

Praying through Advent and Christmas

Session Focus

This session explores how to pray during the Advent and Christmas seasons. In her consent to the angel Gabriel, "let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:38), Mary models for us the way to humbly respond in prayer to God's initiative in our lives. The Cantic of Mary, or the Magnificat, was her prayer of cooperating with the Father's plan of loving salvation.

Learning Objectives

The session on praying through Advent and Christmas guides learners of all ages to...

- Understand that the Advent and Christmas seasons call us to pray in a unique way as we welcome the Christ Child into our lives
- Value and appreciate what Scripture and tradition teach about praying through the Advent and Christmas seasons
- Learn creative and traditional ways of praying through the Advent and Christmas seasons

Session Overview

Part 1. (20 minutes)

Gathering and Opening Prayer Service

Part 2. (20 minutes)

All Ages Learning Experience

Part 3. (100-115 minutes)

In Depth Learning Experiences

- Learning Activity Center Format - participants rotate through selected activities in the same room or in separate rooms.

Part 4. (15 minutes)

Sharing Learning Experiences

Part 5. (10 minutes)

Closing Prayer Service

Design for In-Depth Learning: Learning Activity Centers

The Learning Activity Center Format provides structured learning activities at a variety of stations or centers in a common area. Learning activity centers are self-contained learning experiences, focusing on a specific topic or theme. They include brief presentations by the facilitators, interactive and experiential activities, group discussion and sharing. Each center can utilize a different learning method, such as drama or role play, creative arts, prayer, ritual, film, games, demonstrations, exhibits, and music.

One of the best ways to envision a Learning Activity Center Format is to imagine visiting a children's museum or one of the Epcot pavilions at Walt Disney World in Orlando. You will find a variety of interactive, experiential exhibits, media presentations, and staff-facilitated learning activities.

Learning Activity Centers can be used with all age groups. They can be developed for an intergenerational audience or for particular age groups, such as families with children or adolescents or adults. Learning Activity Centers can also be utilized in the families with children learning program within the Age Group Format.

Scheduling

Learning Activity Centers are designed to be conducted within a 20-30 minute timeframe. Depending on the session design, this will allow three or four learning periods to be offered during the In Depth Learning Experience.

Here is a sample schedule with four rounds of learning centers:

- 6:00 Hospitality and Dinner
- 6:30 Part 1. Gathering and Prayer
Part 2. All Ages Learning Experience
- 6:50 Round 1: Learning Activity Centers
- 7:15 Break (move to next center)
- 7:20 Round 2: Learning Activity Centers
- 7:45 Break (move to next center)
- 7:50 Round 3: Learning Activity Centers
- 8:15 Break (move to next center)
- 8:20 Round 4: Learning Activity Centers
- 8:45 Part 4: Presenting the Home Activities (no small group sharing)
Part 5: Closing Prayer

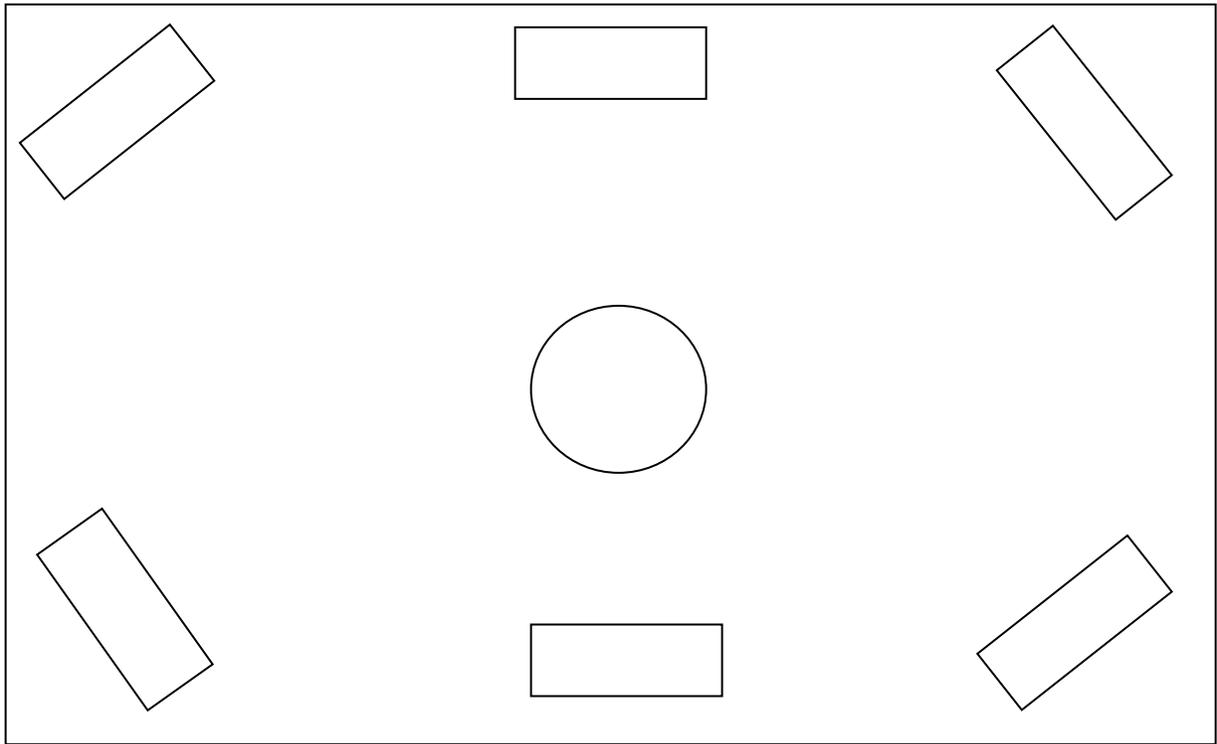
Here is a sample schedule with three rounds of learning centers:

- 6:00 Hospitality and Dinner
- 6:30 Part 1. Gathering and Prayer
Part 2. All Ages Learning Experience
- 7:00 Round 1: Learning Activity Centers
- 7:25 Break (move to next center)
- 7:30 Round 2: Learning Activity Centers
- 7:55 Break (move to next center)
- 8:00 Round 3: Learning Activity Centers
- 8:25 Break (gather in intergenerational groups)
- 8:30 Part 4: Sharing Learning Reflections and Home Application
- 8:50 Closing Prayer

Organizing the Activity Centers

There are two ways to set up activity centers: one large room, or multiple break-out rooms.

If you arrange all of the learning centers in one large meeting gym or parish hall, set-up the centers around the outside of the room (see example). The center space can become a storytelling center with a carpet or chairs for children to sit. The example below shows six different learning centers plus the storytelling center. You may still need separate rooms if you have a learning center that focuses on prayer (worship space) or shows a film (meeting room).



Keep in mind the following when organizing in one room:

- Make sure there is adequate space between learning centers so that people are not interrupted by the activity at other centers.
- Set-up each learning activity center with tables and chairs (or carpeted floor space) for participants to listen, discuss, and create. Children and teens can use the floor, but adults will need chairs.
- Assign each learning center a number and post the number on the wall and floor at each center.

If you arrange learning centers in multiple rooms such as meeting rooms, classrooms, parish hall, gym, worship space, assign one learning center to each space. This format resembles a conference where people move from room to room for each session. Place the learning center name outside each room and develop a list of centers with locations, and a map if necessary, so that people can easily find the correct room.

Organizing Groups

Once you have determined how many learning centers you will offer, you can organize participants accordingly. If you offer four learning centers, you can organize the participants into four groups of equal size and assign each group a specific sequence that they will move through the learning centers. Assign a number to each learning center and an alphabet letter to each group, then describe how they will move through the centers: Group A: 1-2-3-4; Group B: 2-3-4-1, Group C: 3-4-1-2, and Group D: 4-1-2-3. If you offer three learning centers, there would be three groups rotating among the three learning centers. Keep families together in one group.

If you offer more than three or four learning centers, allow people to choose the learning centers they are going to experience. Remind them that if a particular center is crowded, they can move to another center and then return to their first choice in another round. Families with children should stay together because the activities require parents to work with their children.

Staffing

Each center is facilitated by a team of facilitators who guide the participants through the activity plan. The teaching team facilitates the overall learning plan for the center: making presentations, guiding learning activities, organizing discussions, and so on. The number of team members needed depends on the complexity of the activities and the number of participants at a learning center. Teams should have at least two or three people, but some centers will require five or six people. Older adolescents can also serve as members of the teaching team, and are especially valuable in facilitating creative activities and dramatic presentations.

To present the focus of each learning activity center, ask the teaching teams to present a very brief overview of what they will be doing in each center. Give each participant the list of learning activity centers with short descriptions, a schedule, and the locations of the centers.

Materials for the Session

Gathering

- Name tags
- Community building activities
- Opening Prayer Service
- Bible

All Ages Learning Experience

- Handout #1

In-Depth Learning Experience

- Handouts
- The materials participants will need are identified in each Learning Activity Center plan.

Closing

- Closing Prayer Service
- Bible

Session Plan

Part 1. Gathering (15-20 minutes)

Preparation

Prepare a newsprint sheet or handout that lists the order of the activities or create a PowerPoint presentation that guides people through the session.

Registration and Hospitality

- Welcome people and ask them to sign in for the program.
- Provide name tags or invite people to make their own.
- Distribute any handouts participants will need for the session. (You can also distribute handouts for the activities at the beginning of the activity.)
- Invite people to share a meal. Depending on the time of day, the program may end with a meal.

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

This session explores the manner in which we are taught to pray during the Advent and Christmas seasons. The Canticle of Mary, or the Magnificat, shows how Mary cooperated in God's plan for our salvation. In her consent to the angel Gabriel, "let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:38), Mary models for us the way to humbly respond in prayer to God's initiative in our lives.

1. Group Formation

This program utilizes a learning activity center format. Five learning centers are developed for your use. Each activity lasts from 25-35 minutes, allowing everyone to participate in three learning activities within a one and a half to two-hour timeframe. Once you have determined how many learning centers you will offer, you can organize participants accordingly.

2. Opening Prayer Service

Preparation

Invite seven persons to be readers. Three persons are needed for the reading, Luke 1: 26-38. Four readers are needed for the Response.

Gather

Blessed are you, Lord God of our Salvation.
We thank you for sending us your son, Jesus,
Born to Mary and Joseph of humble means.

We thank you for the role models of prayer you have given us
In the prophets and the saints
And in particular, Mary.

Through her humble trust in you, she shows us
How to say yes to your initiative in our lives.
Like Mary, help each one of us to become aware
Of your work in the world that hinges on our humble consent.

Blessed are you Lord God of our Salvation.
Amen.

Listen

Invite three persons to proclaim the passage: one person to read the narration, a male voice to read the words of the Angel Gabriel, and a female voice to read the words of Mary.

Luke 1: 26-38

Respond

Presider:

As we prepare for the birth of the Christ Child in our midst, let us pray as Mary prayed when she received news that she would become the mother of Jesus, our savior. Our response is "Here am I, the servant of the Lord."

Reader 1:

My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

Assembly: Here am I, the servant of the Lord.

Reader 2:

For the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.

Assembly: Here am I, the servant of the Lord.

Reader 3:

He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;

Assembly: Here am I, the servant of the Lord.

Reader 4:

He has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,

in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.'

Assembly: Here am I, the servant of the Lord.

Go Forth

Presider:

God, help us to learn to pray as Mary prayed. Help us to respond to your initiative in our lives first with prayer, and then with care and concern for others. As we journey through Advent toward Christmas, and as our anticipation builds, we pray that so too will our appreciation build for the ultimate gift of salvation through your son Jesus Christ. Amen.

Part 2. All Ages Learning Experience (20 minutes)

The All Ages Learning Experience is designed to help the participants explore what the seasons of Advent and Christmas teach us about prayer. Based on the events in the first chapter of Luke's Gospel, we will hear from the Angel Gabriel, who has graciously agreed to be interviewed.

Preparation

In advance, ask two participants to prepare the "interview" with the Angel Gabriel. Give them each a copy of Handout #1, which contains the script of the interview. One person plays the role of Gabriel, and the other the Interviewer.

Activity Plan

Interviewer: It's a great honor to have you here, Angel Gabriel. Thank you for taking the time.

Gabriel: No problem. You can call me Gabriel, or Gabe.

Interviewer: You played a prominent role in the events that led up to Jesus' birth. What was that like? It must have been fascinating.

Gabriel: Indeed, it was fascinating and also humbling. Whenever God reveals himself, it is both fascinating and humbling. It was not I who played a prominent role. Rather it was God. I was simply God's voice to both Zechariah and Mary.

Interviewer: That's right! I had forgotten that you visited Zechariah before appearing to Mary. Zechariah was the father of John the Baptist, wasn't he?

Gabriel: That's correct. His is a great story. So human. When I appeared to him and told him that he and Elizabeth would have a child, and even though this news was an answer to *his own prayers*, he scoffed in doubt, for he and Elizabeth were supposedly too old to have a child.

Interviewer: What did you do when Zechariah expressed his doubt?

Gabriel: I reminded him that I was sent by God to bring *good news*, but since he doubted God, I rendered him speechless until all that I announced came true.

Interviewer: And then what happened?

Gabriel: Some months later I appeared to Mary, but let me finish up Zechariah's story first. I don't want people to think he was a bad or weak person, for he truly was very holy and dedicated to God. I've noticed that all humans have doubts now and then.

Interviewer: Can you blame him for his skepticism? After all, he and Elizabeth were old! It seems human nature to be doubtful when something extraordinary happens.

Gabriel: Yes, that's true, and no I don't blame him. But since he did not have his own voice for several months, I think he was better able to hear the voice of God and realize that nothing is impossible for God.

Interviewer: And then the baby came, and they named him John. Afterwards Zechariah could speak again.

Gabriel: Yes, and do you know what his first words were after all these months? They were words of prayer and praise to God! Zechariah simply could not wait to express his thanksgiving for his son John, who would prepare the way for the Lord, and would later be known as the greatest of all the prophets!

Interviewer: You also appeared to Mary with some extraordinary news!

Gabriel: Yes, I think most people know that I told Mary she would be the mother of Jesus. And like Zechariah, she was confused about how this would work. But unlike Zechariah, she harbored no doubt about God's power, and she immediately gave her humble consent. Mary is the perfect model for how to respond when God intervenes.

Interviewer: You also told Mary that Elizabeth was going to have a child.

Gabriel: Yes, and Mary immediately went to assist her cousin Elizabeth. Humans can learn a lot from Mary. She was chosen for a most important role in God's saving plan, and she gave humble consent right away, and then turned her attention to help someone else when nobody would have blamed her for focusing only on herself.

Interviewer: I am beginning to realize how right you are. I am beginning to see that the lives of Zechariah and Mary and all of the events leading up to Jesus' birth teach us to respond to God's activity in our lives first with prayer of praise and thanksgiving, and second by turning our attention to those in need.

Gabriel: That's just what all Christians should strive for during Advent and the Christmas season.

Interviewer: Gabriel, thank you very much for joining us today.

Gabriel: My pleasure.

Instruct participants in table groups to discuss the interview with Gabriel using these questions:

- What struck you about the interview?
- In what ways do you tend to be doubtful and skeptical?
- In what ways are you open to God's intervention in your life?

Wrap up the All Ages Learning with the following:

As we explore various ways to pray through the Advent and Christmas seasons, let us remember how we are to respond to God's initiative in our lives: first with prayer of praise and thanksgiving, and then with assistance to others.

Part Three: In Depth Learning Experience: Praying through Advent & Christmas (100-115 minutes)

Introduce each center by having a team member who is conducting the center provide a brief overview of what is going to happen at the center. If you wish, give each participant or family the list of learning activity centers with short descriptions, a schedule, and the locations of the centers.

Each learning center is designed for 25–30 minutes, allowing everyone to participate in three or four learning activities. Select the first three for families with children, three for adolescents, and three for adults.

Activity 1. O Antiphons (recommended for All Ages)

Activity 2. Advent—Christmas Prayer Placemats (recommended for All Ages)

Activity 3. Advent Wreath (recommended for All Ages)

Activity 4. Waiting, Watching, Hoping (recommended for Adolescents and Adults)

Activity 5. Response to Significant Events (recommended for Adolescents and Adults)

Activity 1. O Antiphons

This learning activity center engages participants in understanding and making an Advent Jesse Tree.

Preparation

Make copies of Handout #2 for all participants.

Materials

- Markers, crayons, and other materials for drawing symbols and pictures
- Bible
- Handout #2

Activity Plan

Introduce the activity with the following words or use your own words:

The Prophet Isaiah spoke of the Messiah who would come as Savior for the world. Isaiah had seven titles for the Messiah, and each title indicated a particular good that the Messiah would bring to the world. We celebrate these titles through the O Antiphons, which cover the period of Advent preparation known as the Octave before Christmas, December 17-23. Each day of the final week of Advent, we celebrate a different O Antiphon. Let's discover what they are.

Ask one participant to proclaim Isaiah 11:2-3 from the Bible.

“The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.
His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.”

After listening to this reading, can anyone guess what the first O Antiphon is? **O Wisdom**. This is how we pray this antiphon. Recite the prayer with me: “O Wisdom, O holy Word of God, you govern all creation with your strong yet tender care. Come and show your people the way to salvation.”

On your worksheet, fill in “**O Wisdom**” in the space for the first O Antiphon. Now take a few moments to draw a symbol or write a few words reflecting on the meaning and importance of wisdom in your life right now. Parents and children can work together.

Ask one participant to proclaim Isaiah 11:4-5.

“but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.
Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.”

After hearing this reading, can anyone guess what this O Antiphon is? **O Lord.** This is how we pray it. Recite the prayer with me: “O sacred Lord of ancient Israel, who showed yourself to Moses in the burning bush, who gave him the holy law on Sinai mountain: come, stretch out your mighty hand to set us free.”

On your worksheet, fill in “**O Lord**” in the space for the second O Antiphon. Now take a few moments to draw a symbol or write a few words reflecting on the meaning and importance of Jesus as Lord in your life right now. Parents and children can work together.

Ask one participant to proclaim Isaiah 11:1 and 11:10.

“A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.”

“On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.”

After hearing this reading, can anyone guess what this O Antiphon is? **O Root of Jesse.** Essentially this refers to Jesus’ family tree. Jesse was the father of King David, and it was prophesied that the Messiah would be of the house and lineage of David and be born in David’s city, Bethlehem (Micah 5:1). Recite the prayer with me: “O Flower of Jesse’s stem, you have been raised up as a sign for all peoples; kings stand silent in your presence; that nations bow down in worship before you. Come, let nothing keep you from coming to our aid.”

On your worksheet, fill in “**O Root of Jesse**” in the space for the third O Antiphon. Now take a few moments to draw a symbol or write a few words reflecting on the meaning and importance of your family tree—parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, and so on. Parents and children can work together.

Ask one participant to proclaim Isaiah 22:22 and Isaiah 9:7.

“I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David; he shall open, and no one shall shut; he shall shut, and no one shall open.”

“His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onwards and for evermore.”

After hearing this reading, can anyone guess what this O Antiphon is? **O Key of David.** This refers to vast kingdom over which the Messiah would reign. Recite the prayer with me: “O Key of David, O royal Power of Israel controlling at your will the gate of Heaven: Come, break down the prison walls of death for those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death; and lead your captive people to freedom.”

On your worksheet, fill in **“O Key of David”** in the space for the fourth O Antiphon. Now take a few moments to draw a symbol or write a few words reflecting on your vision of heaven and everlasting peace. Parents and children can work together.

Ask one participant to proclaim Isaiah 9:1.

“The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.”

Does anyone know which O Antiphon this passage refers to? **O Radiant Dawn**. Recite the prayer with me: “O Radiant Dawn, splendor of eternal light, sun of justice: come shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death.”

On your worksheet, fill in **“O Radiant Dawn”** in the space for the fifth O Antiphon. Now take a few moments to draw a symbol or write a few words reflecting on the importance of justice and fairness in the world. Parents and children can work together.

Ask one participant to proclaim Isaiah 9:6 and Isaiah 2:4.

“For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

“He shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
and their spears into pruning-hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.”

Which O Antiphon do these passages refer to? **O King of Nations**. Recite the prayer with me: “O King of all the Nations, the only joy of every human heart; O Keystone of the mighty arch of man, come and save the creature you fashioned from the dust.”

On your worksheet, fill in **“King of Nations”** in the space for the sixth O Antiphon. Now take a few moments to draw a symbol or write a few words reflecting on your vision of Jesus as Wonderful Counselor or Mighty God or Everlasting Father or Prince of Peace. Parents and children can work together.

Ask one participant to proclaim Isaiah 7:14.

“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel.”

After hearing this reading, can anyone guess what this O Antiphon is? **O Emmanuel.** Remember “Emmanuel” means God with us. Recite the prayer with me: “O Emmanuel, king and lawgiver, desire of the nations, Savior of all people, come and set us free, Lord our God.”

On your worksheet, fill in “**O Emmanuel**” in the space for the seventh O Antiphon.

Let us conclude our session by singing one verse of “O Come Emmanuel.”

O come, O come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear.

Rejoice! Rejoice!
Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

Activity 2. Advent – Christmas Prayer Placemats

This learning activity center engages participants in creating a table placemat containing a meal prayer for each week of Advent, plus a prayer for their Christmas celebration.

Preparation

Make copies of Handouts #3 and #4 for all participants. These handouts need to be printed on 11 x 17 size paper. The more durable the paper, the better.

Materials

- Crayons, markers, and other materials for decorating placemats
- Handouts

Activity Plan

Introduce the activity with the following words or use your own words:

This will be a “hands-on” learning activity center where each person or family will be invited to create an Advent-Christmas table placemat with a meal prayer for each week of Advent, plus a prayer for your Christmas celebration. Families with young children should work together on this activity.

Give each participant a copy of Handout #3. Explain that this is a simple sample of the placemat that they are invited to create. Point out that there is a prayer for each week of Advent and one for Christmas dinner. Stress that these are just sample prayers, and that they will be invited to write their own.

Give each participant of copy of Handout #4. Explain that this is the template for their Advent-Christmas Prayer Placemat. Point out the theme of each of the four weeks: prayer of humility, prayer for our neighbor, prayer in thanksgiving, prayer of obedience.

Ask participants to compose a table prayer for each week of Advent according to the four themes. Ask them to also compose a prayer for their Christmas dinner. Tell them to use the prayers on Handout #3 as a guide.

Once the prayers are written, invite participants to color and decorate their placemats.

When finished, invite participants to show their placemats to others nearby.

Conclude the activity with these comments:

Congratulations on creating your Advent-Christmas Prayer Table Placemat. Take it home and use it. If you are concerned that it is not durable enough to last through the Advent and Christmas season, you can put the placemat in the center of your table and refer to the appropriate prayer. If there is more than one person’s placemat in the center of the table, take turns each evening with whose placemat is on top and whose prayer is read aloud for the whole family.

Activity 3. Advent Wreath

This learning activity center engages participants creating an Advent Wreath for their use at home, complete with prayers for each week of Advent.

Preparation

Make one copy of Handout #5 on card stock. Cut the handout into nine individual cards. As participants gather for the session, pass out cards to individuals and ask them to be prepared to read aloud the information on the card.

Give copies of Handout #6 to all participants.

Materials

- Bible
- Wreath-making supplies: circular base to which evergreen branches are attached; evergreen branches; four candles: three purple and one pink (makes one wreath)
- Candle holders, or some way to set the candles into the wreath
- Wire or other material to attach evergreen branches to base
- Christmas music
- Handouts

Activity Plan

Introduce the activity with the following words or use your own words:

Praying around the Advent Wreath is one of our most popular Advent rituals. When we light the Advent candles, we are reminded of the promise of the coming of Jesus, who is the light of world. Each week we light another candle, and as the light grows, so does our anticipation of Jesus' birth. Our expectations join with those who waited centuries for the coming of the Messiah, and we rejoice in Jesus who pierces the darkness of sin by the light of his love.

If you have not already done so, pass out the cards from Handout #5 to nine individuals and ask them to read aloud the information on the card. Each card contains useful information about the Advent Wreath.

1. The church year or liturgical year begins with the first Sunday of Advent.
2. Advent begins on the Sunday nearest November 30th, which is the feast of St. Andrew, and lasts until December 24th.
3. The word Advent comes from the word adventus which means "coming."
4. Advent is the season 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.
5. 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.
6. 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.

7. The circle and evergreens on the Advent wreath remind us of God’s everlasting love which has no beginning and no end.
8. It is customary to use three purple and one pink candle on the Advent wreath. The purple reminds us of the need for sorrow for our sins. The pink candle reminds us of the joy and hope we share in Jesus, the Light of the World, whose birth we celebrate at Christmas.
9. 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 the wreath-making materials and guide participants in making a wreath. Begin with the base. Attach evergreen branches to the base. Then attach or insert candles.

Play Christmas music while participants create their wreaths.

Direct participants’ attention to Handout #6 where they will find a listing of Advent Scripture Readings and sample prayers for each week of Advent. Be sure to tell participants which cycle (A, B, or C) you are in.

On Handout #6 you will see that the Sunday readings of Advent are listed. Each time you light the candles of your wreath, choose an appropriate reading.

	Cycle A	Cycle B	Cycle C
Week One of Advent	Isaiah 2:1-5 Matthew 24:37-44	Isaiah 63:16-17,19; 64:2-7 Mark 13:33-37	Jeremiah 33:14-16 Luke 21:25-28, 34-36
Week Two of Advent	Isaiah 11:1-10 Matthew 3:1-12	Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11 Mark 1:1-8	Baruch 5:1-9 Luke 3:1-6
Week Three of Advent	Isaiah 35:1-6, 10 Matthew 11:2-11	Isaiah 61:1-2, 10-11 John 1:6-8, 19-28	Zephaniah 3:14-18 Luke 3:10-18
Week Four of Advent	Isaiah 7:10-14 Matthew 1:18-24	2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8-11, 16 Luke 1:26-38	Micah 5:1-4 Luke 1:39-45

The handout also has sample prayers for each week of Advent. We encourage you to write your own prayers to use each time you light the candles. If you participate in the “Advent-Christmas Prayer Placemat” learning activity center, you will compose your own prayers for each week of Advent.

Sample 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.

Sample 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.

Sample 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.*

Sample 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!*

Conclude the activity with these comments

Congratulations on creating your own Advent Wreath. Take it home and light the appropriate candles each evening. Even if only one or two family members are home, they can keep the tradition going. Light the candle(s). Read the appropriate Scripture reading. Recite the prayer you have composed.

Let us conclude by praying together a few of the prayers you have written for Advent.

Invite three or four persons of different ages to prayerfully read aloud one of the prayers they have written.

Activity 4. Waiting, Watching, Hoping

This learning activity center engages participants in an exploration of how the season of Advent calls us to wait with hope and longing for the Christ child to be born. This session also shows us that prayer is a good tool to both *prepare* for an event, and to simply *wait*.

Preparation

You will need a total of seven persons to each read aloud a short statement or a brief passage from Scripture.

Materials

- Bible

Activity Plan

Introduce the activity with the following words or use your own words:

Advent is the season for waiting, watching, and hoping. We spend four weeks preparing our hearts to receive the Christ Child. The anticipation builds toward that special day when there are “presents” for all, and we rejoice in the true “presence” of Christ in our midst. In this activity we will explore the sweet agony of waiting, watching, and hoping, and how that experience can teach us to pray.

Let’s begin. Waiting is a part of life. Often we are forced to wait . . . for a person, or an event, or even just a streetlight to change. We become anxious, or even frustrated, because we feel as though our precious time is being wasted.

What are some circumstances in which you find waiting to be difficult and frustrating?

Invite comments from the group.

We also anticipate and wait for special events or occasions. For these, the waiting becomes part of the experience because we do things to prepare for them. What are some special events or occasions that we get ready for while we’re waiting?

Invite comments from the group. Examples: a guest coming to stay, a special anniversary or birthday, a vacation or holiday, a graduation, and so on.

Advent shows us that prayer is a good tool to both *prepare* for an event, and to simply *wait*. Through prayer, we can turn our waiting from an experience of anxiety and frustration to one of hope and belief. The praying of Advent is intended to weave into our daily lives and show us how to integrate meaningful prayer into our daily routine. Listen to these comments about Advent.

Ask six volunteers to each read aloud one of the following statements.

1. In Advent, we light candles from a wreath to remind us to pray each day “Come Lord Jesus, Come!”

Pause

2. In Advent, we may have a special calendar that counts down the days for us, so that we savor and appreciate each day of waiting for the Savior.

Pause

3. In Advent, which means “coming,” we remember that the world waited thousands of years for the Messiah.

Pause

4. In Advent, we take time to remember and celebrate that Jesus, who is also called Emmanuel which means God with us, became human like us to show us how to live and love.

Pause

5. In Advent, we prepare for the coming of the Christ Child into our lives by our prayers, and by our generosity and kindness toward others.

Pause

6. In Advent, we “give up” some things as a way of making room for prayer and sharing.

Now, invite participants to listen to a piece of advice that St. Paul gave to the Philippians. Ask one participant to proclaim Philippians 4:6-7 from the Bible.

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Invite participants to discuss in small groups the following questions:

- What does St. Paul call us to do?
- How would St. Paul suggest we spend our time waiting for Christmas?

Conclude this activity by conducting the following prayer litany. Tell the participants to make themselves comfortable in a posture of prayer. Tell them that you will read a brief petition, and their response is **“Help me to pray.”**

Lord Jesus, we await your coming with great hope, for we know that you are the Savior of the world. In the meantime, we journey through the days of Advent.

When I feel anxious . . . **help me to pray.**

When I become impatient . . . **help me to pray.**

When I am filled with anticipation . . . **help me to pray.**

When I am losing hope . . . **help me to pray.**

As I watch and wait for the coming of the Messiah . . . **help me to pray.**

When my heart is restless . . . **help me to pray.**

When I cannot sleep . . . **help me to pray.**

When my priorities are askew . . . **help me to pray.**

Invite participants to offer their own petitions.

Lord Jesus, we offer these petitions to you in full confidence that you hear our prayers and respond to them in love. Amen.

Activity 5. Response to Significant Events

This learning activity center engages participants in reflecting on how key biblical figures (Mary, Elizabeth, Zechariah, and Simeon) responded to the events that led up to the birth of Jesus.

Preparation

Make copies of Handout #7 for all participants.

Materials

- Handout #7
- Bible

Activity Plan

Introduce the activity with the following words or use your own words:

In this learning activity center we will use passages from Luke's gospel to explore how key biblical figures teach us to pray. The prayers of Mary and Elizabeth, Zechariah, and Simeon, as recorded in the early part of Luke's gospel, show us four essential qualities for a good prayer life: humility, love of neighbor, recognition of God's love for us, and obedience to God.

Ask one participant to proclaim the following passage:

"In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

And Mary said,

'My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;

he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,

according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever” (Luke 1:39-55).

In small groups, ask participants to discuss the following questions:

- What is the significant event that occurred in this passage?
- How did the person(s) respond?
- What does their response teach us about responding to significant events in our lives?

Invite a few comments to be shared with the whole group.

Conclude this portion of the session with these words:

Mary and Elizabeth teach us a vital element of prayer: when a significant event occurs in our lives, our first response should be prayer. The Cantic of Mary challenges us to follow prayer with action, especially on behalf of the poor and vulnerable who need our help.

Mary: “let it be with me according to your word.”

Elizabeth: “blessed is she who believed . . . “

Mary: “My soul magnifies the Lord . . .”

Continue:

Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist and husband of Elizabeth, also teaches us about prayer.

Ask one person to proclaim the passage:

“Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, ‘No; he is to be called John.’ They said to her, ‘None of your relatives has this name.’ Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing-tablet and wrote, ‘His name is John.’ And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them and said, ‘What then will this child become?’ For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:

‘Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.
He has raised up a mighty savior for us
in the house of his servant David” (Luke 1:57-68).

In small groups, ask participants to discuss the following questions:

- What is the significant event that occurred in this passage?
- How did the person(s) respond?
- What does their response teach us about responding to significant events in our lives?

Invite a few comments to be shared with the whole group.

Conclude this portion of the session with these words:

Zechariah's experience is similar to those of Mary and Elizabeth. When he has an encounter that brings him in touch with God's work in the world, his spontaneous response is first one of prayer, and then concern for the world, particularly those who are less fortunate. Luke puts these words into the mouth of Zechariah to show us that the birth of the Jesus is immanent. Our response must be to shrug off our silence and our doubts and pour forth praise and thanksgiving to God who is sending a savior to redeem the world. For nothing is impossible with God!

This is the lesson we learn from Luke during Advent. All of the events leading up to Jesus' birth teach us to break into spontaneous prayer of praise and thanksgiving, and then turn our attention to those who are less fortunate.

Advent ends with the birth of Jesus. We can all rejoice in the coming of the savior. All will be joyful and peaceful until the end of time, yes? Not quite. We know that Jesus must give his very life—along with John the Baptist and many others—for the sake of salvation. The years ahead will bring much pain, sorrow, and struggle, much of which is foreshadowed early in Luke's gospel.

While his parents at the time did not understand, the discriminate reader of Luke's gospel will grasp the significance of Jesus' need to be about his Father's business. It is precursor to his eventual passion, death, and resurrection.

Simeon is another Scripture person who shows us that ours must be a prayer for strength and guidance to surrender to the will of the Father, and to remain faithful to God's call in our lives.

Ask one person to proclaim the passage:

"Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, 'Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.'

And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too'" (Luke 2: 25-35).

In small groups, ask participants to discuss the following questions:

- What is the significant event that occurred in this passage?

- How did the person(s) respond?
- What does their response teach us about responding to significant events in our lives?

Invite a few comments to be shared with the whole group.

Conclude the session by sharing these thoughts:

What do these experiences teach us about our prayer during the Christmas season? Mary and Elizabeth, Zechariah and Simeon all show us that ours must be a prayer for strength and guidance to surrender to the will of the Father, and to remain faithful to God's call in our lives.

Simeon remains faithful to God to the very end when his promise of seeing the Messiah is granted. It is then that he foreshadows the trials and pain that both Mary and Jesus will face. Mary surrenders to the will of the Father as she ponders the things in her heart that she cannot understand.

As you move from Advent into the Christmas season, pray for a discerning heart to grow in understanding of God's ideas for you and your family. Recall that the launch of God's plan of salvation hinged on Mary's response to the angel Gabriel. In what small way does God's plan hinge on your response?

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

Ask participants to gather in intergenerational groups to share what they have learned and created. Invite them to take several minutes to share their responses to the following questions:

- What is one new thing you learned about prayer during the Advent and Christmas seasons in this session?
- If you participated in the “O Antiphons” learning activity center, which one is your favorite? Share your drawing or symbol.
- If you participated in the “Advent—Christmas Prayer Placemats” learning activity center, share one or two of the prayers that you composed.
- If you participated in the “Advent Wreath” learning activity center, share one or two of the prayers that you composed.
- What did you learn about Advent as a season of waiting, watching, and hoping during this session?

Part 5. Closing Prayer Service (10 minutes)

Gather

The ritual of the *Angelus* commemorates Mary’s humble consent to be the mother of Jesus. It is a simple ritual. Let us pray it now to conclude our session.

Listen

Luke 1:46-50

Respond

Leader: The Angel of the Lord declared unto Mary

Response: And she conceived by the Holy Spirit.

Leader: Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.

Response: Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.
Amen.

Leader: Behold, the handmaid of the Lord.

Response: Be it done unto me according to thy word.

Leader: Hail Mary ...

Response: Holy Mary ...

Leader: And the Word was made flesh

Response: And dwelt among us.

Leader: Hail Mary ...

Response: Holy Mary ...

Leader: Pray for us, O holy Mother of God,

Response: That we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.

Leader: Let us pray.

Go Forth

All: Pour forth, we beseech you, O Lord, your grace into our hearts, that we to whom the Incarnation of Christ, thy Son, was made known by the message of an Angel, may by His Passion and Cross be brought to the glory of His Resurrection, through the same Christ, our Lord, Amen.