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WHAT'S IN YOUR TEACHING GUIDE

This Teaching Guide has three purposes:

- to give the teacher tools for focusing on the content of the session in the Study Guide.
- to give the teacher additional Bible background information.
- to give the teacher variety and choice in preparation.

The Teaching Guide includes two major components: Teacher Helps and Teacher Options.

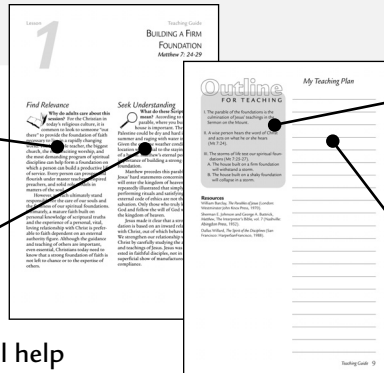
Teacher Helps

Find Relevance

helps you zero in on why each session is important for the adults you teach.

Seek Understanding

presents helpful Bible Background informations and insights that will help you better understand the Scripture.



Teaching Outline

provides you with an outline of the main themes in the Study Guide.

My Teaching Plan is a convenient place for you to make notes for teaching the session.

Teacher Options

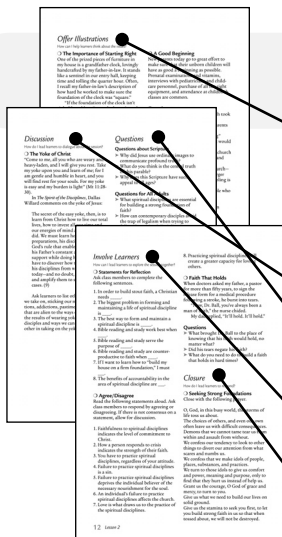
Offer Illustrations presents material that will help you paint a picture of the session. This section often presents items from church history, current events, or interesting anecdotes that help introduce the session.

Discussion provides teaching activities that will help learners discuss the Scripture text.

Questions presents multiple collections of questions for various kinds of adults.

Involve Learners helps learners become actively involved with the Scripture text for a particular session.

Closure gives you a means for wrapping up the session.



You Can Choose!

There is more material in each session than you can use, so choose the options from each section to tailor the session to the needs of your group.

Prepare Before the Session

Read the session for today in the Study Guide. Then read the options in this Teaching Guide, placing checkmarks beside the activities you plan to include. After you have decided which options to use, gather the appropriate materials.

LOOKING FORWARD AND LOOKING AROUND

Matthew 24:36-44

Find Relevance



Why do adults care about this session? Life's routines surround us. We perform typical and perhaps repetitive activities at work. We use particular stairs, elevators, and streets every day. We easily fall into patterns—the restaurants we frequent, the meals we cook at home, the stores we shop. We have typical routines for showering and brushing teeth, and we may even wear certain clothes on certain days. Rituals surround our worship, teaching, and preaching. Most Sunday morning bulletins present a similar pattern. It does not take long to wear a path.

In the process of wearing paths, we can slip into a monotony that dulls not only our five senses, but also our religious sense. This lesson encourages a heightened awareness and an anticipation of Jesus' return. Many individuals live without an ongoing hope in Christ's return. We may say we believe in Jesus' return, but little is evidenced in how we live.

This lesson not only stirs up the embers of anticipation in Christ's return, but is also a wake-up call to see where God is working in the routine activities of everyday life. Perhaps people do not anticipate Christ's return because they have not recognized where Christ is already present in this world.

Seek Understanding



What do these Scriptures mean? Matthew 24:36-44 is part of a larger speech that begins in 24:1 and runs to 25:46. In the Gospel of Matthew, this is Jesus' fifth major discourse and is typical of his extended teaching. His discourse is directed to his disciples who have questioned "the sign of your coming and of the end of the age" (Mt 24:3).

Jesus states quite clearly that "no one knows" the day or the hour of the end of the age (24:36)." Two points are important in this statement. First, Jesus does not indicate that time the earth itself will end. Those who speculate on the world's climatic end miss Jesus' framework of understanding. Jesus' return signals the end of the age. The ancients believed in two ages: the present evil and corrupt age and the age to come, which will be filled with all that is pure and holy. Second, even though Jesus did not specify a time, he did issue a warning that humanity is to remain alert. Anticipation and readiness are the watchwords for those living in the hope of Jesus' return and the beginning of the new age.

Early Christian ethics were grounded in the belief that Jesus would return. Paul's concern to preach the gospel, to live with moral uprightness, to worship in

Outline

FOR TEACHING

Introduction: Jesus has entered Jerusalem before his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. His words are a call for watchfulness as we wait for the Son of Man's return.

I. The setting and God's timetable

A. Matthew 24:1-25:46 is Jesus' fifth discourse in Matthew's Gospel and deals with issues related to the end of the age. (The other discourses are found in 5:1-7:27; 10:5-42; 13:1-52; and 18:1-35).

B. The future coming of the Son of Man and the coming age are hidden from humans and angels (24:36).

II. Examples of the Son of Man's unexpected coming (24:37-41)

A. Learning from the days of Noah (24:37-39)

1. People in Noah's time were engaged in the routine activities of life.
2. Within the routines of life, some people did not recognize God's presence.
3. Unaware individuals are swept away in the flood.

B. Learning from a countryside example (24:40-41)

1. Two men are working in a field. One is not watchful, and he is swept away.
2. Two women are grinding meal. One is not watchful, and she is swept away.

C. Being watchful (24:42)

III. The lesson of the house owner and watchfulness (24:43-44)

A. Vigilant homeowners will prevent their properties from being robbed.

B. Everyone is called to be ready for the coming of the Son of Man.

reconciliation with Jew and Gentile, and to see no differences between male and female or between slave and free are all grounded in his belief in Jesus' return. Even when the delay of Christ became impossible to ignore, the early Christians, such as John the Seer on Patmos, still turned their attention to a better age someday in the future. How one lived in the meantime, however, was of continuing importance.

Resources

R. Alan Culpepper, "Maranatha," *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Watson E. Mills et al. (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1990).

Søren Kierkegaard, *Consider the Lilies*, trans. A. S. Aldworth & W. S. Ferrie (London: The C. W. Daniel Company, Ltd., 1940).

Dale Moody, *The Word of Truth* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1981).

Paul Redditt, "Apocalyptic Literature," *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Watson E. Mills et al. (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1990).

Christopher Rowland, *The Open Heaven* (New York: Crossroad, 1982).

My Teaching Plan

Offer Illustrations

How can I help learners think about the issues?

○ Finding God in the Routine

A stanza from “Aurora Leigh” by Elizabeth Barrett Browning declares:

Earth’s crammed with heaven
And every common bush afire with
God;
But only he who sees, takes off his
shoes,
The rest sit round it and pluck black-
berries.

Questions

- In what sense is the world already afire with God?
- How do our routines cause us to miss God’s presence in the world?
- What can we do to avoid missing the flaming presence of God today?
- What experiences have caused you to seek “bushes afire with God?”

○ Future Expectations

Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard captures the essence of a misplaced expectation of the future. He tells a brief parable about a wild pigeon and the bird’s cousins, the domestic pigeons. From his forest perch, the wild pigeon often saw the farmer’s domestic pigeons sitting on the barn roof. One day he perched upon a branch close enough to the barn to engage his cousins in conversation. The talk eventually turned to how each survived and looked to the future. The wild pigeon said, “Each day I find what I can and let each day be sufficient for itself.” His domestic cousins said, “Oh, it is not so with us. We are assured of our future because the farmer harvests, and stores, and he has much to give us. Our future is guaranteed.” When the wild pigeon flew home that night, he began to think, “It must be wonderful to know that one’s future is secure. It is a wretched thing to live in uncertainty and not really know what the

future will hold.” From this point, he began to conjure in his mind the anticipation of need. His peace was gone, and now he worried about his material future.

The wild pigeon wished he was like his cousins, those rich farm pigeons, and he began to pity himself. “Why am I such a poor wild pigeon? What can I do to take care of my future?” One day he decided to join his cousins on the roof of the barn. He noticed that each evening they flew into a place on the roof. Here, he thought, was the wonderful place of food and rest from all his concerns. So, that evening he also flew into the barn pigeons’ loft. When the farmer came into the barn to close the loft, he found a wild pigeon among the domestics. He separated the bird out, put it into a box, and killed it the next day.

Questions

- What anticipations about the future are misplaced?
- How would our goals change if our focus on the future was for Christ’s return?

Discussion

How do I lead learners to dialogue about the session?

○ Betting Our Lives

In Spring 1997, a cult called Heaven's Gate made news around the world. Because of their belief that the comet Hale-Bopp was a sign marking the end of time, thirty-nine people took their lives. News reporters, cult experts, and religious leaders attempted to explain what motivated such an action.

In a dialogue with a news reporter, one expert said that this group represented only a small minority perspective in the United States. In one sense, however, they *didn't* represent a small minority. They represented the vast majority. All people are seeking a hope that will give meaning and direction to their lives. Christian hope is based on the belief in Christ's return. This hope can order how we live in the present, how we deal with spouses, children, and money, and how we prepare for the end of life. Whether people realize it or not, the hope they choose is the one on which they are betting their lives.

Questions

- Cult members are often considered on the fringe of society because of their extremism. Do individuals outside the church consider Christians extreme because of our belief in Christ's return?
- In what ways do we orient our lives to Christ's return?
- Is it a hope on which we are betting our lives?

Questions

Questions about Scripture

- How does the story of the fig tree (Mt 24:32-35), which precedes our lesson Scripture, contribute to understanding Jesus' words?
- How do the three parables in Matthew 25 reinforce or add to Jesus' words about expectation in 24:36-44?

- Besides Noah's story of those caught unaware, what other Old Testament stories illustrate the need to be ready?

Questions for All Adults

- Imagine the response and feeling of those who were taken in this passage. What excuses might they have given? What excuses do people today give for not being ready?
- What unexpected event has happened in your life? What would you have done differently if you had known?
- How do you prepare for the future? Have you set priorities or goals for the next couple of years? The next ten years? Thirty years?
- How would your behavior change if you knew that Christ would return within the next four weeks?

Questions for Mature Adults

- In your experience, how have you balanced an emphasis upon living in the present while anticipating the future? How has your future turned out differently than you anticipated?
- How do you view your stewardship of the present?
- In what ways have you experienced the presence of God recently?

Questions for Younger Adults

- In what ways are you occupied with the future?
- In expectation of your future, what are the biggest motivating factors in how you prepare for the future?

Questions for Adults with Children

- What hopes do you have for your children's future? What fears do you have for your children's future?
- In what ways do your children see the presence of God in the midst of everyday experiences?
- How can you be more attuned to the presence of God?

Involve Learners

How can I lead learners to explore the session together?

○ **Sayings and Clichés about Time**

Our culture has numerous sayings, clichés, and stories about time. As a group, brainstorm some of the phrases or sayings used to buttress our understanding of time, especially about the future. Some examples are, “Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow you may die” and “How time flies.” A traditional story about time is the fable about the grasshopper and the ant. List the sayings, clichés, and stories on a board. Ask the class members to consider any consistent themes or lessons in this collection. Use the sayings to help your group discuss our orientation toward the future.

○ **The Interim Period**

Christians live in an interim period between Jesus’ ascension and the day of his return. On a chalkboard or marker board, visually demonstrate this dynamic to show that Christians live in an in-between time. Ask class members to recount times in their lives when they have found themselves in an in-between time (examples: job, engagement, college, or driving at twilight).

Questions

- What are the feelings and experiences of being in an in-between time of life?
- How can we cultivate the sense that the time we live in is not permanent, but an interim period?
- For what should we be most alert during this interim period?

○ **Create a Parable**

The illustrations of Jesus’ unexpected return are drawn from the common experiences of an agricultural society. What might be a good parable or analogy for contemporary individuals in an industrial and technological society? As a class, create a contemporary parable that illustrates unexpectedness and the necessity of being prepared. Would this parable be a helpful warning to people who are ignoring the coming return of the Son of Man?

Closure

How do I lead learners to respond?

Leila Naylor Morris expresses these words about Christ’s return in a verse of her hymn “What If It Were Today.”

Jesus is coming to earth again,
What if it were today?
Coming in power and love to reign,
What if it were today?
Coming to claim His chosen Bride,
All the redeemed and purified,
Over the whole earth scattered wide,
What if were today?

What if it were today? This question is one to consider prayerfully as we contemplate our goals. Another line in this hymn, “Faithful and true would He find us here,” is a reminder for us to consider how we will live as we wait for Christ’s return.

2

TRANSFORMED BEING AND REFORMED LIVING

Matthew 3:1-12

Find Relevance



Why do adults care about this session? Many people think of repentance as something they do at the beginning of their

Christian pilgrimage. Few think of repentance as influencing current behavior. It is important to rekindle the significance of repentance. Help your class members discover a repentance that continually influences their world view, goals, and aims.

This lesson affords class members an opportunity to assess their priorities and motivations. In this evaluation, they can reflect upon their experience of repentance and consider how a lifestyle of continuing repentance can transform them, inspiring them to bear fruits of reform.

Seek Understanding



What do these Scriptures mean?

Luke's Gospel introduces us to John the Baptist by telling the story of John's birth. In Matthew's Gospel, John arrives abruptly on the scene, and the first word out of his mouth is "repent."

John proclaims that repentance is necessary because the Kingdom of Heaven has come. The Kingdom of Heaven is the Kingdom of God. The word "heaven" is

used, however, because the audience to whom Matthew is writing is mostly Jewish Christians. "Heaven" is used to speak reverently about God without using God's name. Both phrases refer to God's sovereign rule now beginning in their midst.

In his repentance message that God's reign has dawned, John undercuts a foundational pillar of Judaism. The Jews believed that by birth they were members and participants in the coming reign. John scoffs at this belief, shouting that their father is not Abraham, but a snake: "You brood of vipers! (3:7)." If the foundations of birth and heritage are removed, then how does one participate in this new Kingdom? John proclaims that God's rule of our lives begins with our repentance and continues with our bearing fruit (3:8). John is saying that repentance is more important than one's lineage back to Abraham. Jesus is the guarantee that the salvation is effective, and he is the model of living, working, and ministering in the Kingdom of God.

Outline

FOR TEACHING

Introduction: With a genealogy of kings and a herald to announce his coming, Matthew clearly presents Jesus as royalty. John the Baptist’s announcement is shocking because of what he asks listeners to do in preparation for the coming king.

- I. John the Baptist is a herald in the wilderness (3:1-6).
 - A. John’s urgent message is to prepare for the arrival of God’s reign (3:2).
 - 1. The earlier message of the prophet Isaiah gives John’s message credibility (3:3).
 - 2. John’s own prophetic nature, signified by his dress and meals, also lends credibility to his message (3:4).
 - B. John’s revival movement drew a huge following. Jewish crowds confessed their sins and were baptized (3:5-6).
- II. The Pharisees and Sadducees serve to draw out the details of John’s message (3:7-10).
 - A. One’s lineage does not guarantee one’s readiness for God’s Kingdom. Everyone is called to repentance demonstrated by one’s actions in the world (3:7-9).
 - B. The time for repentance is now (3:10).
- III. John also announces the coming king (3:11-12).
 - A. John’s baptism is one of water. The coming King will baptize one with the Spirit (3:11).
 - B. The coming King will separate those who repent and bear fruit from those who do not acknowledge and embrace the new kingdom (3:12).

Resources

J. Bradley Chance, “John the Baptist,” *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Watson Mills et al. (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1990).

Olive Gilbert, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* (New York: Arno Press, 1968).

James A. Weaver, “Ambrose,” in *A Cloud of Witnesses*, ed. C. Douglas Weaver (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 1993).

N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).

My Teaching Plan

Offer Illustrations

How can I help learners think about the issues?

○ The Emperor and the Preacher

In *A Cloud of Witnesses* is the story of Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan, and his encounter with Emperor Theodosius. The emperor had traveled to Milan and was preparing to enter Bishop Ambrose's church to celebrate communion. The bishop, however, knowing that the emperor had recently slaughtered 7,000 citizens of Thessalonica, stopped him at the door of the church and said, "You cannot enter here with hands soiled by human blood." The emperor responded that his actions were comparable to King David who was a man after God's own heart. The bishop's replied, "You have imitated David in his crime, imitate him in repentance." (Weaver, 11-12) It is not easy to repent.

Questions

- What reasons do individuals give for avoiding the call to repent?
- What does one give up in order to repent?

○ The Fruits of Repentance

In a small rural section of southern Missouri, several farmers were surprised one morning to find at their doors a small bunch of fruit or vegetables. At one house was a small bag of potatoes, at another a few carrots, and at others some apples. Along with the food was a brief note. Though each note was a little different, the essence was the same. "I used to steal food out of your garden. I know it was wrong."

No name was attached to the notes, but there was no need. Only a week earlier, a revival had been held in the community, and one of locals, known for his stealing and wild life, went forward in an act of repentance. He may not have known much about the Bible, but he knew that there was more to repenting than just walking down a revival aisle. In his small way, he was literally bearing the fruit of his repentance in reparation for his past.

Questions

- How do we bear the fruit of our repentance?
- What restitution is appropriate when people repent?
- What are examples of how repentance has totally changed a person's aims and goals?

Discussion

How do I lead learners to dialogue about the session?

○ Speaking Truth to Power

During his term in office, President Ronald Reagan's trip to Germany stirred conversation around the globe. During this trip, he was invited to a local cemetery to lay a memorial wreath on some graves and to deliver a brief address. These seemingly harmless actions provoked a ferocious media response. The cemetery in which this event was to take place was a burial place for numerous Nazis.

Elie Weisel, the 1986 Nobel Peace Prize winner, urged the President not to go. He told the president that this action would not be appropriate for what it would symbolize. The president delivered the wreath and speech. When asked if he felt that he had failed since his words did not deter the president's actions, Elie Weisel replied, "One must always speak truth to power." John the Baptist was speaking truth to power when he addressed Pharisees and Sadducees.

Questions

- What truths are we called to speak?
- To what powers do we speak? How have we softened the truth?
- What are the costs of speaking truth to power?
- What are the most positive outcomes of speaking the truth? What could happen to the messenger?

Questions

Questions about Scripture

- In what ways is John's message similar to Jesus'?
- In what ways is John's message different from Jesus'?
- From what did the common folk of John's day need to repent? From what did the Pharisees and Sadducees need to repent?

Questions for All Adults

- What signs indicate that repentance is an active part of a person's life?
- What do people usually understand about a call for repentance?
- Is repentance always personal? In what sense does a group, church, denomination, or nation need corporate repentance?

Questions for Mature Adults

- Who would you consider a modern prophet issuing a call for repentance? What was powerful about the call? How did people respond?
- From what does your generation need to repent?
- How have your goals been influenced by your repentance?

Questions for Younger Adults

- Who are the prophets proclaiming repentance today?
- John's message was delivered in person and in the desert. In what ways could you communicate a message of repentance to a younger generation? What would be the most effective method?

Questions for Adults with Children

- How do you teach your children theological concepts such as repentance?
- In what ways do you share your values and goals with your children?


Involve Learners

How can I lead learners to explore the session together?

○ Bumper Sticker Theology

Ask class members to list messages on religious bumper stickers. Ask younger class members to describe religious slogans on T-shirts. In what categories do these slogans fit? How do you know if a person believes the slogan? Can a slogan become a life-changing belief?


○ Goals and Aims of Life

 Distribute pencil and paper to each class member or hand around copies of the Resource Kit page titled “Goals and Aims.” Direct your group participants to list some of their goals and aims for the next five, ten, and twenty years. Use the following or similar questions for reflection: Why are our goals important? What influences your goals and aims? What will you have to do to accomplish these goals? How are these goals part of the *movement* (Kingdom) of God?



○ Imagine the River

The following scenario is printed on the Resource Kit page for this session. Give each class member a copy to read silently. When they finish reading, ask the group to reflect aloud on possible responses to John’s message.

 Place yourself in the Jordan River with John the Baptist. You are a typical peasant, a common laborer or farm worker, in Judea and have gone to hear the wild-eyed prophet about whom everyone is talking. As you listen, you understand bits and pieces of his message. You can’t remember everything that he is saying, but you remember one word that he keeps repeating: “Repent!”



The crowd is pushing and pressing its way toward the prophet. Their arms are stretched out, elbows flying, smelly bodies splashing forward, and it is all a little overwhelming. But you are willingly swept along with the crowd because, just like everyone else, you have become keenly aware of your sins. Before you know it, you come up out of the water sputtering. You’ve been baptized. You are swaying with the cool water lapping against your legs, you feel soft mud squishing up between your toes, and your heart is thumping against your chest so hard you think it will explode. “What have I done?” You look around at the rest of the crowd. They are wet, but happy. It may seem silly, but things seem different. As you step back onto the bank, the prophet tosses one more cry over his shoulder in your direction, “You’ll never be the same now! You’re part of God’s movement! Show it!”

In what ways are you never the same? What had been the focus of your life? How would you have treated the Romans in your village in the past? How will you act toward them now? How did you view the Pharisees and Sadducees? How will you view them now? How do you understand the Scripture now? What do you do with your surplus crops? How do you explain to others what took place on the banks of the Jordan River?

Closure

How do I lead learners to respond?

○ Challenge

Challenge your class members to think anew about repentance. Guide them in reflecting upon their need for repentance. In closing, read this quote from Sojourner Truth (Isabella Baumfree, 1797-1883), the black abolitionist. When asked to define her mission in life, Sojourner said, “I was to travel up and down the land, showing people their sins, and being a sign unto them” (Gilbert, p 44). Bless the class by sending them out to be signs of repentance.

A PUZZLING MESSIAH

Matthew 11:2-11

Find Relevance



Why do adults care about this session? The phrase “too close to the situation” usually implies that a person is so intimately involved in a situation that it is difficult to see the circumstances clearly. In the first century, John the Baptist and his disciples were caught up in the complexity and immediacy of the events in their world. Because they were so “close to the situation” of Jesus’ words and actions, they did not always understand them. The Messiah God actually sent and the disciples’ expectations of the Messiah were very different.

Contemporary Christians have difficulty understanding Jesus’ identity, but for reasons different from those of the first believers. Jesus’ identity and purpose are defined in so many different ways that it is difficult and confusing to discern the truth. In addition, instead of being too close to the events of Jesus’ life, Christians today are too removed. This separation is not only geographical but also chronological, cultural, societal, and economical.

This lesson focuses on helping class members understand Jesus’ identity and how it was shaped by a different type of messiahship than first-century Christians expected. Help your class members reflect upon how Jesus was and is identified. Encourage the group to allow Jesus’

actions and words to shape the image they paint of him.

Seeking Understanding



What do these Scriptures mean? In this passage, John the Baptist is in prison. Matthew does not explain John’s imprisonment until much later in his Gospel. In 14:1-12, Matthew records the death of John the Baptist and notes that John had been imprisoned by Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee. John’s message that Herod’s marriage to his brother’s wife was unlawful had not been favorably received.

During John’s imprisonment, Jesus’ ministry grew. John’s disciples informed him of Jesus’ ministry, and John is puzzled by Jesus’ actions because they are not consistent with the actions of the messiah he has been proclaiming. In the first century, there was no clearly established notion of the messiah, what the messiah would be or do. But Jesus’ actions and words illustrate a very different notion of messiah than most people expected and desired. Jesus is portrayed as a servant and a healer. His words proclaim a way based on love, not violence. John the Baptist was not the only one asking questions about Jesus.

Outline

FOR TEACHING

Introduction: John, by way of his disciples, asks Jesus, “Who are you?” Jesus’ actions supply his response. Jesus also blesses any who recognize that he is the Messiah.

- I. The Question: The Identity of Jesus
 - A. Considering his disciples’ reports, the imprisoned John the Baptist is struggling to discern Jesus’ identity.
 - B. He sends his disciples to interview Jesus in order to discover if he were indeed “the coming one” or if they should be expecting another (11:2).
- II. Jesus’ actions and words give a clear answer (11:4-5).
 - A. Jesus’ actions identify him as the one who has come to usher in the Kingdom.
 - 1. Blind see.
 - 2. Lame walk.
 - 3. Lepers are healed.
 - 4. Deaf hear.
 - 5. Dead are raised to life.
 - B. Jesus’ words identify him as the one who has come to usher in the Kingdom.
- III. Jesus’ Beatitude: Jesus blesses John, his disciples, and anyone who does not “stumble” over his identity (11:6).
- IV. The Identity of John the Baptist (11:7-11)
 - A. While John the Baptist seeks Jesus’ identity, Jesus reveals the identity of John the Baptist to the crowds (11:7).
 - B. In contrast to the weak-willed ruler Herod Antipas, John is a strong unwavering prophet (11:8-9)
 - C. John is a messenger preparing the way (11:10)
 - D. Anyone recognizing Jesus’ identity is great (11:11).

Resources

Linda McKinnish Bridges, *The Church’s Portraits of Jesus* (Macon GA, Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 1997).

Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, tr. Charles E. Wilbour. (New York: Carleton, 1862).

Larry Thornton, “The New Light: German Christians and Biblical Distortion During the Third Reich,” *Fides et Historia* 18/2 (1986) 32-43.

My Teaching Plan

Offer Illustration

How can I help learners think about the issues?

In Victor Hugo's novel *Les Misérables*, Jean Valjean, a former prisoner, experiences a conversion of sorts and becomes a changed man. Not only does he change his actions, but also his name. He becomes Father Madeleine, a kind and generous person who is known for his good deeds, generosity to the poor, and support of anyone in need. He becomes a prosperous factory owner and eventually the mayor of his town.

A police inspector, Javert, has been searching for Valjean. He suspects Father Madeleine and is determined to discover his true identity. Javert succeeds and attempts to arrest Valjean. The inspector, however, is confused by the person he is hunting. Javert expects Valjean to act like a criminal, yet Valjean is always helping anyone in need, even at one point saving the inspector himself from the bonds of French Revolutionaries. Due to Javert's intense confusion on account of the differences between his expectations and Valjean's actions, Javert finally jumps into the Seine River and drowns.

Understanding Jesus' identity is central to the story of John's imprisonment. John baptized Jesus but is still confused about Jesus' identity. Which of Jesus' actions and words do not meet with the expectations of the time? What were typical messianic expectations? What are these expectations today?

○ Nazi Germany and Jesus

When the Nazis came to power in Germany in the late 1930s, they realized that it was important to control not only the industrial power, the media, and the state, but also the people's religion. They placed National Socialist clergy in leadership positions in the state churches. Believing such an influence would not be enough, they sought to create a new portrait of Jesus for the people. The Nazis printed new translations of the Bible, using phrases and values of the Third Reich to portray Jesus very differently from a Jewish Messiah. An example of such rephrasing is from Jesus' teaching about forgiveness as found in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:38-42): "I say to you, it is better so to live with your fellow-countrymen that you get on well together. The community of the Volk [people] is a high and holy good for which you must make sacrifices. Therefore, accommodate your adversary as far as possible before breaking with him altogether. If your comrade, in his excitement, strikes you in the face, it is not always right to strike back at once" (Thornton, 36).

What effect does a person's image of Christ have on a his or her faith? Although in this example the distortion of Jesus' image is intentional, most people and groups do not intend to reshape the image of Christ. It is true, however, that distorted images of Christ exist in our world. Why is it so difficult to understand the Christ we read about in the Gospels?

Discussion

How do I lead learners to dialogue about the session?

○ Books about Jesus

Over 65,000 books dealing with Jesus are in print. In 1996 alone, there were over 1,500 new books on Jesus, and approximately four new books about Jesus are published each day. (Religious News Service, quoting David Barrett, as reported to *Idea*, German Evangelical Alliance)

Questions

- What does the great number of books on Jesus indicate?
- What evidence do you think authors use to construct their views about Jesus?
- How do an author's social position and culture influence what he or she writes about Jesus?
- What books about Jesus have class members read recently?
- What recent news stories have dealt with Jesus' identity?

Questions

Questions about Scripture

- Why was John in prison?
- What did the ancient Hebrews expect of a Messiah? What do people of our century expect?
- What was the good news that Jesus proclaimed for the people of his day (11:5)? What do people today consider good about Jesus' message?

Questions for All Adults

- In discussing Jesus' identity, it is difficult to balance his humanity and divinity. On which side do people usually err?
- How do culture and society shape our image of Jesus?
- In what ways might individuals "stumble" over Jesus today (11:6)?

Questions for Mature Adults

- How have you shaped your image of Jesus?
- Who was most influential in helping you understand Jesus' identity?
- How has your understanding of Jesus changed?

Questions for Younger Adults

- What do you find most puzzling about Jesus?
- How does the media help shape the image of Jesus?
- How can the church more effectively introduce non-Christians to Christ?

Questions for Adults with Children

- What questions do children ask about Jesus?
- What is the most important characteristic of Jesus children should learn?
- What is the most difficult aspect about Jesus to teach to children?

Involve Learners

How can I lead learners to explore the session together?

○ Portraits of Jesus

Bring pictures of Jesus to display in your classroom. Try to find some pictures that portray Jesus in contemporary situations as well as the more traditional ones. Begin dialogue with your group members by asking questions.

Questions

- Do you think that these pictures portray Jesus accurately?
- How about the artist's feelings at the time?
- How do you feel when you see Jesus portrayed in contemporary scenes?
- How might we create Jesus in our own image?
- How can we guard against making Jesus' identity like our own?

○ Jesus at the Movies

Jesus has been a regularly featured character in the movies. The first time Jesus was portrayed in motion pictures was in 1916 in D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance* and Thomas Ince's *Civilization*. Both of these movies were silent pictures. The first picture with sound that featured Jesus was a 1935 film called *Golgotha*, and since it was a French film, Jesus spoke French. Ask the group to name the movies they have seen or heard about that relate to Jesus. Ask if the movies capture an authentic portrait of Jesus. Many movies about Jesus have stirred a controversy. Is it possible today to portray what Jesus was really like?

○ Objects that Cloud Our Vision Regarding Jesus' Identity

In attempting to recognize Jesus as the Messiah for us today, class members need to be aware of the factors that influence and often shade their personal understanding of Jesus. In order to provoke reflection, write the heading "Personal Influences" on

a chalkboard or marker board. Under this heading, ask the class to list some possible influences on their understandings of Jesus' identity. Influences could be gender-based, economic, ethnic, geographical, political, social, and denominational. Linda Bridges elaborates this point:

To American scholars writing in the political turmoil of the Vietnam War era, where an antiestablishment mentality was in vogue, Jesus appears as a political revolutionary. To scholars writing during the extreme economic polarities of the modern 1990s where rich get richer and poor get poorer, where society makes decisions on political expediency and economic security, Jesus appears as a marginalized peasant. (Bridges, 11)

Explore with the class how such factors affect how we interpret the identity of Jesus. Is it possible to keep these factors from clouding one's vision regarding Jesus' identity?

Closure

How do I lead learners to respond?



Tell the class that many individuals in the past have tried to understand Jesus and his role. Point out that one of the earliest ways that Christians attempted to understand Jesus was based on Isaiah 53. End the class by giving each member a copy of the Resource Kit page entitled *Servant Song*. Read it responsively.



4

FOLLOWING THE RIGHTEOUS SPIRIT OF CHRISTMAS

Matthew 1:18-25

Find Relevance



Why do adults care about this session? On one hand, the relevance of this story is self-evident: Jesus' birth has changed this world forever. The world may not seem changed, but because God sent Jesus, we can live new lives. On the other hand, the Christmas story is so familiar that it has lost some of its power both to evoke a sense of wonder and to provoke Christians to act as citizens of God's Kingdom.

This lesson can help class members hear the Christmas story anew. Read verses 18-25 aloud to remind your group that few people in the ancient world could read. When people celebrated Jesus' birth, someone told the story.

This lesson also helps class members recognize Joseph as a model of righteousness. Joseph's actions can inspire us to consider what God calls us to do and how we are to exceed minimum requirements as citizens of God's Kingdom.

Seek Understanding



What do these Scriptures mean? Matthew's Gospel places Jesus' birth securely within Jewish royalty and the lineage of David. The genealogy, which begins the Gospel (Mt 1:1-17) and is directly before the lesson passage, functions to highlight Jesus' Jewish heritage and his connection with the royal house of King David. Jesus' honorable origins are important since the situation surrounding his birth was scandalous.

The emphasis on the kingship of Jesus is further accentuated by the arrival of the star gazers (2:1-12). Unlike the account of Jesus' birth in Luke, in which Jesus is surrounded by common field hands, in Matthew's account Jesus is surrounded by enlightened and wealthy star gazers from the East. This distinguished entourage seems worthy of a newborn King.

One other feature deserves note in Matthew's account. Verse 23 quotes Isaiah 7:14. Matthew scoured the Old Testament to find references that undergird the validity of the Messiah's arrival and with him the Kingdom of Heaven. Isaiah 7:14 is the first of many Old Testament quotes found in Matthew. This extensive use of the Old Testament illustrates that the evangelist's original audience was well grounded in Old Testament knowledge and believed in its authority.

Outline

FOR TEACHING

Introduction: In contrast to Jesus' genealogy, the tragic events after his birth, and accounts of his ministry, Jesus' birth is told in a very simple and concise manner. The economy of the narrative helps to undergird the greatness of the event.

I. How It All Began (2:18a)

II. Mary, Joseph and the Dilemma (2:18b-19)

- A. Mary is engaged (betrothed) to Joseph and is pregnant with a child by the Holy Spirit (2:18b).
- B. Joseph decides to divorce Mary quietly (2:19).

III. The Change of Plans (2:20-21).

- A. An angel of God appears to Joseph in a dream and halts his dismissal of Mary.
- B. In the dream, the angel tells Joseph of Mary's child (2:21).
 - 1. The child is the result of the Holy Spirit.
 - 2. The child of Mary will save people from their sins.
 - 3. The child's name will be Jesus.
- C. Matthew quotes Isaiah to underscore that the events surrounding Jesus' birth were the fulfillment of God's plan (2:22-23).

IV. A New Direction (2:24-25)

- A. Joseph was obedient to God and took Mary as his wife (2:24).
- B. Joseph named the child Jesus (2:25).
- C. Until Mary delivered Jesus, Joseph had no marital relations with her (2:25).

Resources

M. Eugene Boring, "Matthew 1:18-25," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995).

Warren Carter, *Matthew: Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist* (Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 1997).

Robertson Davies, *The Merry Heart* (New York: Viking, 1997).

David L. Mueller, "Concept of Revelation," *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Watson E. Mill et al. (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1990).

John J. Pilch, *The Cultural World of Jesus: Sunday by Sunday, Cycle A* (Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press, 1995).

Joseph L. Trafton, "Joseph," *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Watson E. Mills et al. (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1990).

My Teaching Plan

Offer Illustration

How can I help learners think about the issues?

○ A Christmas Carol

One of the most beloved stories at Christmas time is the story of Ebenezer Scrooge in Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. Scrooge's life could be called many things, but never righteous. He had perfected selfishness and greed to a fine art. The world and those around him did not concern Scrooge one bit, unless of course it interfered with his money. The Christmas season for him was a speed bump on the road to maximized profits. Scrooge's greatest concern was that his ledgers should weigh heavily on the asset side of the column. Christmas compassion could only detract from his gains.

By a revelatory dream, Scrooge was changed. The ghosts of Christmases Past, Present, and Future revealed to him what had been, what was, and what was to come. Awaking on Christmas day, Scrooge was a transformed man. His conversion was completed when he demonstrated works of righteousness by helping those in need.

Scrooge's dream was not about the birth of a child that would save people from their sins, but it was a dream about a new birth, namely, his own. God's will can be revealed in many ways, sometimes even in dreams. How has God revealed direction and purpose in your life? How do conversion and righteousness intersect in a Christian's life?

○ A Letter from C. S. Lewis

C. S. Lewis is best known for his children's stories, *The Chronicles of Narnia*. A prolific writer, Lewis was also the author of poetry, scholarly books on English Literature, and science fiction. Many of his insights are preserved in his correspondences with his numerous admirers. Included in *Letters of C. S. Lewis*, edited by his brother, Warren H. Lewis, is part of a letter that reveals an important aspect of what it means to practice righteousness. A portion of the letter reads:

The love we are commanded to have for God and our neighbour is a state of the *will*, not of the affections.... So that the test of music or religion or even visions if one has them—is always the same—do they make one more obedient, more God-centred and neighbour-centred and less self-centred? (Lewis, 268-69).

Questions

- Joseph's obedience illustrated his God-centeredness.
- How do you evaluate your activities? Are they God-centered or self-centered?
- How would our church meetings, family relationships, and business encounters benefit from such an evaluation?

Discussion

How do I lead learners to dialogue about the session?

In the Scripture narrative, Joseph does not follow the letter of the Jewish law. Joseph's actions define him as a righteous person. One writer states:

As modern readers ponder the opening scene of Matthew's story, some may be struck by the similarity between Joseph's quandary and their own. We want to "do the right thing," and we believed that somehow it is revealed in the Bible. We may belong to a church that claims to accept the Bible as the norm for its faith and practice and, yet, sense that the "Christian thing to do" does not follow the letter of the Bible" (Borg, 136).

Questions

- What do you think the writer means by his statement that the Christian thing to do "does not follow the letter of the Bible?"
- What examples can you give?
- Do you think that some people in Joseph's village would have labeled him as a poor example because he did not follow the law concerning Mary?
- What is our guide to righteousness?

Questions

Questions about Scripture

- What were the sins of the people (2:21)?
- What Old Testament story demonstrated to those in Jesus' day that "God was with them?"
- Examine the context of Isaiah 7:14. To whom is this prophecy originally directed? How have later writers understood its meaning?

Questions for All Adults

- How do you define "righteousness?"
- What good thing has someone done for you this week?
- Have you ever done something that you were convinced was right even though others considered you a bad example? How did you feel?

Questions for Mature Adults

- In your church experience, what difficult decisions have been made "because it was the right thing to do?"
- How did you know it was the right action to take, and not self-centered or self-serving?
- What kinds of things, if any, do you wish you had done differently?

Questions for Younger Adults

- How do we emphasize righteous actions today?
- Who models righteousness today?
- What pressures cause persons not to "do the right thing?"

Questions for Adults with Children

- How would you describe righteousness to your children?
- When is it most difficult to model doing the right thing?

Involve Learners

How can I lead learners to explore the session together?

○ A Christmas Haiku

Japanese haiku is a type of poem composed of only three lines. The first line has five syllables, the second line has seven, and the last line has five syllables. Usually the last line reveals a twist or revelation. This poetry form is appropriate for considering Matthew's account of Jesus' birth. Matthew has used an economy of words to tell of this event and he has included some surprising revelation by way of Joseph's dreams.

Distribute pencils and paper to your class members, and have them compose a haiku describing the importance of Jesus' birth in their lives. You might want to give them an example of a haiku. Consider this example:

Pregnant and Scared,
Righteous and Obedient,
a cry...God with us.

After the haiku are composed, ask for volunteers to share what they have written and any other reflections they have upon Jesus' birth. Discuss the unique characteristics of each haiku and the unique revelation God has for each of us.

○ A Christmas Quiz



Give each person a copy of the Resource Kit page titled the

“Christmas Quiz.” The answers are as follows:

Answers: 1. B, 2. B, 3. D, 4. B, 5. E, 6. C, 7. A, 8. C, 9. C, 10.



D. Allow people to share their answers and express their feelings about what they did and didn't remember. Remind the group that although the story is very familiar, we can always learn something new. As you give the correct answers for the quiz, talk with your class members about how we commonly harmonize the stories from Matthew and Luke into one story. We even add details from hymns and pageants. Ask how our harmonization might affect our understanding of the original author's intention and the significance of particular stories in particular Gospels?

Closure

How do I lead learners to respond?

○ Four Days Til Christmas

Encourage class members to make time each morning for the next four days to read aloud Matthew 1:18-25. Ask them to ponder each phrase, word, and syllable, seeking any new insight God may have for them. After each reading, they might ask themselves this question: “In light of Jesus' birth, how will I practice righteousness today?” Ask them to read the story aloud each evening before they go to bed and ask this question: “Because of Jesus' birth, how have I practiced righteousness today?”

5

WHEN KINGDOMS
COLLIDE*Matthew 2:13-23**Find Relevance*

Why do adults care about this session? Often after the final celebrations of Jesus' birth, individuals quickly move on to consider the coming year. Life gets back to normal, and the purpose of Jesus' birth can easily be overlooked. This lesson can help class members reflect upon the continuing effects of Jesus' birth in their lives. In Matthew, this continuing influence is illustrated by the clash between Herod's kingdom and God's Kingdom.

The media is filled with stories of clashes between cultural and religious values, political groups, and ethical perspectives. Christians must consider the tensions that arise in their world when they consciously attempt to live their lives as members of God's Kingdom. This lesson should help evaluate areas of possible conflict and appropriate responses to the conflict.

Seek Understanding

What do these Scriptures mean? Matthew 2:13-23 echoes the story of Moses. Matthew's audience is primarily Jewish Christians who are well versed in Old Testament Scripture. Moses' close relationship to God, his mediating work on behalf of Israel, and his role as liberator from the oppression of Pharaoh made him the paradigm for Jews. Matthew wanted

his audience to recognize Jesus as having and exceeding those characteristics.

Another important key for understanding this passage is the strategic use of the Old Testament. After the three major episodes in 2:13-23, the writer indicates that everything took place to fulfill Old Testament prophecy (2:15, 18, 23). Matthew wants his readers to know that the events of Jesus' birth are all part of the larger plan of God.

Interestingly, Matthew claims the statement "He will be called a Nazorean" (2:23) to be from the Old Testament prophets; however, there is no Scripture that corresponds to this citation. The references cited (Isa 11:1; Zech 3:8; 6:12) are references to a messianic *branch*. The Hebrew word for "branch" is *netzer*, which is similar in sound to "Nazareth." Though this may be the reference, no Old Testament passage directly supplies the quote in verse 23.

The frequent use of Herod's name indicates his level of concern over the birth of this new king. Verse 16 begins, "When Herod saw," and verse 19 begins, "When Herod died." In Joseph's dream, he is told to wait "until the death of Herod" (2:15). This passage is filled with predictions of death, attempted assassinations, and a massacre. Revelation 12:4b-5 illustrates these events, only in more symbolic language. The writer accurately portrays the character of the time and the cruelty of Herod.

Outline

FOR TEACHING

Matthew records the events after the birth of Jesus. His brief description is filled with both the providence of God and the violence of humanity.

I. Joseph, Mary, and Jesus Escape into Egypt (2:13-15).

- A. A second dream instructs Joseph to take the child and Mary to Egypt (2:13). Herod desires to kill the child.
- B. Joseph and his family flee to Egypt and remain there until the death of Herod (2:14-15a).
- C. The flight to Egypt fulfills the words of the Lord. "Out of Egypt I have called my son" (Hos 11:1 and 15b).

II. Herod's Paranoia Results in a Massacre (2:16-18).

- A. Herod is tricked by the Star Gazers (2:16a).
- B. Herod orders the murder of all male children two years of age and under in and around Bethlehem (2:16b).
- C. The results of the massacre fulfill the words of Lord (2:18). "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more" (Jer 31:15).

III. Joseph, Mary, and Jesus Settle in Nazareth (2:19-23).

- A. In a third dream, Joseph is told to return to Israel because Herod has died (2:19-20).
- B. Joseph learns that Herod's son, Archelaus, rules Judea. Joseph is warned in a fourth dream not to stay in Judea, but to go to Galilee and establish his home in Nazareth (2:22-23a).
- C. Living in Nazareth fulfills what the prophets had spoken. "He will be called a Nazorean" (Isa 11:1 or Zech 3:8; 6:12).

Resources

John C. H. Laughlin, "Herod," *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Watson Mills et al. (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1990).

"Militants Kill 30 in Algeria," *Kansas City Star* 30 December 1997,A-2.

John J. Pilch, *The Cultural World of Jesus: Sunday by Sunday, Cycle A* (Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press, 1995).

James A. Weaver, "Martin Luther," *A Cloud of Witnesses*, ed. C. Douglass Weaver (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 1993).

Elie Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Avon Books, 1969).

My Teaching Plan

Offer Illustrations

How can I help learners think about the issues?

○ “Here I Stand”

Because of his views on the authority of popes and councils, the great reformer Martin Luther (1483-1546) was called before princes of Germany and the Holy Roman Emperor Charles. The German city of Worms was abuzz with the news that Luther would be questioned at a heresy trial. Johann Eck, Luther’s questioner, asked: “Do you or do you not repudiate your books and errors that they contain?” The clash between Luther’s beliefs and the combined power of Church and State could not have been clearer. Luther replied, “I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against my conscience is neither right nor safe. God, help me. Amen.” Some accounts also include that he added, “Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise.” (Weaver, 67)

Questions

- What issues cause clashes between the Kingdom of God and earthly powers?
- How have the clashes between Church and state affected you? Your church? Your school?

○ “Where is God?”

Elie Wiesel, the 1986 Nobel Peace Prize winner, and his father were prisoners in a Nazi concentration camp at Buna. In *Night*, Wiesel recounts how the prisoners were forced to stand and watch the hanging of two men and a young boy. While the men died quickly, the young boy did not. He hung there suspended between heaven and earth in pain and torture. “‘Where is God? Where is He?’ someone behind me asked.... For more than half an hour he stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes.... Behind me, I heard the same man asking: ‘Where is God now?’ And I heard a voice within me answer him: ‘Where is He? Here He is—He is hanging here on this gallows....’” (Wiesel, 76)

Questions

- Jesus and his family escaped the violence in Bethlehem. How might the parents of the dead children have felt about God’s presence?
- How was God present with the innocents who were slaughtered?
- What do you think that Wiesel meant when he said, “Where is God? He hangs there from the gallows”?

Discussion

How do I lead learners to dialogue about the session?

A news article in the *Kansas City Star* dated December 30, 1997, reported the massacre of thirty peasants by Muslim militants.

The massacre was part of a wave of violence before the Islamic holy month of Ramadan—and the sixth anniversary of the beginning of an insurgency against Algeria’s government. The fighting has left more than 75,000 dead, including at least 48 who were killed over the weekend.

“God must bring us back to our senses. It has to stop,” said Hassan, a taxi driver who works in the nearby port of Oran. Hassan, who would give only his first name, planned to move his wife and three children out of the village of Safsaf.

“I knew all those people who died,” he said. “Everyone knows everyone here.”

Villagers in Safsaf, a town of dirt roads and stone homes, said about 40 hooded men attacked the tiny white mosque at the end of evening prayers Saturday.

Questions

- In what ways do you think the experience of those in Bethlehem was similar to that of the victims in this news report?
- Might some of the Romans have said something similar to the Jews; “Ask your God to save you?”
- What was Jesus’ response to violence?

Questions

Questions about Scripture

- The writer of Matthew understands the birth of Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. In verse 23, he quotes the prophets as saying, “He will be called a Nazorean.” Is this an Old Testament quote? What does this suggest about the author’s use of the Old Testament?

- The story of Jesus’ baptism immediately follows this lesson’s passage. Why does Matthew reveal nothing of Jesus’ early years?
- What connection did the Israelite people have with Egypt?

Questions for All Adults

- Mary, Joseph, and Jesus were miraculously saved by divine providence. How do we distinguish between providence and luck?
- What Christian values are in conflict with societal values?
- Is conflict always a part of living out our Christian convictions? Why or why not?

Questions for Mature Adults

- When have you witnessed or been a part of the positive resolution of conflict? What made the experience positive?
- The writer Søren Kierkegaard said that “we live life forward, but only understand it in reverse.” In what ways have you experienced God directing your journey?

Questions for Younger Adults

- Are individuals today penalized for their Christian values?
- If we do not experience conflict because of our values, should we be concerned about our lifestyle? Why or why not?

Questions for Adults with Children

- This lesson is filled with death, violence and bloodshed. In what ways are children today exposed to violence?
- How do you help your children deal with the violence around them?
- The biblical approach to conflict is always love and peace. In what ways can adults model for our children a peaceful approach to conflicts?

Involve Learners

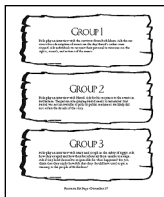
How can I lead learners to explore the session together?

○ Bethlehem News Account



Ask the class to role-play an interview between journalists

and the people described in Matthew 2:13-23. Form three groups and give each group one of the following assignments. Tell the group that they may use the following questions or others. The group assignments are also found on the Resource Kit page for this session.



Group 1: Role-play an interview with the survivors from Bethlehem. Ask the survivors for a description of events on the day Herod's orders were obeyed. Ask individuals to recount their personal testimonies on the sights, sounds, and actions of the events.

Group 2: Role-play an interview with Herod. Ask for his response to the events in Bethlehem. The person role-playing Herod needs to remember that Herod was not answerable to polls or public sentiment. He likely did not soften the details of the story.

Group 3: Role-play an interview with Mary and Joseph in the safety of Egypt. Ask how they escaped and how they feel about all those who were unable to escape. Ask if they hold themselves responsible for what happened? Do you think that they might have felt that they should have tried to get a warning to the people of Bethlehem?

○ No Competition

Ask your class members to form two small groups. Give each group two pieces of construction paper, one red and one black, and offer the following instructions: The object of this game is to score as many points as possible. Here are the rules: Each team has two pieces of paper, red and a

black. As a group, decide which color to show the other team. Both teams will show their colors at the same time. The teacher is the moderator of the exercise. Points are determined as follows:

When one team shows red and the other shows black, red scores 2 points. When both colors are black, both teams score 1 point. When both colors are red, both teams lose 2 points.

Play ten rounds, allowing one minute for the groups to decide the color they will show. The groups may not speak to each other except through the moderator. The groups are allowed to strike a deal, with the help of the moderator, in order to score points.

Watch how the groups function and try to determine their "goal." When the exercise is finished, debrief by asking the group with more points how they feel about the way they played the game. Then ask the group with fewer points the same question.

Depending on how the groups interacted, consider these questions: Did the teams consider negotiating to show "black" every time so that both groups could score? Why did the game become competitive? Remind everyone that the goal was to score as many points as possible and that nothing was said about scoring more than the other team. Why didn't the groups work cooperatively in order to score?

Our culture has a great influence over us. It has taught us well that for someone to win, someone else must lose. God's Kingdom, however, is vastly different. No one has to lose (Jn 3:16).

Closure

How do I lead learners to respond?

This session is the last in our journey on the Bethlehem road. Review the previous four sessions. Ask class members what has been significant for them during their

Advent journey. Ask the class to envision the journey they will be making during the new year. Ask them to consider silently how they will be ordering their lives for God. End with these two quotes:

“For you made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”
St. Augustine

“Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.... Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper for us the work of our hands—O prosper the work of our hands!” (Psalm 90:1-2, 17)

IMAGINE THE RIVER

Place yourself in the Jordan River with John the Baptist. You are a typical peasant, a common laborer or farm worker, in Judea and have gone to hear the wild-eyed prophet about whom everyone is talking. As you listen, you understand bits and pieces of his message. You can't remember everything that he is saying, but you remember one word that he keeps repeating: "Repent!" The crowd is pushing and pressing its way to the prophet. Their arms are stretched out, elbows flying, smelly bodies splashing forward, and it is all a little overwhelming. But you are willingly swept along with the crowd because, just like everyone else, you have become keenly aware your sins. Before you know it, you come up out of the water sputtering. You've been baptized. You are swaying with the cool water lapping against your legs, you feel soft mud squishing up between your toes, and your heart is thumping against your chest so hard you think it will explode. "What have I done?" You look around at the rest of the crowd. They are wet, but happy. It may seem silly, but things seem different. As you step back on to the bank, the prophet tosses one more cry over his shoulder in your direction, "You'll never be the same now! You're part of God's movement! Show it!"

SERVANT SONG

ISAIAH 53

Leader: Who has believed what we have heard?
And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?

Group: For he grew up before him like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.

Leader: He was despised and rejected by others;
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;
and as one from whom others hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him of no account.

Group: Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.

Leader: But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.

Group: All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have all turned to our own way,
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

Leader: He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,

yet he did not open his mouth;

like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

Group: By a perversion of justice he was taken away.

Who could have imagined his future?
For he was cut off from the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people.

Leader: They made his grave with the wicked
and his tomb with the rich,
although he had done no violence,
and there was no deceit in his mouth.

Group: Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him with pain.
When you make his life an offering for sin,
he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days;
through him the will of the LORD shall prosper.

Leader: Out of his anguish he shall see light;
he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge.

The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.

Group: Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great,
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong;
because he poured out himself to death,
and was numbered with the transgressors;
yet he bore the sin of many,
and made intercession for the transgressors.

CHRISTMAS QUIZ

1. Who heard the angels singing about Jesus' birth?
 - a. The Star Gazers
 - b. shepherds
 - c. Mary and Joseph
 - d. both a and b
2. The Star Gazers from the East found Jesus in a...
 - a. manger.
 - b. house.
 - c. stable.
 - d. Motel 8.
 - e. good mood.
3. Who told Mary and Joseph to go to Bethlehem?
 - a. an angel
 - b. Herod the Great
 - c. Elizabeth
 - d. Caesar Augustus
4. What did the angels sing at the birth of Jesus?
 - a. Alleluia
 - b. Glory to God in the highest
 - c. Ave Maria
 - d. none of the above
5. What did the innkeeper tell Mary and Joseph?
 - a. I have a stable you can use.
 - b. There is no room in the inn.
 - c. Come back after the Christmas rush.
 - d. both a and b
 - e. none of the above
6. According to Matthew, how many Star Gazers were there?
 - a. three
 - b. several
 - c. at least two
 - d. twelve
7. Who saw the star?
 - a. the Star Gazers
 - b. the shepherds
 - c. Mary and Joseph
 - d. both a and b
8. According to Luke, immediately after hearing the angel's message, Mary...
 - a. Went in haste to tell Joseph.
 - b. Went to the temple to praise God.
 - c. Went in haste to visit her cousin Elizabeth.
 - d. Waited for another angelic message.
9. Which Old Testament prophet does Matthew record as telling of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem?
 - a. Micah
 - b. Isaiah
 - c. Joel
 - d. Malachi
10. The story of Jesus' birth, plus the answers to all these questions, is found in...
 - a. Matthew.
 - b. Luke.
 - c. John.
 - d. both a and b
 - e. all four Gospels

Answers: 1. B, 2. B, 3. D, 4. B, 5. E, 6. C, 7. A, 8. C, 9. C, 10. D

GROUP 1

Role-play an interview with the survivors from Bethlehem. Ask the survivors for a description of events on the day Herod's orders were obeyed. Ask individuals to recount their personal testimonies on the sights, sounds, and actions of the events.

GROUP 2

Role-play an interview with Herod. Ask for his response to the events in Bethlehem. The person role-playing Herod needs to remember that Herod was not answerable to polls or public sentiment. He likely did not soften the details of the story.

GROUP 3

Role-play an interview with Mary and Joseph in the safety of Egypt. Ask how they escaped and how they feel about all those unable to escape. Ask if they hold themselves responsible for what happened? Do you think that they might have felt that they should have tried to get a warning to the people of Bethlehem?