

# ***A Christmas Carol: A Book Study for Advent***

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This study draws on a series of three sermons preached by Laura Alary (Christian educator, storyteller and children's author) in December 2014. She turned to the author and storyteller, Charles Dickens, and his novel *A Christmas Carol* – a popular dramatic reading in many venues during Advent. Laura wanted to consider how the book's message of "the hope of transformation" relates to the Season of Advent, its scripture readings, and the stories they tell. She wondered if Dickens' story might "help us tell and hear the Advent Story in a way that helps us experience it."

There are six parts to this study:

1. Introduction
2. Marley's Ghost
3. The Spirit of Christmas Past
4. The Spirit of Christmas Present
5. The Spirit of Christmas Yet to Come
6. Conclusion

This study can be used individually or in a group, and can be led by lay leaders. You will need:

- NSRV Bible and one or more other translations
- A study Bible and/or access to the internet to learn about the living conditions (e.g. political, economic) in biblical times under the rule of the Roman Empire.
- The Book of Praise hymnbook
- A copy of Dickens' book *A Christmas Carol* for each person and/or a DVD of the movie with a DVD player.

The study material is designed to follow the reading and/or viewing of the relevant chapters, called "staves."

# 1. Introduction

## What is Advent?

What does the Season of Advent mean to you?

Advent is the beginning of the church year and includes the four Sundays leading up to Christmas. The word “advent” comes from the Latin verb “advenire” meaning “to arrive.” Advent is often thought of as a period of waiting for the arrival of the baby Jesus, God-with-us. However, connected to the idea of waiting are the ideas of yearning for God, preparing for God, waiting for God to come, and waiting for God to transform the world.

Think about your home, work or student life. What activities and feelings do you associate with Advent? Think about your church. What activities and feelings do you associate with your congregation’s celebration of Advent? Think about the world outside your faith community – locally and globally. How might Advent themes relate to current events?

## Reflect on scripture

### A. Read Exodus 2:23-25.

1. Recall the story of the Israelites’ captivity in Egypt. What were the conditions that they were experiencing?
2. How could this be described as an Advent story?
3. What is another Old Testament story that echoes the themes of Advent?

### B. Read Luke 3:1-6.

1. Recall the story of the Judean people at the time of the birth of John the Baptist and Jesus. What were the conditions that they were experiencing under Roman rule?
2. How could this be described as an Advent story? Read the box “The Story of Advent.”

#### **The Story of Advent**

*In a way there really is no such thing as the Advent Story – at least not in the sense of a single coherent narrative, like the stories of the birth or death of Jesus. The Story of Advent is more like a collage or a quilt – a collection of pieces arranged to form a meaningful image. These pieces – fragments from different times and places – are bound together by a common feature: a sense of longing and expectation. – Laura Alary in *The Spirit of Advent Past: Wake up!* (2014)*

## Hymn

Sing or say “Oh come, oh come, Emmanuel” #122 in the Book of Praise.

## Pray

Dear God,  
we trust you will come into our lives, into our world,  
again and again.  
We trust you will not leave us.  
We long for a glimpse of you,  
for an experience of you, for God-with-us.  
We pray for our lives and world to be transformed. Amen.

## Next Steps

- Think about your plans in the weeks and days leading up to Christmas. How are the themes of waiting, yearning, preparing, and arriving present in your life?
- Think about the life of your congregation. How are the themes of waiting, yearning, preparing, and arriving present in your congregation's ministries?
- Read Stave One in *A Christmas Carol*.

## 2. Marley's Ghost

In *A Christmas Carol*, Ebenezer Scrooge was visited by the Ghost of his deceased business partner, Jacob Marley. The Ghost forewarned Scrooge that he would be visited by three spirits in succession.

It was Christmas Eve and Scrooge, having dined at the tavern, had gone home to go to bed. Describe Scrooge and his surroundings at the time that Marley's Ghost entered. Generate as long a list as possible with details about place, time, dress, behaviour, emotions, etc.

How is this scene similar and/or different to the scenes in many of our homes on Christmas Eve? How do you think it might be similar and/or different to the scenes in the homes of some of our neighbours (local and/or global) who do not celebrate Christmas?

Marley's Ghost was weighed down by heavy chains. Who forged them? What did they represent? Because Marley's eyes had been "turned down", what had Marley missed seeing and failed to do during his lifetime? What was the hope that the Ghost gave Scrooge?

### Reflect on scripture

#### A. Read Psalm 25:1-10.

1. This psalm is described as a prayer for guidance and deliverance. What Advent themes do you hear in this psalm?
2. Discuss how suitable this prayer – in whole or in part – would be for Scrooge to pray at this point in his life?

#### B. Read Luke 21:25-36.

1. This passage stresses "seeing" and being "on guard" and "alert." What are we told to look for? How does this passage connect with the Season of Advent? Read the box "Hoping."
2. What is the hope in this Luke passage? Where do you see people today longing and hoping for God?

#### **Hoping**

*When we gather up [from the Bible] all these bits of history and mythology and memory and put them together we create one great story, the story of people in trouble longing for the coming of God – the Advent of God – into times and places where it feels like God is absent. The Story of Advent is about people sitting in darkness, hoping for a glimpse of light. – Laura Alary in *The Spirit of Advent Past: Wake up!* (2014)*

#### **Hymn**

Sing or say "What is the crying at the Jordan" #132 in the Book of Praise.

## Pray

God, we believe you love us always.  
Even when we are experiencing darkness and fear in our lives  
when gloom and anxieties consume us  
we have hope,  
that we will see a sign of you,  
experience you,  
and be changed by you. Amen.

## Next Steps

- By reminding Scrooge of his past, Marley's Ghost placed Scrooge's attention on a part of himself – and on his way of living – that Scrooge had never questioned. What part of yourself might need attention as you prepare for Christmas this year?
- Read Stave Two in *A Christmas Carol*.

### 3. The Spirit of Christmas Past

What memories of the past come to your mind as you prepare for Christmas?

In *A Christmas Carol*, Ebenezer Scrooge was visited by the Ghost of Christmas Past. Dickens described the spirit in detail right up to the crown of its head where “sprung a bright clear jet of light, by which all this was visible.” This Ghost took Scrooge on a trip into the past, where he saw himself first as a boy and then as a man. The Ghost cast its light showing Scrooge “shadows of the things that have been.”

What were the different scenes from the past that Scrooge saw? What feelings are aroused in Scrooge by these scenes? In one scene, the fair young girl mentioned she had learned “a Truth.” What truth had she learned? What truth was illuminated for Scrooge by this Ghost’s light?

#### Reflect on scripture

##### A. Read Malachi 3:1-4.

1. In this passage the prophet Malachi speaks of the coming of someone who will refine and purify people. Why is this necessary? What had been happening in Judah? (Read Malachi 1 and 2 for descriptions of corruption and evil doing.)
2. What Advent themes do you hear in this?
3. How was the Ghost of Christmas Past like an Old Testament prophet (e.g. Malachi)?

##### B. Read Luke 1:68-79.

1. In this passage of Luke, Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, looks back and remembers what God has done before he shifts to envisioning the future for his son. What Advent themes do you hear in this?
2. Like Dickens’ description of Scrooge sitting in darkness, this passage refers to “those who sit in darkness.” How have you seen – or experienced – both the dark and the light at work in people’s lives? Comment on how they are both part of change, growth, and transformation. Read the box “Advent Paradox.”

#### Advent Paradox

*The paradox of Advent is that we need both light and darkness. We need the light that wakes us up and show us who and where we are and how we have come to be here. And we need the gentle darkness where we wait for transformation – for new life to be formed, for seeds to germinate, for new paths to open. – Laura Alary in *The Spirit of Advent Past: Wake up!* (2014)*

#### Hymn

Sing or say “People in darkness” #124 in the Book of Praise.

## Pray

Patient God,  
help us to hear the words of prophets of the past and of today;  
people who stir us in our dark moments,  
arouse us from complacency and self-centredness,  
direct us to look at ourselves, our lives, and our relationships.  
May we see the truth and welcome the chance for a new life in you. Amen.

## Next Steps

- Think about how you have come to be “here” today. “Here” might be using this resource, it might be in a church, or in a job or other undertaking, in a relationship or in a particular situation or life stage. Shine the “light” of your attention on how this came to be. What truth does this reveal to you? Looking forward, I wonder what new paths may be open to you...?
- Read Stave Three in *A Christmas Carol*.

## 4. The Spirit of Christmas Present

In *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge's next visitor was the Ghost of Christmas Present. Dickens described this spirit as a "Jolly Giant" who held its torch high up to shed light on Scrooge and his surroundings. He spoke with a "cheery voice" and had a "joyful air." In contrast, Scrooge was submissive, timid, and reverent and hung his head. He said, "conduct me where you will. I went forth last night on compulsion and I learnt a lesson which is working now. To-night, if you have aught to teach me, let me profit by it" (Stave Three).

Again Scrooge travelled from his home, but this time he travelled to scenes in the present time. What are the main scenes that Scrooge sees and lingers at? What feelings are aroused in Scrooge by these scenes? What feelings are stirred in Scrooge when in Stave Three the Ghost repeated Scrooge's own words to him:

*"If he be like to die, he had better do it, and decrease the surplus population."*

*"Are there no prisons? ...Are there no workhouses?"*

What changes had happened to Scrooge's view of the world, of the people in his life, and of his relationship to them? What lesson or truth did Scrooge learn from this Ghost?

### Reflect on scripture

#### A. Read Isaiah 12:2-6

1. In this passage the prophet acknowledges God's presence and activity in his life; he turns from worry and fear to trusting God and thanking God. What Advent themes underlie this passage?
2. Identify the actions the prophet encourages. We can choose to say and to things or not to act or speak. How do you think our choices affect God's presence? Our relationship with God? Our relationship with others?

#### B. Read Luke 3:7-18.

1. John the Baptist wanted people to be baptized as they repented for their wrongdoings. He urged them to change their behavior, citing very specific changes. He spoke about a coming Messiah. What Advent themes do you hear in this passage?
2. How is John the Baptist similar to the Spirit of Advent Present? How might Scrooge have been similar to the people John baptized? Read the box "Repentance."
3. Explain in your own words the "good news" that John proclaimed.

## **Repentance**

*To his credit, Ebenezer Scrooge responds to the truth bravely. He does not become defensive or angry...Instead, he receives this insight, this new awareness of this own connectedness to others, his own role in creating suffering in the lives of others, and he feels shame and sorrow. In the traditional language of the church this is called repentance. True repentance is not destructive self-loathing. Rather, it is the truthful acknowledgement of what is wrong in a given situation, the recognition of the part we play in it, and the intention to change. – Laura Alary in *The Spirit of Advent Present: Connected* (2014)*

## **Hymn**

Sing or say “Comfort, comfort you my people” #113 in the Book of Praise.

## **Pray**

Loving God,  
we seek awareness of our actions.  
We seek honesty and humility to admit mistakes,  
to see our responsibility in causing other parts of creation to suffer.  
We want to change our ways, to live your way. Amen.

## **Next Step**

- We are all connected – face-to-face with family, neighbours, work and school mates, etc. but also globally, often through the products we buy and consume. What we say and do matter – along with the choices we make – whether we are aware of what we are doing or not. Reflect on the parts of creation that intersect with your life. What do you need to repent? What will you do differently?
- Read Stave Four in *A Christmas Carol*.

## 5. The Spirit of Christmas Yet to Come

Caught up in all the preparations and activities of this season, we do not very often think about Christmas in the future. Perhaps we think about how one day we might improve our family space with renovations or by moving to a new apartment or house. Perhaps we see in our children the young adults they will become. Perhaps we recognize that our elderly family members may not be with us too many more times for Christmas.

How do you feel when you think about future possibilities at this time of year? Scrooge felt afraid, but he accompanied the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come in hope – “I hope to live to be another man from what I was” – and to “do it with a thankful heart.”

What were the scenes of the future that the Ghost showed Scrooge? How did they reflect on Scrooge’s life and relationships? When Scrooge understood that in these scenes he had been the dead man, what did he ask the Ghost? What hope did he seek? How did he say he would live from that day onward?

### Reflect on scripture

#### A. Read Micah 5:2-5a.

1. The prophet Micah is speaking at a time of great suffering in Judah. Like the period of wilderness wanderings, the people were struggling. What Advent themes are in this situation and Micah’s prophecy?

#### B. Read Luke 1:46-55.

1. In this familiar passage, known as Mary’s Song of Praise, Mary speaks with acceptance and certainty about God at work in her life and in the world. However, this was sometime after the angel Gabriel’s visit to Mary with the news that she would bear a son who would be named Jesus (Luke 1:31). How was Gabriel’s role similar to that of the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come?
2. Like Scrooge, Mary was confronted by a mysterious visitor who presented her with a future vision. Like Scrooge, she may have wondered if the vision was something that must be or might be, something that she could choose to participate in or to decline. What are the implications of the possibility that Mary had a choice? Read the box “Yes or No?”

### **Yes or No?**

*“I wonder if Mary could have said ‘No’?” These were the words of a little girl during the children’s wondering time; I had just shared the Advent story. Some people would say Mary had no choice: the all-powerful God had an unstoppable plan for salvation that required her participation; Mary is passive, an actor in a script already written for her. But there is another possibility. Perhaps the Spirit of God is a more subtle force than we imagine, working within and among us in gentler ways, inviting our participation, calling but not forcing. After all, in any other situation, what would we call it when a teenage girl is made pregnant without her consent? Is this really the sort of power we imagine God exercises? Suggesting that Mary could have said “No” – that she had a real choice – does not mean that the Spirit of God is weak or helpless. A better analogy might be that the Spirit is like water: we can block its path...but the Spirit is infinitely creative and will find other channels. I imagine if Mary had said “No”, the Spirit would have found some other way to come into the world. But for Mary that opportunity would have passed, never to be repeated. – Laura Alary in *The Spirit of Advent Future: Choose!* (2014)*

### **Hymn**

Sing or say “Tomorrow Christ is coming” #131 in the Book of Praise.

### **Pray**

Inviting God,  
We wonder how many opportunities we miss,  
opportunities to participate in bringing about your realm on earth?  
May we look for chances; may we be receptive.  
May we learn your ways and alter ours.  
May we live the future in hope and with you. Amen.

### **Next Steps**

- In Advent we don’t have to be passive. We can actively participate in the coming of God dwelling in our midst. What might this mean for you?
- Read Stave Five in *A Christmas Carol*.

## 6. Conclusion

### Hope of Transformation

In *A Christmas Carol*, Ebenezer Scrooge was visited by the Ghost of his dead business partner, Jacob Marley, and then in succession the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Christmas Present, and Christmas Yet to Come.

After his night of visions, Scrooge was a transformed man who then made a difference in the world around him. What actions did he take that demonstrated his transformation? What people were affected by his actions? While *A Christmas Carol* is a work of fiction, what is the “truth” in the story that we all long for?

### Reflect on scripture

#### A. Read Isaiah 9:2-7.

1. This passage is often read on Christmas Eve. That evening concludes the four weeks of longing, waiting, expecting and hoping for God to come. How are Advent themes expressed by this prophet?
2. Describe the prophet’s vision of a transformed world.

#### B. Read Luke 2:1-14.

1. It is an amazing story. Our longing and expectation for a rescuer, a dramatic agent of change, a powerful hero has brought us before a vulnerable, new-born baby in modest surroundings. God has come. God is with us. In your own words, explain the good news of Advent and Christmas. Read “Is this good news?”.

#### Is this good news?

*Perhaps it seems disappointing at first. Not enough in a world so discordant, where relationships are out of tune on every level and so many people struggle with such heavy burdens, heart-breaking losses and complex problems. The message seems almost too simple: God comes. Christ comes. Christ comes into the world through all those who say “yes” and allow themselves to become a place where the Spirit can grow and be born. Christ comes in ways we cannot explain – in dreams and in prayer, in surprise encounters and when we are all alone. Christ comes. Of course Christ is present in every time and every place. But we forget. There is too much noise or too much worry or too much pain. So we need these four weeks of Advent. We need our sacred times and our sacred stories to focus our attention on what is always true: Christ comes, not to fix every problem or heal every wound, but to be with us, to help us remember that beneath all the chaos and noise and hurt, there is God. Deep in the heart of things, there is peace and stillness and a love that never ends. And when we know this – really know it and feel it – we no longer have to ask if it is good news. – Laura Alary in *The Spirit of Advent Future: Choose!* (2014)*

### Hymn

Sing or say “There’s a voice in the wilderness crying” #128 in the Book of Praise.

## Pray

Loving God,  
you came and you come.  
The world needs you though it rejects you.  
Come into our lives as we strive  
to push aside everything  
that is not your love, your justice, your peace.  
Come into our lives;  
we want transformed lives,  
we want to fulfill the hope for all creation. Amen.

## Next Step

- Reflect on your experience in this study of Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. How many times had you heard/read/viewed this story before? How was this experience similar or different?
- Reflect on how the story of Scrooge relates to the Season of Advent. How might it help others experience and share the Advent Story?