

# Advent Retreat 2017



## Let it be . . .

Advent is a season with much preparation for the coming of Christ. One event follows the other, and between decorating, baking, shopping, and gathering, we hardly find space to wait for the One who came, is always coming, and will come again. This half-day retreat opens up space to wait with one another, with Scripture and with silence, to watch for God's coming and to listen with the prophet Isaiah for God's word to us. In listening, we learn to join Mary in saying, "Let it be . . ."

## Introduction

When we think of the Advent season, preparing for Christ's coming, we find people in the Gospels who are waiting; whether Elizabeth and Zechariah, Mary and Joseph, the magi who are actively and persistently searching, or Anna and Simeon who are patiently dreaming, hoping, and waiting their whole life. Nobody went home on the same road from the birth of Jesus, not the magi, not Zechariah and Elizabeth, not Mary and Joseph, not the shepherds, not Anna and Simeon, and neither should we. All were guided in their journey to the light of Christ by angels, dreams, the Hebrew Scriptures, or a star. The Isaiah Scriptures invite us to join this group of people to explore our vulnerability in waiting, our openness to receiving the words of God, and our courage to respond like Mary, "Let it be to me according to your word."

## Schedule

9:00 a.m.	Gathering
9:15 a.m.	Let it be . . . tear open the heavens and come down ( <i>Isaiah 64</i> )
10:15 a.m.	Let it be . . . comfort, O comfort my people ( <i>Isaiah 40</i> )
11:15 a.m.	Let it be . . . restored, the spirit of the Lord God is upon me ( <i>Isaiah 61</i> )
12:00 noon	Closing worship
12:15 p.m.	Gather for a soup and bread lunch to slowly reenter the world

## Materials needed

- A center table with a tablecloth, Advent candles, greenery, maybe nativity figures, or other visuals appropriate to the season
- Recorded music for the Advent season, including a recording of "O Come, O Come, Immanuel."
- Tea, coffee, baked goods, and fresh fruit for gathering time and refreshment breaks
- Session materials: handouts with Scripture texts and reflection questions, playdough or clay for session 1, art supplies for session 2, writing supplies
- Optional centerpieces—a napkin, candle, evergreen branches—that people could take with them to the space where they will spend their quiet time with the texts
- Soup and bread and jam or cheese for lunch (depending on the size of the group and where you gather, you may ask for volunteers to bring items for lunch)

## Gathering

Welcome participants with light refreshments as they arrive. Invite them into the worship and gathering space prepared with a table in the center with a tablecloth, greenery, and Advent candles, with the first candle already lit. Light the other candles one at a time before each session. You may have additional visuals appropriate to the season, such as artwork or nativity figures that help set the tone for a quiet, contemplative space. Keep it simple. Have some music playing as people settle in.

## Music suggestions:

STS 106	Like a Tender Breath Stirring
STJ 69	Cuando el pobre
HWB 178	Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus
HWB 172	O Come, O Come, Immanuel

Outline the retreat structure briefly, followed by a time of introductions. Invite people to share their names, why they are here, how they approach the Advent season, and/or a word that describes best where they find themselves at that moment (tired, excited, centered, waiting . . .). You may want to adjust the introduction time, depending on how well the group knows each other.

Depending on the group and setting, you may also set up centerpieces in various rooms for people to use, or have items, such as a beautiful napkin, a candle, an evergreen branch, ready for people to take with them.

Conclude the gathering time by reading Isaiah 63:7-9, followed by an opening prayer of thanks for this time and the people gathered. Invite God's blessing upon your time together, and depending on your group, end with a song. Then distribute the first handout. Dismiss participants to find a place alone for the first session.

Between each session, ask participants to return at a set time, or call them back by playing an Advent song if everyone is within hearing distance. Light the next candle before participants return. Invite people to share a brief word or reflection from the previous session, or simply acknowledge that you are moving into the next session with a brief introduction or quote or by reading the Scripture or introductory paragraph from the handout aloud for the next session.

### ***Lectio divina***

*Lectio divina* is a prayerful reading of Scripture. It invites the reader, through several readings of the text, to let go of what we bring to the text and to open ourselves to hear God's voice. Fr. Gervase Holdaway has likened *lectio divina* to "feasting on the Word": first, the taking of a bite (*lectio*); then chewing on it (*meditatio*); savoring its essence (*oratio*); and finally, digesting it and making it a part of the body (*contemplatio*).

*Lectio* (reading): Read the Scripture slowly, and listen for a word or phrase that stands out to you.

*Meditatio* (reflection): Read the Scripture again, let it sink in, and reflect more deeply on the word or phrase that speaks to you, and why.

*Oratio* (response/prayer): As you read the Scripture again, what is God's invitation to you in this word or phrase?

*Contemplatio* (rest/contemplate): Read the Scripture one more time and spend several minutes sitting in receptive silence.

## **Session 1: Isaiah 64:1-9 (*handout*)**

"O that you would tear open the heavens and come down." The prophet Isaiah jolts us out of ordinary time and into the season of Advent. A time of waiting with anticipation, full of yearning and longing for God's presence. A longing to make that presence known in powerful ways in our wounded, fearful, and divisive world: to make the mountains quake, to make the nations tremble, to speak for the powerless, to bring justice into oppressive structures and our personal lives.

### **Read Isaiah 64:1-9 slowly several times (*lectio divina*)**

What do you notice? What words draw you? Where do you find yourself resisting?

### **Some questions for reflection**

We yearn for God to tear open the heavens and come down, to visit us wherever we find ourselves. And yet we shake, we quake like the mountains in the presence of God. Where are we resisting or fearful of God coming down to us? What makes us shake in God's presence?

### **Praying with clay**

Lean into the intimacy and connectivity of God molding, shaping, and forming you. What does it feel like being the clay in the Potter's hands? How has God formed you and held you in the past? How is God forming and shaping you in the present?

### **Praying by writing your own psalm**

As you read the Scripture, what is your response to the opening phrase? How would you continue, in your own words, the following line, as in writing your own prayer to God: "*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down . . .*"

### **Praying for the world**

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,  
into our world . . .  
into our community . . .  
into our church . . .  
into our homes . . .  
into our life . . .

## Session 2: Isaiah 40:1-11 (*handout*)

Into your fears, your wounds, your attachments, hear the words from the prophet Isaiah. The prophet speaks words of comfort, tenderness, and gentleness. Lean into the vulnerable space of trusting God, the One whose word will stand forever. That is the opening to learn to say yes in a new way to God, to make God's home within you. And the way forward is one already known, in remembering the way through the wilderness.

Isaiah 40 is a word from the almighty and incarnate God, a word of hope and promise to a people in exile. God's mighty arm mends what is broken. God comes in power to lift up, make straight, level the uneven, and make plain the rough places. But this might and power comes with the gentleness, nurturing, and caring attentiveness of a shepherd. Just as God will come to us this season in the form of a vulnerable, small child in an out-of-the-way place, so here we find a God who comes to his people.

### **Read Isaiah 40:1-11 slowly several times (*lectio divina*)**

What words is God drawing your attention to? Where do you need to be comforted? Held tenderly?

### **Prayer of response**

The promise is that all people, even the oppressors, will wither and fade. This is the word of promise to the lonely, the meek, those who mourn, and those who are persecuted, for they shall see God. It is a word of comfort to those experiencing trauma, those who are numb, afraid, or hopeless. Here is where you find hope in the presence of God who will appear: "Here is your God." "And I said, 'What shall I cry?'" What are your current discomforts? Where do you find yourself in exile or in the wilderness? Where does your hope come from?

### **Praying with art**

Gather a handful of colored pencils, crayons, markers, or watercolors. Play with the images and colors in the Scripture by drawing, doodling, coloring words, or writing the text in color. How does your drawing reflect or change the way you hear the words? What is God showing you?

## Session 3: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 (*handout*)

The epistle reading for the third Sunday of Advent from 1 Thessalonians 5:20 speaks to us: "Do not despise the words of prophets." So let us claim the words from the prophet Isaiah for ourselves—a time of restoration, dreaming, rejoicing, and rebuilding. Do not quench the Spirit, and with Mary proclaim: "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

### **Read Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 slowly several times (*lectio divina*)**

What do you notice? What words draw you? Where do you find yourself resisting? What word do you hear from God?

### **Praying our lives**

What is your call? A long time ago a friend stated, "A call is always simple and impossible so that you cannot rely on your own strength." Where are you called to join God in bringing good news, binding up, proclaiming, releasing, providing, and transforming?

### **Praying with your imagination**

Go for a walk, or imagine yourself in the images of the text: ruins and devastation being rebuilt, repaired, and restored; the earth bringing forth shoots, seeds springing up, the abundance of a garden. What do you notice within and around you?

### **Praying with gratitude**

Write a prayer of thanksgiving and praise. Or write a card to someone you are grateful for in your journey of faith.

## Closing lunch

To slow down the transition from a morning spent in the company of God to a return to the noise of the world, gather over a simple lunch of soup and bread at the end of the retreat time. Share with one another about the morning's experience.

Welcome the participants to the table, quietly playing the song "O Come, O Come, Immanuel." Offer a prayer.

## Closing prayer

O God of the waiting, we have listened

to your words spoken through the prophet Isaiah.

We have listened inside ourselves

to the stumbling blocks that keep us from finding peace.

We have listened

to your tender loving words of comfort.

We have listened

to our response: "Here I am, the servant of the Lord;

let it be with me

according to your word."

Be with us now as we gather around the lunch table,

and go with us into the noise of the world.

In the name of the One who came to dwell with us. Amen.