

Incarnation: Rediscovering the Significance of Christmas

Church of the Resurrection Small Group Leader Guide

2020 Advent Small Group Guide

In a year which has included a pandemic, justice issues, and an incredibly tumultuous election season, the words from the beloved Christmas carol *O Holy Night* by John Sullivan Dwight, identifies the hope we as Christians are longing for:

*"A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices,
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn"*

Thank you for leading your group through the Advent study, *Incarnation: Rediscovering the Significance of Christmas* by Pastor Adam Hamilton. We pray that you will experience a "thrill of hope" as you prepare for Christmas Day!

Group Basics:

- **Communicate.** Send reminders for upcoming meeting discussions, include prayer requests and, for those meeting online, be sure to include a link to join.
- **Participation.** To best benefit from the experience, encourage people to participate weekly.
- **Start and end on time.** Honor everyone's time by sticking to your start and end times.
- **Begin and end with prayer.** It is important to remember that not everyone is comfortable praying aloud. At first you will likely need to model group prayer, then encourage others to pray as they feel comfortable. Sample prayers will be provided. Use them as is, adapt them, or feel free to write your own. Please choose a way to capture prayer requests so that you can check-in with the group the following week. (See prayer tips below)
- **Be Inclusive.** The goal is to get everyone participating in the group discussion. Some people naturally jump in to answer a question, while others may need prompting. Work hard to include everyone.
- **Create a Safe Environment.** At the first meeting, share the importance of having a safe and authentic environment where people are free to share their opinions and ask questions.

How to use the study:

- **90-minute template (adapt as needed)**
 - ⇒ 15 min – Welcome, Introduce Theme, Icebreaker and Optional Activity
 - ⇒ 15 min – Watch the Video (found on **Amplify**, the subscription streaming service used for Resurrection small groups. If you do not already have an account, or have any questions, please contact Melanie Hill at melanie.hill@cor.org)
 - ⇒ 45 min – Discussion
 - ⇒ 15 min – Joys and Concerns; Closing Prayer, Suggested Spiritual Practices
- **Optional Activities.** Included are some fun and festive things to help break up the Zoom fatigue as well as ideas to take the topic into the week.
- **Discussion time.** Provided are suggested questions for each chapter. Feel free to create your own or use the Leader Guide by Abingdon Press.
- **Suggested Spiritual Practices.** These are ideas to help your group continue to engage in the five essential practices through out the week. Be sure to share these with your group weekly at the end of your meeting or in a text or email during the week.

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Week 1: Presidents and Kings

Advent Theme: HOPE

Icebreakers:

- When does your Christmas tree typically go up? When does it typically come down?
- How soon do you start listening to Christmas music, before or after Thanksgiving?
- What is your favorite Christmas song or carol? What is your least favorite Christmas song or carol?

Optional Activity:

"Name That Christmas Carol"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1muOFjTqdSU> (25 songs played with answers at the end)

Watch the Video: (15:09) Opening prayer is included in the video.

Discussion:

1. We've just come through a turbulent election season here in the US. Pastor Adam says, "While our politics have divided us, Advent should bring us together, uniting us around the newborn King and his life, message, ministry, death, and resurrection." (p.17) In the weeks and months that follow, how can we as Christians, be a unifying force in our communities?

2. Referencing the story King David's anointing, Pastor Adam said, "When a new king was crowned, exuberant hopes for his reign would be uttered by the prophets. There was a longing on the part of the prophets and many of the people for a king from David's royal bloodline who would reign with justice and righteousness." (p.27) Who are the leaders from your past you think led well during difficult times? In what ways did they lead well? How do the examples from your past help to shape how you face hardships today?

3. In recent years many Americans have begun to lose faith in the role of the President or other elected leaders. How does a President differ from a King? How helpful is it to you viewing Jesus as the King?

Show clip from S. M. Lockridge sermon (3:19) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yzqTFNfeDnE>

4. What part of Lockridge's description of Jesus the King most resonates with you?

5. This week we celebrate the theme of Hope in Advent. Pastor Adam writes, "And though we live in that time between triumphs, the triumph of the Resurrection and that of the Second Coming, the first gives us confidence in the second. The resurrection of Jesus leads us to be, in the words of Zechariah, "prisoners of hope."" (p.39)

6. Read Revelation 19:11-12a, 16; 21:3-5 (p.37) How do these readings in Revelation inspire you to become a "prisoner of hope"?






7. Pastor Adam shared the inspiring story of Nancy Brown who was a significant servant from our congregation. Over many years, Nancy continued to bring hope to those she worked with in Africa. Many of us may never reach Africa, though we can have impact in our own communities. What is one thing you can do to bring hope in your community this week?

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Closing Prayer: *"Blessed are you, our God, King of the universe. You came to us in Jesus to show us who You are and who You call us to be. To Jesus, we yield our lives. Jesus, be our Christ, our Messiah, our King. To you, O Lord, we offer our time, our talents, our resources, our influence, and our all to You. Help us to live in such a way that we honor You in all that we do. Amen."* (adapted from prayer on p.42)

Suggested Spiritual Practices:

	Worship: Join us in lighting your advent wreath candles each week during worship services, while reading the accompanying devotional.
	Study: Read about the biblical foundations of Jesus' anointing. Read 2 Samuel 7:1-16 & Luke 1:26-38
	Serve: As a group or individually, collect new toys for our partner school to drop off Friday, December 4 th from 9-12pm at the Leawood campus. Ideas include: legos, crafts, action figures, ethnic dolls, Hot Wheels, balls, slime, etc. Please no weapon themed toys or nerf guns, etc. Contact Ann Carter for more details. anncarter@gmail.com
	Give: Jesus had a group that were committed to support the work of the ministry. This campaign continues today through your tithes and offerings by completing your 2021 Ministry Pledge.
	Share: Invite someone to our online Candlelight Christmas Eve service or purchase an advent wreath kit for a neighbor.

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Week 2: The Savior and Our Need for Saving

Advent Theme: PEACE

Icebreakers:

- What is one Christmas tradition you fondly remember from your childhood?
- What is your favorite holiday food?
- What is the best holiday movie of all time?

Optional Activity:

Christmas Trivia Questions – You can come up with your own or choose from a list on the following website. Consider coming up with a fun, virtual prize for the winner.

<https://www.whiteelephantrules.com/christmas-trivia-questions/>

Watch Video: (11:20) Opening prayer included in the video.

Discussion:

1. Pastor Adam mentions that some people find the phrase “being saved” uncomfortable. Have you heard that phrase before? What do you interpret the phrase to mean?
2. Pastor Adam says that the word ‘sin’ is most commonly translated to mean to stray from the path or to miss the mark. “This implies that there is a right path, a mark, or an ideal that we’re meant to follow as human beings—a path, target, or mark we routinely struggle to remain upon or to hit.” (p.52) How is this imagery helpful to you? How do you think about sin in your own life?
3. We see Jesus as Savior in the ways He helps us avoid straying from the ideal path. Pastor Adam says, “the more we seek to grow in him, follow him, love him, and serve him, the more we recognize the tempter and his fast-talking ways.” Whether you view the devil as “a metaphor or personification of temptation and evil” or as a “literal spiritual being”, how does Jesus help you resist the temptation to stray from the path?
4. While Christians believe Jesus saves us from sin, Pastor Adam asserts that we need to also understand *how* He saves us in different ways. Read the two passages from the Incarnation book which are found on page 63.

“Some see his redemptive work mechanistically, transactionally, or juridically: Jesus, God in the flesh, the one holy and righteous man who ever lived, died in our place for our sins...His death was a full and sufficient payment....

Others see Jesus’s death on the cross...less in transactional terms and more in terms of God’s attempt to speak to us about sin, mercy, and love.”

Which of the passages do you find most appealing and why? Do you agree with Pastor Adam when he says, “He has saved me from my sin and he *is saving* me from my sin?” What do you think Pastor Adam means when he makes that statement?

5. In forgiving our sins, Jesus saves us from the “guilt, shame, and sense of alienation from God that we feel when we sin.” (p.62) Moreover, Pastor Adam says, “He saves us from *lovelessness*. You are loved regardless of what anyone else might say. You are loved regardless of how unloved you may feel at this

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particular moment. You are loved."(p.77) During this unprecedented season that has led many of us to feel isolated and alone, what does that statement mean to you?

6. The advent theme for this week is Peace. How might loving others help bring peace to our communities that are feeling so divided? What is one tangible way you can display love to someone this week?

Closing Prayer: *"Jesus, we need you to save, rescue, deliver, and heal us. We trust in you as our Savior. Save us from our sin and from ourselves. Save us for you and your purposes. Save us by your love and for your love. Save us from despair and give us hope. Help us to trust in your resurrection, that we might face death, not with fear, but with hope. Amen."* (adapted from prayer on p.81)

Suggested Spiritual Practices:

	Worship: This week choose a favorite hymn or Christmas carol and reflect on the lyrics during your prayer time.
	Study: Read the foundational passages that go along with this week's chapter and reflect on them in light of our group discussion this week. Matthew 1:18-21, Luke 2:8-14, Genesis 3:1-13, & Romans 7:18-25
	Serve: Many of our Silver Link members are still feeling very isolated. Contact Claire Clough at Claire.clough@cor.org to receive a list of people you can write Christmas cards to.
	Give: Holidays are difficult times for those that have experienced the loss of loved ones in this year. Initiate a "I Am Loved" campaign and send a card to family members to let them know they are loved and that their loved one is remembered. An additional act of generosity may be to provide a gift to a charity in their memory.
	Share: Host a Zoom watch party or just invite others to view, "Christmas at Resurrection" online. Available December 10-13 at 7:30pm with the addition of matinees on Saturday at 10:00am and Sunday at 1:30pm. All performances are online at cor.org/live

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Week 3: Emmanuel in the Midst of a Pandemic

Advent Theme: JOY

Icebreakers:

- What is your favorite holiday dessert?
- What is your favorite holiday beverage?
- What does Christmas look like in your city, town or village? Is there anything unique to your specific geographic area?

Optional Activity:

Christmas Hats – you’ve heard of ugly Christmas sweater competitions, but have you participated in a crazy Christmas hat competition? Before your meeting, ask everyone to wear their best Christmas hat – they can be silly, ugly, or just festive. Capture the moment during your small group time using screenshots or a similar image capture feature to snap a photograph. Then send them to the group in email or text. I would love to see them too! Melanie.hill@cor.org

Watch Video: (13:45) Opening prayer included in video

Discussion:






1. Has COVID affected your normal holiday traditions? If so, in what ways?
2. Pastor Adam states he doesn’t believe that God caused the pandemic, but God can wring good out of it and was, and is, with us through it. Do you agree? If yes, where and how do you see God wringing good from the pandemic? If no, why not?
3. Pastor Adam writes that “...when we speak of the Incarnation: God took on flesh and entered our world as a human being.” That God “became human” in Jesus. (p.102) What’s the difference between a Jesus who *appears* human and a Jesus who *is* human? Why is this such an important question to consider?
4. How does Jesus, being fully God and fully human, allow you to experience God?
5. Pastor Adam (quoting Frederick Buechner) is fond of saying, “The worst thing is never the last thing”. During this pandemic, it can be hard to embrace that phrase. As we celebrate the theme of Joy this week in Advent, how does it bring you joy to know that God is always with you, even in the worst of times?
6. In Jesus, God came to be with us, to incarnate God’s love for us. How can we represent or bring Christ to others this week?

Closing Prayer: *“Oh God, how grateful we are that you came to us in Jesus Christ, our Emmanuel. You understand our humanity, our fears, our weaknesses, our succumbing to sin, those moments when we are less than what you wish us to be. You understand our love, our hurts, and our pain. You understand our struggle with grief and death. Thank you for revealing yourself to us in Jesus, that we might know who you are and that we might walk with you and love you all of our days. Lord, use us to represent you to those who don’t know you. Help us to incarnate your love and grace to all that we meet. In Jesus’s name. Amen.”* (Adapted from prayer on p.114)

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Suggested Spiritual Practices:

	Worship: Find a nativity set in your home or a picture online to contemplate. Think of what it means for Jesus to be fully divine and fully human. Recite the familiar phrase <i>O come let us adore Him</i> from the carol, "O Come All Ye Faithful". Bask in the adoration of God choosing to come and be with us.
	Study: Read the foundational passages for this weeks study. Matthew 1:22-25; Isaiah 7:1-16; Hebrews 1:1-4; 4:14-16
	Serve: Many are struggling as a result of the pandemic, while others have not been as financially impacted. You can bear a message of hope through your giving directly to help those impacted by the pandemic through joy in serving at cor.org/joy . Ideas include gift cards to ministry partners, food support, and donations to our global ministry partners who are facing the needs for funds for disaster relief.
	Give: While others may not be struggling financially, isolation brings its own challenges. Giving may include a homemade gift with a card delivered to the porch of their home as a sign they are not alone.
	Share: Share your own story of what Jesus, Emmanuel—"God with us" means to you. Write it down. Send it to someone who you think needs to hear it along with well wishes for Christmas.

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Use the guide below if you are meeting together for week 4. If your group will not meet for week 4, consider sharing a few questions throughout the week over email, text or a group chat app as you journey closer to Christmas day. Join us for a bonus week 5, "Epiphany" on Wednesday, December 30th at 6:30pm at cor.org/live.

Week 4: The Light of The World

Advent Theme: LOVE

Icebreakers:

- What are you most looking forward to this week as we celebrate Christmas?
- If you could be a character in a holiday movie who would you be and why?
- If you could spend Christmas anywhere in the world, where would you go and why?

Optional Activity:

Virtual Scavenger Hunt – Award points for each item people can find in their homes. They must show it to the group for it to count. Some items to include tinsel, holiday cards, Santa hat, ice skates, Elf on the shelf, egg nog, candy canes, etc. The person with the most points at the end wins!

Watch Video: (15:06) Opening prayer included in video

Discussion:

1. Read John 1:1-14. John calls Jesus God's Word and claims that the Word became a human being in Jesus. Pastor Adam says the Greek word for *word* is "logos" which means reasoning, wisdom, or logic. (p.133) What do you think John is trying to say about Jesus? What does this mean to you?
2. Pastor Adam says, "All other words about God, everything else we read in scripture, must be read in light of the Word of God that is Jesus." (p.134) What does this mean for how we read scripture? Do you agree or disagree?
3. John also calls Jesus the light and later Jesus would say he was "the light of the world" (John 8:12). Pastor Adam mentions a few examples of the comparison in scripture between light and darkness. He further says it is "not only a battle outside of us, it is a battle that is fought *within* us." (p.126). How do you see this battle play out outside of us? Within us?
4. At what age or stage of life did Christ's light first shine into your life? What are some of the first things that you remember seeing more clearly in the light of Jesus' love and grace? What are one or two ways that Christ's light has helped to give you clearer vision in the most recent weeks and months of your walk with him?
5. In John 8:12 we read Jesus telling his disciples "*I am the light of the world*" and in Matthew 5:14 he tells them "*You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid...Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.*" How are we to incarnate the light to others?
6. At Christmas it is often said it is better to give than to receive. Pastor Adam says, "*When you do good for others, you do good for yourself. Love that gives of itself is better than a pill. It heals you. When you take your eyes off yourself and focus on others, realizing that it's not about you, then you find joy and fulfillment. When you share the light, you also receive it.*" (p.142-143) When and how have you found this to be true in your life? How does it heal?

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7. In both the book and the video, Pastor Adam spends time sharing the Resurrection tradition of Candlelight Christmas Eve services. Some of us have participated in these services in the past. If you have attended in the past, what have you found to be meaningful? How do you plan to celebrate it this year in light of us not being able to gather together in person?

Closing Prayer: *“Jesus, we trust in you. Be our light. Fill us with your light. Grant us your hope. Help us to walk in your light, to share in your light, to live your light, to give your light. Use us, we pray, to push back the darkness. In your holy name. Amen.”* (Adapted from the prayer on p.148)

Suggested Spiritual Practices:

	Worship: Join us this week for Candlelight Christmas Eve services online on December 23 at 5 and 7pm and December 24 at 3, 5, 7, 9 and 10:30 pm at cor.org/live OR on KMCI (Channel 38) December 24 at 5 and 7 pm or KSHB (Channel 41) on December 24 at 10:30pm.
	Study: With your family or friends, read through the Christmas story in the gospels at breakfast on Christmas morning. (Luke 2:1-20)
	Serve: People in need are all around us. Who in your neighborhood could you demonstrate the love of Christ to by shoveling a driveway, returning garbage cans from the curb to their garage, dropping off a meal, running an errand, or another tangible act of service?
	Give: The Christmas Eve offering is an opportunity for us to come together as a community of those who share the light of Christ with the world. This year you might consider donating a gift equivalent to what you might spent on your family to help transform the world and close the opportunity gap as a part of the Vision 2030 initiatives.
	Share: Invite someone to join you for Candlelight Christmas Eve services. You can help spread the word by posting on your social media sites as well.

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PRAYER TIPS

Guided Prayer

A simple way to introduce a group to praying aloud together is through a prayer model. The leader gives a statement that leaves space for the group to fill in the blank. This keeps the prayers simple, unintimidating and allows everyone the opportunity to participate. It's also a great way to connect the prayer to your study topic. For instance, if you're topic is celebration, guide the group with "God, I celebrate you because ____."

It's important to let the group know the following guidelines:

- Keep it short and let everyone know there will be time later for longer, more specific prayers.
- Participating more than once is encouraged.
- It's okay to repeat a word or thought someone else has already prayed.

Some examples could be:

- God, you are ____.
- God, thank you ____.
- God, I love you because ____.
- God, help me overcome my fear of ____.

As the leader, you will begin the prayer to illustrate how it works. An example might be: "God, you are forgiving." Then group members can share their own sentences. When it's time for the second one the leader will again go first. After you've gone through two or three sentence prayers, transition the group into a time of open prayer. Now is the time to pray for anything that may be on your heart or mind (Himes, 2016).ⁱ

Notebook or Chat Room Requests

While it is important to make sure you leave enough time to close your group in prayer, sometimes the invitation for specific prayer requests can easily start to overtake the group time. This is especially true if you have a larger group or someone in your group is especially chatty. We want to guard our time but also make sure we give space for everyone to share their concerns and joys. One way to make sure you gather all those prayer requests is to ask group members to bring their pre-written requests that you can collect. If you are meeting online, you can utilize the chat feature and ask people to type in their requests. As the group leader you can then scan the requests before closing your group in prayer. This also gives you a written record to share throughout the week with the group via email or text as well as to check in with individual members.

Ask Ahead of Time

Often times, part of the discomfort of praying aloud is being put on the spot. We can ease the discomfort by asking someone if they would be willing to close the group in prayer before your meeting starts or at the very beginning. This gives them time to adjust to the idea and hopefully feel more comfortable with it. It also lets the group know that you won't be putting them on the spot.

Follow Up

Following up with our group's prayer requests lets them know that not only are we thinking about them but that we value prayer. This can be done in a few ways. You can check in with group members at the beginning of your prayer time about requests that were made the week before. You can also check in with them during the week or on a specific day if they had something big coming up. Reminding your

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whole group of what was requested by the group half-way through your next meeting time also reinforces the importance of prayer and the value of each person sharing.

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Himes, B. (2016, February 26). *Teach Your Small Group to Be Comfortable with Group Prayer*. Retrieved from Smallgroups.com: <https://www.smallgroups.com/articles/2016/teach-your-small-group-to-be-comfortable-with-group-prayer.html>