

LEADER GUIDE: NOW IS THE TIME



SAMPLE of the Leader Guide for 2020 Advent Small Group Study Now is the Time

When you register for this resource you also receive a WEBLINK & PASSWORD with access to all the resources you need.

Welcome to this Prayer Bench Small Group Study. We are many small groups, from many parts of the world, and I am grateful we meet here at the Prayer Bench.

Things to think about in Planning Your Sessions:

- This process is designed for use in person and adaptable for a platform like Zoom. The directions assume knowledge of using Zoom, showing videos, and providing handouts to zoom participants. You will find a simple PowerPoint you can work with on the study webpage.
- This session is designed for one hour with a recommended group of 6-8 participants. You will need more time for a larger group. Giving participants the time they need and maintaining a schedule is always a balancing act. Go through the process and decide what is important to you to include. Assign approximate times and then you can be flexible and listen to where the Spirit is leading. *Suggested direction for Leaders is in italics.*
- Using the Check-out gives participants opportunity to name aloud what they are taking away or what might be stirring in them. It will give you information about the session and how participants are feeling. A check-out practice can take less than a minute -- and it can take much longer. You, as leader, will need to decide whether to let stories be told rather than simple words shared.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful for the generosity of Ruth Harvey, the new leader of the Iona Community in Scotland, for her permission to use an extract of her address to the Corrymeela Community (Ireland) in June 2020. The address was titled, “Patterns of an Emergent Community.” Learn more about The Iona Community: <https://iona.org.uk/>

My friend and former colleague, Laura Hunter is always generous with her time. She agreed to a conversation with me about emerging signs calling to us in this time of pandemic. She is the Minister for Justice & Mission serving the Atlantic Regions of the United Church of Canada and the host of the podcast series, *Making Hope Visible*. <https://www.buzzsprout.com/844450>

I’m excited by the work of another friend, Linda Yates. She is thoughtful and insightful with her words. Linda is in the beginning of a writing project called “365 Marked Days”, daily reflections that take us through the Gospel of Mark. She gave permission to use Day 1 in this study. Are you interested in this project? Let me know and I’ll keep you up to date with her progress.

The process is designed by Janice MacLean, Host of the Prayer Bench.

All your resources are on the NOW IS THE TIME study webpage. Here is my email. Please be in touch if you have questions or issues accessing the resources. janice@prayerbench.ca

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Table of Contents

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT IN PLANNING YOUR SESSIONS:	1
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	2
PREPARATION FOR SESSION 1	4
SESSION 1: DWELLING IN LIMINAL SPACE	5
PREPARATION FOR SESSION 2	ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.
SESSION 2: BETWEEN THE NOW AND THE NOT YET	ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.
PREPARATION FOR SESSION 3	ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.
SESSION 3: SIGNS OF THE TIME	ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.
PREPARATION FOR SESSION 4	ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.
SESSION 4: NOW IS THE TIME	ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.
SCRIPTS FROM RECORDINGS OR PAPERS FOR ALL SESSIONS	8
VIDEO SCRIPT FOR SESSION 1: DWELLING IN LIMINAL SPACE	ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.
PAPER FOR SESSION 2: BETWEEN THE NOW AND THE NOT YET	ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.
VIDEO SCRIPT SESSION 3: SIGNS OF THE TIME	ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.
PAPER FOR SESSION 4: NOW IS THE TIME	9
PARTICIPANT SHEETS WITH QUESTIONS	10
PARTICIPANT SHEET #1	11
PARTICIPANT SHEET #2	ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.
PARTICIPANT SHEET #3	ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.
PARTICIPANT SHEET #4	ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.

Preparation for Session 1 Dwelling in Liminal Space

Leader Notes and Preparation for Session 1

You will need:

- *If meeting in person:* a circle of chairs for participants and a small table or bench to create a focal area. You may want fabric/cloth for your focal table in the colour of the liturgical season: purple or blue for Advent. Or you may choose to use another fabric or scarf of your liking.
- *Both in person and online:* a bible: the scripture sentence is included from the NSRV translation, but you might choose to use the longer passage suggested.
- a candle or Advent wreath, if you wish to light one during the session or a chime or recorded songs or You tube videos if you wish to begin with a song or chant.

Things to do:

- *If online* download and prepare the PowerPoint using and adding what you need.
- *If meeting in person,* gather several half sheets of paper to use with the Advent word for the check in. Type or print one word per sheet. Use the words more than once. Have enough half sheets so each participant can take one home. Have a few blank sheets and a marker to write in another word of the participants choice. *Online* you might type or write the words on a whiteboard.

Here are some words: Awake. Prepare. Wait. Hope. Dwell. Announce. Shine. Watch. Save. Seek. *(Add more Advent words if you wish.)*

- Download Audio Recording #1 from the Study webpage. If you are meeting in person, test to see if you need speakers for your laptop so all can hear.
- Download and print a copy of Script #1 from the Study webpage for each participant. The scripts and session papers are also in back of this Guide. Some participants appreciate following along using the script.
- Download and print Participant Questions Sheet #1 from the Study webpage if you chose to offer all the questions for take home. These sheets are also printed in this Leaders Guide and included in the PowerPoint.
- Read over the Group Spiritual Practice and Closing Reading and be familiar with it so you can be led in your own voice and from your heart.

Session 1: Dwelling in Liminal Space

Gathering

Welcome participants. You may choose to signal the beginning of the session with a chime, or by listening to a carol, and/or offering a scripture sentence: *“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”* (You may choose to read more from Isaiah 40:1-11) You may also decide to light a candle or the first candle in a wreath.

Check-In

This is a time for participants to check in, make themselves present to the group and share their voice. If the group does not know each other well, begin by sharing names. Remind the group that in check-in, we go around the circle and each one has a chance to speak. There is no crosstalk or discussion. It is often very helpful if you as leader begin. Here is a prompt.

If gathering in person, lay out several sheets of paper printed with Advent words, one word per piece of paper. If gathering on zoom, type the words on the whiteboard. *See Leader Notes and Preparation for Session 1 (above) for a list of suggested words.*

Invite participants to choose a word either by picking up a piece of paper or putting their name beside it on the whiteboard, that says something about how they are entering this Advent season. It might express a reality in their life, it might be a word they find challenging, it might be a word they would like to explore more deeply this Advent.

Don't rush this check-in. It is an important storytelling time and helpful for grounding and group building. More time will be spent on check-in this week than in the following weeks.

Norms

Take five minutes as a group to discuss the norms or expectations that would make this group a good experience for all. Ask questions like these: What helps you get the most out of a group like this? What helps you feel comfortable in a small group? What agreements help make this time safe and the best it can be for all of us? Record the responses.

Settling

The leader might say something like this: Let's take a moment for making silence together before listening to the recording. We learn to hold the noises in our lives by befriending silence. We do not have to create silence; it is there within us. What we have to do is let it emerge and enter into it, to become silence. Silence is the language of the Spirit. Let us be in silence together for one

minute. *(The leader should time one-minute ending by saying amen or another phrase of your choice.)*

Listening to the Audio Recording

Before listening to the Audio Recording #1, you may wish to ask the group if they want 3-5 minutes of silence at the end of the recording for journaling or jotting down notes.

Prompts for Discussion

Choose one or two questions most relevant to your group or invite participants to respond to a question of their choice. Some questions will be repeated next week so if you don't have time today, you can always come back to one again.

1. What did you hear that feels particularly meaningful to you right now, either in your own journey or in your community of faith or our global experience?
2. Think about the ground you are standing on right now. What are the realities that make it feel like liminal space, betwixt and between? In what ways is your community of faith living in liminal space? What isn't the same as it always was? What are the losses? What are you doing that is new? What are the gifts of such a time as this?
3. Janice asks a number of questions as she re-imagines our Advent/Christmas stories during a time of global pandemic. Review the script (the questions are in italics) and choose one or two that intrigue you.
4. Inhabiting liminal space is often uncomfortable and disorientating. Think of other times you, or your community of faith, have lived in in-between times. What did you learn? Based on your experience, what wisdom would you record as reminders or signposts for NOW? *(You might want to record the group wisdom on newsprint. You or another participant might want to work it into a litany or prayer or poem for another gathering.)*
5. When our losses are large, practicing lament is a container helping us confront fears and naming the costliness of our grief and loss. Lament helps us dwell in this liminal space. What are some rituals of lament you can recall in our tradition? Where, in the Advent/Christmas stories, are there signs of lament, of living with things that are hard to fix, or times of confusion and uncertainty? How might you use this Advent season to make space for lament?

Group Spiritual Practice An Advent Word

The leader may say something like: Reflect back on the Advent word you chose at the beginning? Are there ways the word changed for you after our conversation? You might want to take your word home and spend more time with it: learn more about your word, look it up in a dictionary, ponder why it is an Advent word, look for a scripture that helps illuminate your word, or journal with your word, use it in a poem or make a prayer with it. Make art with your word, colour it or make a card with your word. It is a word that chose you, so it is a gift for you.

The leader might then invite each one to simply say their Advent word aloud. Let this be a prayer of anticipation among us.

Closing

Here is a poem you might want to use to close the gathering. It is written by Caroline Crowell and used with permission.

I'm waiting ...

what shall I do while I'm waiting
for the dawn to follow the dark
for sunshine to dry up the rain
for warmth to return to the earth
for renewal to touch my soul
for rebirth to happen to me?

I will live today while I wait
remember the knowledge of love
the fact of my infinite worth
welcome the darkness, cold and rain
for growth and pain go hand in hand
reach out and give myself away.

From *To Touch the Mystery: Poetry for the Journey of Life* by Carolyn Crowell. Carolyn is an educator, minister, theologian and writer in The United Church of Canada. She writes poems that reflect the presence of the Spirit in everyday life. Learn more and how to purchase her book at her website: [To Touch the Mystery](http://www.touchthemystery.com)

One Minute Check Out

Invite participants to take a moment to reflect on the session and allow one word or phrase rise in their heart that describes the feeling they are taking home. Go around the circle and ask participants to share their word or phrase without explanation.

Scripts from Recordings or Papers for All Sessions

You will also find these scripts and papers in four separate PDF documents on the Study Webpage.

You might prefer to download and copy them from there.

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PAPER for Session 4: Now is the Time

By Linda Yates, a United Church of Canada minister living in Nova Scotia. Linda is writing a series of 365 reflections on the Gospel of Mark called "365 Marked Days. She gives permission to use Day 1 in this study. (Are you interested in this project? Let Janice know and we'll keep you up to date with her progress.)

Day 1: Mark 1:1-8

Mark sure knows how to begin a story. No manger and babe, no confused would-be bridegrooms and scandalously pregnant young woman. Just this strange man, John, standing his ground in a muddy river, assuring everyone around that they have been noticed and just in the nick of time, at that.

Mark begins by saying simply that he will start at the launch of the story of Good News. What came before the day of the camel-coated man shouting in the river is of no account. The Good News begins where genesis of new human movements always happens – swirling around some weirdo clamouring from the edges. Isaiah, prophet of old reminded us God would commission, just such a one. *The voice of one crying in the wilderness. 'Prepare the way of the Lord.'*

It will be *before your face*, Isaiah insisted. You will know it when you see it.

Isaiah and John sing a duet: the Heart of Love is coming. A force is building on the edges, and will be released from ripe, dirty sandal strappings by the only one weird enough to try, John. John, orthorexic, eating only unpolluted manna-like food provided by the desert, he leaves light footprints. He exists on the bodies of insects and the sweet product of the labour of the organized matriarchy of bees. Disciplined to see generosity in the midst of arid scarcity, only John can discern the deep worth of the swirling, soul-dirty people waiting at rivers edge.

These are life-shredding times, they say. What can we do, they cry, collapsing in dark, watery eddies? The world's gaze skims over them, seeking only utility in the relentless quest for fame and power. He is harsh, that John, but he does, at least, see them. He does, at least, remind them that God sees them. Their faces are eternally before God's face. You can turn your life around, John says. You have agency and you matter. However, to be seen has consequences. Unseeing becomes impossible.

It turns out, where you choose to move your feet and where you rest your sandals matters. It turns out, to choose to steal another's sandals or to choose to offer to shod the wounded feet has cosmic impact. If you have no sandals, God cares, very much. This is the harsh, good news.

Stand in the muddy water for a minute. Let the strange, electric, wild-eyed man see you. Life is coming, in all its fullness. Christ is coming. Can you see? More importantly, can you let yourself be seen?

Participant Sheets with Questions

*You will also find these Participant/Take-Home Sheets in one document on the Study Webpage.
You might prefer to download and copy them from there.*

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Participant Sheet #1
Session 1: Dwelling in Liminal Space

Prompts for Discussion

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Thank you for reviewing this Leader Guide.

If you have questions or would like further information, please contact me at Janice@prayerbench.ca

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