



Presbyterians *Read*

First Week of Advent

Presidents and Kings

Open the Gathering with Prayer — *Choose your own prayer or read Psalm 24 responsively.*

Gathering Prompt — *Choose one invitation to start connecting with each other and the week's themes.*

As a group, write down as many biblical names for God as you can recall. Then, discuss:

- Is there a name of God that is particularly meaningful for you?
- What aspects of God's character does that name express?
- Is there a name for God that you rarely use?
- What aspects of God's character does that name express?

Overview — *A short summary of the chapter to remind participants of the main themes.*

Messiah — Matthew begins his record of the nativity story by calling Jesus “the Messiah.” In Hebrew, messiah means “anointed” or “anointed one.” It refers to “an individual or object upon which special oil has been poured as a way of setting the object or person apart for God's purposes” (19). In the Hebrew scriptures, kings, such as Saul, David and Solomon, were hailed as “messiah—as the Lord's anointed” (23).

Davidic Covenant — King David's reign is usually said to be from 1010 BC to 970 BC. Through the prophet Nathan, God told David that his descendants would rule over God's people forever (25). Through many years of hardship, the people of Israel held onto God's promise that, despite foreign rulers, “the day would come when God would raise up a new king—like David—from David's royal line to rule as a shepherd over God's people” (26). This messianic hope is



JESUS MAFA. The Annunciation – Gabriel and Mary, from Art in the Christian Tradition, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN.

woven into the Hebrew scriptures, particularly in the words of the prophet Isaiah from around the year 730 BC: “For a child has been born for us, a son given to us, authority rests upon his shoulders...” (27).

Angel’s Annunciation – Seven hundred years after Isaiah wrote those words, the promise that a descendent of David would rule forever is repeated to Mary in Nazareth. Mary learns that she is pregnant with *the* long-awaited Anointed One, “the long-promised Messiah, the Christ, the Davidic King” (29).

A Different Kind of King – The king most people were expecting was one who would raise an army and overthrow their Roman oppressors. Jesus encouraged his followers to love their enemies. The kingdom Jesus advocated was based on peace, selfless love and caring for the vulnerable. He was not anointed or crowned in a royal ceremony. Instead, a woman who is described as a “sinner” anointed his feet (Luke 7:36–48) and the Roman soldiers mockingly placed a crown on his head as they nailed him to a cross (34–35).

Inquiry – *Initial questions, thoughts, new ideas arising out of the reading.*

What details in this chapter were new or interesting to you?

How have these details enriched, shaped or challenged your understanding of Christ’s birth?

Something Extra to Consider

Power and Politics in the Canadian Context

It is obvious from this first chapter that Hamilton is writing from an American perspective. In Canada, we do not have a president, nor do we have two major contemporary parties called “the Democrats” and “the Republicans” fighting for political power. The political context in Canada is undoubtedly different. Yet, like our neighbours to the south, our own nation struggles with issues of power and the church’s relationship with the state.

The negative consequences of individuals and groups accumulating and exerting power over others can be seen in the issues of poverty, injustice, violence and inequality that continue to plague our country. Hamilton’s reminder that “there is only one King” (17) is a reminder that our primary allegiance is to God, whose power is made known through service and vulnerability, not systems of domination.

The nativity story is steeped in issues of power and state politics. Jesus, a child born in Bethlehem, is a challenge to the imperial power of Rome. His parents are required to travel to Bethlehem for a census—a political tool that would allow Rome to update tax rolls and tighten its grip on people. And, after his birth, Jesus’ parents are forced to flee when King Herod orders that “all the male children who were two years old or younger” be murdered to pre-empt any challenge from the rumoured newborn “king of the Jews” (Matthew 2:16–18).

From the moment of his birth, Jesus challenged worldly power. The nativity story invites us to reflect on our own relationships with power. Are we, as individuals and as church communities, yielding to God’s redemptive power? It is a power that is made perfect in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9).

As Hamilton explains, “Many people wanted a king who would raise an army to push the Romans out of the land—‘peace through strength.’ Jesus instead called his fellow Jews to love the Romans and any other enemies they had” (32). Are we loving our neighbours and enemies? This is a question that Christians in all countries need to keep in mind when we consider our relationship with power.

Scripture — *Re-read key scripture passages together.*

Read this quote from Chapter One of the book:

*“In this book, we’ll seek to understand **who** this King is, **why** he came, and **how** we might, in Wesley’s words, ‘transcribe his life in our own.’ In other words, we’ll seek to understand **the purpose of the incarnation**” (18).*

With this quote in mind, read the following two passages from scripture:

2 Samuel 7:8–17

AND

Luke 1:26–38

Discussion — *Questions related to the scripture passage.*

What do these passages help us to understand about:

- Who is the King?
- Why did he come?
- What impact does *the King*—God who created and sustains the universe—becoming flesh have on our lives?

Living Practices — *Practices connected to the theme for participants to engage in between sessions.*

“For those who count Jesus as King, as I do, we awaken each day recognizing that our highest allegiance, our deepest devotion, and our greatest commitment is not to country or political party or even to family, but to Jesus the Christ, our King, whose kingdom is the climax of human history” (39).



Lauren Wright Pittman. *A Choice*, from *Art in the Christian Tradition*, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN.

Morning Prayer Time — In this chapter, Hamilton mentions that each morning he gets on his knees and recommits his life to God’s mission, saying “Here I am Lord, send me” (39). This week, add a morning prayer practice to your routine. If you already have one, consider adding an element to your prayer practice that meditates on God as King. Your prayer time does not need to be long. It can even just be a few minutes before you get out of bed or while you are eating breakfast.

- Say the Lord’s Prayer. Pause when you get to the part of the Lord’s prayer that says, “your Kingdom come, your will be done.” Invite God to show you how to live out God’s will during that day.
- Breathing deeply, quietly repeat a name for God that is meaningful to you. You may want to try repeating “Jesus is King.” Get into a rhythm of letting the name run naturally off your lips. Note what images come to mind. Tell God what you sense about God through this name. Thank God for sending Jesus to be King.
- Write “King” (or other name for God) on the middle of a blank piece of paper. Draw a shape around the words to start the doodle. This is your prayer space. Start to doodle around it, releasing your words to God in prayer. Doodle in silence or talk to God if you feel led. Add other people, other names for God or other parts of the scripture verse to your paper. Draw a shape around each set of new words to create a separate prayer space. Doodle around these and pray.

This “Living Practices” section is based partly on ideas found in Adele Ahlberg Calhoun’s *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us* (IVP, 2015)

Close the Gathering with Prayer — *Choose your own prayer or use the one below.*

LORD, MESSIAH AND KING

Blessed are you, O God,
who rules with majesty, glory and truth
in our hearts and in the world.

In the Law and in the prophets,
you have given us your will for creation and our lives,
and in Jesus Christ, you have revealed the depth of your love for us,
and in him your kingdom comes near.

As we wait for the birth of the Prince of Peace, our Lord and Messiah,
you call us into relationships of care, not control;
into service of one another, not supremacy over each other;
into the power of love, not the love of power.

Remind us again that we conform to the life of your Son when
we show wisdom by trusting,
we respond to offenders by forgiving,
we handle money by sharing,
we contend with enemies by loving,
we handle leadership by serving,
and we handle power gently.

Open our minds to the meaning and power of your incarnation,
and let us see your grace at work in the world around us.

Based partly on a quote taken from Rudy Wiebe's book *The Blue Mountains of China*
(Toronto: McClelland and Steward, 1970), pp. 215–216.

