



Held in God's Grace: An Advent Study Pack

SESSION 1

In the secular world, waiting is the frustrating interval between now and the moment when we get what we want. For Christians, however, waiting is the hope-filled way we live as God's people.

Scripture Reading for the Week: Isaiah 52:7–10

Goal of the Session

We begin this week a communal journey of preparing for the birth of Christ by exploring themes that enhance our observance of Advent at home and in church, our coming celebration of Christmas, and our spiritual lives throughout the year.

Preparing for the Session

- You are encouraged to bring your own experiences and reflections into consideration as you decide how to structure the study and the weekly activities. The Participant Handout and Leader's Guide are only maps for the spiritual journey of your participants and you over the next four weeks. Feel free to skip places that do not seem relevant, take detours, or even pause along the way to spread out for a picnic if any one part of the study particularly moves your group.
- The themes chosen for this Advent study follow a series developed by the Carmelite order of the Roman Catholic Church. For each week texts have been chosen for in-depth study. The first and third sessions' texts are from the book of Isaiah, and the second and fourth sessions' texts are from the book of Luke.
 - Week 1: Waiting
 - Week 2: Accepting

Session at a Glance

OPENING

- Welcome
- Opening prayer

EXPLORING

- Introducing the liturgical year
- Practicing waiting during Advent (Bible study)

RESPONDING

- Journaling

CLOSING

- Preparing for next week
- Closing prayer

- Week 3: Journeying
- Week 4: Birthing
- As you begin your preparations for today's session, set aside some quiet time for you to wait to hear God's still, small voice of calm within you. Take a few deep breaths, put aside distracting thoughts, and sit still for a few moments. Pray as you feel moved to do so. Once you feel focused, move on to your further preparations.

- Read the Participant Handout and the Scripture reading, making notes as you read about the issues that feel particularly important for today's session and would be helpful in guiding the participants in the celebration of waiting.
- Room setup: Chairs in a circle, with newsprint stands in front for recording observations by the participants.
- If space allows, set up a worship table with a white or purple cloth, four candles, greenery, a Bible, and a different symbol each week that speaks to the theme. For example, a calendar with the days of Advent marked could be a symbol for waiting. Use the table as the center of your prayer time.
- You may want to ask participants ahead of time to lead the opening and closing prayers or to read Scripture when needed, though you should provide the opening prayer in this first session.
- For this first session there will be some participants who have not read the handout or Scripture. If time permits before the session begins, find out how many have not and ask those who have to summarize the material. See the first Teaching Alternative at the end of this Leader's Guide for a suggestion if no one has read the Participant Handout prior to the session.

Materials Needed

- Bibles
- Paper, pens, and markers

Teaching Tips

- Consider purchasing some spiral notebooks for participants to use as a journal during this study and through Advent. Many are not in the habit of journaling and may appreciate some suggestions to get started.
- In the Leader's Guide for session 4 is a format for leading a prayer the Carmelite way. Think about whether your group would like to incorporate that sort of prayer during each session and rearrange the activities to have time to use it.
- The first two sessions' "Exploring" activities mostly consist of questions and answers. The final two ses-

sions are more activity oriented. Review the teaching alternatives if you prefer to use another method instead of questions and answers.

Additional Information for Leader for Session 1

Far more than merely a timeline of events, the Christian liturgical year is a richly significant way for us as the church to experience and express what God is doing in history. It would be well worth it for you as leader to spend some time learning about the liturgical year, how it developed, and the different concepts illuminating celebration of the various seasons and holy days. It may help to download and use the Thoughtful Christian study "Seasons of the Church Year" and review the handout. Some books are recommended at the end of this Leader's Guide as well.

The church's observance of the liturgical year is its enactment of the encounter between God's time and human time. For example, the mystery of how God became human in Jesus Christ was a unique event, yet we participate once again in Christ's birth each year as we observe Christmas. We are not just remembering a past event, as if reminding one another to remember the Alamo. Every Christmas, as we sing "O Little Town of Bethlehem," we declare, "Be born in us today." The purpose of our Christmas customs is more than nostalgia for a baby in a manger 2,000 years ago. The purpose is for Jesus to be reborn in our hearts in a way that makes a palpable change in our lives as we meet anew the incarnate God.

Similarly, the Advent period of the church calendar is a time for us to practice God's time in the midst of human calendars, schedules, appointments, and our other myriad distractions. Rather than rush into the celebration, we need to set aside a time for prayer and study with others in our faith community. The Advent themes are not new—we know them from Scripture and tradition—but if we heed the call to reflect quietly with others on their significance for our present lives, we will know what it is to wait joyfully with hope.

Opening (5 minutes)

1. Welcome

Once the participants are seated welcome them with the following, either read aloud or in your own words.

Welcome to the first session of our Advent study. Thank you for setting aside this time in your busy lives to reflect on the Scriptures and pray together with your brothers and sisters in Christ. We pray that this will be a time of renewal for our whole congregation.

You may know each other already, but I would like for each person here to tell us your name and one sentence about your need for spiritual blessing this Advent. What or whom are you waiting for? I'll begin.

State your name and give one sentence about your longings for Advent. Allow time for each participant to do the same.

2. Opening Prayer

Read the following to lead people into the prayer:

*Wait for the LORD;
be strong, and let your heart take courage;
wait for the LORD!*

Psalm 27:14

Do you know someone who is waiting today? Waiting for a letter, waiting for a job interview, waiting for a baby to arrive, waiting for a lab report from the doctor, waiting for a loved one to come home? If you know someone who is waiting and needs our prayers, please name them as we observe a time of prayer.

God of hope, we are your Advent people, rejoicing in your promises, waiting and watching together for signs of your reign. We pray now for the people whose waiting is in our hearts, who need your comfort and courage, those we name and those we remember silently.

(Pause for silent or spoken prayer for joys and concerns as the participants feel moved to do so.)

Thank you, God, for your patience with us as we hurry to get beyond the waiting. Teach us your patience and help us listen to each other. Open us to your Holy Spirit, and guide us as we study your Word. In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

Exploring (30 minutes)

3. Introducing the Liturgical Year

Using the "Preparing for the Session" section above as a resource, give a brief introduction to the themes and goals for these sessions. Ask the participants to share what they already know about the church year calendar.

Give an overview of the Christian year celebrations and the place of Advent in the liturgical cycle.

4. Practicing Waiting during Advent (Bible Study)

The following Bible study asks the participants to read the Scripture passage three times, and after each time reflect on one of the three different ways of waiting discussed in the Participant Handout. Invite the participants to consult the handout to help in their reflections on the passage.

Waiting with Watchfulness

Read Isaiah 52:7–10 before reflecting on these questions.

- What parts of the passage call us to be watchful, and what should we be watchful about?
- In what ways do you practice watchfulness in your life? For yourself? For your loved ones? For your possessions/achievements? For what else?
- In this period of Advent, how would you like to change the things you are watchful about?

Waiting in Solidarity

Read Isaiah 52:7–10 again, and during this reading look for issues of solidarity.

- What parts of the passage call us to be in solidarity, and with whom should we be in solidarity?
- In what ways do you practice solidarity in your life? With your loved ones? With strangers near or far? With yourself? With those suffering poverty or oppression? With and for whom?
- In this period of Advent, how would you like to change the ways in which you express solidarity?

Living according to God's Time

Read Isaiah 52:7–10 again, and during this reading look for issues of God's time line.

- What parts of the passage call us to live in God's time instead of human time?
- In what ways do you already live according to God's time within your personal life? With your family? With your church congregation?

- Who or what else in your life helps you to live by God's time instead of human time?
- In this period of Advent, how would you like to practice living according to God's time?
- Are there Advent hymns you know that are helpful reminders of God's time? Look in the Advent section of the hymnal for suggestions.

Responding (15 minutes)

5. Journaling

Encourage participants to keep a journal during Advent. Remind them that journaling, especially when one is on a journey, is a way of remembering, then reliving and deepening a significant experience. The Advent journey lends itself in a variety of ways to journaling. The participants can dedicate a section of their notebooks for this purpose and get started during the session. Help them begin by asking evocative questions such as, "What was the hardest thing you ever had to wait for? Remember a time in your life when you experienced a painful waiting; a hopeful waiting; a joyful waiting. How have you as an adult changed in the way you experience waiting from the experience you remember as a child? What new idea about waiting have you encountered in this discussion today?" Encourage the participants to write more about their experience in today's group session when they get home.

Closing (5 minutes)

6. Preparing for Next Week

Remind participants to prepare for next week by reading the Scripture and studying the Participant Handout. Encourage them to pray for the group, for the congregation, and for those lifted up today in the opening prayer.

7. Closing Prayer

Loving God, keep us always in your care. Bring us together again to support and encourage each other that we may grow in your love. Remind us of your unfolding presence as we wait for the good news of Christ's coming again in glory as he came long ago in Bethlehem. Give us your peace. **Amen.**

Teaching Alternatives

- If no one has read the Participant Handout prior to the session, consider using the "Opening" activities

and then providing about fifteen minutes of quiet time to allow them to read the handout. Then, either spend a few minutes talking about general reactions and continue with the "Responding" and "Closing" activities, or use some of the questions in the "Exploring" section to provoke discussion.

- **Modern-Day Wedding Parties: Participant Skits.** Read together the passage mentioned in the handout, Matthew 25:1–13. Divide the participants into groups of five or six people each and ask them to make a skit that represents a modernized version of this parable, and to be prepared to act it out for the entire group. What would modern bridesmaids and groomsmen need to do to get ready for the coming of a wedding couple? What would happen when the wedding couple arrived and everyone was asleep?

Allow the groups ten to fifteen minutes to plan and practice their skit, then ask them to come back into the big group and present their three- to five-minute skit, depending on how many groups and how time allows.

After all the groups have given their skit, ask the participants to come back together in the large group and share their experiences, using the following questions as guides.

For the bridesmaids and groomsmen: what did it feel like to wait? What were you most excited to be waiting for? What was frustrating about waiting? How did it feel when the wedding couple arrived?

For the wedding couple: How did it feel to arrive and have everyone asleep? What did you wish your wedding party had done differently in anticipation of your arrival? How do you think their behavior will influence the way your wedding party turns out?

Thinking of Jesus' coming again as Christianity's "party to beat all parties," what should we in this era do to prepare for that much-anticipated event? What are the contemporary equivalents of oil lamps that will light the way of party guests? What is the equivalent of oil that will keep those lamps lit for the guests and for the coming bridegroom? What new ways can we think of to bank up our supply of that kind of oil during this Advent season?

- Divide the group into pairs or triads and assign each a Scripture reference from the Participant Handout. Ask them to read and discuss the verses and report

back to the whole group. Suggestions: Matthew 24:30–44; 25:1–13; 25:31–36; and Luke 2:22–35.

For More Information

The following books provide excellent arguments for us to reclaim the deeper meanings of the liturgical year and to understand the background of our Advent journey.

Joan Chittister, *The Liturgical Year: The Spiraling Adventure of the Spiritual Life* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2009). As the title suggests, this book demonstrates how observing the liturgical year is a journey of collective and personal spirituality. One recommendation for the book notes that the author turns the calendar into a retreat.

Martin Connell, *Eternity Today: On the Liturgical Year: On God and Time, Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Candlemas*

(New York: Continuum, 2006). A clearly written book that offers a depth of information about the Christian calendar and includes worldly poetry that illustrates the liturgical themes.

Blair Gilmer Meeks, *Season of Light and Hope: Prayers and Liturgies for Advent and Christmas* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005). This resource offers a clear introduction with an understanding of Advent and gives practical guidance for prayer, teaching, and programming for churches and households.

Scott Waalkes, *The Fullness of Time in a Flat World: Globalization and the Liturgical Year* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010). This author proffers the intriguing idea that the best way for Christians to respond to globalization is to observe the traditional church calendar.



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Waiting usually means the frustrating interval between now and the moment we get what we want. For Christians, however, waiting is the hope-filled way we live as God's people in the here and now.

Scripture Reading for the Week: Isaiah 52:7–10

Introduction

For the next four weeks you are invited to join in prayerful consideration of Advent as we explore various parts of history and culture to add to our understanding of the season. We will base our exploration on four themes of Advent originally suggested by the Carmelite order: waiting, accepting, journeying, and birthing. We will also take short detours to the other side of the world, to Indonesia, to share in that country's experience of our four themes. Like travelers who return to their native land with new perspectives on things formerly commonplace, when we venture abroad in time and space through this study we will gain new insights into the way we observe Advent at home.

A Celebration of Waiting

Advent is the season of waiting. It is also the beginning of the Christian year. Thus we begin our celebration of the liturgical year by waiting. In our fast-paced society, it sounds odd to say that we celebrate by waiting. But as God's people it's significant that we practice a little holy lingering for the four weeks of Advent. This may be a tall order when every store in town barrages us with Christmas carols and advertisements starting before Thanksgiving Day. We need to guard Advent as a unique period of waiting for the church. Like Christianity in general, Advent calls us to reject the drive to achieve and acquire. During Advent, God invites us to



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let go of our desire for instant gratification and instantaneous progress. Instead, in this holy season of Advent, God simply invites us to wait.

Christian waiting is a crucial spiritual discipline that does more than teach us patience and suppress our many longings. Waiting during Advent is not just delaying the gratification from the gifts we hope to receive on Christmas morning. It has deeper significance when we as Christians wait for the Savior to come. Hope-filled waiting during Advent connects us to the whole world's longing for deliverance from suffering (Romans 8:19–23). We will explore three aspects of waiting together in this session: waiting as watchfulness, waiting as solidarity, and waiting as living according to God's time.

Waiting as Watchfulness

One of Jesus' core messages to his disciples was to wait and be watchful. Much like us, Jesus' followers were eager to be told a specific date for the coming of the end-time. Jesus never satisfies this curiosity. He insists that no one knows how long we must wait, not even the

Son of Man. Instead he emphasizes in his sermons and parables the importance of keeping ourselves prepared while we wait. He calls us to *active* waiting, in which we must be watchful.

Jesus' parable in Matthew 25:1–13 describes preparations for a wedding party. The bridesmaids who failed to prepare ahead of time forgot to bring enough oil for their long wait for the bridegroom. They are roundly condemned and do not get to attend the party. Jesus is letting his hearers know that everyone is invited but only those who are in party mode ahead of time will enter. The party, of course, is the reign of God that includes a huge feast where every guest has a seat at the banquet table. In Jesus' view, being in "party mode" means we are already setting places at the table for those who never get a seat at worldly banquets: the poor, the orphan, the widow, and the lowliest among our fellow human beings.

In Jesus' parable, the bridesmaids who were in party mode fell asleep alongside the unprepared ones while waiting for the bridegroom (v. 5). In other words, Jesus doesn't expect us to lose sleep in anticipation of his second coming. Nevertheless, we need to be sure that before we go to sleep we have done the necessary things to welcome him when he does arrive. Jesus is speaking pastorally: we shouldn't lose sleep by worrying about when he will come again. At the same time we should not neglect good care of ourselves while we are waiting. We can get a good night's sleep and still be faithful to Jesus' call to be watchful. Watchfulness is not a trial to see how much waiting we can endure. It's a way of life in which we are always ready to welcome the bridegroom and are already welcoming the poor among us. By serving them we serve the bridegroom (i.e., Jesus; see Matt. 25:40).

If we look carefully at the message of this parable we see that the wedding party begins at a late hour, long after its participants have gathered. Although elsewhere Jesus says that the Son does not know the hour of his second coming (Matt. 24:36; Mark 13:32), here he is anticipating that he, the bridegroom, will be late. As a parable about the reign of God, Jesus isn't talking about his personal habits but about the likelihood that it will take longer for the reign of God to arrive than any of us suspect. Thus we see that Jesus not only wants to prepare us to be watchful but also wants to inform us that we face an extended wait. During Advent we celebrate the task of waiting because Jesus has alerted us to the

need to wait. At the same time, Jesus assures us that our waiting will not be in vain. With the coming of God's reign, the watchful among us will be admitted into a magnificent celebration, imagined here as a wedding party that starts a whole new life and relationship with our beloved bridegroom, Jesus Christ.

From a theological perspective it is quite shrewd on the part of God not to inform us of an exact date to welcome Jesus back to earth. Theologians have a word for God's cleverness in this regard—"eschatology." Because we do not know when the end will come, we must be watchful at all times. If we knew a specific date, we could always fall back on Scarlett O'Hara's refrain, "I'll think about that . . . tomorrow." Not having handed out precise chronological details, God uses the opportunity to remind us that every moment of our lives is a potential moment for Jesus to return. From an eschatological standpoint, every moment of every day is holy because every moment contains the possibility of Jesus' arrival and the beginning of the heavenly party. Every moment is pregnant with amazing possibility that we will meet and celebrate with Jesus.

Waiting in Indonesia: Watchfulness in the Ring of Fire

For the Indonesian people every moment contains the possibility of an earthquake, volcano, or other reminder of the immense power held captive in the earth's crust. This extraordinary geographic vulnerability is nothing new to the Indonesians, who became accustomed to it long before the 2004 tsunami put them on the world's radar screen. They regularly feel the earth tremble beneath their feet, watch the swaying of coconut palms and skyscrapers, and jokingly refer to their country's identity as the supermarket of disasters.

Because the indigenous people of the Indonesian archipelago have had extensive experience with disaster, their local wisdom is replete with stories of how to reduce risk when disaster strikes. After the tsunami, the island of Simeulue became known as Lucky Island. The residents had only seven casualties from the tsunami, though they were less than a hundred kilometers from the epicenter of the earthquake. Because this remote island has no access to television and very few radio stations, the usual nighttime activity is to sit with the extended family and listen to the lore of the elders. Sometimes the



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elders describe a tsunami that hit the island long ago. They always note that before the tsunami arrived, the tide went far out to sea. The story is said to be about one hundred years old, which dates it to the time of a 1907 earthquake and tsunami. Early on the day of the 2004 tsunami, the people noticed that the tide dropped lower than they had ever seen before. They remembered the story that they had heard on so many starlit nights with their grandparents and they immediately headed to higher ground.

Thus a lack of modern technology quite literally saved the lives of the people of Simeulue. We think modern technology makes us more disaster resistant. But in this period of Advent, as we seek to be more watchful, we should question this perception. Because we have learned to watch television and videos and numerous other forms of entertainment as passive observers, it is possible that we have lost much of our capacity to be watchful. Furthermore, globalization often serves the role of a blender of the world's cultures, reducing the variety of it all to a rather bland soup. This reduction in distinctively local culture leads to a loss, not merely of local traditions told in stories, but the wisdom about life that a culture develops and preserves over multiple generations.

For Christians, the church can serve as a symbolic fireside around which we gather to hear our elders pass on age-old wisdom about how to be watchful for the coming Savior. Generations of such fireside chats are recorded in the Bible as the written history of the holy lingering of God's people. We can learn from our predecessors and celebrate with them a long tradition of watchfulness for what is coming, not only for coming disasters but also for the coming reign of God.

Waiting as Solidarity

Advent is a time for waiting in solidarity with those who have waited before us. This concept is an original part of the Advent celebration. When Advent was first

observed in the late fourth century, part of the celebration honored the many people who, for centuries, had anticipated the arrival of the Messiah. The Byzantine Rite, developed in Constantinople, set aside the Sunday before Christmas to celebrate all the historical heralds of Christ. Their prayer of thanksgiving for that day began with Abraham then went down through a role call of Jewish history to Moses and David. It included the prophets and specifically named women who dance along with the prophets when Mary gladdens their hearts with her arrival. The Advent celebration of waiting in solidarity invites us to dance with joy along with our foremothers Miriam, Sarah, and Mary at the fulfillment of God's promise.

As Christians, with a significant part of our faith heritage passed on to us from the Jewish people, we descend theologically from a people who had to become accustomed to waiting, urged on by their prophets and by never-ending hope. After the exodus from Egypt, they waited for forty years in the desert. In the promised land, they waited for the anointing of a king. In exile, they waited for their return to the beloved city of David. Returning to Jerusalem, they waited for the coming of the Messiah.

The first women of the New Testament also waited. Elizabeth waited until an advanced age for the birth of her child, the one who would pave the way for the Messiah. Mary waited nine months to give birth to the Messiah, the long-heralded Word-become-flesh. After the Messiah's birth, one special woman did not forget her fellow Jews' long-suffering labors of watchful waiting. In Luke 2:36–38, an elderly prophetess named Anna pays respect to the many who faithfully came to the temple to pray for the arrival of the coming Messiah. As Simeon blessed Jesus, she informs the temple goers that their prayers and their patience were not in vain.

Now that the Messiah has come and the hopes of a people have been fulfilled, Christians have joined in the task of waiting—this time for the second coming when the reign of God will be established in all its glory. Our Christian ancestors have waited patiently for nearly 2,000 years, and their legacy can be an inspiration to us. Rather than presuming that ours will necessarily be the era in which Jesus will return, we should humbly be willing to wait along with them and dance for joy with them at knowing Christ is coming. We can learn from how they waited and realize that the waiting itself carries deep

Behold, the Virgin proclaimed through the ages by the prophets comes into our world; she who gladdens the hearts of the wise and all upright people. With them dances Sarah, most honored among women, Rebekah and Rachel, Anna and Moses' glorious sister Miriam. The ends of the earth rejoice with them; all of creation celebrates, for God will come to be born in the flesh and fill the world with [divine] mercy.¹

meaning for our lives. The waiting can change us, just as it has changed countless generations before us. Through our waiting and our dancing for the crucified and risen Christ we can change the world.²

Waiting as Living according to God's Time

As humans, particularly those influenced by European culture, we measure the meaning of our time by looking at what we achieve during our lives, both materially and in terms of our social status. We see evidence of this in the conversations we have when encountering a stranger. Acceptable questions focus on what the person does and has: where she works, where he lives, what car she drives, or what sport he plays. These questions imply that the point of our lives is to be constantly doing and producing as well as consuming. This drive has a huge impact on the way we view time. We talk about making the most of time, not wasting time, and making up for lost time. Time becomes a commodity that we feel compelled to mine continuously for its benefits. Even attending worship is measured by what we "get out of it," whether we learn something from the sermon or experience personal growth.

We can gain insight into living according to God's time from Indonesian culture. At first encounter, Indonesians express little interest in what their acquaintance "does." Their questions to a stranger are usually, "Are you married?" and "How many children do you have?"

If the conversation continues, they will ask if the person's parents are still living. They want to establish a new acquaintance's identity based on who that person is within a network of family relationships. They show relative indifference to what that person does or has achieved. This point of view has a major impact on how they look at time. The priority is who they are, not what they do. Therefore there is no impetus to achieve things in a given amount of time. Time may pass quickly or slowly, but what is important is that a person is surrounded by family and friends.

During Advent, to live according to God's time means to let go of our drive to do and to achieve. Instead, we have the luxury to focus on who we are: that is, to explore our identity based on our place in our relationships within the family of faith. First and foremost we are the children of God, loved solely because we are and not because of what we do. Second, we are members of an extended family called the church that reaches back in time as well as across twenty-four time zones. Right now, our ancestors in the faith surround us as a great cloud of witnesses with their wisdom passed on to us through the Bible's witness. Our brothers and sisters in our home congregation and the ecumenical church worldwide also join us in this Advent season, yearning and eager to experience the coming once again of a baby in the manger.

About the Writer

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Endnotes

1. Irénée H. Dalmais, "Troparia of Sunday morning," *Le Maison-Dieu: Revue de pastorale liturgique* 59, 27–28, quoted in Robert Gantoy and Romain Swaeles, *Days of the Lord: The Liturgical Year*, vol. 1, *Advent, Christmas, Epiphany* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 23.
2. Julie Clawson, "Waiting," Blog. *onehandclapping*. Posted on November 29, 2009. <http://julieclawson.com/2009/11/29/waiting/>.