# Advent in Plain Sight

## SMALL-GROUP STUDY GUIDE

The simplicity of Jill Duffield's *Advent in Plain Sight* makes it a very relatable foundation for your group's Advent study. As you journey through Advent and Christmas, reflect on the object metaphors and their related spiritual lessons, and watch for each of the ten ordinary objects as they show up throughout your daily life.

This study guide assumes that, while you will hopefully enjoy Duffield's devotions on a daily basis, your small group will only meet once per week to discuss the themes and readings. For that reason, this guide includes materials for just six sessions: the four Sundays of Advent and two Sundays of Christmas. The focus texts suggested for reading at the beginning of each session are the same as those suggested in the *Advent in Plain Sight* Sermon Series Guide to enhance cohesion across the seasonal program.

We suggest that you begin each session by sharing examples of the object at the center of the day's discussion. Talk about what symbolism the object holds for you and if there are any examples of that object that hold special meaning for you (for example, the main entry gate to your college or the vintage belt your parent handed down to you). After that ice breaker, read the focus Scriptures aloud and begin discussing the questions provided. A closing prayer is also offered.

An Advent Group Study Based on *Advent in Plain Sight: A Devotion through Ten Objects*, by Jill J. Duffield

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# FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT: GATES

## Ice Breaker

Begin by displaying or sharing photos of gates, including doorways and other passageways. Invite participants to share any symbolism that gates hold for them or any stories of particular gates that are meaningful to them.

## Focus Scriptures

Read aloud Genesis 28:1–5, 10–22 and Matthew 24:29–35.

## Main Idea

Advent is a "liminal space," positioned on the threshold between what is and what will be. We look forward both to Jesus' birth and the ultimate appearing of Christ at the apocalypse—a scary word that really just means "revealing"—of all things. In Advent, we arrive at the Lord's gate, approaching the incarnation, but Christ is simultaneously "near, at the very gates" (Matt. 24:33), preparing to return.

## Discuss

1. What comes to mind when you think of gates? What is their purpose or significance in your life? Are there any gates (or doorways/thresholds) that hold special meaning for you?
2. Have you ever experienced a "thin place," where divine things seem visible or closer than usual? Where do you experience God's presence during Advent?
3. Read Deuteronomy 6:6–9 and reflect on the Jewish practice of mounting a mezuzah by the doorway of one's home. What words of God do you most need to be reminded of as you pass through the door or gate of your home?
4. Do you struggle to think about the Second Coming of Jesus during Advent? What can we learn from reflecting on Jesus not only preparing to be born from his mother's body but also "standing at the gates" ready to return to earth in glory?
5. When you think of a gate as a boundary, who do you picture waiting near the gate to be let in? Who is waiting along the edge of our communities needing an invitation or voice of welcome? Who is being shut out?
6. What else stood out to you in this week's devotions?

## Prayer

Lord, make plain to us those places and moments when we stand at the gate between heaven and earth. Let those experiences sustain our faith in less-profound moments and inspire us to watch for opportunities to welcome others into our community and into your presence. Amen.

# SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT: TEARS

## Ice Breaker

Begin by displaying or sharing photos of people crying or symbolic representations like a small glass bottle of water (Ps. 56:8). Invite participants to share any stories or feelings about tears and the display of strong emotions, particularly sadness and anger.

## Focus Scriptures

Read aloud Psalm 126 and Revelation 7:13–17.

## Main Idea

Despair doesn't disappear with the coming of the Lord, nor does it disappear at the holidays. On the contrary, the festive atmosphere exacerbates many people's grief and depression. Our comfort is that God sees our tears and mourns with us. Scripture offers us hope that, while real and valid, our tears will not last forever, but be wiped away by the very hand of God when all is made well in God's kingdom.

## Discuss

1. Are the Advent and Christmas seasons difficult for you, emotionally? Why is that?
2. Have you ever cried the words of the psalmist, "How long, O Lord?" What is it you were longing for in that moment? Did you feel like God heard your prayer?
3. Reflecting on Psalm 80, the author writes, "Our desperate prayers, our bread of tears, may be that which keeps us alive until we experience Immanuel" (p. 31). Can you relate to the idea that lament is itself life-giving, sustaining us through hardship?
4. What connections do you see between the "bread of tears" metaphor and Psalm 126's image of sowing tears like seeds in order to reap shouts of joy? Where might this metaphor fall short and fail to bring comfort?
5. Do you often reflect on the tears and pain of people who are oppressed in our society? What do you imagine their prayers to God sound like? What would good news look like for them as we anticipate God's presence breaking into the world through Jesus?
6. What else stood out to you in this week's devotions?

## Prayer

O God who hears our cries and collects our tears, comfort us with your presence and sustain us in the hope that one day—whether in this earthly life or beyond—you will dry all our tears and turn all mourning into dancing. Amen.

# THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT: BELTS

## Ice Breaker

Begin by displaying a variety of belts and sashes. Invite participants to share any symbolism that belts hold for them or any stories of particular belts or similar garments that are meaningful to them.

## Focus Scriptures

Read aloud Jeremiah 13:11 and Mark 6:8–9.

## Main Idea

The terms we translate as "belt" refer to a variety of garments a man would wear around his waist, serving purposes of protection, modesty, and/or utility. These kinds of belts can remind us to recognize and embrace our vulnerability and our dependence on God. We are not as strong as we like to think we are.

## Discuss

1. What is the significance of the things you wear around your waist? Some are purely aesthetic, but many serve a purpose. What are those purposes?
2. What would it feel like to wear righteousness and faithfulness like a belt around your waist, as Isaiah 11:5 suggests? How does "wearing" these virtues differ from, say, carrying them in your hand or holding them in your heart?
3. Read Jeremiah 13:1–11. Why is a loincloth the most appropriate image for this lesson that God wishes the prophet to impart to the people? What other metaphors might Jeremiah have used to send this message?
4. How do you respond to the idea of vulnerability or dependence? Do you embrace or resist them in your interpersonal relationships? What about in your relationship with God?
5. How would you feel if Jesus ordered you to take a journey without taking any supplies along? In what areas of life do you feel under-equipped? What would it mean to trust in God and step forward without having everything you think you need?
6. What else stood out to you in this week's devotions?

## Prayer

Lord God, you are as close to us as the clothes we wear and as vital as the supplies we carry with us. Help us to grow in intimacy with you and learn to trust you for everything we need in life. Amen.

# FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT: TREES

## Ice Breaker

Begin by displaying or sharing photos of different trees—Christmas trees, palm trees, oak trees, etc. Invite participants to share any symbolism that trees and other plants hold for them or any stories of particular trees that are meaningful to them.

## Focus Scriptures

Read aloud Job 14:1–17 and Matthew 13:31–32.

## Main Idea

Trees and other plants can offer us lessons in life and death. This week's focus Scriptures emphasize abundant life emerging in unexpected places—a coppiced stump and a tiny mustard seed. During Advent in the northern hemisphere, with its cold and short days not so conducive to growth, we seek the unexpectedly evergreen life that God brings.

## Discuss

1. When it comes to Christmas trees, are you a "real tree" family or an "artificial tree" family? What lessons in the natural life cycle have you learned from experiences with real trees?
2. What steady sources of spiritual or emotional nourishment do you have access to like the tree planted by a stream in Psalm 1:3? If you don't have such a source, what would this look like for you?
3. Have you ever spotted a tree where you wouldn't expect to see one—on an outcropping of a mountain or jutting out over a river at a 90 degree angle? What does their perseverance tell you about God's creation? What do some of this week's Scriptures (Job 14:7, Isaiah 41:19–20, and Matt. 13:31–32, for example) tell you about God's kingdom?
4. What does the metaphor of "good fruit" and "bad fruit" mean to you? Does it strike fear in your heart, as John the Baptist's words might (Matt. 3:10), or offer you a meaningful guide for discerning that which is of God and that which is not (Matt. 7:16–17)?
5. Read Matthew 3:1–12. Does such a dire warning seem out of place during Advent, or a fitting way to approach the momentous occasion of Christ's coming?
6. What else stood out to you in this week's devotions?

## Prayer

Lord, help us to spot life in places we might only expect barrenness. Give us the confidence to expect your abundant life to break forth, no matter the circumstances. Amen.

# FIRST SUNDAY OF CHRISTMAS: HEARTS

## Ice Breaker

Begin by displaying photos or other representations of hearts, both the shape and the organ. Invite participants to share any symbolism that hearts hold for them or any stories of particular hearts that are meaningful to them.

## Focus Scriptures

Read aloud Psalm 51:1–12 and Luke 2:8–20.

## Main Idea

The week after Christmas is often calm, a good time for rest and reflection after the weeks of busyness, preparation, and events. As we reflect on the year behind and ahead, let us take a close look at the things our hearts try to hide and what they truly long for as we decide what we need to treasure and what needs to be cleansed.

## Discuss

1. How does your heart feel now that the hustle and bustle of Christmas Eve and Day have passed? What will you treasure and ponder in your heart, like Mary (Luke 2:19)?
2. What would be nurturing or restorative for your heart and soul in these remaining days of the holiday season?
3. Read Psalm 51:1–12 aloud three times. What stands out to you in this prayer for cleansing? What phrases or verses will become your prayer as you transition into a new year?
4. The author says on p. 122, "One of the failures of our Christian imagination is embracing this truth [that God can cleanse and forgive] and living out of it, both individually and as a communal force in society." What would it look like for God to "put a new and right spirit" within our whole society? (Careful not to exempt yourself from whatever communal sin you are thinking of!)
5. What does the term "pure in heart" (Matt. 5:8) mean to you? Who comes to your mind as a person who is pure in heart? Would you apply that term to yourself?
6. What else stood out to you in this week's devotions?

## Prayer

Loving God, break open our hearts to see ourselves and others as you see them. As we close out one calendar year and enter another, help us to purge what must be left behind and hold close those things that lead to righteousness. Amen.

# SECOND SUNDAY OF CHRISTMAS: GOLD

## Ice Breaker

Begin by displaying photos of or objects made of gold—coins, jewelry, a cross. Invite participants to share any symbolism that gold holds for them or any stories of particular gold items that are meaningful to them.

## Focus Scriptures

Read aloud Exodus 32:1–6 and Matthew 2:1–12.

## Main Idea

New Year's resolutions often reveal what we truly treasure and value. These articulated vows and goals can point to an idol, such as a "beach bod" or a big raise—or they can be a gift to use for the good of others. Your group might wish to consider the tradition of "star words" to replace typical New Year's resolutions with a guiding value that will enrich others, not ourselves.

## Discuss

1. Does gold signify true value to you, or simply a shiny façade? What do you value that will stand the test of time, and what do you value that might lose some of its shine over time?
2. The gold that ultimately forms the golden calf (Exod. 32:2–3) is likely the same gold the Hebrews took from the Egyptians when they fled (Exod. 12:35–36). What gifts have you received that ultimately cause you to stumble morally?
3. What idols do you recognize in your life? Do your goals and hopes for the new year perpetuate these false gods or take you in a new direction of living more for others?
4. In Exodus 35, the Hebrews gather other items of gold and jewels—this time to give to God and adorn God's new house, the tabernacle. Likewise, in Matthew 2, the magi bring precious gifts for the Christ child. How might you give more generously in the new year?
5. Consider also this week the devotion for Epiphany (pp. 161–163). What might your "star word" be for the coming year, something that guides you in all circumstances you might face?
6. What else stood out to you in this week's devotions?

## Prayer

God, we long to be like the magi, giving you the best of what we have. Too often we are more like the Hebrews in the wilderness, seeking a shiny but artificial substitute for all you offer us. Forgive us, Lord, and guide us in the way we should go. Amen.