



Pausing on the Road to Bethlehem: A Spiritual Journey through Advent

SESSION 1

| Bible focus: Isaiah 40:1–3

Note to the Leader

The leader not only guides the class through a variety of spiritual exercises but also engages in these exercises as an active participant. In order to be both guide and participant, it is crucial for the leader to practice the spiritual exercises during the week before class.

In addition to the spiritual exercises, each session offers a prayer experience. These prayer experiences are deeply rooted in Christian tradition, and many have been part of the church since its beginning.

Directions for each spiritual exercise and prayer experience are included in the Participant Handout. The leader should practice the exercises and prayers in advance of the class in order to truly gain the benefit and then be able to lead the participants during class time.

Think of it as homework that isn't work but rather a joy. Practicing the exercises provides you, the leader, with extra spiritual breaks during the week. You will be more rested, centered, calm, and prepared for leading the class, but the benefits will bless your life beyond the class, too.

Take some time to research the types of prayer and other spiritual exercises provided. There are wonderful resources available, a few of which are listed. Leave time to search for these resources at your local library, bookstore, or church resource center.

A last word of advice: have fun with this devotional. It is designed to enrich the spiritual lives of those who participate in the classes, and that includes the leader. As you journey to Bethlehem this Advent, pause often along the way. In so doing, you will find that your own heart has prepared room for Christ.

Preparing for the Session

- Begin by taking some slow, easy breaths.
- Offer a prayer, asking God's blessing both as you prepare and as you lead the class.
- Choose some soothing music to play as you read through the Leader's Guide.
- Read the list of materials you will need and gather all the necessary items. If there are items that are not readily accessible, discern that in advance and give yourself time during the week to gather these items.
- You will lead the class through the lighting of the Christ candle and the first Advent candle.
- This week's activity centers on the reading of Scripture, using the *lectio divina* method. Read the material on *lectio divina*. Practice using this type of prayer in your daily life.
- A unison prayer for the closing is provided.
- Suggestions are given for participants to incorporate today's exercises and prayers into their daily life.

Materials Needed for All Sessions

For each session you will need the following items:

- A blue cloth for the center of the table (large enough to serve as a place setting for a Christ candle and four smaller candles)
- Five candles, four of any size and shape and one white candle taller than the rest (the Christ candle)
- A CD player and CDs (or tape player and tapes) of calm, instrumental music (Advent-appropriate hymns, classical music)

Materials Needed for Session 1

Depending on the size of the group, you may need several of each item, so that there are enough for everyone:

- Smooth stones
- Small branches from a bush or tree, or several large twigs
- Pieces of flannel or other soft fabric
- A ceramic bowl
- Small cups of water

Arrange the table(s) so that participants are in a circle or rectangle, not in rows. Set the main table in advance by placing the blue cloth in the center, with the large, white candle centered on the cloth. Place the other candles in a circle around the white candle. Place the other items (stones, branches, and so on) around the edges of this centerpiece, within reach of the participants. These items will be used in the opening exercise.

Opening (15 minutes)

The opening section for the first week is longer than the openings in future sessions. This is the first time that the class has gathered, and you need to allow time so that participants get to know one another a bit and are comfortable together. In addition, you will be distributing the Participant Handouts and briefly reviewing them with the class to familiarize participants with the themes of the study.

1. Setting the Mood

Have music playing softly as everyone gathers.

Once the participants have arrived, welcome everyone to the class by saying, “The peace of Jesus Christ

be with you,” to which everyone responds, “And also with you.”

Light the Christ candle, saying, “Come, O light of the world. Shine in the darkness.” Then light the first Advent candle (one of the smaller candles), saying, “The darkness shall never overcome the light.”

2. Opening Prayer

Invite the class to pray in unison:

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on each of us gathered here. Fall afresh like a soft rain on parched land. Fall afresh like the breath of a gentle breeze on a still day. Fall afresh on us, so that your word may speak to our hearts. We pray in the name of our living Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Now turn off the music, and pass out copies of the Participant Handout to the class.

3. Poem

Read aloud the following poem, and invite participants to silently follow the words in the handout:

In each heart lies a Bethlehem,
an inn where we must ultimately answer
whether there is room or not.
When we are Bethlehem-bound
we can no longer look the other way
conveniently not seeing stars
not hearing angel voices.
We can no longer excuse ourselves by busily
tending our sheep or our kingdoms.

This Advent let's go to Bethlehem
and see this thing that the Lord has made known to us.
In the midst of shopping sprees
let's ponder in our hearts the Gift of Gifts.
Through the tinsel
let's look for the gold of the Christmas Star.
In the excitement and confusion, in the merry chaos,
let's listen for the brush of angels' wings.
This Advent, let's go to Bethlehem
and find our kneeling places.

Ann Weems, "In Search of Our Kneeling Places"¹

4. Introduction to the Study

Using the material in the Participant Handout, explain the format of this five-week devotional. Our focus is on “pausing” on the road to Bethlehem, taking time to let the Bible readings sink in as we make this Advent journey.

All participants are encouraged to speak, but if at any time someone chooses not to speak during the times of sharing, he or she can just say the word *pass*.

5. Presentation of the Table

Invite everyone to look at the items in the center of the table.

The blue cloth represents Advent. Many churches now use blue as the liturgical color, but some may still use purple.

The large candle is our Christ candle. We will light that candle each week as we begin our time together, inviting Christ to be at the center of our lives.

The smaller candles represent the weeks of Advent. Each week, we will light the Advent candles, one on the first week, two on the second, and so on.

Point out the various items gathered around the candles: stones, branches, cloth, ceramic bowl, cups of water.

Take five minutes to pass the items around, asking each person to contemplate the object and then describe it briefly in the space provided on the Participant Handout. After everyone has had a chance to examine each object, begin the time of sharing.

Tell your name. Then pick up one object and share your description of that item. Set down the item and invite the next person to give his or her name and a brief description of one object.

After everyone has had a chance to speak, ask what people notice about the descriptions of these objects. Do people describe the object by the feel of it? The shape? The color? How often was the object described by its possible use or function? By its smell? This exercise seeks to make us more aware of our surroundings, of using all of our senses to experience the world around us.

Group Activity (20 minutes)

Read through the information on *lectio divina* provided in the Participant Handout. You may wish to do some exploring on your own via the Internet or various resources. Practice the *lectio divina* method with your personal Bible reading this week. Allow yourself time so that you do not feel rushed.

6. Presentation of the *Lectio Divina*

Using Isaiah 40:1–3, the group will engage in a *lectio divina* reading of this Bible passage. Explain the steps to the group, and ask three different people to read aloud. Allow two to three minutes of quiet time for reflection after each reading. Participants may wish to write down their thoughts in the space provided in the Participant Handout.

First Reading

Reader 1 reads Isaiah 40:1–3, speaking slowly and clearly. Then Reader 1 reads the same passage again.

Ask the class to be attentive to any word or phrase that “jumps out” from the text and is especially meaningful to them.

Let the class meditate quietly for two to three minutes. You are, as always, the timekeeper.

Invite class members to share their word or phrase. No elaboration is necessary.

Remind the class that at any time an individual may choose to “pass” and not speak out, and that is fine.

Second Reading

Before the next person reads aloud Isaiah 40:1–3, ask the class to think about how the Scripture passage is speaking to them today.

Reader 2 reads aloud Isaiah 40:1–3.

Let the class meditate quietly for two to three minutes. Then let participants share with the group what they have written on their handout.

Third Reading

Before the third reader speaks, ask everyone to ponder what God is calling them to do today through the Scripture.

Reader 3 reads aloud Isaiah 40:1–3.

Allow two to three minutes of quiet meditation. People may again share their responses to the meditation.

After everyone has had a chance to share answers to the specific questions, ask if there are any thoughts or questions that come from using the *lectio divina* method of reading Scripture. Does this seem a helpful way to read the Scripture on a personal level? How do you think it would work in a worship service?

Prayer Experience (5 minutes)

Beginning next week, the class will begin each session with the breath prayer provided in the handout. A breath prayer is a type of prayer that allows us to connect with God no matter where we are or what we're doing. In a breath prayer, we pray to the rhythm of our own breathing, which we intentionally slow down. The breath prayer can be a prayer in itself, or it can lead into further prayer. By practicing breath prayers regularly, you allow a "spirit break" that becomes as natural as breathing.

7. Demonstration of Breath Prayers

Lead the class through a breath prayer by giving the following directions: "Close your eyes. Breathe in slowly; then breathe out slowly. Repeat this several times."

Give the first line of the breath prayer (reminding people to breathe in). While directing the class to breathe out slowly, give the second line of the breath prayer. Repeat the prayer several times, and then allow time for silence.

Close this time of breath prayers with the prayer included in the "Closing" section of this guide, by saying, "And now let us all pray together."

You may use one of the following breath prayers or create one of your own using a line of music, a poem, another Bible verse, and so on.

Spirit of the Living God,
fall afresh on me.

Be still,
and know that God is God.

Create in me,
a clean heart, O God.

This is the day
that the Lord has made.

Closing (5 minutes)

8. Closing Prayer

Ask the class to join in the following prayer:

God of grace, of beginnings and endings and everything in between, be our guide on this journey as we hike the road to Bethlehem. Be with us in the chaos of traveling and in the quiet moments when we pause to ponder. Grant us your shalom, so that we may truly rejoice in the good news that has been told to us, the good news of Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

9. Take It Home

Encourage the class to practice using breath prayers at home. At the opening of next week's session, we will have a few minutes to debrief on the use of this type of prayer.

For More Information

Kathleen Long Bostrom, *Finding Calm in the Chaos: Christian Devotions for Busy Women* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005).

Frederick Buechner, *The Faces of Jesus* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989).

Thomas J. O'Gorman, ed., *An Advent Sourcebook* (Chicago: Archdiocese of Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1988).

Nancy Roth, *Spiritual Exercises: Joining Body and Spirit in Prayer* (New York: Church Publishing, 2005).

Ann Weems, *Kneeling in Bethlehem* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987).

Endnote

1. Ann Weems, "In Search of Our Kneeling Places," in *Kneeling in Bethlehem*: (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 19.



Pausing on the Road to Bethlehem: A Spiritual Journey through Advent

SESSION 1

| Bible focus: Isaiah 40:1–3

Introduction to the Study

Can it possibly be Advent already? Didn't we just finish packing away the Christmas decorations in preparation for a new year? Time does fly, more quickly every year, it seems, and once again, the whirlwind of activities and preparations that lead to Christmas has begun. If we're not careful, we will rush quickly through another Advent, hardly stopping to take a breath and wonder at the good news of Emmanuel, "God with us."

This Advent-ure isn't for everyone. It is designed for those who long to slow down and sink into the Advent

season. It is inspirational and devotional in nature, an experiential Advent-ure. It is for those who wish to journey through this season at a mindful pace. We will hear the words of the prophet Isaiah, listen as the angel showers Mary with an unbelievable pronouncement, watch as Mary and Elizabeth and their unborn sons greet one another in joy, and soar along with Mary as she lifts her heart in praise to God.

We are pausing on the road to Bethlehem, not rushing headlong down that road with Christmas as the goal. We step thoughtfully and prayerfully as we ponder all these wonderful things in our hearts.

Each week we will engage in a variety of interactive activities centered on biblical passages that tell the Advent story. Every session includes the following:

- A Bible passage that relates to Advent
- A group activity that draws the participants into the biblical story and encourages thoughtful reflection using poetry, music, art, and prayer
- Guided prayer using a unique format each week
- Take It Home—suggestions for continuing the Advent-ure during the week

There will be a lot of group interaction as we make this journey together. All participants are encouraged to speak, but if at any time you choose not to speak during the times of sharing, just say the word *pass*.

You will notice this Advent study is formatted differently than our other studies. Rather than fill you with words, this study will engage your heart and mind in a different way. Through activities and suggested prayers, the content will emerge for you.

The Participant Handouts should be seen as similar to a church bulletin. The shaded areas are for you to read before or after the session. Otherwise, follow along with the leader through the "Opening," "Group Activity," "Prayer Experience," and "Closing" sections. The leader will guide you through these sections each week.



Opening

Opening Prayer

When all the participants have arrived, the leader will greet the class by saying, "The peace of Jesus Christ be with you." Respond by saying, "And also with you."

The leader will then light the Christ candle and the first Advent candle, offering a small prayer while doing so.

Now pray the following prayer in unison:

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on each of us gathered here. Fall afresh like a soft rain on parched land. Fall afresh like the breath of a gentle breeze on a still day. Fall afresh on us, so that your word may speak to our hearts. We pray in the name of our living Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Poem

Reading poetry—either silently or aloud—is a wonderful way to pause and reflect on the biblical story. Savor the sound of the words. Imagine the smells and sounds. Let the words speak to the hidden places in your soul.

Listen as the leader reads aloud the following poem:

In each heart lies a Bethlehem,
an inn where we must ultimately answer
whether there is room or not.
When we are Bethlehem-bound
we can no longer look the other way
conveniently not seeing stars
not hearing angel voices.
We can no longer excuse ourselves by busily
tending our sheep or our kingdoms.

This Advent let's go to Bethlehem
and see this thing that the Lord has made known to us.
In the midst of shopping sprees
let's ponder in our hearts the Gift of Gifts.
Through the tinsel
let's look for the gold of the Christmas Star.
In the excitement and confusion, in the merry chaos,
let's listen for the brush of angels' wings.
This Advent, let's go to Bethlehem
and find our kneeling places.

Ann Weems, "In Search of Our Kneeling Places"¹

We often limit our experience of the world around us by using only one of our senses. We inhale the wonderful aroma of fresh coffee but gulp it down, paying little attention to the taste on our tongue, the warmth as we drink (unless it's too hot—then we notice), or even the cup from which we drink. We drive past a variety of beautiful trees, perhaps noticing if the leaves are changing, if that. But we rarely take time to feel the texture of the bark or to stop and discover the smell of the leaves.

The spiritual exercises we will be doing during these sessions are designed to enlighten our reading of the Scripture, using senses that are often neglected. We will not be asked to "eat our words" or to literally "taste and see that the Lord is good." Rather, through contemplation, music, art, meditation, and silence, we will sink deeply into the words of Scripture so that our spirits may become more rooted in God's word.

Presentation of the Table

In the center of the table, the leader has placed a variety of objects. Examine each of the objects, and then write down the words or thoughts that come to mind.

Stone _____

Branch _____

Cloth _____

Bowl _____

Cups of water _____

What senses do you use to describe the items? What senses have you left out?



Group Activity

In our fast-paced world, we tend to read the Bible as we do the newspaper—as fast as we can, scanning quickly down the page, moving on to the next article, before the one we’ve just read has a chance to sink in.

Even those with the good intention of reading through the entire Bible can get caught up in the number of pages or chapters finished rather than taking time to dwell on the deeper meaning of the text.

When it comes to reading the Bible, the same advice holds true as when we’re driving through a school zone—*slow down!* Read the passage carefully; then read it again. Give the words time and attention so that the Word may speak to you. Listen carefully, the same way you should when you’re having a conversation with another person. Give God a chance to get the Word in edgewise every now and then!

One method of Bible reading that offers a simple and user-friendly way of slowing down and meditating on the reading of Scripture is known as *lectio divina*. This ancient technique of Scripture reading has received renewed attention in modern times. St. Benedict, a monastic leader back in the fourth century, refined the technique of *lectio divina* based on his belief that we need to hear “with the ear of our hearts.”² *Lectio divina* calls us to read the Bible slowly, carefully, and attentively. Bible reading becomes an exercise in reverence, in learning to be still and know that God is God. We seek to find God’s word to each of us, so that we are led to a greater awareness of what God is calling us to do in the world.

The word *lectio* means “reading,” and that is how we begin. Using the *lectio divina* method, a Bible passage is read several times, each time with a different intent. First, the passage is read through at a calm pace. Then, the passage is reread, and time is given to contemplate. The reader (or listener) seeks a word or phrase in the passage that stands out and meditates on that word or phrase.

Second, the passage is read again. The listener takes time to reflect in silence on the passage, focusing on the question, “Where does this passage connect to my life today?”

The passage is read a final time. The listener seeks to discover, “What is God calling me to do today?”

It is crucial to allow time for silence and meditation after each reading, not rushing too quickly to the next step.

Lectio Divina

Practicing the *lectio divina* method, read this week’s Bible focus, Isaiah 40:1–3. Your leader will guide you through, and you may jot down notes as you proceed.

First reading: What word or phrase caught your attention? _____

Second reading: In what way does this passage speak to you? _____

Third reading: What do you think that God is calling you to do today? _____

How do you think this method of Scripture reading would work in worship? _____



Prayer Experience

Each week, we are learning (or relearning) a different type of prayer. These methods of prayer are used to help focus, pause, and reflect. The prayer methods are easily incorporated into your daily life. You don't need to use all the methods all the time. As you practice each week, see what method works best for you, or alternate uses of the prayer. Choose what you know you can do, and don't let yourself feel guilty if you are not consistent at first. Persevere! Prayer will become as natural as breathing.

A breath prayer is a type of prayer that allows us to connect with God no matter where we are or what we're doing. In a breath prayer, we pray to the rhythm of our own breathing, which we intentionally slow down. The breath prayer can be a prayer in itself, or it can lead into further prayer. By practicing your breath prayer regularly, you allow a "spirit break," something we could all use more often.

As you do a breath prayer, close your eyes. Breathe in slowly; breathe out slowly. Do this several times. Then recite your prayer silently. As you breathe in, pray the first line; as you breathe out, pray the second line. Repeat until your thoughts are focused, you feel relaxed, and you are at peace.

Breath prayers can be verses from Scripture, hymns, poems, or whatever lifts your spirits. You can even write your own!

Use the breath prayer method each day. You can do breath prayers when you wake up, before you go to sleep (they are great for relaxing the body and mind), while you're waiting in line or for an appointment, or when you're out for a walk or exercising—breath prayers lend themselves to fitting into your daily life.

Breath Prayers

You may use one of the following breath prayers, or you can create one of your own using a line of music, a poem, another Bible verse, and so on.

Spirit of the Living God,
fall afresh on me.

Be still,
and know that God is God.

Create in me,
a clean heart, O God.

This is the day
that the Lord has made.

hike the road to Bethlehem. Be with us in the chaos of traveling and in the quiet moments when we pause to ponder. Grant us your shalom, so that we may truly rejoice in the good news that has been told to us, the good news of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Take It Home

Practice the breath prayer method each day. Be prepared next week to tell the class how you used breath prayers and how they worked for you. People have used breath prayers while waiting for a job interview, standing in line at the grocery store, and even when stuck in a traffic jam (although it's a good idea to keep your eyes open when driving!).

About the Writer

Kathleen Bostrom serves as copastor of Wildwood Presbyterian Church near Chicago, Illinois. She is the author of two dozen books, mostly for children (kathleenlongbostrom.com).

Endnotes

1. Ann Weems, "In Search of Our Kneeling Places," in *Kneeling in Bethlehem*: (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 19.

2. "The Word in Prayer" in *Lord, Teach Us to Pray* (Louisville, KY: Office of Spiritual Formation, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), item 7044004001), 1.



Closing

We pray for our own journeys but also for the journeys that others are taking. Let's not become too self-focused! As you pray, pray for yourself, and keep in mind the people around you, especially those who may be struggling to find their way.

Say the following prayer in unison:

God of grace, of beginnings and endings and everything in between, be our guide on this journey as we