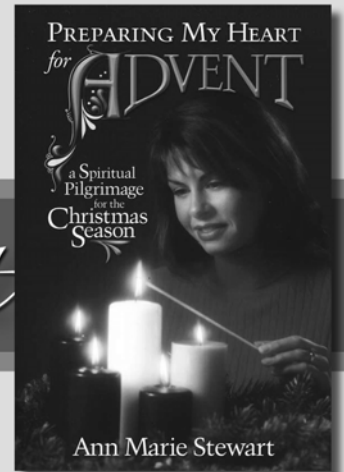




Discussion Leaders Guide for Preparing My Heart for Advent

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Getting Ready to Lead

1. Pray for the women and their spiritual growth.
2. Prayerfully select a convenient date, time, and place and then create an informational brochure to place in churches and community centers. Since this is time-sensitive material, the Introductory Session should be in October or no later than November 1st. A Monday or Tuesday works best because Thanksgiving falls on a Thursday and many leave town. If you must choose a Wednesday, Thursday, or Friday, put the make-up date on Monday or Tuesday of the week of Thanksgiving and include those dates in the brochure.

Once you've chosen which day of the week you're meeting, check to see which numerical day in November it falls on. If it falls on the first, your Introductory Session #1 can go on November 1st. Otherwise, schedule your Introductory Session #1 for October. To help determine the remaining dates, check the schedule below. If your first November meeting date falls on:

November 1	Session #1	Introduction
November 2	no meeting	(Session 1 was in October, wait until next week for session 2)
November 3	no meeting	(Session 1 was in October, wait until next week for session 2)
November 4	Session #2:	Discuss days November 1-3 (Session #1 Intro was in October)
November 5	Session #2:	Discuss days November 1-4 (Session #1 Intro was in October)
November 6	Session #2:	Discuss days Nov. 1-5 (Session #1 Intro would have been in October)
November 7	Session #2:	Discuss days Nov. 1-6 (Session #1 Intro would have been in October)
November 8	Session #2:	Discuss Week One
November 9	Session #2:	Discuss Week One
November 10	Session #2:	Discuss Week One

This is time sensitive material, and so try to meet for the Introductory Session #1 on or before November 1st. The second meeting should not be prior to November 4th, or you will have but a few days of questions to review. The sixth session will wrap-up the remaining questions and ends with a party.

3. If you want to supplement your study, purchase and gather Christmas decorations, music, books, and videos to begin a resource table. Consider purchasing a few resources such as *The Traditions of Christmas* and *The Carols of Christmas* by Ace Collins, *The Adventure of Christmas* by Lisa Whelchel, *Celebrating a Christ-Centered Christmas* (book or video) by Sharon Jaynes, or the Focus on the Family video *Herod the Great, Jesus the King: The True Christmas Story*.
4. If needed, enlist a few volunteers for music, drama, scripture reading, and lighting the Advent Candle. This encourages involvement, commitment, and the use of God-given talents.
5. In the weekly format below, you will find many optional suggestions for adding to your study. Pick and choose what fits your group.

Meeting Format

Resource Table — Provide a resource table with Christmas books and member's personal resources for the first two to three sessions.

Initial activity — Each week's opening activity is a thought-provoking handout related to that week's theme.

Opening prayer and Advent Candle — Read scripture provided and light a candle.

Special Music — Ask a musician volunteer from church to co-lead with you or ask a soloist to sing each week.

Caroling — As a group, sing a carol appropriate to the theme.

Conversation Starter/Question/Monologue — Preview these and ask women to read the monologues.

Selected Study questions — Pre-select five to ten questions from the week's study to focus upon in discussion.

Specific questions of participants — Although you're prepared with five to ten questions, always encourage the participants to ask questions from their week of study.

Preview for the next week — Discuss the next week's theme and "make the way straight" by pointing out challenging parts of the upcoming week's study.

Prayer time — As women share prayer requests, keep the focus on prayer and encourage the women to write the requests on the back page of their study. God answers prayer; it's exciting to record how He works.

Connections — As the women leave each week, find a specific way to connect with them or for them to connect with one another. Suggestions follow within each week's plans.

Week One: Introductory Session (On or before November 1st)

Resource Table — Introduce this table and its CD's, books and other resources. Encourage participants to contribute their favorites.

Initial Activity: Give each woman a slip of paper with one of the questions as she enters. If she wants to use a previously answered question, that's fine, too! For studies with more than fifteen women, use the list more than once.

1. If you could be any character in the Christmas story, who would you be?
2. If you could ask any character in the story ONE question, who would you ask and what?
3. What is your favorite family tradition?
4. What is your favorite Christmas carol?
5. If you could skip one holiday activity, what would it be? What would you replace it with?
6. What is your favorite Christmas fragrance?
7. What puts you in the holiday mood more than anything else?
8. Are there any special ways your family keeps Christ in Christmas? Share one.
9. What is your favorite Christmas food?
10. What is the best Christmas present you've ever received?
11. What was the worst Christmas present you ever received?
12. What was your most memorable Christmas?
13. Do you have any traditions for decorating the tree?
14. Do you have a special tradition for Christmas Eve?
15. Do you have a special tradition for Christmas morning?
16. What Christmas tradition means the most to you?
17. What is your favorite Christmas memory?
18. Which person in the Christmas story would you like to have been?

Some of these questions are based from the book and video *Celebrating a Christ-Centered Christmas* (pages 25-26). Author Sharon Jaynes suggests putting questions in a jar so family members can draw one out per night for dinner conversation and discussion.

Opening Prayer

Special Music: "Come Thou Long Expected Jesus"

Caroling: "O Come All Ye Faithful"

Preview:

- Hand out the books
- Have someone read Introduction out loud
- Explain the 30-day concept. Six days involve homework and the seventh offers a song, symbol and suggestion.
- The study goes through November, and devotions follow from December 1 through January 6. These devotions correspond with the November study.
- In-depth Bible study: involves 20-30 minutes/day commitment
- Give four-week overview: Setting and Characters, The Old and the New, The Songs of Christmas, and Believers in Action.
- Tell participants that the most important thing is to come prepared. The study will have easy and difficult days, but we're all in it together.
- Hand out sheet with meeting dates and times.
- Remind them about schedule. You will always begin at _____ and end at _____. Encourage them to be on time. Schedule snacks and fellowship at the end.
- Encourage them to bring friends for the next week, any later and newcomers may feel behind.
- Encourage them to bring additional Christmas books, CD's for Resource Table.
- Pass around address/e-mail/phone lists and treat signup sheet.
- Preview the next week of Setting and Characters.

Conversation Starter Monologue: - By Ann Stewart

When my daughter Julia turned six, I struggled over her birthday theme. At three we celebrated "Down on the Farm" with a scavenger hunt at a neighboring barnyard; at four, we played unicorns and princesses; at five, we turned our front yard into an Indian village and painted some of the tepees on the lawn while listening to authentic Indian music. The preschoolers created feathered headdresses, beaded necklaces, played Indian games, had their faces painted, roasted food on the fire, and then took home cornucopia dolls. How could I top last year's theme?

Finally, Julia settled on a Wild, Wild West theme. I found some hoe down music, and made her favorite chocolate cake. We played pin the tail on the horse, squirted down the bulls' eyes drawn all over our garage doors, raced our hobby horses, and played a sidewinder snake game. The only problem? When I focused so hard on the birthday girl's birthday activities, I had less time for the birthday girl.

I wonder how many times we do that on Jesus' birthday. Striving for the perfect Christmas decorations, activities, and foods, we neglect to remember the birthday child. Over the next six weeks let's learn from one another how to keep the focus on Christ throughout Christmas.

Topics of Discussion: Pass out a sheet with these topics and let them share their suggestions and ideas about each.

- ❖ Gift Ideas – homemade or purchased
- ❖ Teacher gifts
- ❖ Favorite Christmas foods
- ❖ Traditions
- ❖ Cookies
- ❖ Keeping Christ in Christmas
- ❖ Scheduling - holding free time open
- ❖ Family Activities/Family Nights
- ❖ Avoiding Stress
- ❖ Simplifying your celebrations without guilt
- ❖ Christmas cards/letters
- ❖ Resources: Books, games, CD's, Devotionals, Recipes

Prayer Requests – Have them enter requests in the back of their book. Ask, "What do you most hope to get out of this study?"

Connections: Write down each woman's prayer request and hope for Christmas. E-mail, phone, or write each participant about your hopes and prayers for her.

Week Two: The Characters in the Cast

Resource Table – Add Advent Candle.

Initial activity: Pass out slips of paper with names from last week’s study, Day #3, “Character Overview.” Ask each participant to share something new they learned about their character. This could be something that challenged them about the person or a question they’d like to ask that character.

Herod
Gabriel
Zechariah
Elizabeth
John the Baptist
Mary
Joseph
Simeon
Anna
Jesus
Shepherds
Magi

Opening prayer:

Light Advent Candle #1: Scripture Isaiah 9:2, 6-7

Special Music: “I Wonder as I Wander”

Group sing: “O Come, O Come Emmanuel”

Selected Study questions—choose five to ten from last week’s study

Specific questions of participants:

Preview for the next week: The next week is predominantly Old Testament. This is the most challenging week, but for many, it’s the most fascinating as they see the Old correlating with the New.

Prayer time —take prayer requests

Connections: Have the women write their name and a prayer request on a card. Collect each card in a basket and have each woman draw one of the cards from the basket so that they can pray for each other.

Week Three: The Old and the New

Resource Table – Last week to share Christmas materials.

Initial activity: Handout: Old or New? List of Scriptures: Guess whether they are OT or NT

Old or New?

“Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.”

“She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

“Listen, O high priest Joshua and your associates seated before you, who are men symbolic of things to come: I am going to bring my servant, the Branch”

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener.... No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine, you are the branches.”

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

“I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.”

See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

Jesus found a young donkey and sat upon it.

He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.

Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spit on him. Falling on their knees they paid homage to him. And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple robe and put his clothes on him.

But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by men and despised by the people. All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads.

[Answers: Beginning with old, alternating with new until ending with old.]

Opening prayer

Light Advent Candle #2: Matthew 1:18-23, Luke 2:1, 3-7

Special Music:

“He shall Feed His Flock” from Messiah

“The Little Road to Bethlehem”

“Comfort Ye” “Every Valley” from Messiah

“O Thou that Tellest Good Tidings” from Messiah

Group sing: “O Little Town of Bethlehem”

Conversation Starter Monologue: Zechariah’s friend speaks out - By Ann Stewart

It was such an unusual day at the temple. Zechariah was the chosen priest. I was outside the temple gates praying, but when Zechariah came out he was silent. We all wondered what had happened. When he motioned that he could not talk, we realized something miraculous had occurred in the temple. But who would have imagined he’d be silent for weeks!

As the months went by, we still didn’t hear from Zechariah and we did not see his wife Elizabeth. At last after five months, she came out of the house. Much to our surprise, she was with child. Who would have thought such an elderly couple would be blessed with a child?

They had a young visitor who consumed Elizabeth’s time and attention. She was a girl from Nazareth and she stayed about three months. Mary was her name, I believe. She left about the time Zechariah’s son was born.

They didn’t name their baby Zechariah. That shocked us all. They named him John. And at the announcement, Zechariah was able to speak. What praise he offered! At last we heard the long awaited benediction and then Zechariah spoke out in prophecy. I didn’t quite understand it all. It had something to do with his son and the coming Messiah.

But I don’t know, we’ve waited an awfully long time. Why should Zechariah really believe the time is now? What’s so special about this time and place?

Selected Study questions – choose five to ten from the week’s study

Specific questions of participants

Preview for the next week: Next week is easy compared to this past week’s accomplishments! We’ll be looking at the songs of Christmas through scriptures.

Prayer time – take prayer requests

Connections: Have each woman write her name, address, and e-mail and one prayer request. Draw names out of the basket and each person should contact the person for whom they are praying.

Week Four: The Songs of Christmas

Initial activity—Carol Guessing Game

1. Move hitherward the entire assembly of those who are loyal in their belief
2. Listen the celestial messengers produce harmonious sounds.
3. Nocturnal time span of unbroken quietness
4. An emotion excited by the acquisition or expectation of good given to the terrestrial sphere
5. Exalted heavenly beings to whom harkened.
6. Small municipality in Judea southeast of Jerusalem
7. The first person nominative plural of a triumvirate of far eastern heads of state
8. In a distant location the existence of an improvised unit of newborn children's slumber furniture

Opening prayer

Light Advent Candle #3 – Scripture: Luke 2:8-20.

Special Music:

Play any "Magnificat" recording

Caroling: "Hark the Herald, Angels Sing,"

Conversation Starter: Read from Life Change Units test found at:

www.prcn.org/next/stress.html

Have the women determine their own Life Change Units score

Life Change units are good and bad events which add to a person's stress level and their potential for illness. Sometimes we need to take inventory to determine our weaknesses and rely on Christ's strength!

Selected Study questions – choose five to ten from the week's study

Specific questions of participants:

Preview for the next week:

Prayer time – take prayer requests

Connections: Cut out different sized stars or hearts, and then cut each in half like a jigsaw puzzle piece. The total halves should equal the number of women in your Bible study. Let each woman take half a heart or star and write her name and prayer request on it. Have them find their match and swap half stars with that person—their prayer warrior for the week.

Week Five: Believers in Action

Initial activity: Hand out paper and crayons. Have each member draw what she thinks an angel might look like.

Opening prayer

Light Advent Candle #4: Matthew 2:1-12

Special Music: "Mary did you Know?"

Caroling: "Angels we have heard on High," "Silent Night"

Conversation Starter Monologue: "Pondering Pregnancy" by Ann Stewart

In December of 1996, I was nine months pregnant with a delivery date around Christmas. I wrote a monologue which I planned to read at the December 22nd Sunday morning church service. But Christine arrived on the night of December 21st, so I handed it off to my friend who had just delivered a boy the week before. (For a brief and ridiculous moment, I considered heading off to church to read my piece anyway!) This is a portion of my thoughts and ponderings.

Perhaps this year more than any other, when I read that you pondered all these things in your heart, I have to wonder what it was like to be you, Mary, the Mother of Jesus. This year when I read about being great with child, it holds new meaning, new anticipation, and new hope.

I wonder what it was like knowing the child you carried was your Creator, Brother, and the Son of God. I know you must have loved Him before He was born. But could you begin to understand how much He loved and would love you? What was it like not to have a pregnancy test, but an angel announcing you were bearing Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world?

Were you frightened? Was the journey to Bethlehem long? Did you feel the promised Messiah move His baby feet in your womb? When He was born, did He cry?

Could you understand that His first home would not be the castle he deserved, but a manger trough in an inn? Did you sleep beneath the stars knowing that the Great Shepherd was not one of the night's strange visitors, but the tiny form wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger?

When you caressed His head, could you foresee the crown of thorns that would be placed upon His brow as His enemies shouted, "King of the Jews?" Could you understand that the swaddling clothes wrapping His tiny body would later be a shroud He would break free from as He conquered death?

When the Magi stood in awe, bearing gifts, did you know about the unruly crowd demanding his crucifixion? Could you comprehend that this carpenter's son would one day carry two wooden planks to Golgotha, and the tiny hands you loved so dearly would be nailed to those boards? Did the stars overhead on that glorious night of His birth outshine the darkness you felt on the day of His death?

Was your everyday joy stained with the prophecy that your soul would one day be pierced through? Did you know what your Son came to do? Just what were you treasuring and pondering in your heart?

I think of you Mary and I ponder these things.

Selected study questions: – choose five to ten from the week's study

Specific questions of participants:

Preview for the next week: Plan food and fun for final meeting.

Prayer time – take prayer requests

Connections: Swap names for:

- Secret Santa or Magi gift exchange
- Ornament Exchange
- White Elephant
- Coupon exchange (give the gift of a service or craft)

Week Six: Happy Birthday, Jesus!

Initial activity – Birthday cake for Jesus

Opening prayer

Light Christ Candle (center): John 15:9-13

Special Music: "Happy, Birthday, Jesus" recorded by Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir

Special Video: "Herod the Great, Jesus the King: The True Christmas Story," That they May Know (Fascinating background history on Herod comparing him with Jesus; may be purchased from Focus on the Family) approximately 15 minutes.

Group sing – Take requests for favorites

Selected Study questions

Conversation Starter Monologue: Innkeeper's story by Ann Marie Stewart

I'm sorry, we don't have a room. I have three couples in my guest room and even a couple in the stable. You won't find anything this late. But still, come sit at the table and I'll pour you something to drink

Have you seen that star out there? Most unusual! Terribly bright! And if I didn't know any better, I'd say it was right over the cave by my field.

It's so light out there I've been watching all the activity. I have these interesting guests out in the cave. I didn't have a room for them in our house. My wife and I felt badly about it. We wanted to help, but our rooms are filled. We make a little extra when we do this. It helps me pay my taxes.

This couple arrived with their donkey. The woman looked very uncomfortable. Now I ask you this, "What is a woman with child doing traveling at a time like this?" I do not know about such things. The man implored me to find any place for them. He had tried almost every other inn in town, but everything was booked. "Please! Anything, my wife is with child." I didn't really realize that he really met THAT night until I looked at her more closely.

Such a young girl. She was holding the rope on that donkey so tightly. She needed to come down soon. My rooms were filled with paying guests. What was I to do? I mentioned the cave, "But there are animals," I said. He turned to his wife and she nodded. I didn't charge him.

I don't apologize for the conditions, I didn't have a choice. I took them out toward the hillside. We have extra animals because of the extra guests, but it was warm and dry and they'd be out of the wind. They could rest on the hay. It wasn't my responsibility to take care of them; I was doing them a service just finding them a place.

Later I heard a baby cry. I wanted to go up there but my wife said I shouldn't. 'You didn't give them a room,' she reminded me. But later I went outside. The wife had some food and drink for them. Mary was so quiet. She never blamed me for not giving her a bed. Mary said his name was Jesus. He was such a pretty baby and He sure made a lot of noise. But the animals were still. That baby was wrapped in a blanket, real tight so he'd be warm. They say babies like it that way. It reminds them of what it was like inside their mothers. I almost wanted to stay there myself, but the wife needed me with our other guests.

That star revealed a whole group of shepherds running straight to my cave. I wonder how long the little family will stay? I suppose they'll want to move on. Too bad, I think I could have moved them into the guest room shortly. I'd like to get to know them all better. Especially the baby boy. Did I tell you his name is Jesus? Did you know it means Savior? Maybe someday we'll see Him again. He's supposed to be special. I don't know about that. But this was some special night. Yes sir, some special night.

You have to be on your way? Well, I bid you good evening. The star is still so bright, I'm sure you'll find your way!

Specific questions of participants

Preview —December devotionals

Prayer time – take prayer requests/Review answered prayer

Connections – Pass out copy of addresses/e-mails, Discuss future Bible study classes

Gift Exchange —White Elephant, Ornament Exchange or Coupons to give one another, or draw names

Bring your group together again for "Preparing My Heart for Easter" – Now Available!

