

SCC SMALL GROUP

Preparing for Christmas

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Preparing for Christmas

Session 1 - His coming foretold

By Rick Dietzman, SCC Adult Ministries Nov 2007

Note to small group facilitators:

This small group study is organized around four themes associated with the coming of Christ. It can be done either on your normal group night or on a corresponding Advent Sunday. Your group (or if using this personally, your family) is free to use as many or few of these lessons as you'd like to carry you through the end of the year. The next study, which I am writing, will be available the first week of January 2008.

History

The celebration of Advent begins four Sundays before Christmas. When the Church began to observe Christmas in the fourth Century, a period of preparation was soon added to celebrate the coming of Jesus. The word "Advent" literally means "coming". For centuries, celebrating advent has focused the attention of busy people in a busy season on spiritual matters.

The four Sundays of Advent are often traditionally celebrated with four candles with one to be lit each Sunday. Each candle has a specific meaning associated with different aspects of the Advent story. The first one almost always symbolizes expectant hope and is sometimes associated with prophecy. The others are organized around characters or themes as a way to unfold the story and direct attention to the celebrations and worship in the season, such as peace, love and joy. The third (and sometimes fourth) is generally symbolic of joy at the imminence of the coming of Christ. A fifth, white or gold, candle -- called a "Christ Candle" -- is often lit in the center on Christmas Eve and/or Christmas Day to signify Christ's birth.

A common way of marking the days of this advent, particularly among children, is an Advent Calendar, traditionally made of wood but today usually made of cardboard. Typically, there is a tab that can be unsealed and raised for each day of Advent. Something is hidden behind each tab, such as a devotional reading, a

seasonal picture, a piece of candy, or a small item such as a toy. Another home-based craft is the Advent wreath that uses the candles described above as well as a circular wreath. If your group would like to light candles each time you gather, using a wreath, please do so. Each study, light the preceding week's candle(s) and add an additional one. On Christmas eve/day light the center one.

Session 1 : His coming foretold.

Suggested song to sing: O Come O Come Emmanuel

Candles: If you chose to use Advent candles, light the first candle at this time.

Ice breaker: Describe a time when you had an inkling for what your "big Christmas gift" would be. What was it like to have to wait to open it?

Background:

Many people are surprised to see the detail with which Jesus life and ministry was described in the Old Testament. When Jesus' disciples attempted to explain the significance of his death and resurrection to others, they invariably referred to the fulfillment of prophecies about him. Understanding what was foretold bolstered people's faith in that time, and can also fortify our own faith. We see that the promises about Jesus have been anticipated for centuries. Some of these were fulfilled when he first came to earth, and others will be fulfilled at his second coming.

The prophet Isaiah lived about 700 BC during the expansion of the Assyrian empire and before the time of the Babylonian exile. One of the most significant findings in the Dead Sea scrolls was a copy of the book of Isaiah which was radiocarbon dated between 335 BC and 122 BC. Since the book of Isaiah contains many specific prophecies which were fulfilled in Jesus, it is important to note that none of these verses could have been altered after the fact to better fit with Christianity (as had been claimed by some Bible scholars until the Dead Sea scrolls were discovered in 1947).

His birth foretold - Read Isaiah 9:1-7

1. The season of Advent is represented by candles. In verse 9:2 it says that the people walking in darkness have seen a great light. What effect does light have? What hope does the light that is described bring to a world of gloom and distress?
2. What expectations would this arouse in you if you had just heard Isaiah pronounce it? What type of ruler would you expect to arise?
3. Which of the titles ascribed to the “child” listed in Isaiah 9:6 has had the greatest effect on you and why?

His peace foretold – Read Isaiah 11:1-10

4. The coming messiah was called the “Prince of Peace” in verse 9:6. The passage in chapter 11 gives a vivid word picture of what that peace looks like. Who or what will empower this “root of Jesse” to bring such justice and peace to the world?
5. What stories, teachings, or sayings of Jesus come to mind when you consider the qualities described in verses 2-5? Which of these qualities of Jesus has particularly made a difference in your life?

6. Part of this description was fulfilled when Jesus was here on earth and some of it refers to the future. What does this scene tell you about the human relationships under Jesus reign? What can be applied to your life right now?

His suffering foretold – Read Isaiah 53:1-6

7. Why do you think it was important that this sacrifice was explained hundreds of years before Jesus came?
8. What benefits come to us because of his suffering and death?
9. How does the description in verses 4-6 help you appreciate what Jesus did in order to bring you salvation and healing?

Praying for one another:

In this study you have reflected on some of the prophecies which foretold the coming of Jesus. These passages were meant to inspire faith in the listeners, that God was going to intervene, right injustices, and bring peace and righteousness. You have looked at three passages which talk about a light coming into the world, a messiah king coming to reign, a new peace for humanity, and a sacrifice for our

sins. Which of these attributes of Jesus are you particularly thankful for right now? Is there anyone in your life who needs to hear some of this good news for themselves? What aspect would you share with them?

Pray for each other and any current needs you are facing.

Digging deeper: For those who want to do more personal reflection on this topic

His birthplace foretold: Read Micah 5:2-5

What does it mean to know Jesus birth was planned and foretold by God long in advance?

His Kingship foretold: Read Zechariah 9:9-13

What might surprise someone about the description of this king? Is there anything about Jesus that surprises you?

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Session 2 - His coming announced

By Rick Dietzman, SCC Adult Ministries Nov 2007

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Session 2 : His coming announced.

Suggested song to sing: Hark the Herald Angels Sing

Candles: if you chose to use Advent candles, light the first and second candles at this time.

<p>Ice breaker: Talk about the favorite Christmas gift you remember getting as a child. What was great about it?</p>

Background:

In the beginning of the Gospel of Luke, the author tells the contrasting story of two individuals. One is a respected priest named Zechariah, and the other is a young woman named Mary. Both of these people are described as upright and favored in God's sight. In both cases a birth is announced by an angel, and in both cases, Zechariah and Mary initially have fear. Yet one responds with doubt and the other with faith, and so we have the first lesson in the gospels of how to respond to the grace of God! Although God had foretold the coming of the Messiah on many occasions in the Old Testament, he chose to prepare the way by sending the angel Gabriel to announce what would happen.

The priest who couldn't believe it - Read Luke 1:5-20

Zechariah the priest is chosen to go into the most Holy Place and burn incense, a very rare privilege, and one with some trepidation attached. The custom at that time was to tie a rope around the foot of the priest chosen for this task, just in case God struck the person dead while they were inside. That way, his companions could pull out the body without having to go in themselves, and thus incur God's wrath.

1. In this scene, which resembles something from an Indiana Jones movie, a nervous Zechariah shuffles inside the temple and encounters the angel Gabriel, who at first startles him, and then reassures him. What was reassuring about the angels words?
2. Does Zechariah's response in verse 18 surprise you, given his religious experience and training? Should he have had any reason to doubt?
3. Have you ever encountered overwhelming evidence of God's intervention, and still felt like doubting it. If so, why?

Gabriel's encounter with Mary - Read Luke 1:26-38

4. What truths about Jesus are emphasized in this passage?

5. How would society view both Zechariah and Mary in terms of status, respect, experience, position etc. Who would have been expected to be the one most favored by God? Did God favor one over the other?

6. How does Mary's response in verse 38 compare to Zechariah's in verse 18-20. See also verse 45 for the blessing on Mary.

Nothing is impossible with God - Read Luke 1:39-45

7. Do you think Jesus and John the Baptist grew up knowing each other, since they were relatives? Have you ever considered that thought? What difference would it make?

8. How is Mary's faith an example to you?

9. In what area of your life do you need to believe that nothing is impossible with God?

Praying for one another:

In this study you have reflected on a response to God's promises. In one case a religious authority meets an angel in the temple, is presented with overwhelming evidence and doubts. In another, a humble teenager encounters that same angel and believes. God turns the tables on who the recipient of blessing will be. "Blessed is the one who has believed what the Lord has said will be accomplished". Where in your life is God asking you to trust him right now, and believe his promises? Are you facing any impossible hurdles that your small group can support you in prayer for?

Pray for each other and any current needs you are facing.

Digging deeper: For those who want to do more personal reflection on this topic

Zechariah comes around: Read Luke 1:57-66

Zechariah's voice returns when he is obedient and names his son John as the angel had told him. How do you think he felt at that point?

Filled with the Spirit - Read Luke 1:67-80

Zechariah demonstrates his change of heart and relief by uttering a prophesy about God's salvation. Even though he initially doubted, God turns it around for good, and enables Zechariah to worship freely. What does this passage show you about God's love for his people?

Preparing for Christmas

Session 3 - The birth of Jesus

By Rick Dietzman, SCC Adult Ministries Nov 2007

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Session 3: The birth of Jesus

Suggested song to sing: O Little Town of Bethlehem

Candles: if you chose to use Advent candles, light the first, second and third candles at this time.

Ice breaker: What is a tradition you remember doing as a child with your family (something you repeated each year) at Christmas, or one Christmas tradition you practice now?

Background:

Here we have one of the most familiar stories known to humanity. It's a drama reenacted by children and adults alike year after year in Christmas pageants and plays. An untimely government decree forces an expectant couple to travel on the eve of her giving birth, putting her in a dangerous situation where she has to be on the road, apparently far from friends, family, and access to a midwife. Bethlehem was Joseph's home town, yet there is no mention of any relatives willing to take them in. We don't know why this was so, but it is very possible that news of Mary's "unplanned pregnancy" had resulted in the worst kind of ostracism. In any case, the couple are dependent on God and at the mercy of the hospitality of strangers. They are alone in a harsh world, yet led by the Spirit of God in order that

a prophecy might be fulfilled. As the prophet Micah had said 700 years before, in chapter 5:1-5: Out of Bethlehem will come “one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from old, from ancient times”. This king will be a shepherd of the flock, and “his greatness will reach the ends of the earth. And he will be their peace.”

A trip to Bethlehem - Read Luke 2:1-7

1. Are you surprised that the Lord would be born in such humble conditions? What does this tell you about the nature of God?
2. In light of the promises of Luke 1:30-35, how might Mary feel as she awaited the delivery in a stable?
3. Have you had an experience like the census of Luke 2:1-5 that has been used by God to get you in the right place at the right time? How does this affect the way we can view circumstances beyond our control?

The angel's good news - Read Luke 2:8-20

4. Angels are referred to 15 times in the birth narratives. What do you understand about angels?

5. Of all the people the angels could have visited, why did God send them to the shepherds? (See Mary's song verses 1:51-53 to get more insight about God's priorities.)

6. Of the three responses to Jesus' birth (vs 2:18-20), which most nearly corresponds to yours?

The child in the temple - Read Luke 2:21-38

7. In Simeon's two prophecies (vs 29-32, 34-35) what was he predicting about the work of Jesus? His effect on people? The pain of his parents? What effect do you think these startling predictions had on those who were listening that day?

8. Joseph and Mary went to the temple to observe Mosaic law and in the midst of this they received a blessing from God through Simeon and Anna. How has God blessed you in the midst of a ritual or tradition you have observed?

9. Think of a time when God brought a "Simeon" or "Anna" into your life - someone who delivered a surprising encouragement or a message God wanted you to hear. What was the situation and what impact did it have on you?

Praying for one another:

In this study we have delved into the story of Christ's birth. In the narrative we see that the conditions were uncomfortable and perhaps even threatening, yet God intervened with angels, excited shepherds, and prophets to convey the uniqueness of Jesus for all humanity. In our time together we've addressed our own reactions to circumstances beyond our control, our personal responses to Jesus, and have reflected on those times when strangers have come out of nowhere to bless us with God's love. Share a praise or request with one another related to one of those themes.

Pray for each other and any current needs you are facing.

Digging deeper: For those who want to do more personal reflection on this topic

Jesus at the temple: Read Luke 2:41-52

What was so surprising about Jesus' time in the temple?

How do you think his parents interpreted all that happened in light of the words spoken about him by angels and prophets a few years before?

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Session 4 - A visit from the east

By Rick Dietzman, SCC Adult Ministries Nov 2007

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Session 4: A visit from the east

Suggested song to sing: We Three Kings of Orient Are

Candles: if you chose to use Advent candles, light all four candles at this time. On Christmas Eve or Day, light the fifth center one.

Ice breaker: What was one of the best Christmas gifts you've ever given to someone you love? Did you have to do anything creative to pull off a big surprise?

Background:

Ask the average person about where the story of the wise men is located in the gospels, and you'll get a blank stare. Trivia question: Is it in Matthew, Mark, Luke or John? Most people will give the knee jerk response that it is in Luke, since each and every year we see the Christmas story portrayed with the angels and shepherds visiting the manger followed by the three wise men on camels coming in and joining the festivities. In fact, the story of the Magi is found only in Matthew, and that gospel doesn't have any details about the shepherds or manger! If you look at the other gospels, Mark and John, they have no details about the birth of Jesus at all.

What we have here is a story that must be harmonized between two gospel accounts. It's a story that takes place in Bethlehem, and may have occurred some time after the birth of Jesus, since the Magi visit the family in a house (Matthew 2:11). One speculation about why Luke may have left out the story of the Magi and the escape to Egypt (if he was aware of it), is that Luke was very careful in both his gospel and in Acts not to criticize the Roman government. Many scholars believe that one of Luke's purposes in writing was to convince those in power that the church was not a threat to them politically and that Jesus had come to set up a spiritual kingdom¹. The story of the Magi puts Herod in a bad light and thus may have been too politically hot to handle. This is only a speculation, and it could also be the case that this particular account was available to Matthew and not to Luke.

The Magi's search - Read Mathew 2:1-6

1. How do you think Herod felt when he heard the Magi quote the Old Testament prophecy about a new ruler?

2. The persons involved in the Christmas story got to Bethlehem in different ways. Mary and Joseph went as a family in adherence to societal requirements; the Magi followed the signs and used their intellect. The shepherds went by dramatic revelation. How were you drawn to Jesus?

¹ See Acts 1:6-8 to see Luke's emphasis. Also compare Mark 6:14-29, Matthew 14:1-12, and Luke 3:19-20, 9:19. Luke, who had access to Mark's gospel as a source, highly abbreviates the account of John the Baptist's beheading and focuses mainly on Herod's personal sin.

3. How has God's word helped you in your search for Jesus?

The Magi's worship - Read Matthew 2:7-12

4. The appearance of a star had special significance to many Israelites, and was a sign of the coming Messiah. The "Star Prophecy" is found in the Book of Numbers 24:17: "There shall come a star out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel, and shall smite the corners of Moab, and destroy all the children of Sheth." Jesus is called the "Morning Star" in Revelation 2:28, and 22:6 as well as 2 Peter 1:19. What kind of expectations do you think this association created?

5. When the Magi finally saw the child, what was their response?

6. What kinds of gifts have you given (or are you giving) to Jesus?

Digging deeper: For those who want to do more personal reflection on this topic

The announcement of Jesus from another point of view: Read Matt 1:18-24

Compare this account with Luke 1:26-38. What are the similarities and differences?

Why do you think it was important that the baby be conceived by the Holy Spirit?

How would you have reacted if you had been Joseph?

Facilitators notes--Session 1: to help in leading the discussion

Question 1: see Isaiah 8:19-22 for a description of the gloom and distress encountered by the Israelites. Some of the effects of light are clarity, illumination. This passage speaks of joy and a shattered yoke that used to burden people.

Question 2: This ruler is obviously a king with the government on his shoulders, but also there are divine attributes as well, “mighty God”, “Everlasting Father”, an unending reign.

Question 3: is a personal application

Question 4: The Spirit of the Lord will give him wisdom, understanding, power, counsel, and knowledge. He will be filled with righteousness and justice.

Question 5: Jesus always knew how to answer every question and he was never taken by surprise at circumstances. He quoted Isaiah 61:1-2 in Luke 4 to describe the kind of messiah he would be. One who preaches good news, proclaims freedom to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, the release of the oppressed.

Question 6: Verses 11:6-9 a vivid picture of peace is painted. Natural enemies are at rest together, carnivores become vegetarians, Poisonous snakes stop stinging. Some Scholars believe this was the original situation in the garden of Eden before the fall of humanity. Now this idyllic situation is restored, with the coming of Jesus. “In that day” refers to his second coming and the day of the Lord.

Question 7: Jesus went back to scripture with his disciples many times to help them understand his purposes (See Luke 24:44-49) and the point of his sacrifice. He said everything must be fulfilled that was written about.

Question 8: He bore our iniquities, took our punishment, He brought us peace. We are healed because of his wounds.

Question 9: He gave the ultimate sacrifice because of love. He carried our sorrows and now asks us to follow after him for the sake of humanity, that they might come to know God.

Facilitators notes—Session 2: to help in leading the discussion

Question 1: Zechariah's prayers had been heard, his life-long dream of having a son would now be realized. His son would be well respected and he would be one who brings people back to the Lord. Who could ask for anything more?

Question 2: Mary's song in verse 1:51 answers that question in part. God "scatters those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble" Zechariah has some pride in his heart which God dealt with. Thankfully he came to his senses in 1:62, had his speech restored and was able to praise God. See the digging deeper verses at the end of this lesson to explore Zechariah's restoration and thankfulness.

Question 3: is a personal application

Question 4: Jesus is identified as the Messiah, the Son of the most high, who will have an eternal kingdom. Also his supernatural birth by the Holy Spirit enables him to be called the Son of God.

Question 5: We know God shows no favoritism (Romans 2:9-11) but he also has a special place in his heart for the poor and disenfranchised. Zechariah would be at the top of the social standing, an elder in the community, a priest, a male. Mary would be near the bottom, a unwed teenage woman, soon to be pregnant. It says in Luke 6:20 "Blessed are you who are poor for yours is the kingdom of God". Wrestle with this thought in your group.

Question 6: Read each of the verses and compare them. What do you see?

Question 7: Scripture is silent on this point. Enjoy speculating.

Question 8: is a personal application

Question 9: is a personal application

Facilitators notes—Session 3: to help in leading the discussion

Question 1: See Isaiah 25:4-9 for a taste of how God is a refuge for the poor and needy in distress.

Question 2: Even in the midst of difficult circumstances and perhaps rejection by others, she has a powerful promise to hold onto. She has found favor with God!

Question 3: is a personal application

Question 4: The following is adapted from *Nelson Bible Dictionary*: An angel is a heavenly being who is superior to man in power and intelligence. By nature angels are spiritual beings <Heb. 1:14>. Their nature is superior to human nature <Heb. 2:7>, and they have superhuman power and knowledge <2 Sam. 14:17,20; 2 Pet. 2:11>. They are not, however, all-powerful and all-knowing <Ps. 103:20; 2 Thes. 1:7>. Angels were created by God <Ps. 148:2,5> and were present to rejoice when He created the world <Job. 38:4-7>. In their original state they were holy, but before the creation of the world some of them rebelled against God and lost this exalted position. The leading angel in this revolt became the devil, also known as SATAN <Gen. 3:4,14; Ezek. 28:12-16; Rev. 12:4,7-9>. The vast army of unfallen angels delight in praising the name of the Lord continually <Ps. 103:21; 148:1-2>. Angels represent God in making significant announcements of good news <Gen. 18:9-10; Luke 1:13,30; 2:8-15>. On His behalf they also warn of coming dangers <Gen. 18:16--19:29; Matt. 2:13>. In some cases they are God's agents in the destruction and judgment of evil <Gen. 19:13; 2 Sam. 24:16>. When visible to human beings, angels consistently appear in human form <Gen. 18:2; Dan. 10:18; Zech. 2:1>. Sometimes their guidance comes through human dreams <Gen. 28:12; 31:11>. Angels also protect the people of God <Ex. 14:19-20; Dan. 3:28; Matt. 26:53>. They meet a wide variety of human needs, including relieving hunger and thirst <Gen. 21:17-19; Mark 1:13> and overcoming loneliness and dread <Luke 22:43>. They sometimes deliver the people of God from danger <Acts 5:19; 12:6-11>. Although they are not the objects of salvation, angels are interested in the salvation of human beings <Luke 15:10; 1 Cor. 4:9>. They also were particularly active in the events surrounding the birth and resurrection of Jesus <Matt. 1:20; 2:13, 19; 28:2; Luke 1:11-38; 2:9-15; 22:43; 24:23; John 20:12>.

Question 5: The Lord is often compared to a shepherd, and the image of the shepherd is mentioned in connection with messianic prophecies.

Question 6: Note the three responses in the passage and make a personal application.

Question 7: Jesus would be a controversial figure, and one who would gather people on one hand and alienate others. He would challenge people at the deepest levels. That would bring pain, and eventually result in his crucifixion.

Question 8: is a personal application

Question 9: is a personal application

Facilitators notes—Session 4: to help in leading the discussion

Question 1: Judging by his response, Herod was quite threatened; enough to order the murder of all the young male children in Bethlehem. Historically, Herod was known for his ruthlessness, murdering his wife, his three sons, mother-in-law, brother-in-law, uncle, and many others.

Question 2: is a personal application

Question 3: is a personal application

Question 4: The Old Testament prophecy pointed to the appearance of a ruler who would set things right and do battle. 2 Peter interpreted the Morning Star as a “light shining in a dark place” Revelation 2 speaks of a ruler having “authority over the nations”.

Question 5: They bowed down and worshipped him. The word for worship also means to “pay homage to”, so it is unclear whether they understood Jesus’ divine nature or whether they were revering him as a future king. The Magi were probably astrologers from Persia or southern Arabia. Here is more evidence that Jesus would be king not only of the Jews, but of those from other nations as well.

Question 6: is a personal application

Question 7: An angel in a dream told Joseph to leave. This decision to obey and uproot took a measure of faith on the part of Joseph. He had to discern if the dream was from God or from his imagination, and he made a major life choice to move his family as a result.

Question 8: in Jesus’ day, Nazarene was virtually a synonym for “despised”. See John 1:45-46. As an adult, Jesus was rejected in his hometown (Luke 4:24) when he read the scroll of Isaiah in the synagogue. Nazareth was in Galilee, a place predominately populated with Gentiles (non-Jews), so this was no place to boast about.

Question 9: is a personal application