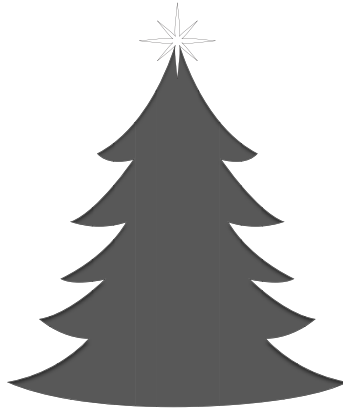




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SESSION 1

DO YOU SEE WHAT I SEE?

PLANNING THE SESSION

Session Goals

Through this session's discussion and activities, participants will be encouraged to:

- Understand why it is incomplete to think of Advent as a time of anticipation.
- Consider how the lights and other visuals of Advent prepare us for something new and serve as deep symbols of hope.
- Learn the difference between anticipation and expectation.
- Explore how our imagination can help us with expectation and change our vision in Advent.

Biblical Foundation

- Luke 2:1
- Jeremiah 33:14-16
- Psalm 30:5
- Isaiah 40:3-4
- Isaiah 7:14
- Isaiah 9:6
- Luke 2:12, 29-32

Preparation

- Read the introduction and chapter 1, “Do You See What I See?” in Matt Rawle’s *Experiencing Christmas*.
- Read through this Leader Guide session in its entirety to familiarize yourself with the material being covered.
- Read and reflect on this session’s Biblical Foundation passages.
- Plan to have extra Bibles on hand for participants.
- You will want to have your DVD player or computer ready to watch the video segment.
- You also might have a markerboard or large sheet of paper available for recording group members’ ideas and paper and pens for note taking, if desired.
- Have an Advent wreath, candles, and lighter available for the Closing Activity.
- If you will be doing the activities under “Additional Options for Group Activity,” read through those options thoroughly and gather any items needed for that time together.

OPENING ACTIVITY AND PRAYER

Welcome participants as they arrive. When most are present, ask each group member to respond briefly to the following question, writing responses on a markerboard or large sheet of paper, if desired.

DO YOU SEE WHAT I SEE?

- What is a favorite Advent or Christmas experience, and which of your senses is most stimulated or utilized in this experience? (For example, the sound of a special song, the taste of a favorite dish, the smell of a Christmas tree, the feel of a warm mug of cocoa, and so on.)

Read aloud or summarize for the group:

These experiences we've shared, taken separately or together as a season of senses, are what it means to experience Christmas. The sights, sounds, smells, and tastes are different during the holidays. Christmas is so tied to our collective memory because it is so intimately connected to our senses. In Jesus, God entered into this world with eyes of God's own, so that we might see God's love clearly. Today we will be exploring how our sense of sight can enrich our experience and understanding of God's love this Christmas. Let's open in prayer.

Opening Prayer

God, thank you for this time together to gaze upon your Word. We pray that during this season of Advent you would enrich our experience of Christmas so that we might rediscover the meaning of the season. May our sense of sight become a sign for us, pointing us to the Incarnation so that we might experience your love in a new way today. We long to see your goodness; in Jesus's name. Amen.

WATCH DVD SEGMENT

Play session 1: "Do You See What I See?" on the *Experiencing Christmas* DVD or via Amplify Media.

Discuss:

- Did anything specific stand out as you watched the video?
- What is something you learned or experienced that seems new or *renewed*?

Invite the group to keep both the video and the book in mind throughout the discussion.

STUDY AND DISCUSSION

A Distant Glow

Read aloud or summarize for the group:

Lights are one of the first signs that Christmas is near. Maybe more accurately, a lack of light begins to signal the changing seasons. At least for those of us north of the equator, the days begin to grow short. . . . For many, these short days offer an anxious anticipation for the next sunrise. . . . For others the darkness is no problem. . . . Whether you experience anxiety or you are filled with excitement. . . we all seem to agree that when it gets dark, we need more light. Either the light brings peace to the anxious heart or light offers beauty to those looking for some Christmas cheer. The light signals to us that something is different.

There are other visual signs too. . . . There are reindeer in lawns, wreaths on streetlights, pop-up Christmas tree stands, inflatable Santas, and Salvation Army kettles in front of grocery stores. You don't have to be a Christian or a person of any faith tradition to recognize that change is in the air. You can see it with your own eyes.

- What are the sights that, for you, signal Christmas is coming?
- How do you respond to shorter days and more darkness? Do you experience anxiety, excitement, or something else?
- How do the lights of the Christmas season help to bring you peace or offer you beauty?

Read aloud or summarize for the group:

DO YOU SEE WHAT I SEE?

Advent is a season of anticipation. “This is a sign for you,” the angels tell the shepherds as they were “guarding their sheep at night.” This is something you need to see. This is something to look for. . . . We almost seem hardwired for anticipation, to recognize that we live in a world of cause and effect. The relationship between what we see and how we respond is basic to our human condition. Sight is a powerful sense. More than 50 percent of our brain’s cortex, the outer layer of our brain, is dedicated to sight.¹

- How does knowing that more than 50 percent of your brain’s cortex is dedicated to sight affect your understanding of the importance of what you see?
- How would you define or explain *anticipation*?
- What does it mean to say that Advent is a season of anticipation?
- How do the sights of the season enrich your anticipation of Christmas and all that it means?

Read aloud or summarize for the group:

At the beginning of the Advent season, we dive into the prophetic poetry of the Hebrew Scriptures that our faith tradition has taught are signs for the coming Messiah. Jeremiah writes,

The time is coming, declares the LORD, when I will fulfill my gracious promise with the people of Israel and Judah. In those days and at that time, I will raise up a righteous branch from David’s line, who will do what is just and right in the land. In those days, Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is what he will be called: The LORD Is Our Righteousness.

(Jeremiah 33:14-16 CEB)

¹ Susan Hagen, “The Mind’s Eye,” *Rochester Review*, Vol. 74, No. 4, March-April 2012. Rochester.edu/pr/Review/V74N4/0402_brainscience.html (accessed May 4, 2023).

During the time that Jeremiah wrote his prophecy, Jerusalem was conquered by Babylon. Yet the prophet articulates hope that even in the midst of destruction, God is doing something wonderful. There's more to Advent than waiting in anticipation. There is hope.

- How do you imagine the people of Jeremiah's time received his words of hope?
- Who has offered you a vision of hope when all you could see was devastation?
- How do you desire to see and experience hope this Advent? What might help you in this?

The Holly and the Ivy

Read aloud or summarize for the group:

Advent is full of visual markers of the season that represent something new is about to happen. But the decorations represent more than the coming of a new season. In a very real sense, these symbols mark the crucial transition between anticipation and expectation.

- Why is it incomplete to think of Advent as a season of anticipation?
- What are some of the markers of the season, and how do they serve as “deep symbols” of hope?
- How might you make room for hope this Advent? How might your anticipation become expectation?

From Anticipation to Expectation

Read aloud or summarize for the group:

The journey from anticipation to expectation hinges on hope. Anticipation is based on what is known. Expectation never is. Anticipation is the fruit of previous knowledge, skill, and deduction, and its goal is an appropriate course

DO YOU SEE WHAT I SEE?

of action for what is coming. Conversely, you can't actively prepare for expectation. The only way to "prepare" for expectation is through imagination. The hope found within expectation is the acceptance of unfettered possibility.

- What are you anticipating about tomorrow? What are you expecting to happen? What's the difference?
- How would you define or describe the difference between anticipation and expectation in your life story?
- If the only way to prepare for expectation is through imagination, how might you open your imagination to what you've never before seen? How might expectation help you to change your vision in this Advent season?
- Discuss the metaphor of the "spiritual walk as a story in three chapters" with a "God box" that is taken apart and rebuilt until there is no longer a box (see pages 22–24 in *Experiencing Christmas*). What about this metaphor resonates with you, and what doesn't? Why?

CLOSING ACTIVITY AND PRAYER

Each week of our study, you will end the session by lighting candles on an Advent wreath and reading aloud Luke's account of the Christmas story, focusing your attention on one of the five senses.

Turn off the overhead lights and ask a group member to light the first Advent candle as participants watch in silence. Then have participants close their eyes and listen as you read the Scripture aloud slowly. Invite them to enter into the story using their imagination, becoming a participant in the scene and focusing primarily on *what they see*. Explain that using our God-given gift of imagination in this way brings the Scripture alive for us so that we may actually encounter God and experience God's goodness and love, not just know about

God. Begin with a prayer, asking God to give each of you the grace to see, trusting that the Holy Spirit is leading your imagination.

Read the account *slowly*, allowing brief pauses where indicated:

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.

(Luke 2:1-5)

Say: *Notice what you see as you enter into this part of the story.* (Pause about 15 seconds.)

While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no place in the guest room.

(Luke 2:6-7)

Say: *Notice what you see as you enter into this part of the story.* (Pause about 15 seconds.)

Now in that same region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

DO YOU SEE WHAT I SEE?

*“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”
(Luke 2:8-14)*

Say: Notice what you see as you enter into this part of the story. (Pause about 15 seconds.)

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them, and Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.

(Luke 2:15-19)

Say: Notice what you see as you enter into this part of the story. (Pause about 15 seconds.)

The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told them.

(Luke 2:20)

Say: Notice what you see as you enter into this part of the story. (Pause about 15 seconds.)

Invite participants to slowly return to the room and open their eyes when they are ready. Then move into a time of discussion.

Discuss:

- What did you notice as you entered the story, focusing on *what you saw*? What stood out to you and why?

Closing Prayer

God, you put on flesh and entered creation with eyes of your own, so that we might see your love clearly. As we gaze upon the symbols of the season,

remind us that the decorations represent more than the coming of a new season, more even than the coming of a child. They are symbols of the great hope we have in and through you. Open our eyes and fill us with expectant hope this Advent! Amen.

ADDITIONAL OPTIONS FOR GROUP ACTIVITIES

If your group is able to meet for longer than 60 minutes, consider adding one of the following activities that invite participants to experience the meaning of the season through their *sight*:

- **Share a favorite Christmas decoration**—In advance, invite each participant to bring a favorite Christmas decoration. Have group members take turns showing their items and telling why they are meaningful and how they serve as symbols of hope.
- **Decorate a Christmas tree**—Work together to decorate a Christmas tree for your meeting space. In advance, ask if anyone has an extra artificial tree they are not using and have group members bring lights and decorations. (If desired, have each person bring a favorite ornament and share the story of that ornament.) Or, if you would like to have a chrismon tree, search for chrismon patterns online and assemble the items needed to make them in advance. Then invite everyone to make an ornament at the end of the session. *(Note: If you have difficulty securing a tree, you could create a flat tree and flat ornaments using butcher or craft paper and display it on a wall.*