

Preparing for the Messiah

Session Focus

This session explores a central theme of the Advent season—preparing for the coming of the Messiah. The season of Advent challenges us to examine our understanding and expectations for the Messiah. It calls us to reflect on our own readiness and openness to welcome the Messiah into our lives and our world. The Advent Lectionary readings serve as our primary resource for understanding what kind of Messiah Jesus would be, and what that means for us.

Learning Objectives

The session on Preparing for the Messiah guides learners of all ages to . . .

- identify images of the Messiah that people hold today and compare these to the images found in the Advent Lectionary readings (know what).
- Incorporate a Scriptural understanding of the Messiah into their relationship with Jesus and into their daily lives as Catholics (know-why).
- prepare for the coming of the Messiah in their lives, families, and world through a variety of practices: prayer, ritual, Bible reading, justice and service, reflection and discernment (know-how).

Session at a Glance

Part 1. (10 minutes)

Gathering

Part 2. (20 minutes)

All Ages Learning Experience

Part 3. (80-90 minutes)

In Depth Learning Experiences: Searching for & Preparing for the Messiah

- 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 Experiences

Part 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

Gathering

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

All Ages Opening Learning Experience

- Handout #1
- Pens or pencils
- Newsprint and marker or PowerPoint

In-Depth Learning Experience

- Handouts
- Current events magazines with pictures and current newspapers for the family activity Consider asking families to bring a selection of current magazines to the session
- Supplies for table group activities: newsprint or poster board, 11x17 paper, 8.5x11 paper, boxes of (washable) markers, boxes of crayons, pens and pencils, large file cards, glue or tape, masking tape, scissors, magazines
- Equipment for visual presentation: multimedia projector and screen
- Bible

Sharing Learning Reflections

- Handout

Closing

- Closing Prayer Service
- Bible

Session Plan

Part 1. Gathering (10 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 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 words below or your own words.

This session immerses us in the Advent season and prepares us for the coming of the Messiah this Christmas. The season of Advent challenges us to examine our understanding and expectations for the Messiah. It calls us to reflect on our own readiness and openness to welcome the Messiah into our lives and our world. The Advent Lectionary readings serve as our primary resource for understanding what kind of Messiah Jesus would be and what that means for us.

In this program we are going to identify the images of the Messiah that we hold today. We are going to study the Advent Lectionary readings to discover what they tell us about Jesus as the Messiah. We are going to explore a variety of practical ways to prepare for the coming of the Messiah through prayer, ritual, Bible reading, service, and reflection and discernment. Through our session and the season of Advent we hope to grow in our relationship with Jesus Christ and recognize his importance in our daily lives as Catholics.

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 symbols of the Advent season: an Advent Wreath, liturgical colors for the Advent season, candles, Lectionary, etc. Consider displaying icons, paintings, and statues that present different images of Jesus.

Gather

God of hope and promise, as we enter this Advent season we ask that your calming presence be with us. Slow us down, Lord. Too often we do not have time to prepare for the Messiah's coming. We get caught up in the busyness of the season and forget to focus on Jesus' coming into our lives, our families, and our world. Help us to find quiet moments during Advent to reflect on this season of preparation and waiting. May your presence, O God, be felt in all of our preparations and planning. Help us to find ways to grow closer to Jesus, our Messiah, during this Advent season. We ask this in the name of the One for whom we wait. Amen.

Listen

Luke 3:3-6, 15-16

Respond

Leader:

Isaiah prophesies, "They will beat their swords into ploughshares." Christ is coming!

All:

We await the coming of the Messiah who brings peace.

Leader:

Isaiah prophesies, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light." Christ is coming!

All:

We await the coming of the Messiah who brings light to those in darkness.

Leader

Isaiah prophesies, "The blind shall see, the deaf hear, the lame walk, the mute speak, and the poor lifted up." Christ is coming!

All:

We await the coming of the Messiah who brings justice and healing.

Leader:

Isaiah prophesies, "A Messiah will arise from the descendants of David." Christ is coming!

All:

We await the coming of the Messiah who brings justice and integrity. Christ is coming! Christ is coming! Rejoice, rejoice!

Go Forth

Wake up, people of God! The Messiah is coming to dwell among us.

Prepare for the unexpected to break into our lives; be alert to the signs of the coming of God.

Look for the Light that was with God in the beginning.
Prepare a dwelling place for the Lord in your homes.

Wake up, people of God! Look for the Messiah!
Listen attentively for the coming of the Word made flesh.

Rejoice, the Messiah is coming to bring us peace and hope. Amen.

Part 2. All Ages Learning Experience: How Do We Prepare? (20 minutes)

Materials Needed

- Handout #1
- Pens or pencils
- Newsprint and markers or PowerPoint

Introduce the activity, using the words below or your own words. Note the reflection question below “Our Unexpected Preparations.” This question goes to the heart of what Advent is about. Draw the group’s attention to this key idea for understanding Advent preparation for the Messiah.

Every day people spend time preparing for simple things such as school, work, or going to bed. We prepare for everyday events such as mealtimes and homework.

Throughout the year we also prepare for events. These are the special occasions such as birthdays and anniversaries, community celebrations, and holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas. We might prepare the garden for planting in the spring or we get ready for a summer vacation. People also find themselves preparing for the unexpected events in life, such as the death of a loved one, or rites of passage such as graduations, leaving home for the first time, and going away to college.

We know that Jesus may return at any time for the “second coming.” Yet in another sense, he returns to us regularly in surprising ways. But we won’t be ready for him or see him unless we prepare for these unexpected returns.

Our opening activity focuses on our experiences of *preparing*. In intergenerational groups you will share stories about the numerous things you prepare for as individuals and as families and how you go about preparing for these things.

Using the questions on Handout #1: How Do You Prepare, guide the participants in reflecting on the questions, as individuals for single people, and as families for family units, and then sharing their responses with their small group.

Give families and individuals several minutes to complete the handout and then ask them to share examples from each of the five questions. This is a storytelling experience, so each person or family unit should have time to share their experiences. The group should not discuss individual responses until everyone in the group has had a chance to share.

Reflection Questions

Our Daily Preparations

What are the things that you prepare for every day (e.g., work or school, meals, transportation, homework, meetings, sports, activities, social engagements)?

Our Occasional Preparation

What are the things that you prepare for occasionally (e.g., birthdays, anniversaries, holidays, special projects at home or school or work, going on vacation)?

Our Unexpected Preparations

What are the things that you have had to prepare for that were unexpected (e.g., the sickness or death of a loved one, a visit of a friend or relative)?

How We Typically Prepare

What is typical about the ways that you prepare for things? (For example, do you get ready far in advance or do you wait until the last minute? Are you very organized with lists and outlines or are you more spontaneous? Does everything have to be just right or do you “cut corners?”)

How We Can Prepare Well

What does it take to prepare well for something? (For example, having a plan, knowing the priorities of what we are preparing for, having the time to prepare well, choosing how to prepare in the best way, knowing the resources we will need and who we should involve are ways to prepare well.)

Conclude by asking the groups to summarize their thinking about what it takes to prepare well for something (last question). Invite the small groups to share several of their ideas with the large group. Identify common threads among the responses. Write the ideas on newsprint or on PowerPoint slides.

Introduce the In Depth Learning with the following:

As Advent begins, our readings from both the Old and New Testaments are about the expectation of a coming messiah. In the Old Testament, depending on whether we are celebrating Cycle A, B, or C of the Lectionary, we read passages from Isaiah, Jeremiah, Baruch, Zephaniah, or Micah, all prophets who spoke in the context of God’s covenant relationship with God’s people. In fact, the expectation of a messiah grew out of the people’s understanding of their covenant relationship with God.

A covenant is an unbreakable, mutual agreement in which each partner binds him or herself in love and fidelity to the other.

We make a remarkable claim when we say we are in a relationship of covenant love with God. After all, God is the transcendent creator of the whole universe. How could we possibly think of God as entering into a relationship of mutual love and fidelity with us, a relationship in which partners are

each bound by certain obligations? Nevertheless, that is our belief, and has been our belief for four thousand years, since the call of Abraham around 1850 B.C.

One of the promises God made to Abraham and his descendants, which includes us, is that God will protect God's people. It is from this promise that the expectation of a messiah was born. The word *messiah*, like the word *Christ*, means *an anointed one*. In Old Testament times priests, kings, and prophets were all anointed. Whenever the people were suffering, whenever they were defeated by a political enemy, they expected God to send someone to save them.

Through the centuries this expectation was fulfilled time after time. When the Israelites were slaves in Egypt God sent Moses to save them. When they were threatened by the Philistines God sent David. When they were conquered by the Babylonians God sent Cyrus. When they were subject to Roman rule, during the time Jesus lived on earth, the people expected God to send someone to save them from the Romans.

During all of these times in their history the people waited for God's messiah, and their expectations were fulfilled. However, in Jesus their expectations were fulfilled beyond their wildest dreams.

In the first learning experience we are going to search for the Messiah in the Old Testament readings that we hear on the Sundays of Advent. Then we are going to turn our attention to the Gospel readings to discover what they tell us about Jesus, the Messiah. Our exploration will help us understand what kind of Messiah Jesus would be and what that means for us today.

Part 3. In Depth Learning Experience (80-90 minutes)

Families with Children Learning Experiences

Family Learning Experience 1. Who Is the Messiah?

Participants will study the Advent Lectionary readings to discover what they tell us about Jesus as the Messiah. The Advent Lectionary readings will serve as the primary resource for understanding what kind of Messiah Jesus would be and what that means for us.

Materials Needed

- One packet of Scripture readings to each table group (Handout #5)
- Handouts #2 and #6
- File cards
- Newsprint and markers
- Magazines and newspapers
- Glue sticks, scissors
- 11x17 paper

Preparation

Collect a variety of current events magazines with pictures and current newspapers for the family activity. Consider asking families to bring a selection of current magazines to the session.

Activity 1. Exploring the Old Testament Readings

Guide families through the following process:

1. Select three Scripture passages from the packet on the table.
2. Read each Scripture passage aloud and ask: "What kind of Messiah are we expecting in this Scripture passage?" Highlight key words on the Scripture passage.
3. When you have finished all three Scripture passages you should write on a file card your answers to the question, "What kind of Messiah are we expecting in these Scripture passages?" Answers should reflect what you learned from all three passages.
4. Share your reflections with the other families at your table.
5. Create a table report on newsprint that summarizes what kind of Messiah was expected in the Advent Old Testament readings. Label the newsprint, "The Messiah who was expected..."

Activity 2. Exploring the Gospel Readings

Guide families through the following process:

1. Read Matthew 4:23-25 and 11:2-11 on Handout #6, and ask "What is Jesus doing in these two Gospel passages?" Highlight key words in the Scripture passage.
2. Recall stories from the Gospels that illustrate when Jesus actually did these things. Think of stories that you hear at Sunday Mass or learned in educational programs that are examples of Jesus actually doing the things that are identified in the two Gospel passages above.
3. To help younger children recall stories from the Gospels, look at the pictures of Jesus' actions on the handout and have them tell a story of what they think Jesus is doing in the story.
4. Read the following Gospel stories on Handout #6 that illustrate Jesus in action. One parent should select a story to read to young children, while the other parent and/or the older children select their own stories to read. Be sure not to select the same story. Have each family member summarize the story he or she reads and then identify what Jesus is doing in the story.
 - The blind receive their sight; Matthew 9:27-31.
 - The lame walk: Mark 2:1-12.
 - The lepers are cleansed: Mark 1:40-45
 - The deaf hear: Mark 7:31-37.
 - The dead are raised: Mark 5:22-24, 35-43.
 - The poor have good news brought to them: Luke 6:17-26 .
5. Invite table groups to share the insights from the stories as a family. Give each family member time to share his or her summary and identify what Jesus is doing in the story. Then continue:

Connect the Gospel stories you have read, as a family, to the Old Testament readings and the two Gospel stories from Matthew. How do Jesus' actions reflect the expectations of the Messiah from the Old Testament? Refer to your newsprint report from the first learning activity: "The Messiah who was expected . . ."

Activity 3. Doing a Creative Activity

Guide families through the following process:

1. Imagine that the messengers of John the Baptist came to your family today and asked you: "Is Jesus the Messiah or should we look elsewhere?" How would your family respond? What would Jesus be doing today as the Messiah—in our community, nation, and world. Your task is to take the work of the Messiah as you read about it in Matthew 4 and 11 and the other Gospel stories and illustrate it with examples from today.

Here are several ways that your family, either as individuals or as a total family effort, can create your response:

- Create a poster that illustrates the work of the Messiah with photos from magazines. Identify photos that portray situations or circumstances in which you think Jesus would be involved. Be sure to label each photo with an action from Matthew 4 or 11.
 - Create artwork to illustrate the work of the Messiah today, such as a picture of Jesus visiting sick people or serving the poor at a soup kitchen. Artwork can take many forms, such as pictures of Jesus' actions today or symbols for Jesus' actions.
 - Create a comic strip to illustrate the work of the Messiah today. Parents and children should work together to create a storyline, develop characters, draw characters, and write the text.
 - Create a visual advertisement for Jesus' work today. You can use a variety of advertising methods, such as an ad in a magazine or newspaper, a poster advertisement, a billboard, a t-shirt, or other article of clothing.
 - Re-write Matthew 11 for today's audience by using the same storyline and adding contemporary examples for each of Jesus' actions.
2. Share your creative project with the other families at the table.
 3. Conclude the first learning experience with the following:

Jesus, when he came, was not at all what the people expected. Jesus was the Word made flesh who dwelt among us (see John 1:14). Jesus was a divine person. The people had expected an instrument of God's power, like Moses or David, but they had not expected God to take on human flesh and dwell among us. Even a God whose love is unshakable and who always forgives was not expected to become one of us.

The understanding that Jesus is a divine person is a post-resurrection understanding. During Jesus' life on earth his disciples realized that he was a great teacher and a great healer. They knew that God's power was in Jesus, but they did not realize until after the resurrection that Jesus is God incarnate.

True, Peter called Jesus “the Messiah” (Mark 8:30; Matthew 16:16; Luke 9:20), but a *Messiah* to Peter was a person who saved God’s people from political enemies and gave them extended life on earth, not a person who redeemed God’s people from sin and offered them eternal life.

Only after the resurrection, when Jesus appeared to the disciples, opened the Scriptures for them, and commissioned them to carry on Jesus’ work of building up the kingdom of God, were the disciples able to proclaim what we also proclaim about Jesus: Jesus is our Lord and our God (see John 20:28). In Jesus the people’s hopes for a messiah, hopes born in covenant love, were fulfilled beyond anything that anyone could imagine. God took on human flesh and dwelt among us in order to reveal the unimaginable depth of God’s love for each one of us.

Family Learning Experience 2. Preparing for the Coming of the Messiah

Materials Needed

- Paper and pens or pencils
- Handouts #8 and #9
- Materials for creating the Advent chains (found on Handout #8)

Participants will create ways to prepare for the Messiah’s coming in their lives, their families, and the world.

Organize all of the participants into the intergenerational groups that were used in the All Ages Learning Experience.

Use the following information to introduce the learning activity. Make your presentation appropriate to the ages of the participants.

We are busy “preparing” all the time—preparing for the ordinary and more complex events of life daily and throughout the year. The season of Advent focuses our attention on preparation for the Lord’s coming. During Advent we especially prepare ourselves, our hearts, and our home for the coming of Jesus in the celebration of Christmas.

Jesus may return at any time for the “second coming.” Yet in another sense, he returns to us regularly in surprising ways. But we won’t be ready for him or see him unless we prepare for those unexpected returns. What steps can we take, as individuals and families, to prepare for the Lord’s coming not only during Advent, but every day of the year in our lives and homes? How can we be prepared to see the Lord in the faces and events of our family and daily life? How are we making our home ready for him, always and every day, not only during Advent?

Ask the groups to consider their readiness for Advent by inviting people to reflect on the following questions, individually or as a family, and then share their responses in the group.

- How do you as an individual or family currently prepare during Advent for the coming of Jesus into our lives and world at Christmas?
- How could you better prepare for Jesus’ coming—in your own life, in your family, in the community?

Direct each group to discuss the following questions, and then ask them to develop ideas for preparing for the Messiah during the Advent season.

- Based on what you have learned about the Messiah in this session, how can you welcome this Messiah into your lives, homes, and world this year?
- What can you begin doing to make sure you prepare well for Jesus' coming at Christmas?

Have each group generate specific ideas for preparing for the Messiah's coming. Ask them to write the ideas on paper so they don't forget. For example:

- Pray together with the Advent Wreath every evening at mealtime.
- Simplify our gift-giving and give gifts of time and self to each other.
- Prioritize the things involved in our Christmas preparation so that we have time to spend together.
- Make the manger scene a focal symbol in our home this year.
- Create an Advent sharing chain and an Advent prayer chain.
- Find ways to serve those in need.

Invite participants to review Handout #8, which provides the instructions for the Advent Calendar or Advent Chain. They are to identify practical ways to do something every day to get ready for Jesus. Everyone will create an Advent Calendar or Advent Chain. (Customize the handout to include only those options for creating the calendar that you can do.)

Guide the entire group through the process of creating the calendar or chain.

Families with children or teenagers should try to create one calendar for the entire family. Or they may choose to have older children and teenagers create their own calendar or chain, while parents work with young children.

Then invite them to share a link or two from their chain with another person or family.

After completing the activity, note that Handout #9 is theirs to take home to select additional Advent Activities. Among the ideas listed are:

- making Christmas ornaments
- writing prayers for each week of the Advent season
- designing Advent placemats
- creating a door decoration to remind us that we are welcoming the Messiah into our homes

(When doing this in Whole Group Format, if the families with children group finish their work before the other groups, give them Handout #10: Advent Word Scramble to complete.)

Adolescent Learning Experiences

Adolescent Learning Experience 1. Searching for the Messiah Today

Materials Needed

- Handout #5 cut out as specified
- Handouts #3 and #7
- Newsprint and markers
- Art supplies: large pieces of paper, pictures from magazines and newspapers, glue, scissors, clay, etc.

Activity 1. Exploring the Old Testament Readings

Referring them to Handout #3, guide adolescents through the following process:

Select one Scripture passage from the packet of Old Testament readings. Read the Scripture passage and ask: "What kind of Messiah are we expecting in this Scripture passage?" Highlight key words on the Scripture passage.

Share your reflections as a group. Begin by reading a selection from your Scripture passage and then offer your response to the question of what kind of Messiah was expected in this Scripture passage.

Create a table report on newsprint that summarizes what kind of Messiah was expected in all of the Advent Old Testament readings. Ask groups to label the newsprint, "The Messiah who was expected . . ."

Activity 2. Exploring the Gospel Readings

Guide adolescents through the following process:

Read Matthew 4:23-25 and 11:2-11 on Handout #7, and ask "What is Jesus doing in these two Gospel passages?" Highlight key words in the Scripture passage.

Recall stories from the Gospels that illustrate when Jesus actually did these things. Think of stories that you hear at Sunday Mass or learned in educational programs that are examples of Jesus actually doing the things that are identified in the two Gospel passages.

Assign one of the following Gospel stories on Handout #7 to each person in the group. Be sure that each of the six categories is covered. Have each group member summarize the story he or she read and then identify what Jesus is doing in the story.

- the blind receive their sight; Matthew 9:27-31, Matthew 20:29-34, Mark 8:22-26
- the lame walk: Mark 2:1-12,
- the lepers are cleansed: Mark 1:40-45, Luke 17:11-19
- the deaf hear: Mark 7:31-37
- the dead are raised: Mark 5:22-24, 35-43, Luke 7:11-17
- the poor have good news brought to them: Luke 6:17-26

Share your insights with the others in your group.

Connect the Gospel stories you have read to the Old Testament readings and the two Gospel stories from Matthew. How do Jesus' actions reflect the expectations of the Messiah from the Old Testament? Refer to your newsprint report from the first learning activity: "The Messiah who was expected . . ."

Activity 3. Bringing the Messiah to the 21st Century

Guide adolescents through the following process:

Imagine that the messengers of John the Baptist came to your group today and asked you: "Is Jesus the Messiah or should we look elsewhere?" How would your group respond? What would Jesus be doing today as the Messiah—in our community, nation, and world?

Your task is to take the work of the Messiah as you read about it in Matthew 4 and 11 and the other Gospel stories, and illustrate it with examples from today.

Here are several ways that your group can create your response:

- Create a resumé for the Messiah today using what you have learned from the Old Testament and Gospel readings. Imagine the Jesus had to present his credentials for the job of Messiah today. What would you put in his resumé?
- Create a ten-minute TV news report on the work of the Messiah. Develop a storyline, create scenes that you want to videotape, write interviews with people, and write your commentary.
- Re-write Matthew 11 for today's audience by using the same storyline and adding contemporary examples for each of Jesus' actions.
- Create a poster that illustrates the work of the Messiah with photos from magazines. Identify photos that portray situations or circumstances in which you think Jesus would be involved. Be sure to label each photo with an action from Matthew 4 or 11.
- Create artwork to illustrate the work of the Messiah today, such as a picture of Jesus visiting sick people or serving the poor at a soup kitchen. Artwork can take many forms, such as drawing pictures of Jesus' actions today, creating posters in the style of movie posters, creating symbols of Jesus' actions on paper or in clay. You could even create pictures that look like modern stain glass windows to illustrate Jesus' actions.
- Create a comic strip to illustrate the work of the Messiah today. Work together to create a storyline, develop characters, draw characters, and write the text.
- Create a visual advertisement for Jesus' work today. You can use a variety of advertising methods, such as an ad in a magazine or newspaper, a poster advertisement, a billboard, a t-shirt, or other article of clothing.

Allow time for the youth to create their responses. Then invite them to share their creative projects with other tables.

Conclude the first learning experience with the following:

Jesus, when he came, was not at all what the people expected. Jesus was the Word made flesh who dwelt among us (see John 1:14). Jesus was a divine person. The people had expected an instrument of God's power, like Moses or David, but they had not expected God to take on human flesh and dwell among us. Even a God whose love is unshakable and who always forgives was not expected to become one of us.

The understanding that Jesus is a divine person is a post-resurrection understanding. During Jesus' life on earth his disciples realized that he was a great teacher and a great healer. They knew that God's power was in Jesus, but they did not realize until after the resurrection that Jesus is God incarnate.

True, Peter called Jesus "the Messiah" (Mark 8:30; Matthew 16:16; Luke 9:20), but a *Messiah* to Peter was a person who saved God's people from political enemies and gave them extended life on earth, not a person who redeemed God's people from sin and offered them eternal life.

Only after the resurrection, when Jesus appeared to the disciples, opened the Scriptures for them, and commissioned them to carry on Jesus' work of building up the kingdom of God, were the disciples able to proclaim what we also proclaim about Jesus: Jesus is our Lord and our God (see John 20:28). In Jesus the people's hopes for a messiah, hopes born in covenant love, were fulfilled beyond anything that anyone could imagine. God took on human flesh and dwelt among us in order to reveal the unimaginable depth of God's love for each one of us.

Adolescent Learning Experience 2. Preparing for the Coming of the Messiah

Use Learning Experience 2 in the Families with Children section.

Adult Learning Experiences

Adult Learning Experience 1. Images of the Messiah

Materials Needed

- Handouts #3, #4, #5, and #7
- Newsprint and markers

Activity 1. Reflecting on Personal Images of the Messiah

Give one packet of Scripture readings to each table group (Handout #5) and copies of Handouts #3 and #7.

The process has been designed to be self-directed by the group. However, if desired, you can guide the adults through the process.

Reflecting on Personal Images of the Messiah

Guide adults through the following process:

Take a moment for quiet meditation on your personal images of Jesus as the Messiah. Close your eyes and relax. Bring to mind all that you have learned about Jesus Christ from the Scriptures, from family and friends, from your ethnic tradition, from your participation in church life. Ask yourself, Who is the Messiah for me? What images or understandings come to mind? Capture this in a key word or phrase, or draw a picture or symbol.

Share your image or understanding of Jesus with the group.

Activity 2. Exploring Old Testament Prophecies

Guide adults through the following process:

Select one Scripture passage from the packet of Old Testament readings. Read the Scripture passage and ask: "What kind of Messiah are we expecting in this Scripture passage?" Highlight key words on the Scripture passage.

Share your reflections as a group. Begin by reading a selection from your Scripture passage and then offer your response to the question of what kind of Messiah was expected in this Scripture passage.

Create a table report on newsprint that summarizes what kind of Messiah that was expected in all of the Advent Old Testament readings. Ask groups to label the newsprint, "The Messiah who was expected . . ."

Activity 3. Exploring Jesus' Actions in the Gospels

Guide adults through the following process:

Read Matthew 4:23-25 and 11:2-11 (Third Sunday of Advent-A) on Handout #7, and ask "What is Jesus doing in these two Gospel passages?" Highlight key words in the Scripture passage.

Share your responses to the question as a group.

Recall stories from the Gospels that illustrate when Jesus actually did these things. As a group identify specific Gospel stories of Jesus actually doing the things that are identified in Matthew 4 and 11.

Assign one of the following Gospel stories on Handout #7 to each person in the group. Be sure that each of the six categories is covered. Have each group member summarize the story he or she read and then identify what Jesus is doing in the story.

- the blind receive their sight; Matthew 9:27-31, Matthew 20:29-34, Mark 8:22-26
- the lame walk: Mark 2:1-12,
- the lepers are cleansed: Mark 1:40-45, Luke 17:11-19
- the deaf hear: Mark 7:31-37
- the dead are raised: Mark 5:22-24, 35-43, Luke 7:11-17
- the poor have good news brought to them: Luke 6:17-26

Share the insights from each group member by moving around the group and asking for brief reports from each person.

Activity 4. Reflecting on the Gospel Images of the Messiah

Guide adults through the following process:

Take a moment to read these reflections on Matthew 11 as found on Handout #4.

John Donohue in *Hearing the Word of God—Reflections on the Sunday Readings Year A* offers these reflections on Matthew 11 and the other Lectionary readings for the Third Sunday of Advent:

“Resonating through the readings today are messages of hope for people almost three millennia ago, for people at the beginning of the first millennium, and for people today. Amidst the turmoil of internal injustice and invasion by the Assyrians, Isaiah proclaims: “Be strong, fear not! Here is your God, he comes with vindication . . . he comes to save you.” James exhorts his community to faithful waiting (patience) for the coming of the Lord, and an imprisoned John the Baptist wonders whether his life’s hope is to be fulfilled, “Are you the one who is to come or should we look for another?”.

“Especially powerful and poignant is the picture of John, the second figure of expectation for Advent. John, the spirit-possessed prophet who, like Amos and Isaiah, castigated the religious leaders of his day, proclaimed the coming wrath of God, and pointed to one coming even stronger than he, sits now in Herod Antipas’ prison awaiting death, because he confronted with God’s word the powerful and violent people of his day. John wonders if his life was worthwhile and ask his disciples to go to Jesus and ask if he really is the awaited stronger one.

“Jesus’ answer is as much a challenge to John as is his life to us today. Jesus is not the stronger one who will usher in the day of wrath and winnow the wheat and chaff, but the one whose deeds give us the most profound hopes of Isaiah: the blind see the beauty of a dawn; the deaf hear the song of the birds; the lame jump; lepers rejoin their families; the poor receive good news that God is on their side (Isaiah 26:19; 29:18-19; 35:6, 61:1). John, who lived proclaiming God’s word, must now wait for death sustained by faith and hope in the that word.” (p. 9)

Mary Birmingham (*Word and Worship Workbook for Year A*) offers these insights on Matthew 11, when she writes:

“What a character, this John! He was in prison. Had he been stupid enough to stand for the truth? Surely he had to know what it would cost him! Was he a fool? Where were all his friends? He sat there alone. Did he wonder if it had all been a hoax? Was he depressed? Why did he ask the question: “Are you the One?” Didn’t he already know the answer? He baptized Jesus, didn’t he? Was he expecting a different kind of messiah? Did Jesus throw him off guard? Rather than give easy answers, Jesus sent word back to John that demanded the same response from John that he asks from us today. Jesus told John to observe the signs and figure it out for himself. The blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life and the poor have the good news preached to them. Of course John would know that these were the very things the scriptures of old foretold as evidence of the reign of God. God’s wonderful works! God’s marvelous deeds! Truly the reign of God was in his midst—in *our* midst. There is always enough

evidence to proclaim the reign of God, but there is also always a fragment or a piece of ambiguity that demands that we accept the good news on faith. Who and where are the signs of God's reign in our modern world: the blind, the deaf, lame, dead, and the poor? Do we recognize the signs, or are we blind to them?" (p. 69)

How do Jesus' actions reflect the expectations of the Messiah from the Old Testament? Refer to your report from the Old Testament readings: "The Messiah that was expected . . ." Discuss this as a group.

How do the images of the Messiah in Matthew 4 and 11 compare and contrast with your own personal images of the Messiah? Where is affirming? What is challenging? What would you change or add?

What impact might your learning have on your relationship with Jesus Christ?

Activity 5. Bringing the Messiah to the 21st Century

Guide adults through the following process:

Imagine that the messengers of John the Baptist came to your group today and asked you: "Is Jesus the Messiah or should we look elsewhere?" How would your group respond? What would Jesus be doing today as the Messiah—in your community, nation, and world. Your task is to take the work of the Messiah as you read about it in Matthew 4 and 11 and the other Gospel stories, and illustrate it with examples from today.

Discuss the focusing question as a group and summarize your thoughts. Prepare a report to share with other groups.

Consider developing a creative project to capture your thinking. Here are several examples:

- Create a resumé for the Messiah today using what you have learned from the Old Testament and Gospel readings. Imagine the Jesus had to present his credentials for the job of Messiah today. What would you put in his resumé?
- Re-write Matthew 11 for today's audience by using the same storyline and adding contemporary examples for each of Jesus' actions.
- Create artwork to illustrate the work of the Messiah today. Artwork can take many forms, such as drawing pictures of Jesus actions today, creating posters in the style of movie posters, creating symbols of Jesus' actions on paper or in clay. You could even create pictures that look like modern stain glass windows to illustrate Jesus' actions.

Share your report and/or creative project with other tables.

Conclude the first learning experience with the following:

Jesus, when he came, was not at all what the people expected. Jesus was the Word made flesh who dwelt among us (see John 1:14). Jesus was a divine person. The people had expected an instrument of God's power, like Moses or David, but they had not expected God to take on human flesh and dwell among us. Even a God whose love is unshakable and who always forgives was not expected to become one of us.

The understanding that Jesus is a divine person is a post-resurrection understanding. During Jesus' life on earth his disciples realized that he was a great teacher and a great healer. They knew that God's power was in Jesus, but they did not realize until after the resurrection that Jesus is God incarnate.

True, Peter called Jesus "the Messiah" (Mark 8:30; Matthew 16:16; Luke 9:20), but a *Messiah* to Peter was a person who saved God's people from political enemies and gave them extended life on earth, not a person who redeemed God's people from sin and offered them eternal life.

Only after the resurrection, when Jesus appeared to the disciples, opened the Scriptures for them, and commissioned them to carry on Jesus' work of building up the kingdom of God, were the disciples able to proclaim what we also proclaim about Jesus: Jesus is our Lord and our God (see John 20:28). In Jesus the people's hopes for a messiah, hopes born in covenant love, were fulfilled beyond anything that anyone could imagine. God took on human flesh and dwelt among us in order to reveal the unimaginable depth of God's love for each one of us.

Adult Learning Experience 2. Preparing for the Coming of the Messiah

Use Learning Experience 2 in the Families with Children section.

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.

Invite people in intergenerational groups to share ideas from their Advent Calendar that they will do during the Advent season. Move from one family or individual to the next sharing ideas from the Advent Calendar they created.

To guide the individuals and families in sharing what they learned through the program, present the following information using the words below or your own words:

Think of everything we have done in this session to understand the meaning of the Messiah in the Advent Lectionary and develop practical ways to welcome Jesus, the Messiah, into our lives, homes, and world.

- What is the most important "lesson" you have learned?
- Which actions of Jesus, the Messiah will you take home with you?
- Why do you think Advent and the ways we prepare for the Messiah are so important for us as Catholics? What difference will it make in your life this Advent and throughout the year?

Invite participants to take several minutes for small group sharing. Ask for responses.

Part 5. Closing Prayer Service (10 minutes)

Gather

Gracious God, we give you thanks for sending Jesus as our Messiah.
He is the One who opens our eyes to your unconditional love,
gives us feet to walk along the path of love and justice,
forgives our sins so that we may be made whole,
opens our ears to hear your Good News in our daily lives,
and give us hope to live as people of the light.
We ask this in the name of our Messiah and Savior. Amen.

Listen

Looking for the Messiah—A Story from the Monastery in the Mountains

High in the mountains was a monastery that had once been known throughout the world. Its monks were pious, its students were enthusiastic. The chants from the monastery's chapel deeply touched the hearts of people who came there to pray and meditate.

But something changed. Fewer and fewer young men came to study there; fewer and fewer people came for spiritual nourishment. The monks who remained became disheartened and sad.

Deeply worried, the abbot of the monastery went off in search of an answer. Why had his monastery fallen on such hard times?

The abbot came to a guru, and he asked the master, "Is it because of some sin of ours that the monastery is no longer full of vitality?"

"Yes," replied the master, "it is the sin of ignorance."

"The sin of ignorance?" questioned the abbot. "Of what are we ignorant?"

The guru looked at the abbot for a long, long time, and then he said, "One of you is the messiah in disguise. But you are all ignorant of this." Then, the guru closed his eyes, and he was silent.

"The messiah?" thought the abbot. "The messiah is one of us? Who could it be? Could it be Brother Cook? Could it be Brother Treasurer? Could it be Brother Bell-Ringer? Could it be Brother Vegetable Grower?"

"Which one? Which one? Every one of us has faults, failings, human defects. Isn't the messiah supposed to be perfect? But perhaps these faults and failings are part of his disguise. Which one? Which one?"

When the abbot returned to the monastery, he gathered all the monks together and told them what the guru had said.

"One of us? The messiah? Impossible!"

But the master had spoken, and the master was never wrong.

“One of us? The messiah? Incredible! But it must be so. Which one? Which one? That brother over there? That one? That one?”

Whichever one of the monks was the messiah, he was, surely, in disguise.

Not knowing who amongst them was the messiah, all the monks began treating each other with new respect. “You never know,” they thought, “he might be the one, so I had better deal with him kindly.”

It was not long before the monastery was filled with new-found joy. Soon, new students came to learn, and people came from far and wide to be inspired by the chants of the kind, smiling monks.

For once again, the monastery was filled with the spirit of love.

(From: *Golden Rules: The Ten Ethical Values Parents Need to Teach Their Children*. Wayne Dosick.)

Respond

We pray for time to prepare for the coming of the Messiah in our lives and in our homes . . .

Response: Hear us, O Lord

We pray that we open our hearts and minds to the Word of God that we hear every Sunday of Advent . . .

Response: Hear us, O Lord

We pray that we celebrate the Advent season in prayer and ritual at home . . .

Response: Hear us, O Lord

We pray that we find ways to serve the poor in our midst during this Advent season . . .

Response: Hear us, O Lord

We pray that we turn away from the busyness and commercialism during December and focus on Jesus and his coming . . .

Response: Hear us, O Lord

We pray that we share in the love of our families and friends during the Advent and Christmas seasons . . .

Response: Hear us, O Lord

We pray that we be blessed with the courage to share the Good News of the Messiah’s coming . . .

Response: Hear us, O Lord

Go Forth

Let us pray . . .

May the spirit of the Lord rest upon us and bless us
with the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
with the spirit of counsel and might,
with the spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord.
May our delight be in our love for the Lord. Amen.