

The Messiah is Coming!

Session Focus

This session explores the Advent season by looking at the Scriptures, the symbols, and the promises of what the Messiah would bring to the world, all of which help us prepare for Christmas and the celebration of the birth of Jesus. As we reflect on the miracle of Jesus' birth and the patient waiting of the people of Israel for this great event, we discover specific actions we can take to be ready to welcome Jesus into our hearts on Christmas Day.

Learning Objectives

The Messiah is Coming learning session guides learners of all ages to...

- develop a deeper understanding of Jesus the Messiah through the exploration of Advent readings and traditions (know-what).
- appreciate the richness of the Advent season as it prepares us to celebrate the Messiah at Christmas and all year (know-why).
- participate more fully in the Advent season (know-how).

Session Overview

Part 1. (5 minutes)

Gathering and Opening Prayer Service

Part 2. (20 minutes)

All Ages Learning Experience: Jesus the Messiah

Part 3. (90 minutes)

In Depth Learning Experience

- Option 1. Whole Group Format - all participants remain in the same room.
- Option 2. Age Group Format - participants go to separate rooms for parallel learning: families with children, adolescents, adults.

Part 4. (20-25 minutes)

Sharing Learning Reflections

Part 5. (5-10 minutes)

Closing Prayer Service

Design Options for In-Depth Learning

Option 1. Whole Group Format

This format guides the entire assembly through each of the learning experiences. You might choose this format if you have:

- a large physical space with good acoustics/sound system and furniture to comfortably accommodate the learners

- a competent large group facilitator/master of ceremonies able to provide clear directions and to manage the dynamics and energy of a large group
- a group of leaders who feel comfortable moving through the assembly offering assistance, or a large enough team of table leaders to have one leader work with each table group
- a learning topic that lends itself to everyone learning the same thing at the same time, but in different ways, in the same space

Facilitation Tips for this Format:

Guide small groups through each of the activities at the same time.

- Organize people into table groups based on age groupings: families with children (grades 1-5), middle school adolescents, high school adolescents, young adults, and adults.
- The lead facilitator guides the entire group through each of the learning experiences. All presentations and activity instructions are given to the whole group.
- The age-appropriate learning activities within each learning experience are conducted in table groups.
- Where needed, small group leaders facilitate the work of the table groups.

Option 2. Age Group Format

This format provides for three separate parallel learning programs. Though age groups are separated, each one is focusing on the same topic. You might choose this format if you have:

- an adequate number of meeting spaces for the various groups to gather
- an adequate number of competent facilitators to work with each group
- a topic that is best explored through age-specific learning

Facilitation Tips for This Format

- Organize participants into three or more parallel learning groups: families with children (grades 1-5), adolescents (grades 6-12), and adults.
- If there are a large number of adolescents, divide them into two groups: middle school and high school.

Organize separate groups for young adults, adults, and older adults. Or you can give the adults their own choice for forming small groups.

- Direct the adolescents and adults into small groups. Give them all the handouts and learning materials needed for the learning experiences
- Guide the families with children into table groups of two or more families. Give each table all the handouts and learning materials necessary for the learning experiences.
- A facilitator must guide all the of the families through each learning experience, while small group leaders move from table to table assisting.

Materials Needed

Set up a prayer table or decorate the large group meeting space with symbols of Advent: Advent Wreath, Jesse Tree, liturgical colors, candles, Lectionary, etc.

Gathering

- Name tags
- Community building activities
- Handout #1

All Ages Learning Experience

- Handout #2

In-Depth Learning Experience

- See materials listed under preparation for each learning experience as supplies needed vary depending on the learning activity chosen.

Session Plan

Part 1. Gathering and Opening Prayer Service (5 minutes)

Registration and Hospitality

- Welcome people and ask them to sign in for the program.
- Ask people to make a name tag. (See below for instructions.)
- Distribute the handouts participants will need for the session. You can also distribute handouts for the In-Depth Learning program at the beginning of the activity.
- Invite people to share a meal; depending on time of day, the program may end with a meal instead.

Welcome the participants to the program and introduce the theme of the session, using the below words or your own words.

In this session, we will explore the Advent season. We will listen to the promises made in Scripture about the Messiah and examine the symbols and the images of the Advent season which help us prepare for Christmas and the celebration of the birth of Jesus. As we reflect on the miracle of Jesus' birth and the patient waiting of the people of Israel for this great event, we will discover specific actions we can take to be ready to welcome Jesus into our hearts on Christmas Day.

Present an overview and the schedule of the program.

1. Group Formation

Organize people into intergenerational small groups of approximately eight people for the All Ages Learning Experience. Ask all members of the same family to sit together in these intergenerational groups. Each group should have as many of the following categories as possible: family (parents, children, teens), young adults, adults without children, and older adults. If members of the same family are intergenerational—children, teens, parents, and grandparents—keep them together in one group.

For the In Depth Learning Experience (Part 3), organize the participants into three types of table groups: family clusters of two or more families, groups of adolescents, and groups of adults.

2. Opening Prayer Service

Preparation

Set up a prayer table with an Advent Wreath, a Bible, and images of the Messiah.

Gather

Good and gracious Father, you so loved the world that you sent your only-begotten Son to redeem us and show us how to love. Be with us now as we learn to prepare our hearts for the Incarnation by entering more deeply into the holy season of Advent. We ask this in the name of the One we await.
Amen!

Listen

The reader proclaims Isaiah 35:1-6, 10.

The wilderness and the parched land will exult; the Arabah will rejoice and bloom; like the crocus it shall bloom abundantly, and rejoice with joyful song. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, the splendor of Carmel and Sharon. They will see the glory of the Lord, the splendor of our God.

Strengthen hands that are feeble, make firm knees that are weak. Say to the fearful of heart: Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God, he comes with vindication; with divine recompense he comes to save you.

Then the eyes of the blind shall see, and the ears of the deaf be opened; then the lame shall leap like a stag, and the mute tongue sing for joy. For waters will burst forth in the wilderness, and streams in the Arabah.

And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and enter Zion singing, crowned with everlasting joy. They meet with joy and gladness, sorrow and mourning flee away.

Respond

Leader: O Wisdom, coming forth from the mouth of the Most High, reaching from one end to the other, mightily and sweetly ordering all things...

All: Come and teach us the way of prudence.

Leader: O Adonai, and leader of the House of Israel, who appeared to Moses in the fire of the burning bush and gave him the law on Sinai...

All: Come and redeem us with an outstretched arm.

Leader: O Root of Jesse, standing as a sign among the peoples; before you kings will shut their mouths, to you the nations will make their prayer...

All: Come and deliver us, and delay no longer.

Leader: O Key of David and scepter of the House of Israel; you open and no one can shut; you shut and no one can open...

All: Come and lead the prisoners from the prison house, those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death.

Leader: O Morning Star, splendor of light eternal and sun of righteousness...

All: Come and enlighten those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death.

Leader: O King of the nations, and their desire, the cornerstone making both one...

All: Come and save the human race, which you fashioned from clay.

Leader: O Emmanuel, our king and our lawgiver, the hope of the nations and their Savior...

All: Come and save us, O Lord our God.

Go Forth

Loving God, we look forward to celebrating the Incarnation, when your Son entered our world and became one of us. As we explore Advent today, help us to be grateful for the wondrous gifts of our Savior Emmanuel, who is truly God with us. Amen.

Part 2. All Ages Learning Experience: God's Promises about the Messiah (20 minutes)

Materials Needed

- Handout #2

Pass out Handout #2 to each table group. Invite them to read each of the following passages out loud, with different people taking each passage. Instruct them to discuss the questions at the end of the handout when they've proclaimed all the Scriptures.

Readings

Isaiah 2:2-5

Isaiah 9:1-6

Isaiah 11:1-9

Isaiah 35:1-6

Isaiah 61: 1-3

Reflection Questions

1. What promises is God making in these passages?
2. How did Jesus fulfill each promise?
3. How are we still benefiting from these promises, from the Messiah coming into our world over 2000 years ago?

Conclude the All Ages Learning by singing together *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*. Invite participants to reflect on the requests we are making of the Messiah when we sing this hymn.

Part 3. In-Depth Learning Experiences (90 minutes)

Families with Children Learning Experiences

Learning Experiences

1. Creating an Advent Wreath
2. Walking through Advent with an Advent Calendar
3. Making and Praying with a Jesse Tree

#1. Creating an Advent Wreath

Materials Needed

- A Bible
- Advent wreath-making supplies: (The supplies listed will be needed for *each* wreath to be made.)
 - A circular base to which you can attached evergreen branches. The base can be made from a variety of materials such as vine wreath, wood, wire mesh, Styrofoam, modeling clay, compressed straw, a florist's sponge wreath form, or a straightened coat hanger shaped into a circle. Check a local craft store or craft catalog for options.
 - Evergreen branches sprayed with water to reduce drying. If you are able to collect branches in your area, involve the participants in cutting and trimming them. Provide old scissors or hand shears for cutting. If boughs are not readily available in your area, ask parishioners to donate trimmings from their Christmas trees the Sunday prior to the program. Provide several buckets of water near the church entrance for collection of the cuttings.
 - Four candles, either taper or votive style: three purple and one pink; or four white candles with purple and pink ribbon to tie around the base of the candles.
 - Candle holders (glass or foil) or a way to attach the candles to the wreath or set inside the wreath.
 - Pieces of wire, hammer and tacks, or carpenter staples to attach the evergreen sprigs to the wreath base.
 - Handout #3

Activity

Introduce the Advent wreath activity by sharing the following, using these words or your own:

The lighting of the Advent wreath is one of our most popular Advent traditions. Its origin is in pre-Christian Germany and Scandinavia where the people gathered to celebrate the return of the sun after the winter solstice. The circular wreath made of evergreens with four candles interspersed represented the circle of the year and the life that endures through the winter. As the days grew longer, people lit candles to offer thanks to the "sun god" for the light. For us, the lighting of the Advent candles represents the promise of the coming of Jesus, the light of the world. As the light of the Advent wreath grows, we share in the expectations of Isaiah, of John the Baptist, and of Mary for the fulfillment of God's promise to send a savior. We look forward to the coming of Jesus who pierces the darkness of sin by the light of his love. \

The church year or liturgical year begins with the first Sunday of Advent. Advent begins on the Sunday nearest November 30th and lasts until December 24th.

The word Advent comes from the word *adventus* which means “coming.” Advent is a season in the church year when we remember how the Word of God became human in the birth of Jesus at Bethlehem, which we celebrate on Christmas. During Advent we also reflect on and celebrate how Jesus comes into our lives and is present with us every day.

Advent is a time of hoping and working for a change of heart. We focus on being more open to the love of God in our lives, and the salvation offered through Jesus.

The Advent wreath is a tradition of the season. It is a symbol of our hope in Jesus Christ, who is the Light of the world. The circle and evergreens on the Advent wreath remind us of God’s everlasting love which has no beginning and no end. The four unlit candles on the wreath remind us of the four thousand years before Christ’s birth, a time of spiritual “cold and darkness” as humanity awaited the birth of the Messiah. They also represent the four weeks of Advent. It is customary to use three purple and one pink or white candle on the Advent wreath. The purple reminds us of the need for sorrow for our sins. The pink or white candle reminds us of the joy and hope we share in Jesus, the Light of the World, whose birth we celebrate at Christmas.

Advent begins with the lighting of one purple candle on the first Sunday of Advent. The pink candle is lit the third week when the Advent focus shifts to the special joy of the Christmas event. The increasing light of each week reminds us that Christmas is closer, and Christ’s presence continues to grow and brighten our lives. It also reminds us that by being Christ’s light today, we can brighten the “darkness” we find in our lives and in the world around us.

Distribute wreath-making materials and guide the participants in making a wreath. Depending on the plan you chose, they will either make one wreath as a group, or make individual wreaths for participants to take home. Play some traditional Christmas carols as the wreaths are being made. If social time is not scheduled at the end of the program, consider providing refreshments while making the wreath.

Offer these instructions:

Begin with the base. Place fresh evergreen branches over the base. You will find it helpful to place the styrofoam circle on a piece of cardboard (or another firm base for moving the Advent wreath). Attach the evergreen branches and candles to the base. (If white candles are used, tie purple ribbon around three, and a pink ribbon around one.)

Add a Scripture passage or a prayer to the Advent wreath. You can add a weekly Scripture passage to the Advent wreath by selecting a reading (Old Testament or Gospel reading) from the Sunday or daily Lectionary readings in Advent. You could also write a prayer for each week of Advent to pray before lighting the Advent wreath candle(s) for the week. Take a look at the sample prayers for each week of Advent on Handout #3.

Prayer for the First Week of Advent: *Come, Lord Jesus! Open our minds and hearts and souls as we wait for you to be born anew in our lives and in our family. Help us to experience your love in our family throughout Advent.*

Prayer for the Second Week of Advent: *Come, Lord Jesus! Bring peace and healing into our family and our world. May we hear again your own prayer—"that we may be one." May we prepare the way for you by being generous and forgiving.*

Prayer for the Third Week of Advent: *Come, Lord Jesus! Come and stay with our family and friends—and all who are dear to us. May your light shine brightly so we can see you everywhere. Help us to spread your light and joy by giving freely and happily to all we meet.*

Prayer for the Fourth Week of Advent: *Come, Lord Jesus! We hunger, we thirst, we wait for you! Come, Lord Jesus and do not delay!*

Close with a blessing of the Advent wreaths. Use or adapt the following prayer.

Leader: Our help is in the name of the Lord.

All: Who made heaven and earth.

Leader: As we gather around these wreaths, we remember God's promise. Listen to the words of the prophet Isaiah: The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone. You have brought them abundant joy and great rejoicing. The Word of the Lord.

All: Thanks be to God.

Leader: Let us now pray for God's blessing upon us and upon this wreath. (Short silence)

Lord our God, we praise you for your child, Jesus Christ: Emmanuel, the hope of all people, the wisdom that teaches and guides us, the Savior of every nation. Lord God, let your blessing come upon us this Advent season. May the wreath and its light be a sign of Christ's promise to bring us salvation. We ask this through Christ our Lord.

All: Amen.

Activity 2. Walking through Advent with an Advent Calendar

Materials

- Handouts #4 and #5
- Handout #6 for planners
- Bible
- Pens / pencils for participants
- Easel and newsprint for presentations, masking tape, markers
- Christmas music

Preparation

To simplify the activity and save time, prepare for the calendar making in advance. Using Handout #6, select the best option based for you. If you select the construction paper calendars, be sure to arrange for volunteers to help prepare this option in advance.

Activity

Read each statement, one at a time, allowing enough time for table groups to share a response with each other. Select as many questions as time allows. Keep the discussion moving from question to question.

Questions Set #1: Thinking Back on Christmas

- “Christmas is . . .” or “What is Christmas?”
- “The word or phrase that best describes Christmas preparation for me is . . .”
- For younger children: “How do you get ready for Christmas?”
- “What I like most about waiting for Christmas is . . .” or “What do you like about waiting for Christmas?”
- “What I like least about waiting for Christmas is . . .” or “What don’t you like about waiting for Christmas?”
- “If there were no presents, what would be the best part about Christmas?”

Questions Set #2: An Alternative Set of Questions

Think back on Christmases past and how you prepared individually and as a family for the holiday celebration. What events and experiences, thoughts and feelings come immediately to mind? Use the following sentences to describe what preparing for Christmas is like for you.

- The word or phrase that best describes Christmas preparation and celebration for me is....
- Getting ready for Christmas brings out the best in me and in others because....
- Getting ready for Christmas brings out the worst in me and in others because....
- If every day were Christmas....

Introduce the calendar activity by explaining the following in your own words or using the words below:

- Advent, which means “coming,” is a time when we remember that the world waited for Jesus who was the perfect and complete gift of God’s love.
- Jesus is always with us, but we take this particular time to prepare and wait to celebrate Jesus’ birth at Christmas.
- In a special way, we celebrate the hope that Jesus brings and our call to continually grow in our love and faith in God. This growth is called conversion.
- Jesus is also called Emmanuel, which means God with us. At Advent we take time to recall and celebrate that Jesus, as God, became human like us to show us the way to live and love.
- Advent is also a time to remember God’s call to love and share. We can prepare for Christmas by praying, by being generous, by being kind, and by serving others.
- To celebrate Advent, we can choose to do things that we hope will help us prepare for Christmas. We can also choose to not do things as a way of making more room for prayer and sharing.
- One of the traditions of celebrating Advent is to use an Advent Calendar to count off the days until Christmas and help us focus on our preparation for this holiday as a “holy” day.
- Our waiting during Advent is “hopeful” waiting, which means we are hoping and believing in something good in the future. We want to be sure that we don’t waste our time waiting during Advent. We want to use our time well in preparing to celebrate Christmas and the gift of Jesus as the Messiah. So what might we do during this time of Advent? As Christians, how are we called to prepare for Christmas?

- We will each make an Advent Calendar that will help us to focus on preparing for Christ's presence at a time when all of the stores and commercials are trying to get us to focus on Christmas as a time of material gifts and money!

Guide the participants in making a personal Advent calendar.

For younger children:

Guide them in making a weekly calendar with several ideas for each week.

- Using the **Advent Calendar Ideas**, select a variety of possible things that the children can do. Write these ideas on poster board or newsprint or on a transparency. Ask the children to help you find ways that they can prepare for Jesus' coming.
- In each of the four boxes on the handout, **My Advent Calendar**, ask the children to write down at least one thing they will do that week to prepare for Jesus' coming. Help them to answer the question, *This week I will...*
- Give them Christmas stickers so that they can put a sticker next to each idea that they do on their Advent calendar.

For older children:

Guide them in making a 25-day Advent calendar.

- Distribute Handouts #4 and #5.
- Ask the participants to read the variety of ideas on Handout #4. Add your own ideas. Invite the participants to brainstorm other ways that they can prepare for Jesus' coming.
- Have them select their choices and place each idea chosen into a box on Handout #5. (Boxes 24 and 25 are already provided on the calendar.)
- Explain how to complete the calendar based on the option you have selected from Handout #6.

While participants are making calendars play Advent/Christmas music in the background.

Suggest that participants take their calendar home and post it on their bedroom door or mirror so they can view it each day in a private way, or on the refrigerator if they want some help from family members to live their Advent ideas.

Activity 3. Making and Praying with a Jesse Tree

Materials Needed

- To make the Jesse tree symbols: cardboard, poster board, construction paper, large file cards, and/or clear plastic transparency sheets that can be traced and colored with magic marker; aluminum foil, last year's Christmas cards, (clay or dough can also work well); pens or pencils, crayons or colored makers, magazines for photos, tape or glue sticks, etc.
- To make the Jesse tree: a bare tree (no leaves) or a series of branches that you can connect. Make sure the tree or branches are large enough for you to attach all of the Jesse Tree symbols. You may need several trees.
- Newsprint or construction paper and markers
- Handout #7

Preparation

- Pot the "tree" or branches in a bucket using sand and stones to help it to stand erect.

- If you assign Scripture stories to individuals or pairs, give them Bibles with their passage marked.

Alternative Format

Another way to create a Jesse tree without the “tree” is to use a very large sheet of poster board or foam core. Draw the outline of a tree on the poster/foam core and use this as a display for the Jesse tree symbols.

Introduce the Jesse tree activity to the group using the following commentary or your own words.

Many of us have photographs of parents, grandparents, great-aunts and uncles, and great-grandparents. Some we actually knew; many we know only through stories. People who make up our family tree hold a fascination for us.

So, too, the people who make up our family of faith tell us much about who we are and how we are related to God. As Christians we are part of the extended family of Jesus of Nazareth. His family tree is the story of salvation history, the story of a people chosen, spared, and redeemed by God.

Matthew’s genealogy (Mt 1:1-17), which we hear at Christmastime each year, tells us that Jesus was the son of David, Israel’s greatest king, and back even further, the son of Abraham, the first patriarch of the Hebrew people, the first person called by God. Out of this family line, God would take flesh and live among the people of earth.

From medieval times, Christians have been fascinated with visual representations of the family tree of Jesus. A stained glass window at Chartres Cathedral in France, built in the early 13th century, depicts a Jesus tree, representing the family tree of Jesse, the father of King David, that blossoms in the birth of Jesus the Messiah, the “Son of David.” This ancient tradition of the Jesse tree was revived in the mid-20th century as an Advent practice.

The Jesse tree represents Jesus’ family tree. The name is taken from Isaiah 11:1, in which Jesus is referred to as a shoot coming up from the stump of Jesse, the father of David. The ornaments on the Jesse tree tell of Jesus’ ancestors, and of the events leading to Jesus’ birth. While it is hard to establish when and where the custom of the Jesse tree began, it most likely started in the Middle Ages as a way to teach Bible stories. A Jesse tree is a bare branch that holds symbols of people from the Old Testament who waited and prepared for Jesus. Tradition has it that the love and preparation given the Jesse Tree would make flowers burst forth from the branch. This is why a bare branch, rather than an evergreen, is used.

Roots are important parts of a tree. As people, we need to know our roots as well. We often run from one thing to another without reflecting on where we have been or where we are going. As we create a Jesse tree during this Advent season, let us pause and look at the great people of faith upon whose shoulders we stand.

To give the group a sense of Jesus’ family tree, read the genealogy of Jesus from the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 1:1-17. (Do your best with all the names.) Make the connection between the Jesse Tree activity and the genealogy of Jesus. Note how many of the people in the genealogy are included on Handout #7.

To illustrate what a genealogy looks like, consider inviting the participants to draw their own family tree on a sheet of newsprint or poster board and presenting it to the group at this time.

Continue with these words or your own:

On Handout #7 you will find prominent people from the Bible, the references to where you can find their stories, and suggested symbols that represent them.

To make your own Jesse tree, select the people from the handout for whom you want to create symbols. (Depending on how the program is organized a particular age group may study several people or the entire list.) Then read the passage(s) from the Bible as indicated on the handout.

Allow time for the reading. Then continue:

Create your symbol to hang on the Jesse Tree. For each symbol include the person(s) name, the symbol artwork, and a brief quote from the Scripture passage that captures the character or contribution of the person. Use any of the materials provided to make your symbols.

Give participants time to make their symbols. Then invite them to share their Jesse tree ornament by introducing their person to the group, the symbol, and the brief quote from Scripture that they included on their ornament.

Close by praying The Magnificat (Luke 1:44-57) together. Consider giving each person a copy of The Magnificat to take home. Encourage them to pray it every night during the remaining days of Advent, asking Mary to give them the courage to approach God with humility and an openness to God's will and spirit in their lives during this Advent season.

Adolescent Learning Experience

Learning Experiences

1. Option 1. Waiting and Advent
2. Option 2. The Messiah is Coming!
3. Advent Wreath-Making

Option 1. Waiting and Advent

Materials Needed

- Handouts #4, #5, and #8
- Handout #6 for leaders
- Bible
- Pens / pencils for participants
- Easel and newsprint for presentations
- Masking tape
- Newsprint / markers
- Christmas music
- Supplies to make calendar covers: (depends upon option selected)
 - construction paper
 - scissors
 - magazines
 - used Christmas cards
 - markers
 - glitter
 - glue / glue sticks

Preparation

- Make the “Meeting in Progress – Please Wait” sign to be posted on the door for the waiting activity.
- Create newsprint posters for the four “Calls” described in the Scripture reading. You will need at least one poster for each call. If you expect a large number of participants, you may need two sets of newsprint posters. The four calls are:
 - We are called to prayer.
 - We are called to be peacemakers.
 - We are called to share.
 - We are called to love.
- To simplify the activity and save time, you will want to prepare for the calendar making in advance. Use the Leader Resource: *Calendar Options*, select the best option based on your community and resources. If you select the construction paper calendars, be sure to arrange for volunteers to help prepare this option in advance.

Activity

To gather for this activity, adapt the following idea to your climate and facilities. Rather than welcoming the youth into the room where you will meet, place a sign on the door that states: **Meeting in Progress – Please Wait**. With the leaders and participants, find a place to stand and wait for the room to be ready. After five to seven minutes, have someone check the room and invite everyone in to find a seat.

In these or similar words, welcome the group:

Welcome, I apologize that the room wasn't ready for us. How did it feel to have to wait? What did you want to do instead of waiting?

Gather ideas from the group, then continue:

I cannot tell a lie. We did this on purpose as a way to experience together what it means to **wait**. In our culture, waiting is sometimes a hard thing that we try to avoid, like waiting in line at the movies or an amusement park or waiting for our favorite show to start on TV or waiting (desperately) for vacation to start! In fact, sometimes we alternate between rushing to get somewhere and waiting to start. "Hurry up and wait," as they say.

Introduce the reflection activity in these or similar words:

Waiting is a part of our lives – but the experience of waiting is not always the same. We can be frustrated or bored while waiting for some things. Sometimes waiting means that we end up with extra time on our hands that we didn't count on. We don't like to "waste" time, so we often try to find some way to fill the time.

For other events, the waiting is part of the experience because we are anticipating something special and because we have things to do to get ready while we are waiting for the special event. Waiting can be fun! Some of the most important occasions in our lives are ones that are worth waiting for—a special birthday celebration, for instance, or a visit from a special person living far away. Part of the joy of the celebration is the anticipation – the getting ready.

With special occasions, there are usually important things to do and people to be with while we are preparing for the event. What are some special events or occasions that we wait for and we get ready for while we are waiting?

List responses on newsprint. Add additional ideas if needed. Here are several examples:

- Preparing for a special guest to come to your home
- Getting ready for an older brother or sister to return home from college
- Preparing for a birthday celebration
- Planning for a vacation or holiday
- Preparing for graduation.

Distribute a copy of Handout #8 and a pen or pencil to each participant. Explain the next activity in these or similar words:

Using your worksheet, take a few minutes to reflect on **waiting** by choosing one event from our list or one from your own life. What are some of the ways that you and/or your family might prepare or get ready for this special event? For example, we wait for the chance to celebrate someone's birthday and while we are waiting, we usually think about that person, we select or make a birthday card or gift, we get the house ready for a celebration, we call friends and talk about the party and other special things to do to celebrate their birthday. After working individually, you will have the chance to share in your group some of the ways that you spend your time while waiting and preparing for a special occasion.

Allow five minutes for individual reflection, then form small discussion groups. Invite individuals to share their responses to the handout in small groups. Here are several sample starter questions for the small group discussion:

- How do we spend our time waiting and preparing?
- What were the most common ways people prepare for a special occasion?
- Which responses were unique to an individual?

After several minutes of small group discussion, gather in a large group and ask for a sampling of ideas that were shared.

Transition from "waiting" to highlighting some key ideas about the season of Advent using the text below or your own words.

We have shared things we do personally or as a family to prepare for a special event. Our faith community also sets aside seasons of time to prepare for our most important church celebrations. Today's program focuses on the upcoming season of Advent, which we celebrate in our faith community as a time dedicated to **waiting**.

- Advent, which means "coming," is a time when we remember that the world waited for Jesus who was the perfect and complete gift of God's love.
- Jesus is always with us, but we take this particular time to prepare and wait to celebrate Jesus' birth at Christmas.
- In a special way, we celebrate the hope that Jesus brings, and our call to continually grow in our love and faith in God – this growth is called conversion.
- Jesus is also called Emmanuel, which means God with us. At Advent we take time to recall and celebrate that Jesus, as God, became human like us to show us the way to live and love.
- Advent is also a time to remember God's call to love and share. We can prepare for Christmas by praying, by being generous, by being kind, and by serving others.
- To celebrate Advent, we can choose to do things that we hope will help us prepare for Christmas. We can also choose to not do things as a way of making more room for prayer and sharing.
- One of the traditions of celebrating Advent is to use an Advent Calendar to count off the days until Christmas and help us focus on our preparation for this holiday as a "holy" day.
- Today we will each make an Advent Calendar that will help us to focus on preparing for Christ's presence at a time when the stores, online shopping sites, and commercials are trying to get us to focus on Christmas as a time of material gifts and money!

Introduce this portion of the session by saying:

Our waiting during Advent is “hopeful” waiting, which means we are hoping and believing in something good in the future. We want to be sure that we don’t waste our time of waiting during Advent. We want to use our time well in preparing to celebrate Christmas and the gift of Jesus as the Messiah. So what might we do during this time of Advent? As Christians, how are we called to prepare for Christmas?

Let’s listen together to a part of the letter from St. Paul to the Philippians. As you listen, what does St. Paul remind us that we are called to do? How would St. Paul suggest we spend our time waiting for Christmas to come?

Ask someone to read Philippians 4: 4-9.

St. Paul is writing to us today as much as he was to the people of his own time. What are some of the things St. Paul suggests we are called to do and called to be as people of faith? How are we to spend our time waiting?

Ask for some sample responses from the group. After several responses, suggest that Advent is an opportunity to reflect on four particular ways we are called to be God’s people, and to show that we belong to Christ Jesus.

Introduce the four “Calls” that will be the focus of discussion by posting each one on a separate sheet of newsprint:

1. We are called to prayer.
2. We are called to be peacemakers.
3. We are called to share.
4. We are called to love.

Explain that table groups will create a list of ideas for things to do as a response to each of the four calls. These lists should be practical ideas of things teens can do this Advent season as a way to live out the “Call” while preparing for Christmas.

To help initiate the process, present and list some examples. For instance, as a response to our call to pray, we could write down a list of people we want to pray for and put the list in our pocket to remind us to pray for these special people during the day. As a response to our call to share, we could choose a charity organization and set aside some of the money that we would use for entertainment or extra clothes to be donated to an organization doing what Jesus would want done.

Option: One Group

If there are less than sixteen participants facilitate the process as one group. Present and post the four calls on newsprint. Spend five to eight minutes brainstorming ideas with the group for one of the calls, then move on to the next. Continue until ideas have been generated for all four newsprint sheets. If possible, post the newsprint sheets in four different parts of the room and ask participants to move from one area to the next as you facilitate the brainstorming process.

Option: Multiple Small Groups

If there are more than fifteen participants, divide the participants into groups of six to ten with a facilitator. Post the four calls on newsprint in four different parts of the room. Assign each group to one newsprint sheet. Allow ten minutes for brainstorming of ideas, then ask groups to rotate to a different newsprint sheet and allow five minutes for them to add ideas to the posted list. Continue until each group has responded to each of the four calls. If your group is very large (more than 50), post duplicate sets of newsprint sheets.

Distribute Handouts #4 and #5. Leaders should be available to assist the adolescents while they are creating their calendars. Encourage leaders to make a personal Advent calendar as well.

Introduce the activity in these or similar words:

Now is the time when we get the chance to choose some of these ideas as personal reminders of what we hope to do during this Advent season as we wait and prepare for Christmas. You will each create a personal Advent Calendar.

Explain the following process for calendar-making.

1. Select 24 ideas from the ideas on the newsprint lists, the ideas listed on Handout #4, and your own ideas. (The 25th idea is already provided on the calendar.)
2. Place each idea chosen into a box on Handout #5.
3. Explain how to complete the Calendar based on the option selected.

Note: While participants are making calendars play some Christmas music in the background.

Option 2. The Messiah is Coming!

Preparation

- Post these questions on newsprint or in a PowerPoint:
 - What does your image of Jesus Christ say about your thoughts and feelings about Jesus? What does it say about your thoughts and feelings about yourself?
 - How does your image of Jesus Christ influence your relationship with him and the way you live your Christian faith?

Materials Needed

- Newsprint and markers
- Handouts #4 and #5

Part 1. Images of the Messiah

Invite the participants to take a moment for quiet reflection on their personal images of Jesus, using these words or your own.

Close your eyes and relax. Call to mind the many images of Jesus Christ you have learned from the Gospels, from personal study and experience, from family and friends, from your ethnic tradition, and from your involvement in church life (ministry involvements, religious education, Sunday

worship, and other activities).

From all of these images of Jesus which are the most personally meaningful for you? Which images best reflect who Jesus Christ is for you today? Capture an image in a key word or phrase. Can you recall a Gospel story that illustrates each of your images?

Take a moment now to reflect on your image of Jesus Christ using the following questions:

- What does your image of Jesus Christ say about your thoughts and feelings about Jesus? What does it say about your thoughts and feelings about yourself?
- How does your image of Jesus Christ influence your relationship with him and the way you live your Christian faith?

Invite participants into storytelling in their table groups:

Share one of your most meaningful images of Jesus with your group, and then discuss the two reflection questions.

After sufficient time for each person to share, invite participants in the large group to share the images they named in the reflection activity. Write these on newsprint for all. Then share the following in your own words or using the words provided below:

The Advent readings announce the coming of the Messiah and what will be the central theme of Jesus' ministry and message: the coming of the reign of God (or kingdom of God).

Through his actions and relationships Jesus gave witness to the meaning of the reign of God. Jesus' actions and words show that the kingdom was present in him and that he was and is truly the Messiah.

The reign of God was evident in the startling way in which Jesus was able to touch and change the lives of those around him. When we look at what Jesus says and does, we see what God says and does. Jesus lives the great commandment to love God and neighbor without any limits. He expresses his love in specific actions of service, compassion, healing, forgiveness, reconciliation.

It is very important to understand Jesus' special concern for the poor and those on the margins of society. Jesus eats with the poor and sinners. He is a friend of tax gatherers and prostitutes and other unsound members of first century Jewish society. He cures the sick and heals the possessed, who were outcasts in Jewish society of the first century. All these people are the "poor" or marginalized. They receive particular attention in the Kingdom because of who God is. God's mercy and compassion for the defenseless assures benefits to the poor in the kingdom.

Read or invite volunteers to read the three readings from Scripture that present specific images of the Messiah:

- Isaiah 35:1-6, 10
- Isaiah 61:1-2, 10-11
- Matthew 11:2-11

In small groups, ask the participants to review the readings and to identify specific images of the Messiah that surface in the readings. Then, ask them to recall specific stories from the Gospels that illustrate these images. Conclude by asking each group to name additional images of the Messiah found in the Gospels.

Invite the small groups to share the images that surfaced in the readings and Gospel stories that illustrate these images. Ask for additional Gospel images they identified. Record the images on newsprint for all to see. After the groups have shared, invite people to add comments and reflections on what they heard.

In small groups, ask the participants to discuss how the images of the Messiah relate to their own lives and faith in Jesus Christ.

- How did your personal images of the Messiah (Jesus Christ) compare to the images from the Advent readings and the Gospels, in general? How has your exploration affirmed and/or affected your personal images of Jesus Christ? Will any of your images change?
- What impact do the images of the Messiah from the Advent readings and the Gospels, in general, have on your relationship with Jesus Christ?
- What impact do they have on the ways that you live your Christian faith?
- How will you pay special attention to the images of the Messiah in the Advent season and throughout the year?

Part 2. Preparing for the Messiah

Distribute Handouts #4 and #5.

Introduce the activity in these or similar words:

Now is the time when we get the chance to develop our plan for preparing for the Messiah during Advent. Each person will each create a personal Advent Calendar.

Explain the following process for calendar-making.

1. Take several minutes to consider ways you can celebrate Advent and prepare for the Messiah. Create your own ideas and/or use the ideas listed on Handout #4.
2. Discuss ideas with your small groups.
3. Develop 24 ways you are going to prepare for the Messiah.
4. Place each idea chosen into a box on Handout #5.

Note: While participants are making calendars play Advent music in the background.

Advent Wreath-Making

Materials Needed

- Handouts #9 and #10
- Several sheets of Christmas wrapping paper (with a simple design)
- Large markers and tape
- Christmas music
- Matches
- Purple cloth (optional)
- Clean-up supplies
- Advent wreath-making supplies (**Note:** The supplies listed will be needed for *each* wreath to be made. If individual participants are making wreaths, each person will need the supplies listed.)
 - A circular base to which you can attached evergreen boughs. The base can be made from a variety of materials such as vine wreath, wood, wire mesh, Styrofoam, modeling clay, compressed straw, a florists' sponge wreath form, or a straightened coat hanger shaped into a circle. Check a local craft store or craft catalog for options.
 - Evergreen sprigs or boughs sprayed with water to reduce drying. If you are able to collect boughs in your area, involve the participants in cutting and trimming them. Provide old scissors or hand shears for cutting. If boughs are not readily available in your area, ask church members to donate trimmings from their Christmas trees the Sunday prior to the program. Provide several buckets of water near the church entrance for collection of the cuttings.
 - Four candles, either taper or votive style: three purple and one pink; or four white candles with purple and pink ribbon to tie around the base of the candles.
 - Candle holders (glass or foil) or a way to attach the candles to the wreath or set inside the wreath.
 - Pieces of wire, hammer and tacks or carpenter staples to attach the evergreen sprigs to the wreath base.

Activity

Invite participants to share their name, what season of the year they like best, and why they chose that season.

Lead a brief dialogue about the changes and seasons of nature. Use the following questions as a guide:

- How do you know when the season has changed from spring to summer, to fall, to winter, to spring?
- If you woke up from a long coma and did not know the date, how would you know what season it was? (If you woke up from a coma, how might you determine what season it is in the liturgical calendar — what would be some clues you could look for?)
- If someone who had never experienced the changes of seasons asks you why there are seasons, and how can you tell them apart, what would you tell them?

Distribute Handout #9 and post a liturgical calendar “poster” on the wall, if available. Give a brief presentation on the seasons of the church year, highlighting the following points

- The cycle of the church seasons reflects the story of salvation — a story which began in the Old Testament.
- Through the course of each year, the church remembers and re-tells the story of Jesus’ life through the seasons of the liturgy.
- The season of Advent, which is about to begin, is a time of preparing and waiting for Christmas — a time when we celebrate both the birth of Jesus in Nazareth and the continued presence of Jesus in our lives today.

If Advent is a time of preparing for Christmas, then let’s consider several different views on getting ready to celebrate. What does the media say about getting ready for Christmas? How does your family get ready? And how do we as a faith community get ready?

On a sheet of Christmas wrapping paper (one with a simple design so printing will be readable), invite participants to draw lines down the page to form three columns. Title them Media, Family/Home, and Church.

Ask the group to briefly describe what the media suggest Christmas is about, and how to get ready. Record their responses in the Media column of the newsprint. Then ask them to name some of the ways their family gets ready and celebrates Christmas, recording responses and noting any ethnic traditions that are named. And finally ask how the church gets ready to celebrate Christmas, recording responses.

Example: Ways to Prepare for Christmas

Media	Family/Home	Church
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • shop till you drop • buy big gifts • buy new decorations • make a big meal • travel to visit • drink a lot • send gifts express 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • decorate the tree • wrap presents • write cards • get ready for guests • have an Advent calendar & wreath • sing Christmas carols • make cookies • light Luminaries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • decorate with trees and flowers • have a Nativity scene • light the Advent wreath • hold special programs • sing Christmas carols • clean the church

Summary

Review the lists that were created, pointing out the differences that are emphasized in preparing for Christmas, particularly between the media and church.

Close with the following comments, using the text below or your own words:

The media tends to focus primarily on Christmas as a “holiday,” whereas the church focuses on Christmas as a “holy day.” The real meaning of Christmas is in the holy day — not the holiday! Sometimes it can be a challenge as a family to keep the two in balance, and not get consumed by the media blitz for glitz. The season of Advent is when the church helps us remember what Christmas is really about.

Share the following explanation of Advent, in your own words or in the words that follow.

Advent is a time when we prepare to celebrate Jesus' birth and reflect on how we welcome Jesus in our lives today. Imagine what it would be like if Jesus were literally coming to your house on Christmas. Consider what you would do to prepare to welcome him if you had four weeks to get ready. Now, consider that Jesus is already here among us!

As you know, Advent lasts four weeks beginning on the Sunday nearest November 30th. During Advent we prepare to celebrate the Incarnation—how God became human through the birth of Jesus two thousand years ago. We also celebrate God's presence through Jesus in our lives today. It is a time when we consider how we might open ourselves more fully to God — how we can “prepare to meet Jesus” each day in the people we meet and the choices we make. Just as your family has traditions and rituals to prepare for Christmas, so does Christianity. One of the symbols we use during this season is the Advent wreath. Today we are going to make an Advent Wreath together and learn about its meaning and use.

Using Handout #10, explain the Advent wreath including its symbols and use during the Advent season.

Then distribute wreath-making materials and guide the participants in making a wreath. Depending on the plan you chose, they will either make one wreath as a group, or make individual wreaths for participants to take home. Play some traditional Christmas carols as the wreaths are being made.

Attach the evergreen boughs and candles to the base. If white candles are used, tie purple ribbon around three, and pink ribbon around one.

Adult Learning Experiences

The Messiah is Coming! - The adult activity is the same as Option 2 for adolescents.

Advent Wreath-Making - Follow the instructions for Advent Wreath-Making in the Adolescent Learning Experience.

Part 4. Sharing Learning Reflections (20-25 minutes)

The whole group sharing experience provides an opportunity for each age group to share something they have learned with the entire group. Ask people to rejoin intergenerational groups from the All Ages Learning Experience OR ask family members to rejoin their own family and individual adolescent and adult participants to stay with their age groups from the In-Depth Learning Experience.

Invite the different learning groups to share with the larger group:

- Families with Children: Several families can present their Jesse Tree or Advent Calendar.
- Adolescents: Several adolescents can share key Scripture passages incorporated in the Jesse Tree or ideas from their Advent Calendars.
- Adults: Adults can share images of the Messiah or an important Scripture reading of Advent.

Present the following information using the words below or your own words:

Think of everything we have done in this session to learn about Advent and preparing for the coming of the Messiah at Christmas. Take a few minutes to reflect on what you have learned in this session:

- What is one thing you learned about Advent and the Messiah that you did not know before?
- What will you look for when you participate in the Advent and Christmas seasons in the church community?
- Why does Advent mean to you now?

Part 5. Closing Prayer Service (5-10 minutes)

Preparation

Write the Gathering Prayer on newsprint or a PowerPoint.

Gather

Leader: All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.

(One person lights the first candle for Advent.)

Leader: Our hope is in Christ, the Light of the World.

All: Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

Leader: Make ready the way of the Lord, clear a straight path.

All: Lord, you are the Way, the Truth and the Life. Help us prepare for your coming by following your example of prayer, caring, and service to others.

Leader: We ask this in the name of Jesus, God's Son and our Savior.

All: Amen.

Listen

Mark 13: 33-37

Respond

Invite the participants to share one idea of something they will do this Advent from their calendar.

After each idea, invite the group to respond together: "Emmanuel, be with us." After everyone has had a chance to share, ask participants to hold their calendar in their left hand and hold out their right hand in a gesture of blessing over the calendars of the group.

Go Forth

Invite participants to hold up their Advent Calendars.

Loving God,

We ask your blessing on these Advent Calendars.

May they remind us of our call to follow Jesus and may they help us to prepare our hearts and lives for the celebration of Christmas.

We ask this through Jesus, our Guide and Friend. Amen.