary about the authors of today's hymn that you have prepared. Next, identify as a group words and phrases in the hymn that are Advent themes. Write them on the newsprint or board.

Responding (10 minutes)

7. Write a Prayer

Distribute index cards and have participants write a prayer for their own personal use during Advent based on the themes of the hymn. Encourage them to take the index card and put it somewhere they will see it during the next few weeks.

Closing (5 minutes)

8. Pray Together

Distribute copies of the Questions for Reflection found in the appendix to this Leader's Guide. Encourage participants to reflect on them during prayer time this week.

Invite a few volunteers to read the prayers they wrote as a final prayer for the group.

9. Sing the Final verse

Sing the final verse of the hymn or read it in unison.

10. Prepare for Next Week

Distribute copies of the Participant Handout for next week and agree as a group to read it during the week.

Teaching Alternatives

- If there is time, read about the authors in the Participant Handout. Find out how many of Catherine Winkworth's hymns are in your church songbook.
- An alternative Responding activity is to use the Questions for Reflection at the end of this Leader's Guide as discussion starters for your group, or spend time in quiet reflection or journaling time centered on the questions.

Key Scriptures

Psalm 24

Revelation 3:20

Appendix

Questions for Reflection: Session 1

1. The people of Ancient Israel eagerly awaited the arrival of the Ark of the Covenant in Jerusalem, as generations later they awaited the coming of God's promised Messiah, expecting both of these events to transform their personal and political lives. What kind of transformation do we—or should we—still expect in our hearts and our communities through the coming of the Christ?

2. Even though he was specially chosen by God, King David did not immediately succeed in every venture he attempted. How can he serve as a model for us when we meet with disappointing or even tragic reversals in our own lives?

3. How many of the hymns that we think of as "ours" actually started out in a different culture and a different language from our own? Pay some fresh attention to the "fine print" in hymnals identifying authors and *translators*, giving thanks for the "gift of tongues" that has enabled God's word to cross the borders of countries and continents. How are songs from other languages and cultures still expanding our grasp of the "breadth and length and height and depth" of the love of Christ (Eph. 3:18)?

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SESSION 1

Today's Advent Hymn: "Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gates"

Introduction to the Study

Hymns have histories: they were written by particular people, often in response to particular circumstances in the writers' lives. More than this: hymns *teach* history. By paying attention to their back stories, we learn of joys and struggles that have occupied our ancestors in the faith from biblical times to our own.

This study series lets us drop in on a handful of historic moments. We visit King David's processional to Jerusalem with the Ark of the Covenant and see how this event inspired a seventeenth-century text that we still sing, over three hundred years later, because of the work of a devout Victorian woman, Catherine Winkworth. We meet Bishop Ambrose, the influential leader of the fourth-century church, whose courageous preaching and hymn-writing instilled the once-controversial doctrine of the Trinity into the hearts and minds of early Christians. We fast-forward to the Reformation and witness how pastor Philipp Nicolai drew solace from hymn-writing during a time of intense social and personal upheaval. And we leap into the twentieth century to enjoy the ways in which Eleanor Farjeon, a writer of children's stories, played with an array of biblical images to craft an Advent song for children and adults alike, with all the flavor of a medieval Christmas carol.

As you read, study, sing, and pray your way through these lessons, look for parallels between the hymn-writers' lives and your own. What challenges did they face that remind you of challenges in our own day? What stories, teachings, and images fueled their creativity and their Christian hope? What lines from their texts help re-kindle in you an eager expectation for the coming—and the Second Coming—of the Christ? How do their words help you to feel part of not just a cloud, but a veritable *choir* of witnesses, stretching back for centuries and leading forward to that time beyond time when we all will sing together before the throne of the Lamb?

"The Lord whom you seek," proclaims the prophet Malachi, "will suddenly come to his temple" (Mal. 3:1).

Biblical Background to Today's Hymn

The first attempt failed miserably. King David had wanted to bring the Ark of the Covenant—the ornate wooden chest containing the tablets of the Law—into the newly-conquered city of Jerusalem in order to make his political capital into the religious center of Israel as well. But the initial transport met with disaster. Uzzah, one of the men charged with bearing the Ark, reached out to stabilize it when the cart on which it was situated lurched unexpectedly. His unthinking act had dire consequences: having violated the taboo against touching the sacred object, he was struck dead on the spot. What began as a joyous occasion thus quickly turned into a tragic one. How could such a holy endeavor go so

badly wrong? Confused, angry, and frightened, David temporarily abandoned his project and left the Ark for safe-keeping in the home of Obed-Edom, a member of the Levite clan historically charged with its care (2 Sam 6:6–10).

Three months passed, during which the household of Obed-Edom prospered—a sign that the Ark of the Covenant was once again bringing blessing rather than disaster. So David decided to renew his efforts, this time with more attention to the ceremonial laws lining out proper care for sacred objects from the ancient tent of meeting (see, for example, Num. 4:4–20; 1 Chr. 15:13). The Ark would be carried by means of the poles passed through the specially designed rings along its sides—on the shoulders of human beings and not on any mechanical contrivance (Exod. 25:12–15). Even more, just as God had commanded six days of labor to be followed by a seventh of rest, when the processional had taken six steps forward, David commanded it to pause so that sacrifices of thanksgiving could be offered (2 Sam. 6:13).

What a glorious parade then followed! Hundreds of professional musicians were charged to "make a joyful sound" with lyres and harps; others, to play bronze cymbals; still others, to blow trumpets before the Ark as it slowly made its way toward its new home (1 Chr. 15:16, 19, 24). The head Levite, a man with an especially sonorous voice, led the singing. In honor of the occasion, David shed his royal robes and dressed in a simple linen garment, like the Levitical priests. After all, there was just one "king" in this processional: the invisible One enthroned between the cherubim on top of the Ark, the King of Kings, the Holy One of Israel, the Lord of Hosts.

Singing and dancing, the lines of celebrants wound up the hill, up to the former stronghold of the Jebusites, recently conquered by David and renamed Jerusalem. In the 1960s, a British archeologist, Kathleen Kenyon, excavated the eastern slope of the city's hill and exposed remnants of a massive stone defense wall surrounding the earlier Canaanite city; David added to this, creating further protection for the capital. Some ruins discovered in Palestine show deep grooves in the posts of gateways, suggesting that their initial passageways opened not *out* but *up*, raising and lowering their doors on a set of pulleys, much like the portcullis on a medieval castle. We can well imagine the shouts of the people as they massed outside these city walls, eager to accompany the Ark to its new home:

> Lift up your heads, O gates;
> and be lifted up, O ancient doors,
> that the King of Glory may come in. (Ps. 24:7)

Other Entrances

The triumphant shouts of Psalm 24 strongly suggest usage during a ceremony re-enacting the entry of the Lord into the sanctuary, or some comparable festival of dedication. The Psalm may have originally been composed for the Feast of Tabernacles, occurring at that time of year when the harvest had been gathered in and people from all over the country, temporarily released from agricultural labor, could make a leisurely pilgrimage to the Holy City for religious celebrations. Later, in the post-exilic temple worship of Israel:

> [Psalm 24] was sung at the time of the morning sacrifice on the first day of the week. The liturgy accompanied a procession that may have reenacted David's bringing of the ark (symbolic of God's throne) into Jerusalem and placing it there in its own tent sanctuary. In broader perspective the liturgy no doubt celebrated the final triumphal march of the King of Glory from Mount Sinai (Ps. 68), or even from Egypt (Exod. 15:1–18), into his royal resting place (1 Chron. 28:2) in the royal city of his kingdom.[1]

But use of this entrance hymn has extended to multiple other occasions. Christians have applied it to the presentation of Christ in the Temple on the fortieth day after Christmas: the "King of Glory" returns to the holy precincts, but in the unexpected form of an infant over whom the elderly Simeon and Anna rejoice, proclaiming that in him they have seen the redemption promised to Israel (Luke 2:22–40). Christians have also used it for Palm Sunday: the gates of Jerusalem again witness the arrival of one proclaimed "King of the Jews," though he comes in a humble processional, contrasting with David's royal arrival. Some early church theologians applied the words of Psalm 24 to the mythic "harrowing of hell"—the descent of Jesus into the underworld during the period between his crucifixion and resurrection, entering those terrible precincts as a glorious conqueror to lead forth the righteous, who had died before his birth, into the salvation destined for them. Still others apply the psalm to the day of the ascension: the very heavens lift up their gates and fling wide their doors to welcome the Christ in a celestial homecoming.

But one of the most significant occasions by far for singing a glorious entrance hymn falls during the season

of Advent. "The Lord whom you seek," proclaims the prophet Malachi, "will suddenly come to his temple" (Mal 3:1). Even now, a messenger is coming to prepare the way. Will we be ready?

Hymn Background

This context of prophecy and anticipation serves as the focus of Georg Weissel's Reformation hymn, translated in the nineteenth century by Catherine Winkworth as "Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gates." The hymn has been popular in denominational hymnals in the U.S. since the early twentieth century. The form in which it frequently appears, however, is significantly shortened from both the original German and the original English translation. Here is Winkworth's full first stanza:

> Catherine Winkworth (1827–1878) is the primary reason that *numerous* chorales of the German Reformation have become beloved hymns in the English-speaking world.

> Lift up your heads, ye mighty gates,
> Behold the King of glory waits,
> The King of kings is drawing near,
> The Saviour of the world is here;
> Life and salvation doth He bring,
> Wherefore rejoice, and gladly sing
> Praise, O my God, to Thee!
> Creator, wise is Thy decree![2]

Of these eight lines, most of us sing only the first four—which, indeed, seem sufficient to capture the expectant language of Psalm 24. We feel ourselves present with the eager crowd at the city walls, awaiting the arrival of the One who is coming in state. The repetition in lines 2 through 4 hammers like the pounding of our hearts: the King of glory is waiting; the King of kings is approaching; the Savior is even now at the threshold! This repetition also mimics the original Psalm: "Who is the King of glory? / The LORD, strong and mighty, / the LORD, mighty in battle" (24:8). Lines 5 through 8 elaborate on our reasons for rejoicing, but such reasons seem already clear in identifying the One who is drawing near as "the Savior of the world."

Once Weissel has established the expectant mood of Psalm 24, we can feel his imagination turning to a New Testament text (Rev. 3:20): "Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me." The command thus extends to *us*, in words from Weissel and Winkworth's original stanza 4, to welcome the coming Savior within the walls of our own lives:

> Fling wide the portals of your heart,
> Make it a temple, set apart
> From earthly use for Heaven's employ,
> Adorned with prayer and love and joy.

The imagery of eating together, from the Revelation text, echoes in the eucharistic resonance of lines 2 and 3 above: in celebrating the Lord's Supper, we pray that the elements of bread and the cup be set apart from any common use to a holy use and mystery. So in this hymn, we pray that our hearts be consecrated for holy uses by an internal Advent of the Christ.

Winkworth and Weissel's final stanza offers a further shift in perspective. Stanza 1 addressed the "mighty gates," after which the address turned to *us*, exhorting us to be ready and welcoming. Finally, the hymn entreats the One whose Advent we await:

> Redeemer, come! I open wide
> my heart to Thee, here, Lord, abide!
> let me Thy inner presence feel,
> Thy grace and love in me reveal.

Some hymnals continue from this point with a version of the remaining four lines of the Weisse/Winkworth original:

> Thy Holy Spirit guide us on
> Until our glorious goal is won!
> Eternal praise and fame,
> Be offered, Saviour, to Thy name![3]

Whether or not this eschatological coda is included, the thrust of the hymn remains the same. It is captured in the epigraph Winkworth provides for it in her *Lyra Germanica*: "Rejoice in the Lord! . . . The Lord is at hand" (Phil. 4:4–5). May every heart prepare him room.

About the Hymn's Authors

Our appreciation of this hymn is enhanced by knowing more about its author and translator. Georg Weissel

(sometimes spelled Weiszel; 1590–1635) was the son of a judge and political official in Prussia. In his early twenties, he served as rector of a school for three years until deciding to pursue further theological study at the University of Königsberg. Upon the completion of his studies, he became pastor of a newly-built Lutheran church in Königsberg, where he spent the remainder of his career. His years in ministry occurred during the tumultuous times of the Thirty Years War, one of the most destructive conflicts of European history, when entire regions were stripped bare by armies foraging for food to sustain themselves, and large civilian populations fell victim to famine and disease. In her book of translations and biographical sketches, Catherine Winkworth notes: "At Königsberg in those stormy days lived a little knot of friends who by no means escaped their share of trouble, but found solace under it in their religion, their mutual friendship, and the practice of music and poetry."[4] Weissel was the oldest member of this so-called "Königsberg Circle," and the only one (thanks largely to Winkworth's translation of "Lift Up Your Heads") whose name is found in major U.S. denominational hymnbooks today.

In fact, Catherine Winkworth (1827–1878) is the primary reason that *numerous* chorales of the German Reformation have become beloved hymns in the English-speaking world. Though her name is not so widely recognized as that of Isaac Watts or Charles Wesley, her contributions to our hymnody are comparably great. A glance in the author index of just a few recent denominational collections bears this out. She is credited with more distinct texts than any other individual author in the *Presbyterian Hymnal* (1990) and in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (2007); among historical authors, only Charles Wesley has more texts in the *United Methodist Hymnal* (1989).[5]

But numbers do not tell the whole story. For that, we must look at the actual titles she has contributed, considering their significance and staying power, and the fact that they have appeared in hymnals across denominations for the past 150 years. The table below lists a small sampling. What would our worship life be like if we were deprived of this body of work? Granted, Winkworth's texts are translations and not original compositions—but anyone who might be tempted to minimize her contribution on that account should attempt the task of rendering a text *poetically* from one language into another, with fidelity not only to the meaning but also the exact meter, rhyme scheme, and melodic contours of the original, so that both can be sung to the same piece of music!

Title of Translation*	Author	Original Date
All My Heart This Night Rejoices	Paul Gerhardt	1656
Comfort, Comfort Ye My People	Johannes Olearius	1671
Deck Thyself, My Soul, with Gladness	Johann Franck	1649
If Thou but Suffer God to Guide Thee	Georg Neumark	1641
Jesus, Priceless Treasure	Johann Franck	1653
Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gates	Georg Weissel	1642
Now Thank We All Our God	Martin Rinkart	1636
O Lord, How Shall I Meet Thee	Paul Gerhardt	1653
O Morning Star, How Fair and Bright	Philipp Nicolai	1599
Open Now Thy Gates of Beauty	Benjamin Schmolk	1704
Praise Ye the Lord, the Almighty	Joachim Neander	1680
Wake, Awake, for Night Is Flying	Philipp Nicolai	1599

* Versions in contemporary hymnals occasionally modernize the language (e.g. altering "Thee/Thy" to "You/Your" or "suffer" to "trust in") or pluralize the pronouns (changing "my" to "our"). However, the bulk of the poetry remains Winkworth's.

Winkworth's biography, written by her niece Margaret Shaen, depicts a woman with a keen mind and a gentle spirit, whose early years were as selfless as they were precocious. A family friend tells the story of arriving at the Winkworth household one day to find Catherine, age eight, sitting on a footstool, reading the Sermon on the Mount aloud as her four- and five-year-old brothers sat at her feet. "What, Kate," the visitor exclaimed, "reading the Bible to your brothers?" "Yes," she replied, "but I try to choose the parts that are suited to their capacity."[6]

Continuing along this path, "Kate" was teaching Sunday school by the age of twelve—a detail all the more significant because during this time in England, the only education available for many working class children came from Sunday school instruction. Her commitment to learning continued late into her life, as she staunchly

promoted higher education for women. Never married, she devoted herself to her work as a translator, and to "district visiting" of poorer women in need of company and counsel. Her letters show her to be an inquiring theologian and a wise spiritual guide.

Ever putting the needs of others above her own, she was on her way to care for an invalid nephew in Switzerland when she died of a heart attack at age fifty-eight. Her earthly life was cut tragically short. Yet, generations later, her words still inspire us to "lift up" our hearts, preparing us during the Advent season, and every season, to live lives like hers: "adorned with prayer and love and joy."[7]

About the Writer

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Endnotes

1. *The Psalter Hymnal Handbook* quoted in "The Earth and the Riches," Hymnary.org, http://www.hymnary.org/hymn/PsH/24

2. For Winkworth's complete translation, see *Lyra Germanica: Hymns for the Christian Year* (1861), 17–18. Available in full text at http://www.ccel.org/ccel/winkworth/lyra.html.

3. Winkworth, Catherine and Georg Weissel, "Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gates," accessed at http://www.hymnary.org/text/lift_up_your_heads_ye_mighty_gates_behol.

4. Winkworth, Catherine, *Christian Singers of Germany* (1869), 203. Full text at http://www.ccel.org/ccel/winkworth/singers.html.

5. In the *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Martin Luther appears to have more entries, but several are different settings of one text; Marty Haugen also has more entries, but some are tunes composed for texts by other authors. In the UMH, Fred Pratt Green—one of the significant authors of the late-twentieth-century "hymn explosion"—has 18 texts to Winkworth's 11; only time will tell how many of these will remain for future generations.

6. Catherine Winkworth, Susanna Winkworth, and Margaret Josephine Shaen, *Memorials of Two Sisters, Susanna and Catherine Winkworth* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1908), 8.

7. Winkworth, Catherine and Georg Weissel, "Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gates," accessed at http://www.hymnary.org/text/lift_up_your_heads_ye_mighty_gates_behol.