



ADULT STUDY

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LEADER'S GUIDE SESSION 1: MATTHEW

A Season of Hope and Anticipation: Advent Themes in the Four Gospels

Matthew shows us that God is not absent or far removed but dwells with us as Emmanuel.

Goal for the Session

Participants will be introduced to the theme of the study and will explore Matthew's birth story as a call to ministry with the dispossessed.

Preparing for the Session

- The word *advent* means coming or appearance. For Christians, Advent is the first season of the liturgical (or church) year. We observe Advent for four weeks leading up to Christmas, with the intention of preparing ourselves for the coming of Jesus Christ. The Scriptures used in Advent direct us to the birth of Jesus and to the second coming of the risen Christ.
- Begin your preparation in prayer: seek God's guidance as you prepare, and pray for the participants who will attend the session.
- Read the Participant Handouts and Leader's Guides for all four sessions before you begin this study so that you are familiar with each session and can adapt them, if need be, for your group.
- Arrange an Advent wreath with candles on a table in a central location of your gathering space. You will use the wreath for each of the four sessions.

Session at a Glance

OPENING

- Welcome
- Opening prayer

EXPLORING

- Retelling the story
- Scripture study
- Small-group discussion

RESPONDING

- Prayer of commitment

CLOSING

- Closing prayer
- Preparing for next session

Consider adding a table covering to make your centerpiece attractive. You will add a new element to the table for each session, so the table should be large enough to hold other items.

- Read the Participant Handout for session 1, highlighting points that draw your attention and making note of questions that come to mind.
- Read the Leader's Guide for session 1 and gather all the materials you will need for the session.
- Research local newspapers and the Internet to find current articles and blog posts for activity 5 below. You will need three articles or posts.
- Consider writing the first verse of the Advent hymn "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" on newsprint to post each session. This will eliminate the need to have copies for participants.

Materials Needed

- Copies of the hymn "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel"
- Newsprint or board
- Marker
- Index cards
- Pens
- Bibles
- Three articles or blog posts (see activity 5)
- Copies of the Participant Handout for sessions 1 and 2
- Advent wreath and candles
- Lighter or matches
- Table covering (optional)

Teaching Tip

The Advent wreath is traditionally made of evergreen leaves, with a colored candle (usually purple or rose) for each of the Sundays of Advent. (Pink is sometimes used for the third Sunday. Follow the colors your church prefers to use.) A white candle is placed in the center, representing Christ. One candle is lit each week. The white Christ candle is lit on Christmas Eve or Christmas morning. There are various traditions about the meaning of the candles. For some, each one represents hope, peace, joy, or love. Since the group will not meet on Christmas the white Christ candle will not be lit during this study.

Make your own Advent wreath using a green Styrofoam wreath mold, evergreens (live or artificial), and taper candles. Cut four holes into the Styrofoam mold spaced equally apart. These holes will hold the candles, so be sure to cut them to the correct size. If they are too large, the candles will not stay upright. Using florist's wire, cover the mold with greenery. You can also add

holly leaves with berries, or a ribbon, for added color. Insert the colored candles into the holes, and you have an Advent wreath. For the Christ candle, use a separate candle holder or plate placed in the center of the wreath.

Several Internet sites offer instructions for making Advent wreaths. Here is one option from the Instructables Web site: <http://www.instructables.com/id/Make-an-Advent-Wreath-for-Your-Family/>.

Opening (5 minutes)

1. Welcome

Since this may be the first gathering of this particular group, welcome everyone and invite them to introduce themselves to the group. If the group is not familiar with Advent and the Advent wreath, give a brief explanation. If you have not posted the words to "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" on the board or newsprint, pass out copies to participants as they arrive.

2. Opening Prayer

Light the first candle of the Advent wreath. For the prayer, sing or recite together the first stanza of "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel."

Exploring (25 minutes)

3. Retelling the Story

Ask participants to recount the story of Jesus' birth. What happened? Where did it take place? Who was involved? Have a volunteer list the proffers of the story on newsprint, trying to put them in chronological order, as the group recounts from memory.

Explain that the story that most of us recall is a blending of the Gospel accounts. Each Gospel begins Jesus' story in a different way. During each week of this study, the group will be looking at the birth story from the perspective of one of the four Gospel writers. This first session will focus on the Gospel of Matthew.

Teaching Tip: If your group happens to know that each Gospel account is different, briefly try as a group to create a list of the elements, plots, or characters that each Gospel account includes in the story of Jesus' birth.

4. Scripture Study

Distribute Bibles and read Matthew 1:18–2:23. Draw the group's attention to the story written on the news-

print in activity 3 and compare it to the story you just read. What are the similarities? Where do they differ? What is missing from the group's story that Matthew's Gospel includes? Add these to the newsprint. What are some elements of the nativity that the group mentioned that are missing from Matthew's story? Why do you think Matthew told the story in this way?

5. Small-Group Discussion

Distribute pens and copies of the Participant Handout for session 1 and form three groups. Each group will discuss one section of the Participant Handout and an additional reading. Tell them to prepare a brief summary of the assigned section of the Participant Handout and the additional reading to share with the large group:

- Group 1 will read the section titled "Jesus the Refugee" in the Participant Handout and a current news article or blog post about immigration policies, or information from a local refugee ministry.
- Group 2 will read the section titled "Adopted into the Family of God" and three biblical texts about adoption: Psalm 68:5–6, Romans 8:14–16, and Galatians 4:4–6.
- Group 3 will read the section titled "Disruption of Families" and a current news article or blog post about a family that is in crisis or that has been disrupted by violence or injustice, and a story about how neighbors and strangers have come to the aid of a family in crisis.

After each small group has reported to the larger group, ask the large group: What does Matthew's take on the birth of Jesus mean to us as Christians today?

Response (10 minutes)

6. Prayer of Commitment

Remain in small groups and give each group one index card and ask them to complete this sentence: "Through his version of Jesus' birth narrative, Matthew is calling us to..." Assure everyone that there are no wrong responses. They should simply share possible ways modern Christians might respond to Scripture. Invite groups to turn their completed sentence into a prayer of commitment stating how they intend to respond to the call that they wrote on the card. The commitment should be something that all members of the small group can agree on.

Closing (10 minutes)

7. Closing Prayer

Instruct the group that you will begin and end the closing prayer. At the appropriate time, someone from each small group will read the prayer written on their index card. As the leader, you may use the suggested opening and closings below or create your own.

Emmanuel, thank you for your presence with us this day. As we explore the story of your birth, may your story be our story. May our lives reflect you as we respond to your word in ways that we have explored today . . .

[Group 1 should share their sentence.]

[Group 2 should share their sentence.]

[Group 3 should share their sentence.]

You are with us, even to the end of the age. You empower us with your Spirit so that we have the strength to dwell with, encourage, and help others in need. In this Advent season as we retell the stories of Christ's birth, renew us in our calling. In the name of your Son, we pray. Amen.

8. Preparing for Next Session

Distribute the Participant Handout for session 2. Thank everyone for their participation and invite them to the next session.

Teaching Alternatives

- Provide materials for the class to create the Advent wreath and do this as a group project.
- Form teams of three to five people. Give each team a sheet of newsprint and a marker. Tell the teams that they have five minutes to list everything they can remember about the birth of Jesus. When time is up, each group should share what they have written. You can spend time checking the lists for accuracy or move on to comparing their lists with Matthew's story.
- Instead of small-group discussion in activity 5 on each section of the Participant Handout, focus on one topic: refugee, adoption, or disrupted families. Spend more time exploring current events

about the chosen topic. If you have the necessary equipment, you can show news or movie clips from the Internet.

- Invite a refugee or immigrant family, or an adult who was adopted to speak to the class about their experience.
- Extend God's care to hurting people or people in need by sponsoring a walk to raise money for their cause. Consider a project sponsored by your denomination that benefits children. You may consider linking the walk you sponsor with Jesus' family's flight to Egypt. Further connections may be made to modern people seeking refuge, such

as international refugees or women and children fleeing domestic violence. Make preliminary plans during the session for the walk. Invite a church leader who is active in missions or social outreach to help you think about possibilities in your community, region, or around the world that benefit children.

Key Scriptures

Psalms 68:5–6

Matthew 1:1–2:23

Romans 8:14–16

Galatians 4:4–6

SAMPLE SESSION



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PARTICIPANT HANDOUT Session 1: Matthew

A Season of Hope and Anticipation: Advent Themes in the Four Gospels

Matthew shows us that God is not absent or far removed but dwells with us as Emmanuel.

Introduction to Advent Study

Advent is the period 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 birth narrative in the Gospel of Matthew is 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. Matthew portrays Jesus paradoxically as both king and refugee. Matthew also introduces Jesus as an adopted child who creates a new family of God the Father that includes all people. The Gospel of Matthew challenges us to care for refugees, strangers, and those exiled from society. This

Gospel also challenges us to regard other people as part of the adoptive family of God the Father.

The Gospel of Mark has no birth narrative but begins eerily with “a voice crying in the wilderness.” Mark tells not of Jesus' birth, but of his baptism, in which Jesus totally surrenders himself to God's will. As one who teaches with authority, Jesus remains a “wilderness” sort of figure throughout this Gospel. He exorcizes demons, heals lifelong infirmities, and rails against the doubt of his followers, who fail to understand who he really is. Mark compels us to immerse ourselves in God's will as Jesus did.

The Gospel of Luke contains the most familiar and beloved Christmas story of all the Gospels, the narrative of a baby born to a humble and lowly couple who must spend the night in a stable. The baby is heralded by angels and visited by shepherds. Luke's birth narrative, which features the humble and grace-filled role of Jesus' mother, Mary, sets up many themes that follow in this Gospel. Luke presents Jesus as a champion of the poor and lowly who compels readers to reach out to those who are in need.

The Gospel of John gives readers an astounding insight: Jesus is the divine Word, the presence of God from the beginning of time, who was instrumental in

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the creation of the world. In the Gospel of John, Jesus teaches his followers to truly see, and he shows them the possibility of new life lived in unity with him.

Through these four very different but interrelated beginnings, the Gospel writers set the stage for their accounts of who Jesus was. This study of the four stories of Jesus' origins, purpose, and meaning invites participants to explore and discuss who Jesus is for us today.

The Gospel of Matthew

The Gospel of Matthew celebrates the coming of Emmanuel, which means "God with us." 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, who was a refugee and an adopted child, reaches out to all those who are homeless, dispossessed, and orphaned, by creating an adoptive family of God.

A Popular Advent Hymn

O come, O come, Emmanuel,
and ransom captive Israel,
that mourns in lonely exile here
until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice! Rejoice!
Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

Jesus the Refugee

The Advent hymn "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" recalls how Israel "mourns in lonely exile until the Son of God appear," and it alludes to how this Emmanuel himself was exiled in Egypt. The harrowing story of Mary and Joseph fleeing to Egypt with their infant echoes themes of exile that can be found throughout the Bible: Abraham leaving his home at God's command (Gen. 12:1); Hagar and her son Ishmael exiled into the wilderness (21:14); Jacob escaping his brother Esau (27:41–45); Joseph sold into slavery (Gen. 37:25–28); the people of Israel in bondage to the Egyptians (Exod. 1:8–14); Israel wandering in the wilderness

(15–18); Israel taken captive by Assyria and Babylon (2 Kings 24–25); Ruth leaving her people to sojourn with Naomi (Ruth 1:6–22).

We usually do not think of Jesus as a refugee or exile, but that is precisely 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. Herod is consumed with fear and jealousy because wise men from the East tell him that they have followed a star in search of someone they call the king of the Jews (Matt. 2:16–17). Herod cannot allow a rival king to exist, not even an infant king. 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 being a refugee, of fleeing with a newborn child to a strange land where there are no family or friends to support them. And yet thousands of people become refugees every year as their countries are consumed by war or famine. Thousands of refugees come to the United States to escape poverty, violence, and other horrors. Americans meet these sojourners with a mixed message. We say that our country is a melting pot, a land of opportunity; but we often turn away strangers because we fear that they could create a drain on our security and economic resources. How should Christians respond to the needs of today's refugees, in light of the story of Jesus the refugee?

Jesus' sojourn as a refugee in this Gospel explains why he ministers to outsiders in the community. Jesus looks violence and suffering straight in the eye and does not flinch or turn away. He strides in among the masses of worried, hungry people and gives them food, welcomes outcasts, heals infirmities, and exhorts those who have plenty to share with those who have nothing. Jesus the refugee continually demonstrates how his followers should respond to the sojourners, homeless, and outcasts in their communities.

Jesus did not live a quiet, secure life. The horrific story of Herod's massacre of the infants reminds us that Jesus' life began and ended with violence. He narrowly escapes Herod's soldiers as an infant, but later, the Roman emperor's soldiers will crucify him (27:27–31). As an adult, Jesus chooses to remain a refugee. He is an itinerant teacher and healer, with no place to lay his head (8:20). He understands the anxieties of the

subsistence-level people around him and so can display the radical nature of his faith when he tells his audience not to worry about what they will eat or wear (6:25–34). Still, Jesus himself faces an agonizing moment on the cross when he doubts that God is with him and cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (27:46, quoting Ps. 22:1).

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. Matthew challenges Christians to look violence and suffering straight in the eye, to feed and comfort the poor, and to welcome the refugee into our hearts.

Messiah/Christ

The word *messiah* (from Hebrew *mashiach*, “anointed one”) refers to someone on whose head oil has been poured to designate him as a king or a priest. Samuel anointed Saul and David as kings of Israel (1 Sam. 10:1; 16:13). At the time of Jesus’ birth, many Jews hoped that God would send a new anointed one (messiah) in the line of David, the greatest king of Israel, to rescue Israel from its bondage to the Roman Empire. Many Jews did not recognize Jesus as the expected messiah because he did not meet expectations. He did not overthrow the Roman oppressors. Jesus was a different sort of king, and he represented a different sort of kingdom—one in which violence, death, and greed would be defeated and people would live in unity with God and each other.

In the New Testament, the word *mashiach* was translated into Greek as *christos*, meaning “the anointed one.” From *christos*, we get our English title for Jesus, the “Christ,” the anointed one. Thus, “Christ” is not Jesus’ last name, but a title.

Adopted into the Family of God

The genealogy of Jesus at the beginning of the Gospel of Matthew (1:1–16) demonstrates Jesus’ lineage going back through Abraham (the father of Israel) and King David (the greatest king). Matthew portrays Jesus as

the “king of the Jews” (2:2). But notice that this proud Davidic dynasty does not belong to Jesus by birth. The Gospel of Matthew’s genealogy traces the line of *Joseph*, who is called “the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born” (1:16). If Jesus is the son of *Mary* (who apparently is not from the line of David) and Joseph is not Jesus’ biological father, how can Jesus claim to be the Messiah in the line of David? By adopting Jesus, Joseph establishes Jesus as part of his own family. Joseph’s adoption of Jesus secures his identity as Son of David and Messiah (1:1; 20–21).

Jesus’ adoptive father, Joseph, is an unusually righteous and selfless man. Joseph sets aside his plan to break off his engagement to Mary and takes Jesus to be his son after an angel of the Lord intervenes to instruct Joseph about the child’s true origin (1:18–20). The Gospel of Matthew emphasizes Joseph’s role instead of Mary’s (she will have the spotlight in the Gospel of Luke) precisely because it is important for Matthew’s readers to grasp the implications of Joseph’s adoption of Jesus and his role in saving Jesus’ life. These themes of selfless righteousness and adoption are woven throughout the Gospel.

Jesus amplifies the implications of his adoption during his ministry; he completely redefines what “family” means. When his mother and brothers visit him, he seems to dismiss them as he says that it is those who do the will of the Father in heaven who are his true family (12:47–50). Only so far as his family of origin became part of the theological family of God the Father does Jesus consider them to be his true “mother and brothers.”

Christians are adopted into the family when we are baptized in Jesus’ name. With God as our Father, we are children of the Holy Spirit and heirs to salvation (Paul also talks about our “adoption” as “heirs,” see Rom. 8:16–17). The family lineage is not ours by birth, but we are adopted and made sons and daughters of God.

The family of God the Father has a responsibility to brothers and sisters in need. Jesus illustrates this responsibility in the Parable of the Last Judgment (Matt. 25:31–46), which depicts the Son of Man returning to separate the “sheep” (who ministered to the “least of these who are members of my family” by providing them with food, water, clothing, and care) from the “goats,” who neglected to provide.

Two Josephs

Jesus' adoptive father bears the same name as another sojourner in Egypt: the patriarch Joseph, whose story of being sold into slavery and eventually rising to power in Egypt is told in Genesis 37–50. The patriarch Joseph was also a dreamer (37:5–10) and interpreter of dreams (40:1–23; 41:1–36). Joseph was a righteous man (39:9–10) who is instrumental in saving the line of Israel (50:20–21). In the Gospel of Matthew, Joseph plays a similar role in saving Jesus.

Disruption of Families

As we read the Gospel of Matthew, we find that the adoptive family of God the Father sometimes contradicts or comes into conflict with traditional “family values” as we know them. Just as Jesus' own family was not traditional (Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit; his mother was pregnant before she lived with Joseph; and they had to flee and live as refugees in Egypt), so the rest of the Gospel shows Jesus disrupting traditional family ties. Jesus upholds the injunction to honor one's father and mother (15:4; 19:19), but he also says, “Call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven” (23:9), and he identifies his true family as the people who follow him, not his family of origin (12:47–50). He tells a would-be disciple who wants to bury his father “Let the dead bury their own dead” (8:21–22); and he says that he comes to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and that our foes will be members of our own households (10:35–36; see also 9:21).

Christians may find this disruptive stance disturbing, and so it is. After all, Joseph took Jesus into his family; is this how a son repays his father? The key here is “father,” because for Jesus, the only father is the Father in Heaven (23:9). The theological family that is in allegiance to God is superior to traditional family ties because Jesus' followers are adopted by God, the only Father.

Jesus said these unsettling things because he expected that the end times were coming very soon. Family ties (including marriage; see 22:30) were no longer as

important as being a devoted disciple (see also 1 Cor. 7:7–8). Today we no longer take quite as seriously Jesus' drastic redefinition of family; however, perhaps this Gospel is calling us to take a good look at our priorities during this Advent season, to consider carefully how our devotion to family sometimes, or often, overrides our devotion to Jesus, the church, and our calling as Christians to be in solidarity with the refugees of the world. Devotion to one's family may sometimes preclude reaching out to others and adopting them into our care. Jesus counted as his family many people who were on the outside of traditional or dominant society: the prostitutes, tax collectors, and other “sinners” of his time. As we follow in his footsteps, Jesus calls us to minister to the “least of these who are members of my family” (Matt. 25:40).

Adopted into the Covenant

The Gentiles, or those who are not born into the people of Israel, are part of the covenant with Israel through adoption. In this Gospel, Jesus begins his ministry by going only “to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (10:6), but later he reaches out to Gentiles and establishes the church as an adoptive heir of Israel. As bearers of the “new” covenant established through Jesus, Christians do not replace the Jews or render the Sinai covenant obsolete; rather, Matthew shows us that Jesus himself is the fulfillment of the covenant, the law, and the prophets (5:17–18). Through baptism in Christ, Christians may share in the covenant.

The New Testament sometimes uses imagery of a “new covenant” (Heb. 8:8–10) and the “new Jerusalem” (Rev. 21:2) as metaphors for the church. This does not mean that Christians replace Israel's continuing place as God's covenant people. Paul makes this clear when he discusses the Gentiles being grafted onto the trunk of Israel: God will not abandon his people or go back on his covenant (Rom. 11:28–29). Just as the “New” Testament does not invalidate the “Old” Testament, so the church does not replace Israel.

Conclusion

Jesus as Emmanuel, “God with us,” shows us that God is not absent or far removed but dwells with us. Far from abandoning God’s people, God chooses to live in our midst as one of us. As Emmanuel, “God with us,” Jesus promises to be with us “always, [even] to the end of the age” (28:20). In the Gospel of Matthew, we discover how Jesus becomes the adoptive son in the line of David, and the church becomes the adoptive family of God the Father. Matthew also shows us that be-

ing part of this family means caring for others who are refugees, who are hungry, naked, and dispossessed, as if they were our own kin—because they are indeed our kin in the family of God the Father. 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.

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