



# Prepare Ye

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**AN ADVENT SMALL  
GROUP PROGRAM**

*With special section for  
families with younger children*

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**DIOCESE OF  
Jefferson City**



# Prepare Ye

## AN ADVENT SMALL GROUP PROGRAM

*With special section for families with younger children*

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## INTRODUCTION

### GROUP LEARNING AND FAITH SHARING AGREEMENT

Many Catholics meet regularly in their parishes. These groups are known by a variety of names and come under various lay and ecclesial organizations: small Christian communities, Cursillo, Knights of Columbus, ladies' groups, men's groups, RENEW, CRHP, TEC, prayer groups, etc. Whatever the name, usually they share five attributes: the members engage in prayer, faith sharing, learning, support and faith-directed action.

The sessions in this booklet include these five attributes. To encourage a healthy and Spirit-filled activity, group members are encouraged to agree to abide by the following.

## HOW TO USE THIS PROGRAM

### WELCOMING

- Prepare an atmosphere of welcome and hospitality to set the tone. Make sure the setting is comfortable (including the chairs) and the group will not be interrupted by other activities or individuals.
- Make use of an Advent wreath. Traditionally, Advent wreaths are constructed of a circle of evergreen branches into which four candles are inserted, representing the four weeks of Advent. Ideally, three candles are purple, and one is rose, but white candles can also be used.
- The purple candles symbolize the prayer, penance, and preparatory sacrifices and good works undertaken. The rose candle is lit on the third Sunday (Gaudete Sunday) when the priest also wears rose vestments at Mass. Gaudete Sunday is the Sunday of rejoicing, because the faithful have arrived at the midpoint of Advent, when their preparation is now half over, and they are close to Christmas.
- The progressive lighting of the candles symbolizes the expectation and hope surrounding our Lord's first coming into the world and the anticipation of His second coming to judge the living and the dead ([usccb.org/prayer-worship/liturgical-year/advent](http://usccb.org/prayer-worship/liturgical-year/advent)).
- Encourage people to share something about themselves (if they do not know one another) as they gather initially.
- Keep the social and refreshment aspects to a minimum.
- Start and end on time. Each session should take between 60 and 90 minutes.
- Plan for some "collection" time at the start of each meeting; allowing 5-10 minutes for all members to arrive, greet one another and settle in.
- Welcome members promptly (don't let members visit too long, gently remind them they could visit after the meeting if anyone is causing a delay. Open your meeting in prayer. You can use the "Opening Prayer" provided on page 3.
- Close with the "Closing Prayer" on page 3 at the end of each meeting.





## SHARING

- Commit to coming prepared and being present at all sessions, except for emergencies. The group is lessened when a member is missing.
- Understand this is a “safe place” for people to share matters of the heart and soul. Respect others’ need for confidentiality.
- Share honestly.
- Listen to others without “correcting,” judging or attempting to preach at them. Ask questions to help you understand better another person’s beliefs, opinions, or knowledge.
- Help to ensure everyone who wants to speak has an opportunity to do so. Do not interrupt others and allow silence, so those who are more hesitant may have the time to gather their thoughts.
- Help the group stay on topic.
- Pray for one another and the diocese between sessions.

## FAMILY CORNER

- This series can also be used by the domestic church – families – in their Advent prayer.
- The section titled Family Corner has questions for families who would like to engage children younger than high school in Advent faith sharing.
- Families are encouraged to modify the format of the opening and closing prayers, Scripture reading and other elements of this program to create a meaningful and appropriate prayer experience for their children. Or, incorporate the questions in the Family Corner section in your usual family prayer experience.

## MORE RESOURCES

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has a wealth of resources for Advent and the Christmas season at [usccb.org/prayer-worship/liturgical-year/advent](http://usccb.org/prayer-worship/liturgical-year/advent). This includes blessings for the Advent wreath, Christmas tree, family creche, etc.; a daily calendar, catechetical reflections and practical resources (such as a reflection on “When Your Family’s Advent Falls Apart”). All resources can be downloaded and distributed by individuals or parishes.





## OPENING AND CLOSING PRAYERS

### OPENING PRAYER

**Leader:** We come, Loving God, to be about our preparations for a new Advent of love among us.

**All:** We hear again Your promise of peace, which came through Your Son Jesus.

**Leader:** We see again Your light which is always promised, even in the midst of darkness.

**All:** We feel again the joy You give as You invite us continually to community and co-responsibility for Your Church, Your world.

### PRAYER WHILE LIGHTING THE ADVENT WREATH

**First Week:** God of Nearness, as we celebrate once again the coming of Your Son among us, we light our first candle. Give us the courage to hope. Make us awake and alert to see Your plans of redemption for our lives, for our parishes and the Church, and for the world. We pray together through Jesus Christ, the source of our redemption and hope. Amen.

**Second Week:** Comforting God, You offer rest for our hearts and peace for our souls. As we light our second candle, nudge us, through Your grace, to seek peace in our lives, peace in our communities and peace in the world. We pray together through Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace. Amen.

**Third Week:** God of Joy, as we light our third candle, we remember how You came to us in human flesh through Your Son Jesus and You stay with us always in the Holy Spirit. Fill us with Your joy and help us shine as a light to the world. We pray together, through Jesus Christ, Who makes our joy complete. Amen.

**Fourth Week:** Loving God, Your mercy and compassion remain forever. Open our hearts, that we may receive Your love; and following the example of Your Son, spread that love to a needy world. We pray together through Jesus Christ, Who loved us to the end. Amen.

**Leader:** May our time together help us to deepen our center: You Who give us meaning and purpose, oneness with You, with each other and with all in Your family.

**All:** We come, loving God, to celebrate and live a new Advent: daily life filled with Your presence which calls us, individually and as a parish, to gratitude, love, and mercy.

### CLOSING PRAYER

**Leader:** We go forth today a more committed people, always reaching for and living the light of Christ.

**All:** We see God at work in ourselves, our parishes, our Church, and our world and that makes all the difference.

*Leader invites each group member – in a moment of silence – to think about the one word/phrase which is now in their heart, and that they will carry in the week ahead.*

*Leader invites those who would like to mention their word/phrase (no explanation needed); just prayerfully listen and receive the many words/phrases.*

**Leader:** We go forth a waiting people, an expectant people, welcoming God's new order of mercy and love, of becoming communities of faith where we encounter the Lord together in these challenging times.

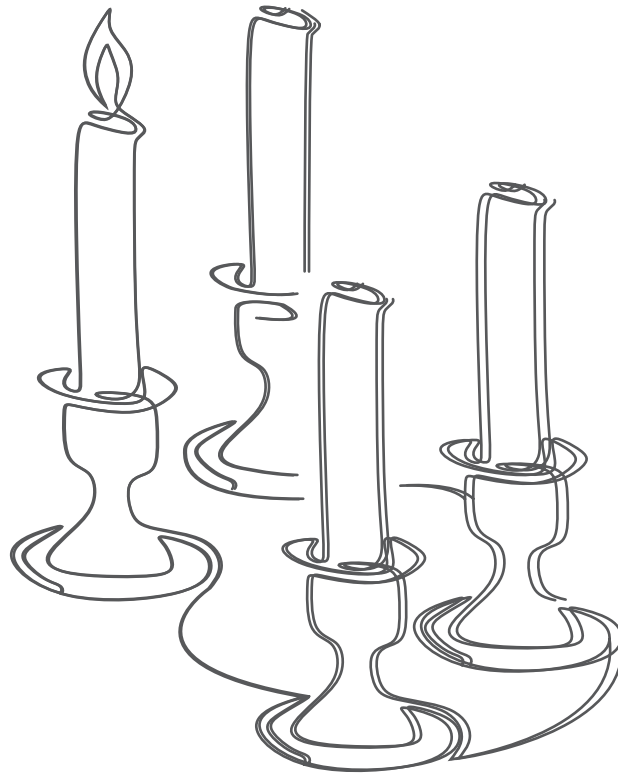
**All:** We welcome God's new day, knowing that God's love surrounds us, calling us closer and closer in unity with Him and with each other.

**Leader:** We go forth as a serving people; all of us together in co-responsibility to make a difference in our homes, our parishes, our Church and the world.

**All:** Teach us, compassionate God, how to truly love. Teach us this Advent how to love You and those around us always with gratefulness and affection. Let love, unity and the desire to work together live intensely in our hearts, in our parishes, in our Church, and in the world. We pray together through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit Who live and reign with You forever and ever. Amen.







## **WEEK ONE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT**

Jeremiah 33:14-16; 1 Thessalonians 3:12-4:2; Luke 21:25-28, 34-36

### **THEME**

What is God calling us to do?

### **OPENING PRAYER**

Opening Prayer (with Prayer While Lighting the Advent Wreath for week one)  
is on page three of this booklet.





### **SCRIPTURE: LUKE 21:36**

*“Be vigilant at all times and pray...”*

In replying to one of his advisors who demanded that he take a particular course of action because he was convinced that “God is on our side,” Abraham Lincoln replied, “Sir, my concern is not whether God is on our side; my great concern is to be on God’s side, for God is always right.”

Today’s readings invite us and challenge us to be vigilant, to continually ask: Am I, are we, on God’s side?

God’s plan for His people is to be a community concerned about one another, rather than possessions and status. God’s vision is care and justice for those who are poor and suffering. Am I on God’s side? How does my parish demonstrate living on God’s side?

God’s plan is individuals taking time for prayer. God’s vision is pray-ers who put their prayers into action. Am I on God’s side? How does my parish demonstrate living on God’s side?

God’s plan is a world daring to forgive, not counting the cost. God’s vision is people committed to inclusivity, unity, co-responsibility and peace-making. Am I on God’s side? How does my parish demonstrate living on God’s side?

God’s plan is each of us living our calling, created in the image and likeness of God. God’s vision is each of us acting as the Body of Christ: hope-filled, compassionate, and courageous. Am I on God’s side? How does my parish demonstrate living on God’s side?

### **REFLECTION/CONVERSATION QUESTIONS**

- If someone asked you, “How are you on God’s side?” what would you tell them about your life?
- What do you think are some of God’s plans and visions for your parish, our Church? For you as a daughter or son of God?
- What will you do during this Advent season? Perhaps slowing down for prayer? Paying closer attention to the people in your life? More involvement in the life of your parish? An awareness of those in our world who are lonely and suffering? An action to reach out to someone whom you might not know?

### **BEING WITH THE WORLD “ENOUGH”**

Mother Teresa told of a time she came down with a terrible fever, becoming delirious. She had a vision of being at heaven’s gates, telling St. Peter she was ready for heaven. St. Peter refused her entry. When Mother Teresa asked why, Peter replied: “Because there are no slums in heaven.”

According to Jeremiah (in today’s reading), this Advent time of waiting calls us to take action. In her dream, Peter turned Mother Teresa away from heaven’s gate because there was still work for her on earth. Mother Teresa certainly didn’t do her work alone; she knew that wasn’t possible. Bishop McKnight always reminds us, “we are ‘Better Together.’”





Advent reminds us we live in an imperfect and chaotic world. “...on earth nations will be in dismay” (Luke 21:25). Our vocation as disciples, our baptismal call, our co-responsibility within our parish, calls us to make Advent about our work right here and right now. Like Peter at heaven’s gate, we remind ourselves, in our waiting, that there is work to do.

The poet Denise Levertov writes, “The world is not with us enough.” Advent calls us to be with the world enough, especially with the poor, with those with whom we differ and with the suffering earth. We are called to be people – and parishes – who are better together and who imitate God’s image of charity and mercy.

### REFLECTION/CONVERSATION QUESTIONS

- What do you think you are being called to do during this Advent? During this next year of your life?
- Advent is often described as a season of hope, a season of rekindling our deepest expectations. “The time of Advent ... returns us to the horizon of hope... Hope doesn’t disappoint because it is rooted in God’s faithful Word. Hope is always possible because we are together on the journey – the whole of humanity ... all together on the paths of time” (Pope Francis, Dec. 1, 2013). What Word of God has brought hope to you? Who on the journey with you has encouraged and supported hope for you? How is your parish a sign of hope in your community?
- This week we celebrate the feast of St. Andrew (Nov. 30), who was a fisherman. We know very little about Andrew from the Gospel accounts, but his feast day during Advent invites us to reflect on how quickly he answered Jesus’ invitation, “Come after Me.” Do you find yourself always waiting for just the right moment? If you’re waiting for the perfect time, might you miss the down-to-earth ways God invites you to be a generous follower of Christ in all the simple happenings of your days?

### ADVENT ACTIONS

*Choose one of these actions for this week; perhaps it will also continue in the weeks to come. If you’re willing, you might share about your action when you meet next week.*

- During your prayer time, decide on two things you will do during this Advent season to begin or to intensify ways you live on God’s side.
- Make an Advent resolution to be with the world, similar to how Mother Theresa and Jeremiah did something for others that was right and just.
- Advent is a season of entering into life, the life Jesus came to share. “Please do not watch life go by from the balcony! Mingle where the challenges are calling you to help carry life forward...” (Pope Francis, Nov. 30, 2013). Are there times you watch life from the balcony? Choose one life situation that is calling you, challenging you to become involved, to make life better – and then do it, get involved.

### CLOSING PRAYER – SEE PAGE 3







# Family Corner

- In today's first reading, Jeremiah talks about David, a member of Jesus' family tree. Who is in your family tree? How have those in your family tree helped you to know about Jesus?
- In Sunday's Gospel, what does Jesus ask His followers to do?
- As this Advent begins, what might you do to always be ready to meet Jesus, because He is always with us?
- If you had a sign in your room that said, "Pray constantly," how/for what would you pray?
- As Catholics, we believe in the sacrament of the present moment. All life is holy; Jesus is with us all the time. We just need to be aware. What practices can you and your family do to be more aware of Jesus always with us?
- As always, Luke reminds us to pray. When do you pray together as a family? Are there other times/ways you might want to pray together during this Advent season?





## **WEEK TWO SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT**

Baruch 5:1-9; Philippians 1:4-6, 8-11, Luke 3:1-6

### **THEME**

Peace

### **OPENING PRAYER**

Opening Prayer (with Prayer While Lighting the Advent Wreath for week two)  
is on page three of this booklet

### **SHARING OF EXPERIENCES OF ADVENT ACTIONS**

For those who are willing, invite two or three people to share their  
experiences of their Advent Actions from last week.





### **SCRIPTURE: LUKE 3:4**

*“Prepare the way of the Lord.”*

The Advent season celebrates what we profess during every liturgy throughout the year. We proclaim, “We proclaim your Death, O Lord, and profess your Resurrection until you come again.” The Nicene Creed promises that Christ “will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.” We believe in the second coming of Christ. Advent is certainly about Christ’s first coming more than 2,000 years ago in Bethlehem, as well as a reminder that Christ will “come again” at the end of time.

Yet, have we misnamed the second coming? At the end of His earthly life Jesus did ascend, yet He also stayed with us. Jesus shows up all the time. Perhaps His coming at the end of time will really be the third coming. If we act as if He’s not here and is hidden until He comes back again, we are being unfaithful to one of our core beliefs, unfaithful to the gift of the closeness of God.

John tells us to prepare the way of the Lord, to be faithful to the gift of the closeness of God. To prepare the way of the Lord today, we must straighten out the tortured paths that truncate our sisters’ and brothers’ hopes as they flee for their lives, seeking a safe haven. We are called to straighten out twisted communications with words of truth and sincere compassion, even for our adversaries.

To prepare the way of the Lord today, we need to muster the courage necessary to enter the valleys of depression and desperation that trap our brothers and sisters in loneliness and fear. In our personal relationships, we are called to build bridges across the breaches that have separated us from family or friends, to forget old wounds and bend low enough to say, “I am sorry.”

To prepare the way of the Lord today, we must reevaluate the mountains (and rivers) that create uncrossable borders between us as families, neighbors, nations, parties, ideologies, genders and even those boundaries that sometimes divide us within our parishes (and don’t allow us to live co-responsibly). Then, willing to see the beauty of “the other,” we can descend from our heights of righteousness and let those mountains be made low.

### **REFLECTION/CONVERSATION QUESTIONS**

- How does the message of John the Baptist sound today – a warning, praise, a reprimand, a challenge?
- What are some concrete ways John’s message is calling your parish (and yourself) to act at this time?
- John the Baptist tells us to “make straight His paths.” This is a call to clear all the obstacles to a new place where the needy are given comfort, care and the blessings of God. Pope Francis says it this way: “Develop the habit of giving real importance to the other person. This means appreciating them and recognizing their right ... to be happy.” (Amoris Laetitia, #138) What is one way you can “make straight the paths” for an older person, a struggling family member, a co-worker who is carrying a burden, someone in your parish, the poor, those treated unjustly, etc.?



### **“MY LIFE WILL NEVER BE THE SAME”**

Ed Mitchell returned from his Apollo 14 mission to the moon in 1971 a changed man. From his experience in the cosmos, he said he gained a greater awareness of the forces that shape the universe.

His website states, “As he hurtled earthward through the abyss between the two worlds, Mitchell became engulfed by... ‘a sense of universal connectedness.’ He intuitively sensed that his presence, that of his fellow astronauts, and that of the planet in the window were all part of a deliberate, universal process.... The experience was so overwhelming Mitchell knew his life would never be the same.”

The ending of Sunday’s Gospel about preparedness reminds us of this connectedness: all flesh and all creation shall be transformed. No one and no thing is excluded. “We are better together.” We are called to co-responsibility in every area of our lives. When we live the Advent message of deepening our connection with God, creation and all humanity, our lives will never be the same.

### **REFLECTION/CONVERSATION QUESTIONS**

- Have you ever had an experience similar to Ed Mitchell’s - a time when you felt connected to/with all of God’s daughters and sons, all of God’s creation?
- What are the requirements for peace in our homes, our neighborhoods, our nation, our world? How might an awareness or realization that we are all connected help to build a peace-filled environment?
- Can you think of a person who realizes we’re all connected, who is a peace-maker? What might we learn from him/her?

### **ADVENT ACTIONS**

*Choose one of these actions for this week; perhaps it will also continue in the weeks to come. If you’re willing, you might share about your action when you meet next week.*

- Ask a trusted friend or family member about their thoughts on what requires your awareness so you can “clear a straight path” (for instance, drawing attention to yourself, inattentiveness to those who are bothersome, etc.).
- John shouted his message to the people. Decide one thing you could do that “shouts” to your world you are a disciple of Jesus.
- We can’t wait for others to bring about the peaceful reign of God in our world. What can you do? Some examples could be to write a letter to the editor, participate in a local meeting about a community matter and become involved in grass-roots efforts for change.

### **CLOSING PRAYER – SEE PAGE 3**



# Family Corner

- Jesus had some best friends. They were His partners in trying to make the world a better place. If Jesus asked you to be His partner and help Him make the world a better place, how would you answer? What kind of things would you do for your partner Jesus?
- John the Baptist called the people to prepare a road for God's homecoming. How is your home a home for God? Is there someone you need to welcome "home" this Christmas?
- This week we celebrate the feast of St. Nicholas. Legends about St. Nicholas tell us he led a life of giving, of sharing his wealth, especially to families and children. Can you be like St. Nicholas this week and give to children in need some of your toys and books which you no longer use?
- Pope Francis said, "The mystery of Christmas, the secret of Nazareth, is that it radiates the beauty of family life" (Amoris Laetitia, #65). Pope Francis rejoices that God chose to become one of us within a family, a place of marvelousness, joy and warmth. Tell another family member how they bring joy and warmth to your life.

Don't forget to  
celebrate  
Saint Nicholas Day  
on December 6!





## **WEEK THREE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT**

Zephaniah 3:14-18a; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:10-18

### **THEME**

Joy

### **OPENING PRAYER**

Opening Prayer (with Prayer While Lighting the Advent Wreath for week three)  
is on page three of this booklet

### **SHARING OF EXPERIENCES OF ADVENT ACTIONS**

For those who are willing, invite two or three people to share their  
experiences of their Advent Actions from last week.







### **SCRIPTURE: ZEPHANIAH 3:17**

*“The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a mighty Savior, who will rejoice over you with gladness, and renew you in his love, who will sing joyfully because of you...”*

“God draws close to us” is the message of this first reading (and the Gospel). Do we always recognize God? We expect to find God in Scripture, during prayer time, in homilies, during liturgy, in our family and friends and in nature.

God also comes in unexpected ways, unexpected places and unexpected people. Jesuit Father Anthony DeMello tells a story in his book, *Taking Flight: A Book of Meditations*.

There was once a woman who was religious and devout and filled with love for God. Each morning she would go to church. On her way, children would call out to her, beggars would accost her, but she was so immersed in her devotions that she didn't even see them.

One day she walked down the street in her customary manner and arrived at the church just in time for the service. She pushed the door, but it would not open. She pushed it again harder and found the door locked.

Distressed at the thought she would miss the service for the first time in years, and not knowing what to do, she looked up. And there, right before her face, she found a note pinned to the door. It said, “I'm out there!”

How can we be awake to all the unexpected ways and places God is with us? Do we welcome all these ways? Is our parish aware of God's presence in unexpected people, unexpected ways, unexpected places?

### **REFLECTION/CONVERSATION QUESTIONS**

- Has there been a time in your life when you were startled by God's love, God's care, God's presence with you because it came in a way that you weren't expecting?
- Are your expectations yours or are they God's? Do your expectations (about God, about others, about life, etc.) affect the larger world as well as your individual concerns?
- On Gaudete Sunday in 2013, Pope Francis said, “In the liturgy, the invitation rings out several times to rejoice, why? Because the Lord is near” (Pope Francis, Dec. 15, 2013). God is near. We don't need to “put God” into our lives because God is already there. It is not our job to pray and do good works so God will come and be with us. God is already here. What might you do to be more aware of the closeness of God within the ordinary moments of your life?

### **A SAINT WHO LOVED JOY**

As we celebrate Gaudete (Rejoice) Sunday today, we remember Pope Francis wrote in *Gaudete et Exsultate*, “Far from being timid, morose, acerbic or melancholy, or putting on a dreary face, the saints are joyful and full of good humor. Though completely realistic, they radiate a positive and hopeful spirit.”

St. John Bosco was known during his life for his joyful attitude. Early in his life he started what he called a “Society of Joy.” His friends (the members of this group) would meet in



the evenings at one of their homes to read, pray, learn and receive one another's advice or correction. When they had completed these rituals, they went out together onto the roads of their city, singing, laughing, visiting wayside chapels and picking bilberries and wild strawberries in the nearby woods.

St. John Bosco loved being an acrobat and putting on shows to amuse and bring enjoyment to his friends. His joyful attitude continued throughout his life. He wrote, "I am a man who loves joy and who therefore wishes to see you and everybody happy. If you do as I say, you will be joyful and glad in heart."

For St. John Bosco, the key to joy was living for God, caring for others and being grateful for all of God's gifts and God's presence with him. That brought a lasting joy.

### REFLECTION/CONVERSATION QUESTIONS

- When did you last experience joy? What does this tell you about yourself?
- Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI said, "Joy is the true gift of Christmas, not the expensive gifts that call for time and money. We can communicate this joy simply: with a smile, a kind gesture, a little help, forgiveness. And the joy we give will certainly come back to us...Let us pray that this presence of the liberating joy of God shines forth in our lives." Who has brought simple joy into your life? How have you brought simple joy to others?
- If you decided joy was going to be a priority in your life, what changes might you make in the coming year?

### ADVENT ACTIONS

*Choose one of these actions for this week; perhaps it will also continue in the weeks to come. If you're willing, you might share about your action when you meet next week.*

- In the morning write the numbers 1 through 10 on an index card and slip it into your pocket. Throughout the day, pay attention to the simple joys. As something delights you, jot it down. In the evening, you will have the basis of a prayer of gratitude.
- "No one has ever heard of a sad saint ... It would be a contradiction. The Christian's heart is filled with peace because he knows how to place his joy in the Lord even when going through the difficult moments in life" (Pope Francis, Dec. 14, 2014). Some people would say it is not possible to be joyful in the midst of difficulties. Jesus reminds us it is possible because we are surrounded by God's strength and joy. Try to be aware of how many times you smile today and how many times you say positive things. Increase the numbers a little bit tomorrow.
- In *Amoris Laetitia* (#130), Pope Francis reminds us joy can grow through pain and sorrow. During Advent, many churches celebrate "Blue Christmas," a time to reach out to those who have lost loved ones and find the season a painful, rather than a joyful time.
- Call, email, or spend time with someone who is experiencing loss, worry, or sadness. Listen; be God's messenger of care to them. Bishop McKnight wrote, "Mercy ... is also experienced when a parish tangibly extends the Church's consolation and support in people's everyday joys and sorrows." How can you participate in your parish's practices of consolation and support for the hurting during this Advent season?

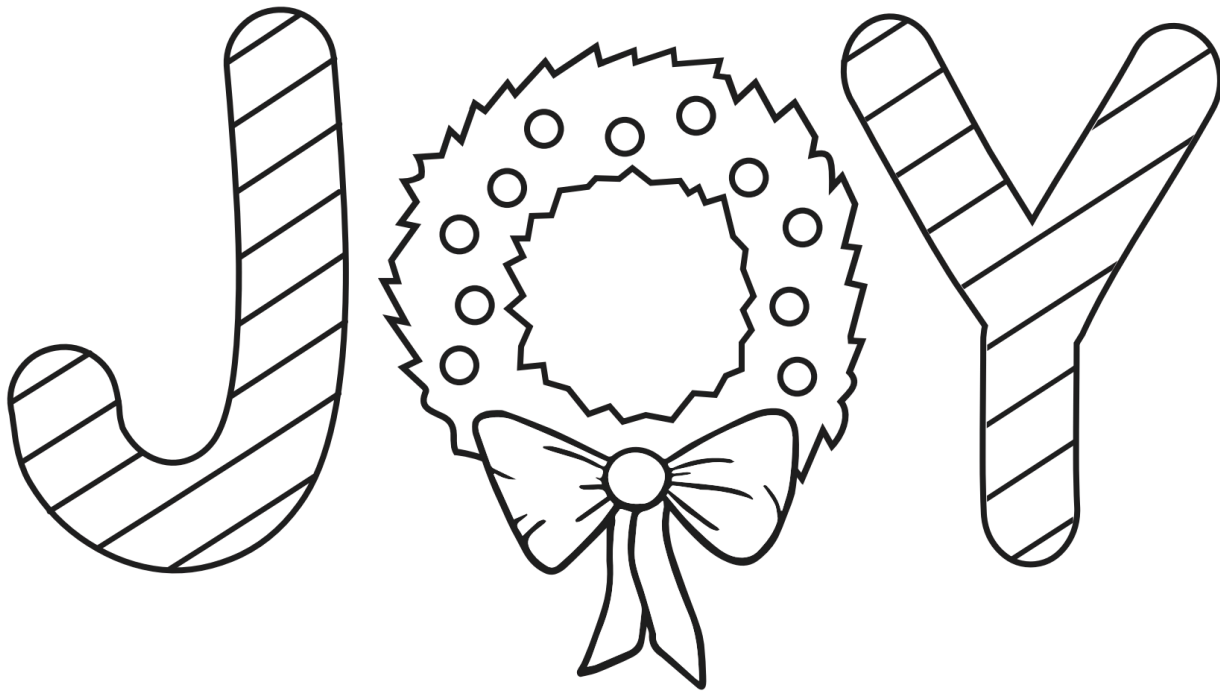
### CLOSING PRAYER – SEE PAGE 3





# Family Corner

- Jesus told the crowds to share. In this season where all the commercials tell us to buy more, how can we be simpler? How can we share with others?
- The Third Sunday of Advent is meant to be a day of wonderful joy. What brings you joy? When does your family bring joy to others?
- John the Baptist was trying to explain how mighty and wonderful Jesus is. Who is the most wonderful person you know? What is the most wonderful thing Jesus has done for your family? What would be a wonderful thing you could do for someone else during this Christmas season?
- John was calling the people to a life of generosity. What do you have that someone needs?
- Christmas is a celebration of Jesus coming into our world. But sometimes people get so busy they forget that. What could you and your family do to remember?





## **WEEK FOUR FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT**

Micah 5:1-4a; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-45

### **THEME**

Love

### **OPENING PRAYER**

Opening Prayer (with Prayer While Lighting the Advent Wreath for week four)  
is on page three of this booklet

### **SHARING OF EXPERIENCES OF ADVENT ACTIONS**

For those who are willing, invite two or three people to share their  
experiences of their Advent Actions from last week.





### **SCRIPTURE: MICAH 5:1**

*“But you, Bethlehem-Ephrathah least among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel; whose origin is from of old, from ancient times.”*

The Book of Micah, like Isaiah, shares the expectation God will deliver Israel through a king in the line of David. Bethlehem-Ephrathah is the home of the Davidic line.

This passage was understood by the Gospel writers as a messianic prophecy and has continued to be understood that way through the centuries. The Gospel of Matthew tells us that the chief priests and scribes cite this passage as the ancient promise of a Messiah in the line of David to be born in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:5-6).

Within the clans of Judah, Bethlehem was scarcely worth noticing, yet God chose to bring the Messiah out of this town. Why?

Certainly because of the lineage of David, but perhaps there is much more. Bethlehem was small. God chose something small, quiet, out of the way which changes the course of history and eternity.

God’s choice of the insignificant and the lowly is fundamental to Who God is and how God acts. God does not choose places or people because of their prominence, success or distinction. God often chooses the forgotten, the humble, the simple.

Jesus was born in the smallest of places. During His life He did not travel more than 50 miles from His home. He left no personal writing and died a degrading death. Yet, His vision of the Reign of God and His fervent desire to see it fulfilled has changed the world.

Bishop McKnight reminds us of Pope Francis’ words in “The Joy of the Gospel” (“Evangelii Gaudium,” #28) about the parish: “It is a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a center of constant missionary outreach.” We, as individuals and as a parish, are a refuge for the lowly, the hurting. We choose like God does.

### **REFLECTION/CONVERSATION QUESTIONS**

- Bishop McKnight reminds us of Pope Francis’ description of a parish. How would you describe a vibrant parish? How would you describe your parish?
- For what are you thirsting? For what are the people in your parish thirsting? For what are the people in your neighborhood/town thirsting? How can the parish/the diocese respond to today’s thirsts? How can you?
- Can you think of instances in Scripture where Jesus cares for the ordinary, the common person? When have you seen and witnessed God’s choice and care of the lowly, the forgotten during this Advent season?

### **ST. JOHN KANTY’S HUMILITY AND SERVICE**

Tucked in right before Christmas is the feast of a lesser-known saint, St. John Kanty (1390-1473). As a university professor in Kraków, John was unjustly kicked out of his position. Rivals who resented John’s popularity with the students had manufactured a false charge against him. So at age 41, he was shipped off to be an apprentice pastor.



In spite of the energy he put into his new ministry, the parishioners were hostile. But John's way was to live and act from the heart.

After eight years, he was exonerated and transferred back to Kraków. Because of his constant love and care for the people of his parish, they then followed him several miles down the road, begging him to stay.

Throughout his life – as a university professor, as a pastor - John became well known in the city for his generosity and compassion toward the poor, especially needy students at the university.

He subsisted on what was strictly necessary to sustain his life, giving alms regularly to the poor.

Once, John was sitting down to dinner when he saw a beggar walk by outside. He jumped up immediately, ran out and gave the beggar the food in his bowl. He asked no questions, made no demands. He just saw someone in need and helped with what he had.

### **REFLECTION/CONVERSATION QUESTIONS**

- Motivated by love, John's life resulted in his always thinking of others, putting the needs of others before his own. Is it difficult in today's world to think of others first? Why?
- Can you share a time when you put the needs of others first? A time when you witnessed your parish place the needs of the hurting front and center in its policies and actions?
- The Fourth Sunday of Advent and the celebration of Christmas is not the end of our reflections on God-with-us and who we are as God's people. What are you going to do next? What would you like your parish to do next?

### **ADVENT ACTIONS**

*Choose one of these actions for this week; perhaps it will also continue in the weeks and the New Year.*

- Nearing Christmas each year we hear the Canticle of Zechariah, expressing the wonder of the deeds of God. Zechariah could praise God this way because he was open to new things. This season calls us to newness, challenging us to give birth. "Brothers and sisters, let us not be closed to the newness that God wants to bring into our lives!" (Pope Francis, March 30, 2013). During this Advent season, what new things have been born in you or in your parish? As you prepare for the 12 days of Christmas, write your own canticle of thanksgiving, listing the new things that have been born in you this Advent.
- All around us the world often prepares for an extravagant celebration of the Christmas season. In "Laudato Si" (#230), Pope Francis calls us to St. Thérèse of Lisieux's little way of love, reminding us love is all-encompassing, including simple daily gestures of kindness, peace and friendship. Today give compliments; go out of your way to say thank you; smile; and/or do a random act of kindness.
- Today's readings and the very nature of our Advent/Christmas season reminds us of the people who have loved us, who have always been there for us. Take this time of gift-giving to tell them "thank you." Think of the reality of how your pastor/pastoral staff have been there for so many people, often in ways you might not even see. Write a prayer for your pastor/pastoral staff. Send it to him/them.

### **CLOSING PRAYER – SEE PAGE 3**





# Family Corner

- How did Elizabeth greet Mary? Have you heard these words before?
- During these last days of Advent, pray the Hail Mary each day with your family.
- Elizabeth is described as “filled with the Holy Spirit.” What do you think this means? Do you know someone who is “filled with the Holy Spirit?”
- Like Mary, is there someone who needs your visit during this Advent/Christmas season?
- Christmas doesn’t end on December 25. The 12 Days of Christmas are the days from Christmas until the Epiphany (traditionally January 6). These 12 days are an opportunity to continue thinking about Jesus becoming one of us; celebrate several important feast days; celebrate family rituals. As a family decide on something you will do on each of the days (e.g., read a book about the Christmas story; visit a living Nativity; picnic next to the Christmas tree; go through your Christmas cards, praying for each person by name; visit an elderly person; take Christmas bread to a shut-in, etc.).





## ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

### AUTHOR

Dominican Sister Janet Schaeffler is the author of hundreds of articles and several publications. Today, she continues the ministry she provided in parishes and as director for Adult Faith Formation for the Archdiocese of Detroit, as she:

- leads days of reflection/retreats, parish missions, and workshops/presentations
- facilitates gatherings and retreats for communities of women religious
- facilitates online courses for the University of Dayton and Boston College
- serves as a pastoral services team member for RENEW International.

She was one of the four-member team who wrote the “Leaders’ Guide” to accompany the U.S. bishops’ pastoral plan for adult faith formation, “Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us.” An elected officer of the executive committee of the National Conference for Catechetical Leadership (NCCL), she received their Distinguished Service Award in Catechetics in 2010.

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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