

# SACRED ORDINARY

Community Groups

*A Weekly Journey*

**ADVENT  
2020**

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*“But the angel said to him: “Do not be afraid, Zechariah;  
your prayer has been heard.” Luke 1:13*

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**In Advent, the ordinary finds itself playing a role for the extraordinary—the Ordinary becomes the Sacred.**

The familiar stories of Advent are full of ordinary places and people God calls surrounding the coming of the Messiah—from the places of Bethlehem to the fields where the shepherds work; from Mary and Joseph to the magi searching for a king. Each ordinary person and place is interwoven in the extraordinary way God chose to come into our world. In many ways, it was unexpected from the night-time journeys and disrupted plans, a king born amongst animals and the shepherds as the first visitors.

Today, we can take comfort from the stories of Christmas, that people who waited in the place of darkness, of fear and anxiety, and even the place of hope and excitement; that God heard them and came to them in those places. We can relate to the breaking of expectations and realities shifting. In these stories, God uses the ordinary in unexpected ways to provide an answer to those waiting in frustration, loss, and pain; and uses the ordinary to bring fulfillment to prophecies made long ago.

Is God inviting us to play the unexpected role in today's story of redemption and the building of the kin-dom (kingdom)? Is Jesus inviting us to be vulnerable and to be patiently waiting in the midst of all that is happening to show the world a different way to be?

This season of Advent, open yourself to the reminder that we all play an active role as co-partners with God that takes us in unexpected places to do some pretty unexpected things—to be and to find the sacred in the ordinary. Perhaps this is the message our world needs to hear after a year like 2020.










The following devotional includes some simple questions for reflection, and ways to prayerfully respond as we prepare for the coming of Christ Jesus. You are encouraged to use this as a Community Group, or you can work through this with some friends or with your family. You may even choose to work through it individually. Any way you choose, allow yourself—give yourself permission to be in a posture of listening and responding to the places God is nudging you towards.

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# Guide for reflecting on the weekly Scripture



Each week there is the main passage as well as several other supportive verses for you and your group to read through devotionally. While you can do this a number of ways, we encourage you to follow this guide.

-  Find a quiet place where you can be undisturbed. If you are doing this together as a group, encourage them to enter into the reading with a minute of silence.
-  Open with a short prayer. Invite God to open your heart and mind for the reading.
-  Read through the passage once, slowly. Take some time to savor each word recorded in Scripture. Pause for some silence before moving on.
-  Read through the passage a second time, slowly. Shift your awareness to any word or phrase that stands out to you, any word or phrase that draws your curiosity. If you are reading it alone, underline or highlight each word or phrase. If you are doing this as a group or with a partner, invite others to share the word or phrase—don't seek to understand why, just take note.
-  Spend a few moments in silence before moving on.
-  Read through the passage a final time, slowly. Notice how each word or phrase fits into the larger passage. Reflect on why that particular word or phrase is drawing your attention.
-  Use the reflection questions included in this devotional to guide you into further reflection. Close with a prayer of thanksgiving.

*The angel said to him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news.” (Luke 1:19)*

## WEEK 1: ORDINARY PLACES



Read: Luke 1:11-20; also consider reading Isaiah 9:1-7.



### **Ponder It:**

The God of the universe, the one who spoke creation into being, and knows each and every hair on our heads chose to come dwell with us in the flesh (incarnation). Choosing a small town called Nazareth, tucked away in the corners of a vast empire, the Messiah came—not in a holy tabernacle, palace, or hospital but in a manger. No, God came in the midst of dirt, animals, and a small gathering of strangers.

- Reflect upon your own “places” in life (work, play, home, neighborhood, etc....) Are there areas you have struggled to be fully present in? How are you doing in those places?
- Are there areas in your neighborhood or community you tend to avoid? Why?

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## **Ponder It:**

In the story of Zechariah, of Mary and Joseph, and of the shepherds, an angel comes and enters into their ordinary places. Their response is one of fear; yet as the angel speaks God's peace, their minds and hearts are opened to the presence before them. In each story they hear the surprisingly good news of grace. So in the moments when it seems like the world is under a great pressure and stress, when it feels like it's spinning out of control or the wall are closing in, let us remind ourselves of the simple truth: God Emmanuel came into this world into the ordinary places—and that is exactly where we find God now.

- Where are the ordinary places in your life where you find God presence more readily? Where are you feeling the absence of God?
- How can you grow more aware and present to God's presence in the ordinary places around you today?



## **Practice It:**

Make a list of the people you know who may be feeling particularly isolated right now. Make it a point to call or Zoom each person on your list at some point this week and just spend some time with them. If that's not possible, consider writing a note or sending a Christmas card.

If you are doing this as a group, reflect on how your group can be used by God to reveal Jesus in the ordinary places of life. Encourage and support one another to think about how the place of home, work, play, and the neighborhood are places and opportunities God may be calling each person to share the Gospel story. Make a covenant to share God's love in a new way in those places this season.

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## Pray It:

Spend some time at the end of each day during this week to pray the **Prayer of Examen**. Set aside at least 5-7 minutes, but feel free to spend more time with the practice as needed. Walk through these following prayer prompts in your group and follow up next week with how the prayer went.

- **Open and close this time in prayer using this prompt:** “Come Lord Jesus and show me where you were present during this day, making the ordinary extraordinary. Revel yourself to me.”
- **Reflect on the day, spending time on each moment from when you woke up to when you went to bed.** Ask God to open your eyes and ears to see God’s presence in that moment and to hear God’s still voice speaking to you in those ordinary places.
- **Reflect on the day, focusing on the places where you did not fully show up or be present.** Pray that God would open your heart and your mind to be fully present in the days following. Ask that God help you see the places in your life the way God sees them.
- **Reflect on the day, focusing on the places where you saw God’s presence clearly.** Give thanks for those places and spend some time on the feelings that stir within you from those moments. Savor each second spent here.



*“This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” (Luke 2:12)*

## WEEK 2: ORDINARY ROUTINES



Read: Luke 2:8-20; also consider reading Philippians 2:1-11.



### **Ponder It:**

Advent offers us a reflection on family traditions and practices that have developed over the course of time. These traditions serve as reminders of how something that seems so ordinary like opening gifts, singing songs, etc... are rather extraordinary to the ones who find them meaningful. These simple, ordinary activities become something extraordinary to us because they serve as a way to encounter life-giving presence--whether its being present with family and loved ones, being present with God, or even present with something deeper within the self. With the weight of everything that has happened this past year, some traditions are going to look different and feel different. Some traditions are not going to be possible. Some are going to be done with a noticeable loss.

- What are some of your favorite holiday traditions? Why are they your favorite/What makes it special?
- How are you navigating family traditions this year in light of COVID?

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## **Ponder It:**

This year, we are collectively craving for more life-giving rhythms and routines in the places where we have some control of our lives. When we lose the shelter of routine because it has been disrupted, our hearts are laid bare and our minds fill with the shadows of the unknown. However, this is the place that Jesus shows up, where life transformation can happen—if we are willing to surrender to comfort and walk boldly in the steps of the Spirit.

Now is the time to be reminded of why we had traditions in the first place, and to honor the place we find ourselves by creating new, healthy routines and new traditions.

- What new routines have you developed during this past year? Which routines have changed?
- How have you been able to deal with the change?
- What ordinary moments in your schedule are you thankful for? Which ones have you kind of neglected?



## **Practice It:**

Spend time baking and cooking something fun. Your body is good, it bears the image of God. God became a body, and seemed to enjoy it! Make yourself lovely things to eat and enjoy. Share them (safely) with people you love and your neighbors!

If you find baking and cooking not that enjoyable, consider crafting something related to Christmas or Advent. This also is embodying the importance of the incarnation—to be able to make something with our hands, to create. Also consider sharing them (safely) with people you love and your neighbors!

If you are doing this as a group, encourage everyone to share the experience—and the results of the creative endeavor with one another. Offer support to those who may not be willing to give this a try.

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## Pray It:

Spend this week praying through an ancient practice called **the Daily Office**—using certain times of the day to pray. Don't worry about trying to do the traditional seven times throughout the day to begin with (unless you are already comfortable doing so.) For this week we will practice a simpler plan of praying three times: in the morning, before dinner, and before bed. Use the following format to help guide you through the prayer during these three times (**morning after waking up, after dinner, and right before going to bed**). Set aside at least 10 minutes for each prayer.

- **Open with a short prayer that opens yourself into a prayerful posture.** Feel free to use a prayer that is meaningful to you, or consider using this prayer: “Lord, come and be revealed. Open my eyes to see, my ears to hear, and my heart to fill.”
- **Spend a few moments reflecting on how your day is going.** If you are praying in the morning, reflect on how your day will look. Invite God into all parts of your life, including the messy part.
- **Read and pray through the following psalms: 95:1-7; 100**
- **Add a period of silence.** Consider using a word like Joy or Peace to draw you back into silence when you feel your mind wandering.

- **Read every day Luke 1: 68-79.** You can also find Zechariah's prayer as a song on youtube. Consider reflecting and praying to that song during this time.
- **Spend the remainder of the time praying for others as they come to your mind.** If this is difficult for you at the moment, pray the Lord's prayer and pause after praying each line.
- **Close your prayer time with a prayer of thanks.**

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*When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.*  
(Luke 1:57-58)

## WEEK 3: ORDINARY TIMING



Read: Luke 1:57-66; also consider reading John 1:1-14.



### **Ponder It:**

While God rarely comes when we desire, God always comes when the moment is right. This was true on the night of the very first Christmas, just as it is true for us today. Those who were faithfully waiting for the coming Messiah ended up waiting over 300 years, with life, fears, anxieties, and darkness that happened in those years. Perhaps we are in a similar place, waiting eagerly for God's answer. Perhaps we are waiting for God to bring healing or maybe even forgiveness. Perhaps we are waiting for God to come and bring changes.

I wonder about the feelings that ran through the families leading up to Jesus' birth. God chose to come when the moment is right, and they were called to play a significant role in making this happen.

- Are you currently waiting for something? If so, how is your soul in the midst of waiting?



## **Ponder It:**

That night when God came in the most unlikely places, the promise was kept. People had expectations, but God shattered those expectations. This is the promise that God would not forsake us or leave us trapped in darkness without hope. This is the promise that is fulfilled when God becomes one of us, being present: in the midst of the darkness in all of our messiness, with our hopes and joys; in the midst of loneliness in the pains of loss, with our cries and fears; in the midst of our longings and dreams, with every moment we patiently wait for God to come.

This season with its many reasons to give up patience and waiting for something to change, may we be filled with the peace and the courage to hold on a little longer. May we find every reason to continue to wait patiently for the coming of Jesus.

- What would you tell a friend who was waiting and close to giving up hope? What would you tell yourself? Are these the same? Different?
- In what ways does Jesus' coming at Christmas help us appreciate our need to put our lives in God's hands?

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## Practice It:

Choose and prayerfully reflect on one of the following areas as a way to be more deeply rooted in God.

- Surrender your timetables and your expectations of time to “go with the flow.”
- Surrender pushing or swimming against the river and honor where God is guiding you to go.
- Let go of any negative images, thoughts, or ideas you carry around about waiting, and do something to develop greater faith in God.
- Look for ways on how to intentionally grow through periods of waiting--especially if it is waiting in darkness and in dread.
- Work to reduce your anger and frustration about waiting.
- Spend more time in intentional reflection on gratitude and generosity.

While you are reflecting on the list above, challenge yourself to rest at least 1 hour each day during this week. You'll want to make sure you schedule this period so you won't forget. During this hour, consider taking a nap, reading for fun, doing a hobby, or just going for a walk.





## **Pray It:**

The season of Advent is a reminder for us to stop and take time to focus on what really counts, and to prepare for the arrival of Jesus Christ. To help you celebrate this season of focus and preparation (especially in the midst of an ongoing pandemic and hard conversations), you are invited to ask God to lead you through one or two of these Advent focused breath prayers.

Breath prayer is an ancient practice that can help ground you in the midst of anxiety, fear, or loss; and is a refreshing way to “abide” in Christ (John 15:7). To practice, all you do is repeat one of these prayers while you breath the words in and out as indicated. If you feel your mind wandering, gently bring it back to the prayer by focusing on your breath as you breathe in, holding it, and then breathing out. As you pray in this way, you are seeking to ground your mind into your heart, relying on the word of God to form you and open your spirit to receive the new life God brings.

### **The Angel Announcing to Zechariah (Luke 1:13)**

Breath in: Do not be afraid

Hold your breath for 4 seconds

Breath out: my prayer will be heard.

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Breath in God's peace  
Sit in that place of peace  
Breath out any feelings you have to God.

### **Mary Receives the Miracle Birth of Jesus (Luke 1:38)**

Breath in: Let it be to me  
Hold your breath for 4 seconds  
Breath out: According to your Word.

Breath in appreciation of the life of Christ filling you  
Sit in that place of life  
Breath out any hang-ups you might have.

### **Joseph Protects Mary and Jesus (Matthew 1:20, 23)**

Breath in: God is with me  
Hold your breath for 4 seconds  
Breath out: I will not fear

Breath in God's holy presence that surrounds you  
Sit in that place of love  
Breath out all fears and anxieties to God that fill you.

### **Angels Sing Out the News of Christ's Birth (Luke 2:10-14)**

Breath in: The Prince of Peace has come  
Hold your breath for 4 seconds  
Breath out: Glory to God!

Breath in the hope of Jesus Christ  
Sit in that hope and allow it to fill your soul  
Breath out impatience and anxiety of waiting.

*But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. (Luke 1:30)*

## WEEK 4: ORDINARY PEOPLE



Read: Luke 1:26-38; also consider reading Matthew 1:18-25.



### **Ponder It:**

Whenever I read through the Christmas story, I am always struck by the people who God gathered together to be a part of history. These were ordinary people who were in the midst of their ordinary lives when God decided to show up in a pretty significant way.

Have you ever taken a moment to pause and reflect on how amazing it is that God uses ordinary people in extraordinary ways? God loves each and every one of us immensely, and calls us into a unique partnership with God to bring peace, love, hope, and joy to a broken world. God is so invested in who we are and who we are becoming that God is constantly entering into our stories to share in our hopes, dreams, and fears. Not only that, but God entrusts to us the care of and the call to build up the kin-dom (kingdom.) How cool is that?

- What new thing is God doing within and around you during this season? How have you been responding to that call?

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## **Ponder It:**

The Christmas story is really a story of how God gave us more, and not just in the redemption narrative. Think about it. God relied on Mary and Joseph for the care of Jesus. This is not only a lot of responsibility, but also takes an extraordinary amount of trust. God entrusted the story to the Shepherds (outcasts, criminals, and poor). Sure God could have relied on the Angels to share with all people as they did with the Shepherds, but God called them to the task instead. God entrusted the magi to come bear witness to the coming of the Messiah and to protect baby Jesus from the powers that sought to destroy him.

- How are you seeing Christ being born in the world today? What role do you think God is calling you to play
- How does this make you feel? How does your gut (your soul) react to this?



## Practice It:

Get outside as much as possible. Take an evening walk and enjoy Christmas lights. Walk through the neighborhood, marvel at Creation. Spend time savoring God's creation.

As you do this, offer thanks for the things you notice with your senses. Also, as you pass people's houses offer a prayer that they might be able to experience hope, joy, peace, and love.

Afterwards, make hot Chocolate from scratch! Boil one cup of milk, whisk in 2 Tablespoons cocoa powder and 1-2 Tablespoons of sugar. Add a drop of vanilla extract, peppermint extract, marshmallows, or whipped cream to make it even better..

If you are doing this as a group, consider going on a prayer walk together (safely). Have each person take a turn to offer a prayer for those in the neighborhood.

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## **Pray It:**

Spend this week using prayer to open yourself in a listening posture with your mind opened to hearing God's call, your heart opened to feel the presence of God guiding and directing you, and your soul opened to sense the nudging of the Spirit. God is calling you and specially equipping you for something extraordinary.

To help you find this prayerful listening posture, follow these simple steps to pray through a spirit of openness and response. Feel free to use this prayer as a prelude to other prayers in this devotional, or spend time praying through the Lord's prayer.

- Make an intention to be in prayer for at least five minutes. Part of this intention is finding a place with minimal distractions. Turn off your phone and other technology unless you would like to listen to worship or meditation music to move your spirit into prayer.
- Start with some silence, to be still. If a thought comes to your mind, acknowledge that thought and allow it to pass. If a thought keeps appearing, listen to what it has to say and journal down that thought. Then enter back into that prayer listening posture with silence.
- Find a place to sit, if you are not already sitting. Say to yourself out loud, "Here I am seated, and I am doing

nothing. I will do nothing for five minutes (or longer if you desire).”

- Draw your awareness to your own bodily presence. Focus on how your body feels next to the chair. Focus on your feet and how they touch the floor. Relax your body. If that is difficult for you, spend time focusing on those areas that are holding in stress while breathing in, holding, and breathing out for 4 seconds. Imagine that breath moving through you to that area of tension, and imagine it releasing with your breath.
- Notice what you feel inside.
- Draw your awareness to the areas around you. Notice the presence of all that is around you. See if there are certain sounds you can hear, certain smells you can smell. Say to yourself out loud, “Here I am in the presence of the room (or wherever you are currently praying). Be aware of the furniture, walls, and any pets or people with you. Just be present and silent in your environment. Relax.
- Say to yourself, “Here I am in the presence of God.” Repeat silently to God, “Here I am.” Sit with God and rest in the presence of God until your time goal has been reached.

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# CHRISTMAS: A NOTE FROM PASTOR BEN

Dear Family and Friends,

If there was only one thing that I can say for sure about God and life, it is that God continually shows up in the ordinary places. Whether it was growing up in a small town in the middle of nowhere Pennsylvania, or during my time working in retail—I have plenty of stories or little moments where I encountered God's presence in some pretty profound ways.

Being honest, I'd say that these weren't always places I expected God to show up—for the most part I was actively seeking ways (and praying) of escaping those places. However, when I look back on my time in those ordinary places I cannot help but give thanks because they helped shaped who I am today.

While I can list the various physical places, there were also places emotionally, spiritually, and mentally where God has shown up.

I remember the first Christmas my family celebrated after my Dad's passing (a few months of also losing a dear friend). I dreaded coming home from school because I knew it was going to be difficult, and it was going to wreck me emotionally



and spiritually. I did, and God showed up in that place. It wasn't easy, and it wasn't pretty but I knew that that was the place I needed to go. It was the place I needed to be present.

This was true because it was the place that brought me healing. It was the place that brought healing to my family—in the small things that we were able to celebrate together (even in some boundaries I had). It was the place where God showed up once again to speak words of peace to me and my family—in the number of friends who came to support us. It was the place spiritually where I was reminded of the importance of the season—that love, peace, hope, joy were all things we absolutely need and are given to us in abundance.

The God who came to walk with us in the flesh, was present in all parts of my mess. And I can say with certainty that God is there with you in your mess—whatever that looks like. God is there with you. In all the places of your life. God is there, and God is patiently waiting with you. In all of your fears, anxieties, worries, doubts, questions—God is there with you, and God is encouraging you to take a step forward. And those things like Hope, Peace, Joy... they are yours if you allow them space to take root.

This Christmas, remember that we all are special. We all are sacred. And God is with each and every one of us! **Merry Christmas.**