



# Presbyterians *Read*



## First Week of Advent

### Theme: Preparing for the Newness to Come

*The whole tenor of Advent is that God may act in us, through us, beyond us, more than we imagined, because newness is on its way among us (p. 5).*

#### Prayer

Light a candle and place it at the centre of your discussion circle. To open, invite someone to read the following prayer from p. 5:

*Living God, visit us in this season with your Holy Spirit that we may get carried away to do obedient things we have not yet done, kingdom things we did not think we had in us, neighbor things from which we cringe. May you act in us, through us, beyond us, more than we imagine, because newness is on its way among us.*

#### Opening Prayer Instructions

Each week, you'll be reading the opening prayer twice, leaving a couple minutes of silence in between for people to quiet their hearts and centre on God's presence. It is best to explain this to participants ahead of time.

Follow the prayer with a few minutes of silent reflection to centre in God's presence. Close the silence with a re-reading of the same prayer followed by an "Amen."

#### Overview of Theme

We experience new things in our lives all the time: new movies, new restaurants, new friends, new challenges, new joys and new sorrows. The newness of Advent, however, is bigger than anything new we've ever experienced before. It is a new reality. A new reality given to us by God and ushered in by a baby in a manger, that is beyond our imagination. This week, Brueggemann invites us to get ready to welcome the new reality God promises by letting go of "what is old, habitual and destructive" (p. 13) and "relinquishing control" (p. 15). This is a challenging task, given how self-sufficient and disillusioned we've become, but Brueggemann assures us that it is possible to awake from our daily slumber and embrace something we can't yet fully grasp.

#### General Opening Questions

Depending on your group, you may want to start with a very general opening question. Here are a few options that you can use throughout the study:

- What struck you about this week's readings?
- Is there a specific passage from this week's readings that caught your attention? Why?
- What did you find challenging about this week's reading?
- Was there a theme in this week's readings that stood out?

## Opening Discussion Prompts

What has been your experience of Advent and its traditions in past years? What are you hoping for this year?

Share an example of a time when God brought about something new in a situation that you thought was impossible to change.

## Biblical Reflection

Read the following passage slowly. If you have time, invite someone else to read it a second time. Reading it twice, especially when using a different translation with a different voice, allows people to hear new things in the passage. After reading the passage, use the following questions to guide your discussion.

### Luke 3:1–18 (NRSV)

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'" John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages." As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah. John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

## Biblical Reflection Discussion Points

What relationship might the author of the Book of Luke be trying to make between the powers of the Empire and the arrival of the Kingdom of God? What is different about the Kingdom of God from the kingdom of humanity?

This passage from Luke begins by reviewing many powerful political leaders in the Roman Empire who were in control. Brueggemann reminds us that we often have more in common with powerful leaders than we are comfortable admitting. Looking at Brueggemann's list of ways we must decrease on p. 13, discuss which ways of decreasing are the most challenging and why.

Brueggemann reminds us that, through Jesus, "vicious cycles are ended, and life becomes possible" (11).

What harmful cycles have you experienced or witnessed being broken? What ones still need breaking? How can they be broken?

## Weekly Spiritual Practice

### DETACHMENT

When the crowds ask John the Baptist what they can do to prepare for the arrival of the messiah, he responds that they should give away their possessions to those in need and be generous in financial dealings. Essentially, he asks them to let go of worldly attachments—the things that stand in the way of knowing Jesus and following him.

This week, our spiritual practice is detachment—releasing control of our lives to God by naming and letting go of our attachments to possessions, control, comforts and achievements. The following spiritual exercises have been adapted from Calhoun's *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* (pp. 105-108) to help you relinquish control to God. Please choose one or both to try this week.

- Walk through your home or office and take note of what you possess. Think about why you've kept certain objects. What do they mean to you? Thank God for what you've been given. Ask God if there is anything you own that you should share, give away, think about differently or enjoy/use in a different way. Listen for God's response.
- Write a list of the things in your life that you are currently trying to control. In prayer, surrender these things one by one to God. Name the issue then say, "Not my will but yours be done, Lord."

## Closing Prayer

Lord, prepare us for the newness that is to come this Advent season. Make it clear to us what we need to release to receive the impossible from you. We confess now the material attachments and self-serving agendas that we let take priority over You and Your plan for our lives and the world.

*[Leave time for people to confess in silence]*

We repent of these things and return to you, O Lord. Reveal to us the newness you are birthing in our lives. Prepare in us a place for your son by overwhelming us with a passion for the possible. Come, Lord Jesus, Come.

### A Note About the Kingdom of God

Throughout the gospels, Jesus preaches and tells parables about the Kingdom of God, also referred to as the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus' teachings about the Kingdom show how God would like the world to function and be governed in the here and now. Although the Kingdom is broad and mysterious, we can discern many of its qualities from the gospels: justice, grace, peace, power for the weak and strength for the powerless. In the Lord's prayer, when we pray "thy kingdom come," we are praying for the politics and justice of God to be established more and more in the world. It is a prayer that recognizes the sovereignty of God in bringing about this Kingdom but also acknowledges our role as the hands and feet of Christ in partnering with God to bring it about.

### Confession

Each closing prayer will offer participants an opportunity to participate. This week, the leader will be pausing to allow participants to confess silently the ways that their material attachments distract from their relationships with God. *Leaders should explain this before starting the prayer.*

