



YOUTH STUDY

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LEADER'S GUIDE Session 1

Preparing Our Hearts: A Youth Advent Study Based on the Gospels

Introduction for the Leader

Advent is the season in the Christian year when we think about God coming into the world as a human being in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. This study examines the four Gospel portrayals of Jesus' origins: Who is Jesus? Where did he come from? What do these narratives tell us about what to expect of Jesus in the remainder of each Gospel? This study will attempt to raise challenging questions about Jesus' origins and will explore what these Gospel portrayals of Jesus' beginnings say about the Son of God and his meaning for the early church and for us today.

The Gospel of Matthew

In this first session, the birth narrative of the Gospel of Matthew gives the familiar account of a newborn king and his wise visitors from the East who found their way to his cradle by following his star. But this Gospel also includes the frightening story of King Herod's attempt to kill the infant Jesus—the plot that the wise men foil by hiding from Herod the location of the newborn king. The Gospel of Matthew reminds us that even in times of fear and uncertainty, God is not absent or far removed but dwells with us as Emmanuel or “God-with-us” through Jesus Christ.

Session at a Glance

ARRIVING

- Recounting your birth story

GATHERING

- Sharing your birth story

OPENING

- Goal of the session
- Opening prayer and Advent candle lighting

EXPLORING

- Retelling of Jesus' birth narrative in Matthew
- Character cards
- Emmanuel: “God-with-us”

RESPONDING

- Advent mural

CLOSING

- New insights
- Closing prayer

To say that God is with us is to declare that Jesus is the culmination of a long history of God's salvific actions on behalf of God's people (Matt. 1:23). Emmanuel begins his life as a refugee: he and his parents flee from wrathful King Herod, whose paranoid and jealous intent is to murder him as a rival king of the Jews (2:1–20). This session will look at the ways in which Jesus reaches out to all those who are dispossessed and offers them hope by truly being present with and for them.

Jesus the Exile: “God-with-Us”

The Advent hymn “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” recalls how Israel “mourns in lonely exile . . . until the Son of God appears,” and it alludes to how this Emmanuel himself was exiled in Egypt. We do not usually think of Jesus as a refugee or exile, but that is exactly what he is in Matthew's story. Not long after his birth, Jesus' parents flee with him to Egypt to escape King Herod's men, who are coming to kill all the male infants in Bethlehem. An angel warns Joseph in a dream to flee with the child, and Jesus becomes a refugee.

Most Christians can only imagine the terror of fleeing with a newborn child to a strange land where they have no family or friends to support them. Yet most Christians can think of times in their lives when they have experienced fear, threat, uncertainty, and/or distance from God. Matthew's Gospel's illustration of the fact that Jesus did not live a quiet, secure life is a powerful reminder that Jesus not only ministered to the disenfranchised but could truly empathize with their experiences.

The story of Jesus' flight to Egypt to escape King Herod and his wandering, homeless ministry are not pleasant and cozy Christmas stories, but they are appropriate stories to ponder during Advent, when Christians think about what it means that God came into the world. The hope of Advent is that God comes to dwell with us so that we have the strength to dwell with, encourage, and help others in need.

Goal for the Session

As Matthew's Gospel helps us understand Jesus as Emmanuel, “God-with-us,” youth will describe how they believe God is with them.

Preparing for the Session

- Read carefully through this Leader's Guide and decide if you will have the group work on activities in partners, small groups, or together as one large group.
- Examine the possible Teaching Alternatives for the session and decide if you would like to utilize any of these options in place of the suggested activities.
- Read the session's focus text, Matthew 1:18–25, 2:1–12
- Write the arriving prompt on the board or newsprint.
- Pray for the young people you will be working with as well as for God's wisdom in your leadership.

Materials Needed

- Bibles
- an Advent wreath and matches or lighter
- a nativity set
- newsprint or board
- markers
- paper and pens or pencils
- prepared character cards (index cards with one of the following names printed on each card: Joseph, Mary, Angel, Herod, Wise Men)
- copies of the Participant Handout

Teaching Tips

- The very first activity asks participants to recall their birth story. Some individuals may be adopted or have little or no information about their birth story. For others, a variety of factors may contribute to this being a sensitive subject to discuss within a group. Encourage participants to share only as much as they are comfortable sharing within the group setting, and help them find ways to think creatively outside the bounds of the question. (“What do you know about your adoption story?” or “What is the earliest memory you have of your family?”)
- Be aware that asking participants to consider how God has been Emmanuel, “God-with-us,” in

their lives may bring up challenging memories or emotions. Encourage active listening within your group, affirm those who share their experiences, and make sure participants know there is no pressure to share more than they are comfortable sharing in this setting.

Arriving (5 minutes)

1. Recounting Your Birth Story

As youth arrive, have them take some paper and writing utensils and respond to the following prompt: write about or illustrate what you know of your own birth story.

Check in with individuals as they respond and encourage them to share specific details of their birth stories that may relate to today's session:

- Where were they born?
- Who was present at their birth?
- What emotions do they imagine their family members and loved ones experienced?

Gathering (5 minutes)

2. Sharing Your Birth Story

Once everyone has arrived, gather your group together and invite volunteers to share what they know of their birth stories with the larger group. Once everyone has had a turn to share, briefly discuss the following questions:

- What similarities do you notice among the stories we have each shared here today?
- What differences do you notice among the stories we have each shared here today?
- How does learning about where we came from influence our understanding of who we are today?

Opening (5 minutes)

3. Goal of the Session

Explain to youth that during this season of Advent we will be studying Advent themes present in the four Gospels. In today's session we will concentrate on the Gospel of Matthew. As Matthew's Gospel helps us understand Jesus as Emmanuel, "God-with-us," youth will describe how they believe God is with them.

4. Opening Prayer and Advent Candle Lighting

Pray together the prayer on the Participant Handout, and light the first candle on the Advent wreath.

Exploring (25 minutes)

5. Retelling of Jesus' Birth Narrative in Matthew

As a group, try to retell Jesus' birth story from memory. (Note: if your group is bigger than ten, form smaller groups or partners.) See how many details you can remember to weave into the full telling of Jesus' birth. Use the following questions to guide your discussion:

- What characters were present?
- When did each of them arrive?
- How did they react to the news of Jesus' birth?

Ask for a volunteer to record your responses on newsprint for the entire group to reference. Once you have included as many details as you can in your retelling of Jesus' birth narrative, ask for volunteers to read aloud from Matthew 1:18–25 and 2:1–12. Have participants note which characters are present in this version and which details must come from other Gospels. Using a small nativity set, add or subtract figures from the nativity set to create a scene that accurately reflects the characters present in Matthew's Gospel.

6. Character Cards

Form smaller groups or pairs and distribute a card to each group with a character's name on it (Joseph, Mary, Angel, Herod, Wise Men.) Ask them to reread the story and think specifically from the perspective of their character.

- What was this person feeling during the events surrounding Jesus' birth?
- What fears did she or he have?
- How did Jesus' birth offer this person hope or excitement?

7. Emmanuel: "God-with-Us"

Have the group look at Matthew 1:23, in which the angel reminds Joseph of the words of the prophet, "'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,' which means, 'God is with us.'" You may want to have a volunteer write this verse on newsprint or a board for everyone to reference as they study the following passages. As a large group or in small groups or partners, read through each of the following stories in Matthew's Gospel and respond to the questions below.

The Beatitudes: Matthew 5:1–11

Jesus Heals Many: Matthew 8:14–17

Feeding the Five Thousand: Matthew 14:13–21

- How are each of these stories an example of how Jesus is Emmanuel, “God-with-us”?
- How do you imagine each of these stories might be a comfort to someone who feels distanced or disconnected from God?
- Do any of these stories remind you of a time in your life when you or someone you know experienced the power of God as Emmanuel, “God-with-us”?

Responding (10 minutes)

8. Advent Mural

Using the designated space on the Participant Handout, have participants briefly reflect on how God has been or is Emmanuel, “God-with-us,” during a difficult time in their lives. One they have had some time to record their responses, designate a space on the wall with a large sheet of newsprint where, throughout the four sessions, the group will have the opportunity to create an Advent mural.

Ask the group to think about what words or symbols they would use to represent what they have learned about God through Matthew’s Gospel and add these to the mural in the color purple. Explain that the liturgical color purple symbolizes preparation, and in the season of Advent we prepare ourselves for the coming of Jesus.

Closing (5 minutes)

9. New Insights

Using the designated space on the Participant Handout, ask participants to write one new thing they have learned during this session. Offer an opportunity for individuals to share their response with the group.

10. Closing Prayer

Using the designated space on the Participant Handout, ask participants to write a short prayer giving thanks for a specific time or way that Jesus has been Emmanuel, “God with us,” in their life. Then close with a time of prayer that allows the opportunity for participants to read their prayers aloud if they so desire.

Teaching Alternatives

- If possible, arrange an interview with a member of your congregation or community prior to the lesson. Invite an individual who has had a profound experience of Jesus as Emmanuel, “God-with-us,” to share her or his story with your group. Possibilities for individuals to invite may include someone who has suffered a particular hardship such as overcoming illness or the death of a loved one, someone who has personally experienced persecution (such as a refugee), or anyone who can personally testify to the power of God’s presence in their lives. Ask your participants to prepare questions for the individual as they relate to the idea of God being Emmanuel, “God-with-us,” through Jesus Christ.
- Talk with your group about modern-day refugees. Although we tend to read the story of Jesus’ escape from King Herod’s persecution as ancient history, in reality there are still Christians today who find themselves fleeing from their homelands because of their belief that Jesus is the Messiah. Find a current news story online or refugee resettlement resources in your area and discuss with the group the reality of these individuals’ everyday lives. How might they hear the story of Jesus’ birth in the Gospel of Matthew in unique and powerful ways?

Key Scriptures

Matthew 1:18–25, 2:1–12

Matthew 5:1–11

Matthew 8:14–17

Matthew 14:13–21

Kathy Wolf Reed is Associate Pastor at First Presbyterian Church in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, where she primarily serves in the areas of youth, college, young adult, and family ministry.



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PARTICIPANT HANDOUT Session 1

Preparing Our Hearts: A Youth Advent Study Based on the Gospels

Advent Themes in Matthew

The story of Jesus' birth in the Gospel of Matthew gives the familiar account of a newborn king and his wise visitors from the East who found their way to his cradle by following a star. But this Gospel also includes the frightening story of King Herod's attempt to kill the infant Jesus—the plot that the wise men foil by hiding the location of the newborn king from Herod. The Gospel of Matthew reminds us that even in times of fear and uncertainty, God is not absent or far removed but dwells with us as Emmanuel, or “God-with-us,” through Jesus Christ.

Scriptures Used Today

Matthew 1:18–25, 2:1–12

Matthew 5:1–11

Matthew 8:14–17

Matthew 14:13–21

Opening Prayer

Emmanuel, God-with-us,

we thank you that no matter how much or how little we know about our birth stories, we do know that you are our Creator.

We pray that in this Advent season we will come to see how you are “God-with-us” through the gift of your Son, Jesus Christ.

We ask that in our time together today you will help us understand Christ's presence with us even now.

In Jesus' name we pray,

Amen.

Questions for Reflection

1. How or when has God been Emmanuel, “God-with-us,” at a difficult time in your life?

2. What is one new thing you have learned about God or yourself in this lesson?

Closing Prayer

Write a prayer giving thanks for a specific time or way that Jesus has been Emmanuel, “God-with-us,” in your life: _____
