



ADULT STUDY

from www.TheThoughtfulChristian.com

LEADER'S GUIDE Session 1

Spiritual Practices for the Season: An Adult Advent Study

Goal for the Session

Through practicing *lectio divina* and breath prayers, participants will see Advent as a spiritual journey and begin their four-week adventure.

Preparing for the Session

- Prepare yourself to lead this Advent study. Find a quiet place and breathe slowly, in and out. Offer a breath prayer. Consider listening to some soothing music as you read through the entire four-week study and make notes on how you may need to adapt it for your group.
- Arrange the room so that participants are in a circle or rectangle, not in rows. Set the table in advance by placing a blue or purple cloth, the two liturgical colors used for this season, in the center, with the Advent wreath and candles centered on the cloth.
- Prepare a music player so that soft music is playing as participants arrive.
- Post a sheet of newsprint and write these two lines, leaving room for three more lines to be written in following weeks:
 - Christ Candle: Come, O light of the world. Shine in the darkness.
 - Advent 1: The darkness shall never overcome the light.

Session at a Glance

OPENING

- Welcome and lighting of Advent candles
- Prayer
- Overview

EXPLORING

- Scripture activity: *lectio divina*

RESPONDING

- Prayer experience: breath prayer

CLOSING

- Preparation for next week
- Closing prayer

- 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.

Materials Needed

- a royal blue or purple cloth for the center of the table
- Advent wreath with five candles; four of any size and shape and one white candle taller than the rest
- lighter or matches
- music player and calming, instrumental music (Advent-appropriate hymns or classical music)
- newsprint and marker
- copies of the Participant Handout
- pens or pencils
- Bibles
- copies of the Participant Handout for session 2 to distribute at the end of the session

Teaching Tips

- The leader not only guides the class through a variety of spiritual exercises but 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. For instance, in session 2, the class will learn about centering prayer. Directions are provided in the Participant Handout. The leader should try this type of prayer ahead of time, to truly gain the benefit and then be able to lead others through this prayer. 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. Make time to search for these resources at your local library, bookstore, or church resource center.
- Although during Advent, the Christ candle is not usually lit until the end of Advent, Christmas Day, we will light the Christ candle at the beginning of each class and light the other candles from the Christ candle.

- Both royal blue and purple are used by churches during Advent. Find out which color your church prefers and use that color.

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Welcome and Lighting of Advent Candles

Once the participants are gathered, welcome everyone by saying, "The Peace of Christ be with you," to which everyone responds, "And also with you."

Call attention to the newsprint on the wall and invite participants to read the phrase in unison as you light the Christ candle and then the Advent candle for this week.

Light the Christ candle, saying: "Come, O light of the world. Shine in the darkness."

Light the first Advent candle, saying: "The darkness shall never overcome the light."

2. Prayer

Say the following prayer or one of your choosing:

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.

Turn off the music.

3. Overview

Invite participants to find the poem by Ann Weems in their Participant Handout and have a volunteer read it aloud to the group.

Explain that this four-week study will be a time of reflection, prayer, and rest as we prepare for Christmas. Each week we will use a different method to reflect on Scripture and also practice different types of praying. In addition, each week some suggestions will be given that they can do at home during the week as well as read the Participant Handout for the following week. The goal is to help participants incorporate some of these into their ongoing faith practices. If anyone feels overwhelmed, assure them that all activities are optional and no one is expected to do absolutely everything. Allow a brief time for questions.

Exploring (25 minutes)

4. Scripture Activity: *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. 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.

1. Before reading the passage, ask participants to be attentive to the word or phrase that is especially meaningful to them and to write that down after hearing the verse.
2. Read Isaiah 40:1–3 and sit quietly for one to two minutes.
3. Read the passage again, this time, asking the class to think about how the Scripture message is speaking to them today.
4. Meditate quietly for one to two minutes.
5. A third time, read Isaiah 40:1–3 and ask, “What do you think that God is calling you to do today?”
6. Meditate quietly for one to two minutes.

Ask if anyone wants to share any of his or her three responses.

Teaching Tip

If your group is larger than eight people, consider forming smaller groups or pairs for the sharing time so that everyone who wishes gets a chance to share.

Responding (10 minutes)

5. Prayer Experience: Breath Prayer

Summarize the information about breath prayers found in the Participant Handout or allow participants a few minutes to read that section.

As you lead the group through the breath prayer, ask everyone to close their eyes. Guide them to breathe in slowly and then breathe out slowly. Do this several times. Once everyone is in a rhythm of breathing, say the first line of the breath prayer (reminding people to breathe in); then give the second line (while everyone breathes out). Guide the participants through this by repeating the prayer several times and then allow time for silence.

Use one of the breath prayers found in the Participant Handout or create one of your own using a line of a hymn, a poem, another Bible verse, etc.

Closing (5 minutes)

6. Preparation for Next Week

Have participants look at the “Taking It Home” section at the end of the Participant Handout. Encourage them to practice any of these during the week and be prepared to talk about what they experience next week when you gather. Distribute the Participant Handout for session 2 and encourage them to read it before the session if they can.

7. Closing Prayer

Close the class with this prayer:

God of grace, of beginnings and endings, and of 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.



ADULT STUDY

from www.TheThoughtfulChristian.com

PARTICIPANT HANDOUT Session 1

Spiritual Practices for the Season: An Adult Advent Study

Introduction

The season of Advent begins the church liturgical year. For Christians, our New Year's Day is the first day of Advent as we prepare for the coming of the Christ child into the world, both on that first Christmas in Bethlehem more than two thousand years ago and in our present-day world. For we are as much in need of a Savior now as we ever have been, and our hearts long for the hope, peace, love, and joy that we pray for as we light the weekly candles around the Advent wreath.

The word *Advent* means "coming" or "arrival." But Advent is not just about the coming of the Christ child, the incarnation, but of the second coming of Christ at the end of time. So Advent begins the church year while it prepares us for the end of time.

We usually think of an ending as a "termination." But in the case of Advent, "end" means not only the end of time but also the central purpose or goal of creation. The history of the world is not a random wandering with an uncertain end, even though it may seem that way at times. Because of God's promise of redemption, Christians consider the end of time to be the fulfillment of what God began in the creation of the heavens and the earth.

The History of Advent

The celebration of Advent, preparing for Christ's birth, had begun to take form by the sixth century and continued to expand through the seventh and eighth centuries. In the sixth century, fasting during Advent was common, centered around the disciplines of the

monastic communities but widely encouraged as a time for all to participate in a regular fasting routine. In the seventh century, the festival of the Annunciation, which had been observed during Lent, was moved to December because it was seen as more fitting to celebrate and remember the conception of Jesus just prior to Christmas rather than during Lent or Holy Week.

Christians consider the end of time to be the fulfillment of what God began in the creation of the heavens and the earth.

In early lectionaries, Advent was listed at the end of the church year, thus placing the significance of the season of Advent as the season in which we prepare for the end of time. The modern-day lectionary places Advent at the beginning of the church year but does so with the inclusion of Scripture readings that address the end times.

The season of Advent is identified through the themes of the four Sundays of Advent. There is a marked difference between Lent and Advent. During Lent, the focus is on the forty days with the exclusion of Sundays, whereas in Advent, the focus is on the four Sundays.

Introduction to This 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 have 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 study 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:

- a Scripture focus;
- a Scripture activity based on the Scripture focus, geared toward drawing us into the biblical story and encouraging thoughtful reflection through the use of poetry, music, art, and prayer;
- a prayer experience using a new format each week;
- "Taking It Home"—simple suggestions for practicing what was learned during the session, including the choice of a memory verse to be memorized during the upcoming week. You are encouraged to review the Participant Handout for the following session before each meeting, but it is not mandatory. Make this study work for you and do as much or little as you choose. Avoid over busyness during a season of preparing and expecting.

There will be a fair amount of group interaction as we take this journey together. All participants are encouraged to speak, but if you ever choose not to, just say "pass." Respect other participants' choice to do the same.

Preparing Our Hearts

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 our 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 the Word of God.

Let's begin this study by reading a poem by beloved writer and poet Ann Weems.

In Search of Our Kneeling Places

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 experience our own advent in his.
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, *Kneeling in Bethlehem*
(Louisville, KY: Westminster
John Knox Press, 2010), 19.

Scripture Activity: *Lectio Divina*

One method of Bible reading that offers a simple and user-friendly way for 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. In the fourth century, the monastic leader St. Benedict refined the technique of *lectio divina* based on his belief that we need to hear with the *ear* of our hearts. *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 is found in words such as "lectionary" (scheduled readings of the Scripture), "lectern" (a stand from which one reads) and "lecture." In *lectio divina* we begin with a reading of the Scripture, a "*lectio divina*" or divine reading.

A Bible passage is read several times, each time with a different intent. First, the passage is read through at a calm pace. 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?"

As we learn to do breath prayers, in rhythm with our own breathing, we also breathe in God's Spirit and nurture our spirit and soul.

A third time, the passage is read. 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.

Practice the *lectio divina* method, reading the Bible focus for today, 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: How does this passage speak to you?

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

Prayer Experience: Breath Prayer

Each week, we will learn (or relearn) a different type of prayer. These methods of prayer are used to help focus, pause, and reflect. The prayer methods can easily be 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. 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.

The English word for spirit is derived from the Latin word *spiritus*, which means "breath." In Hebrew, the word for "spirit" and "breath" is the same word: *ruach*. In Greek, *pneuma* is the word for both spirit and breath. There is a deep connection between our breath and our spirit and God's Spirit. As we learn to do breath prayers, in rhythm with our own breathing, we also breathe in God's Spirit and nurture our spirit and soul.

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.

To begin a breath prayer, close your eyes. Breathe in slowly, and then breathe out slowly. Do this several times. Then recite your prayer silently. As you breathe in, say the first line in silence; as you breathe out, say the second line in silence.

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, when you're out for a walk or exercising—breath prayers lend themselves to the shape of your daily life.

Use one of the following breath prayers, or create one of your own using a line of a hymn, a poem, another Bible verse, etc.

Line one: Spirit of the Living God,

Line two: fall afresh on me.

Line one: Be still,

Line two: and know that God is God.

Line one: Create in me,

Line two: a clean heart, O God.

Line one: This is the day

Line two: that the Lord has made.

Taking It Home

Following are several activities to practice during the upcoming week. Don't be discouraged if you don't do all of them.

- Use the breath prayer method each day. Be prepared next week to tell the group how you used breath prayers and how they worked for you. Some use breath prayers while waiting for a job interview, standing in line at the grocery store, and even sitting in a traffic jam (although it's a good idea to keep your eyes open when driving!).
- Practice the *lectio divina* at home using the Scripture lesson from Isaiah 40:1–3 or another favorite passage.
- Choose a line from Isaiah 40:1–3 and commit it to memory.
- Read the Participant Handout for next week prior to coming to the session.

Kathleen Long Bostrom is a full-time writer and a teaching elder in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). She has published more than forty books and lives in Carlsbad, California.