



ADULT STUDY

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LEADER'S GUIDE Session 1

Christmas Accounts in the Gospels: An Adult Advent Study

Christmas at Mark's House

Goal for the Session

Participants will experience how Christmas is observed in Mark's spare, simple house in order to reflect more deeply on the mystery of Jesus Christ.

Preparing for the Session

- Read through the entire four-session study to get a sense of its scope. Pray for yourself and the participants.
- Adapt this session, and the other sessions in this study, for the needs of your group. There are often more activities suggested than you may have time to do. Also, read the Teaching Alternatives at the end of each Leader's Guide and consider whether or not to substitute activities.
- If possible prior to the study, contact participants and ask them to bring a journal—either a paper version or an electronic tablet—to class. Plan to provide paper and pens for those who do not bring a journal. E-mail the participant handout to them as an attachment and ask them to read over the handout for session 1 prior to the first class meeting.
- On newsprint or a board, print the following open-ended prompts for the Opening activity:
In my home, we decorate for Christmas with/by

Session at a Glance

OPENING

- Discuss Christmas decorating
- Light the first Advent candle
- Pray

EXPLORING

- Explore Mark's spare house
- Examine the absence of a Christmas narrative

RESPONDING

- Discern the source of hope
- Create an ornament

CLOSING

- Sing a carol
- Close with prayer

_____. With our decorations, we indicate that we cherish _____. Our family's personality is reflected in our decorations by _____.

- Set up four candles for the candle lighting and bring matches or a lighter. Alternatively, use electronic candles. It is not necessary that the candles be in an Advent wreath. Next to or in front of the first candle, place a simple cross.
- It would be helpful, although not necessary, to project the illustration of Mark's house. Otherwise, simply refer participants to the illustration in the Participant Handout.
- On another sheet of newsprint or in another location on a board, print the following questions for the Responding activity:
 - What issues in our present political or social context are causing you anxiety in this season? What leads you to feel despair or discouragement?
 - What, in this season, is a source of hope for you?
 - In what ways, and to what extent, have you been transformed by the good news of the Gospel? What spiritual practices might strengthen your resolve to follow the way of the cross, not the ways of the culture?
- For the Responding activity of creating an ornament, cut cardstock or large index cards into the shape of a simple cross. If you need a pattern, you can search online for one.
- Bring some hymnals and arrange for accompaniment so your group can sing "Good Christian Friends, Rejoice." Recordings of the carol can be found online if no accompaniment is available.

Materials Needed

- Newsprint or board and markers
- Copies of session 1 Participant Handout
- Bibles
- Paper and pens
- Cardstock or large index cards
- Crayons or fine-lined colored markers
- Copies of the carol "Good Christian Friends, Rejoice"
- Copies of session 2 Participant Handout

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Discuss Christmas Decorating

Welcome participants to the study. If participants do not know one another, invite people to introduce themselves. Form pairs. Using the open-ended prompts you

posted, ask participants to discuss with their partners how they decorate for Christmas.

After allowing a few minutes for discussion in pairs, invite one or two volunteers to report on any interesting insights from their discussion. Then call the group's attention to the introductory material in the Participant Handout presenting the organizing principal for this Advent study, based on Tom Long's analogy of each Gospel as a distinctive house. Exploring each Gospel "house" will allow participants to savor similar ideas from different perspectives, with the goal of reflecting more deeply on the mystery of Jesus, Son of God, born of Mary.

2. Light the First Advent Candle

Invite participants to sit in silence for a few moments. Then call their attention to the cross placed by the first candle. Note that from Mark's perspective, the cross, not the cradle, is the key symbol for the entire Gospel house. Light the candle with the words, "Come, Jesus Christ, Son of God."

3. Pray

Pray the following or a prayer of your choosing:

Once more, Eternal God, we gather to experience the astonishing and radical mystery of the incarnation of your Son. Draw us into a place of silence and wonder amid the frantic whirl of the season. Make us aware of your presence as together we seek a deeper understanding of the gift of your son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Exploring (20 minutes)

4. Explore Mark's Spare House

Invite participants to examine the illustration of Mark's house and to read silently the narrative description provided by the illustrator. Have the group read Mark 1:1–11 aloud in round-robin fashion, with each person in turn reading a verse until all verses have been read.

Read this Participant Handout quote to the group:

In his commentary on Mark, Lamar Williamson observes that the choice of a lectionary reading from a Gospel which has no account of the birth of Jesus may seem odd. But, as he points out, "Advent . . . marks the coming of Jesus Christ into

human history, and Mark 1:1–8 begins the gospel of Jesus Christ with a clear announcement of the coming (advent) of the Lord.”¹

Discuss the following:

- We read that it seems a little odd to start a Gospel account the way Mark does. Why?
- What was the function of a herald in the ancient world? Who is the herald here, and what is his message?
- What role did God’s Spirit play in Jesus’ baptism? In his temptation in the wilderness?

Invite the group to quickly scan the remainder of chapter 1, as well as chapter 2:1–12. Discuss:

- The author suggests that Jesus’ acts of healing are not just miracles. What does Mark intend to communicate? How do you interpret Jesus’ acts of healing?
- If you had to sum up the message in these first chapters of Mark in a few words, what would you say?
- How does the illustration of Mark’s house, and the illustrator’s description of his rendition, illuminate this information about the beginning of the Gospel? If you were creating a picture of Mark’s house, how would you depict it? Would your illustration be similar to the one we see here, or would your house look very different? If so, how and why?

5. Examine the Absence of a Christmas Narrative

Point out that the Participant Handout poses the following questions about the obvious lack of a Christmas narrative of any kind in Mark’s Gospel: So, why no Christmas story? Why no hint, even, of Jesus’ beginnings? Discuss:

- How does the author explain the lack of a Christmas narrative in Mark?
- What is meant by the following: Mark could be called “a passion narrative with a long introduction”?
- Why does Mark leave Christmas narratives on the cutting-room floor?
- We read that the early followers of John Calvin believed that Sunday was the most important day and Sunday observance should not be cluttered

with other observances. Anything else distracted from what they identified as the core of the gospel: Jesus’ death and resurrection. What is your response to that idea? Do you agree or disagree? If you agree, to what extent do you think this theological position should influence how we observe Jesus’ birth?

Responding (10 minutes)

6. Discern the Source of Hope

The present state of our culture, with its divisiveness and overwhelming problems, stands in stark contrast to the trappings of the season. Invite participants to read over the posted questions and reflect on them by writing in their journals.

After allowing a few minutes for reflection and written response, invite participants to name aloud, pop-corn style, first their anxieties and then their hopes. If some participants have found a certain spiritual practice to be helpful in strengthening their faith to describe that practice, encourage them to share those practices.

7. Create an Ornament

The author tells us that hope is to be found in the manger only because it is found first on the cross. Invite participants to create a simple ornament as a reminder of Mark’s message that God’s way is for us to follow the way of the cross. Distribute the cross shapes and crayons or markers. Have participants choose words or phrases that express their hopes and their desire for the transformation that following God’s way can bring, and print these on their crosses. Encourage them to display their cross at home on a refrigerator door or by a mirror where they can be reminded of Mark’s perspective. Or they may choose to hang it as an ornament on the Christmas tree.

Closing (5 minutes)

8. Sing a Carol

The Participant Handout tells us that some of those old Christmas carols were right on target in their understanding of the message of Christmas, with “Good Christian Friends, Rejoice” as a good example. Sing it together.

Distribute copies of the session 2 Participant Handout, or plan to send it by e-mail to participants.

9. Close with Prayer

Pray the following or a prayer of your choosing:

God of grace, we give thanks for the gift of your Son. By your Spirit, grant us the sure knowledge that we need not fear the grave, for Christ was born to save! As we begin the Advent journey, make us ever more aware that our hope is not in the cradle but in the cross. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

Teaching Alternatives

Compare Gospel Houses

Begin a project that can continue throughout the four sessions as a way of comparing and contrasting the four Gospel “houses.” For this session, head a newsprint sheet with “Mark’s House.” Print the illustration of Mark’s house and tape it near the top of the sheet. Down the left margin of the sheet, print the following: Christmas story? Main message/key concepts; Symbol; House interior. Invite participants to work together to fill in the first four categories. Then have them review the narrative description of the illustration and brainstorm how the interior of Mark’s house might look. Record all of this on the newsprint sheet.

Create a Cross Collage

Instead of individual ornaments, create a group collage. Depending on the size of your group, you may make one collage or form small groups to make several. On a sheet of newsprint or poster board, sketch the outline of a large cross. Distribute colored construction paper scraps and invite the group to print words or phrases that express Mark’s main thematic emphases. Have participants work together to piece the scraps on the outline and then glue them in place. Remind the group of the line from Leonard Cohen’s song “Anthem” quoted in the Participant Handout, and invite them to

reflect on how the light gets in through the cracks in everything. Display the completed collage somewhere in your space for the duration of Advent.

Explore Acts of Healing in Mark

Remind the group that for Mark, acts of healing are not just miracles. Rather, each serves to underscore Mark’s purpose and the focus of his message. Assign some of the following passages to individuals or pairs: Mark 1:21–28, 29–34, 40–45; Mark 2:1–12; 3:1–6; 5:1–20; 6:53–56; 7:24–30, 31–37; 8:22–26; 9:14–29; 10:46–52.

Ask them to read the assigned passages silently. Discuss:

- how each healing can be seen as a sign of power;
- how each one might indicate God is more powerful than suffering and death.

Key Scriptures

Mark 1:1–11, 12–15; 2:1–12

For More Information

Lamar Williamson Jr., *Mark*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1983).

Note

1. Lamar Williamson Jr., *Mark*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1983), 29.

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PARTICIPANT HANDOUT Session 1

Christmas Accounts in the Gospels: An Adult Advent Study

Christmas at Mark's House

Introduction to the Study

Once again, we are putting up the decorations; we are singing carols and buying gifts. Once again, it is Advent. In these days between Thanksgiving and New Year's, many of us visit other people's homes. We may drop in for coffee or be invited to an open house. Some of you may be spending several days with relatives out of town. When we do this, it is always so interesting to see other people's homes—how they decorate, what kinds of things they cherish, how their styles mesh with their personalities. Tom Long, distinguished professor of preaching, has compared the church's lectionary (the three-year cycle of Sunday readings) to homes that the church goes to visit. The first year, the Gospel readings take us to Matthew's house; then we move on to Mark; finally, we visit Luke. Every year, on special occasions (notably in the season of Easter and some other special days) we go to visit John. Just like our own homes, each house is quite different—decor and ambiance change. Some are cluttered; others are spare. Some are decorated within an inch of their lives; others are haphazard. We each like some more than others, but moving around allows us to savor the same things from different perspectives.

Some years ago, Dr. Jon Walton, pastor of The First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York, used this idea as the basis for a sermon series during Advent.

Building on his idea, I invite you on a journey to visit our four Gospel homes. The design of the house is suggested by the shape and character of each Gospel. But the purpose of our journey is to experience how Christmas is celebrated in each place. In the Participant Handout of each lesson, you will find a drawing that is the way the artist Kevin Burns imagines the Gospel home that welcomes us. Burns is an architect by profession and a deeply knowledgeable Bible teacher. We hope that pondering each of the illustrations will draw you more deeply into this journey as we reflect on the mystery of Jesus, Son of God, born of Mary.

Mark's House

We begin by going to visit Cousin Mark. He lives in a spare, simple home, because Mark is kind of like the police detective who says, "Just the facts, ma'am." His house has just what it needs and not much more: a door, a couple of widows, a chimney. The surprising thing is that there isn't much in the way of Christmas going on here. There are no decorations to speak of, not a lot that makes us think of holiday cheer. As far as we know, Mark is the first of these writings that we call "Gospels," and we call them that largely because of how Mark starts: "The beginning of the good news (that is, the "gospel") of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

It's an odd way to start, don't you think? I mean, why would you announce the beginning of something that the reader knows is the beginning? It would be like starting a sermon by saying, "Now I am starting my sermon for Advent, week one." Well, obviously.

Perhaps Mark means something else by "beginning." Where does the Gospel begin? How does this whole thing get launched? According to Mark, it starts with John the Baptist. In the ancient world, the arrival of the monarch required a herald. The herald (or messenger) was the press release or the Facebook post or tweet of the ancient world—the guy sent into the city to say, "Heads up—monarch sighting! Sweep the streets and clean up your act!" The good news begins with the messenger, and the message is, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." Out in the wilderness, at the edge of civilization, in a sort-of-scary liminal space, John is calling out for people to repent, to change their hearts and lives.

Baptism was the sign of people's desire to be ready for the new thing God was doing. Washed in the water of the River Jordan, the people were prepared to start their lives with God anew. Among those who came forward was Jesus from Nazareth. When he came up from the water, Mark says, he saw the heavens torn open and the Spirit of God coming down like a dove. And he heard a voice saying to him, "You are my Beloved, my Son, my Child." Then that same Spirit drove Jesus deeper into the wilderness, where he fasted and prayed for forty days and was tested. When he returned to Galilee, he began to say, "The reign of God has come near." Jesus called a few followers and began a ministry of teaching and healing. By the end of chapter 1, Jesus is surrounded by crowds eager to hear his message. They are anxious as well for healing. For Mark, Jesus' acts of healing aren't just miracles; they are deeds of power. They point to the end of this Gospel and the proclamation that God is more powerful than suffering and death.

No Christmas Story?

That's it. That's Mark's beginning. In a very few quick brush strokes, the saga of the good news is launched. Why no Christmas story? Why no hint even of Jesus' beginnings? All we know is that he came from Nazareth. A pretty slim résumé and not very enlightening. Some think that Mark doesn't include a story about Jesus' birth because he doesn't know one. Mark is writing about thirty

years after Jesus' death and resurrection. Tradition says that Peter and Paul have already been put to death in Rome. Other eyewitnesses are surely dying off. Mark wants to capture the story as it is being told in small communities of believers around the Mediterranean. Maybe he just doesn't know that part of the story.

Frankly, I doubt that. I think Mark is both a skillful writer and editor. Some think that Mark may have been a companion or protégé of Paul's. As we know, Paul is famously uninterested in the details of Jesus' life and ministry. "I preach Christ and him crucified," Paul wrote. Perhaps it is that theology, with its focus on the cross, that shapes Mark's writing. Some have even called Mark's Gospel "a passion narrative with a long introduction." Indeed, this work builds steadily to its dramatic conclusion. Christmas stories are left on the cutting-room floor because they don't serve Mark's purposes. Mark knows (and tells us in his opening words) that Jesus *is* the Son of God. He doesn't need stories of a miraculous or mysterious birth to "prove" that. Jesus *is* the power of life over death. Christmas stories are simply a distraction.

Mark may have been the first to think that Christmas was a distraction, but he was certainly not the last Christian to think so. Long before Christmas became a festival of selling and buying, groups of Christians were skeptical about Christmas excess. Did you know that Christmas carols didn't appear in some Protestant hymnals until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the United States? There was a lot of Christmas celebration in colonial Williamsburg but not much in Puritan New England. Why? Because those followers of John Calvin believed that Sunday was the most important day and Sunday observance should not be cluttered with other festivals and saints and observances. Like Mark, those Christians held that the core of the Gospel was Jesus' death and resurrection. Therefore Sunday, the Lord's Day, should celebrate that alone. Anything else would be a distraction.

Don't panic. Many of you just got all the Christmas decorations out; I'm not going to argue that we should

Long before Christmas became a festival of selling and buying, groups of Christians were skeptical about Christmas excess.

put them back! I am proud to be a Reformed Christian, but there are things that well-meaning Reformers got wrong, and getting rid of Christmas was one of them. Reformed tradition is not wrong about what is at the heart of the good news: The good news of the gospel is not the birth of a child. The good news is that the man who was the Son of God laid down his life for his

Mark reminds us that hope is to be found in the manger only because it is found first on the cross.

friends and that God raised him from the dead as a sign that God's love conquers death.

Finding Hope

The Christmas season is well under way. Cherished traditions are surely appearing in your church, such as Advent wreaths, carol singing, special giving projects. There may be an upcoming children's Christmas pageant and Christmas Eve services to look forward to. But as the days grow shorter and light diminishes, many of us are anxious. So much in our country seems unsettled and unknown. The nation seems to be deeply divided on major political issues. Many feel overlooked or sidelined. Racial injustice, particularly as that relates to poverty, unequal education, and incarceration, is once again in the news. Anti-immigrant sentiments have become common. It has been an anxious year for many, and the times seem out of joint.

Chirpy songs about Santa Clause won't get us very far in the face of the troubles we face. Shopping, fun as it is, doesn't keep anxiety at bay for long. Old-time Christmas nostalgia doesn't insulate us from a broken and fearful world. *Hope* is what we need, but as Cousin Mark reminds us, hope is to be found in the manger only because it is found first on the cross. The hope that Mark offers is not in spite of suffering; it is hope that has been through suffering and emerged on the other side. From the very beginning of this fast-paced Gospel story, we know that Jesus is headed toward his death. Three times he attempts to prepare his disciples; three times they fail to understand; three times he explains

(patiently) that following him means following the way of the cross. It seems utterly counterintuitive, but this is God's way. As Leonard Cohen wrote: "There's a crack in everything/That's how the light gets in."¹

As a child, my family decorated for Christmas on the day after Thanksgiving. We didn't shop; we unwrapped boxes of Christmas decorations. Then on New Year's Day, after the Rose Parade was over, we put it all away. That's one of the problems with Christmas: we have a tendency to think Christmas is something we get out once a year and then put away. We think of the Christmas season as something that has a beginning and an end. We celebrate the "holidays," and then we go back to business as usual, largely unchanged except maybe for the weight we've gained. But that's not the gospel. It's not a moment in time to be celebrated and then largely forgotten. The good news is about transformation. Jesus told us the kingdom of God is at hand. He came to change your life forever. He came to bring you hope for your despair, and peace for your anxiety, and love so that you can stare down death.

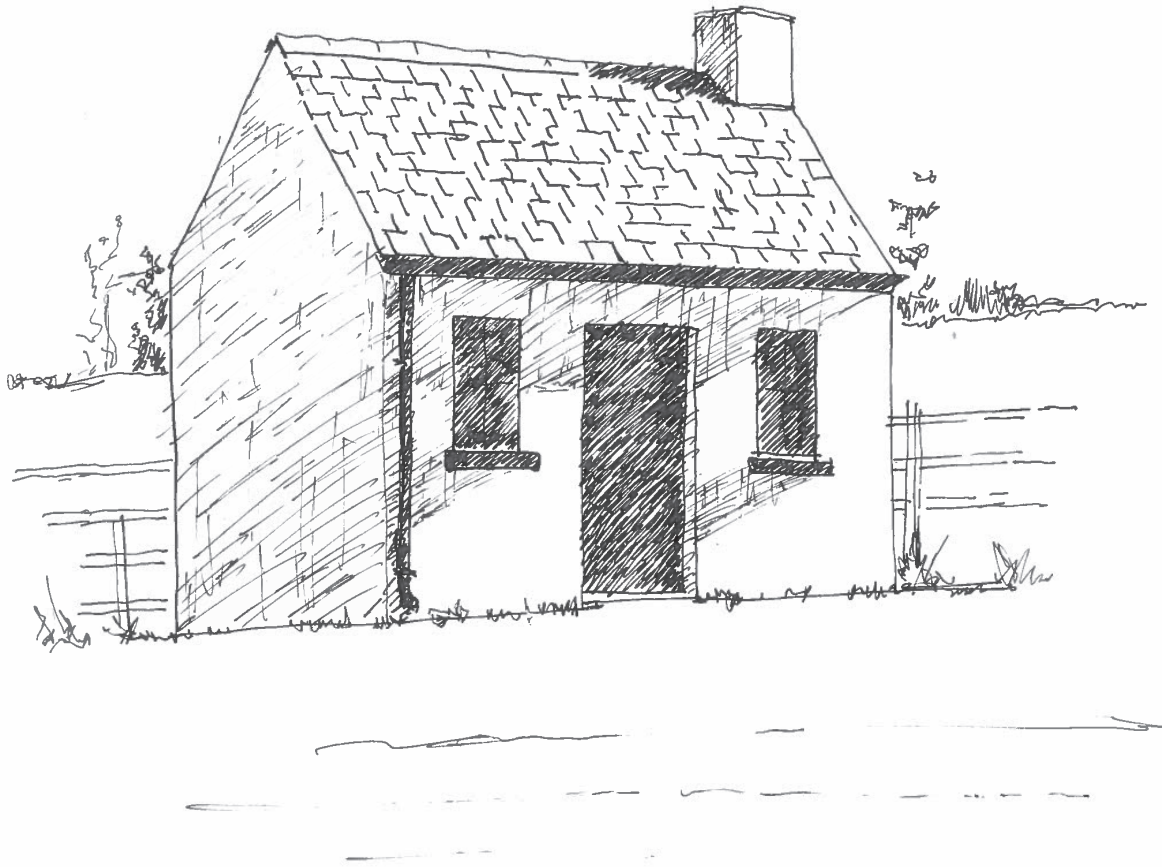
Some of those really old Christmas carols got it right. One dates back to medieval times and was sung in Latin until it was translated in the mid-nineteenth century. "Good Christian friends, rejoice with heart and soul and voice; now ye need not fear the grave: Jesus Christ was born to save!/ Calls you one and calls you all to gain the everlasting hall./ Christ was born to save! Christ was born to save!"²

Notes

1. Leonard Cohen, "Anthem," *The Future*, Columbia, 1992, compact disc.
2. John Mason Neale, "Good Christian Men, Rejoice," *Glory to God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 132.

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Illustrator Kevin Burns is a ruling elder at Highland Presbyterian Church and the owner of an architectural practice in Louisville, Kentucky.



I started with Mark's house. Understood to be the first Gospel written, Mark provides much of the narrative spine for the other Synoptic Gospels. Thus it is lacking some of the embellishment that the later Gospel writers would add to reinforce their own literary perspectives. I found myself pondering the basic essentials of "house" and was drawn to the images of the most basic dwellings of the rural landscape that are universal to many agrarian societies in many countries.