

Navigating Mystery: A Sample of Contents



Welcome to this Prayer Bench Advent Resource for use with Small Groups or for Individual Study or Personal Retreat.

The design of the content and process is written by Janice MacLean, Host of the Prayer Bench.

What if we re-framed “living with uncertainty” into a practice of “navigating mystery?” These evocative words written by Martin Shaw inspire this study. This prayer Bench resource includes two guides: one with process for using as a Small Group Study, and one for making a personal study or an Advent Retreat.

This Sample includes:

- A Sample of an Audio Script for Session 1*
- A Sample of a Spiritual Practice from Session 2*
- A Sample of Questions for Discussion or Journaling from Session 3*

Each of the three sessions includes:

- Suggestions for creating your space & things to do before you gather
- A gathering activity
- A check-in prompt
- Norms
- A suggestion for Praying the Scripture Story
- Listening to the Audio Recording (with written audio script available)
- Prompts for Discussion or Journaling
- Spiritual Practice for group (or individuals in personal study)
- One-Minute Check-Out

This is a digital resource. When you register for this resource, you receive a *weblink & password* with access to the Small Group Leader’s Guide, a Personal Study/Retreat Guide, the downloadable audio recordings, scripts of the audio recordings, poster and promotion information for small group study, and other resources mentioned in the Guide.

The purchase of this Advent Study (\$29) includes unlimited use of the resource, both guides, and an additions All-Ages Advent resource called *All Creation Sings*.

*Questions? Please email me at janice@prayerbench.ca
Offering Ordinary Mystics Resources for Deepening Spirituality.*

Session 1: The Times

SAMPLE AUDIO SCRIPT for Session 1: The Times

By Janice Maclean

What if we re-framed 'living with uncertainty' to 'navigating mystery'? This evocative question, posed by the storyteller Martin Shaw, touches something hopeful in us, doesn't it?

We know all about "living with uncertainty." We were plunged into this so forcefully by the pandemic and we are still reeling even as we scramble to "right" ourselves again in whatever "normal" means to us. Yet, our bodies don't forget the trauma. Our souls are still inviting us to retrieve a vision of whatever courage and kindness we glimpsed in those days.

We find ourselves in this topsy-turvy space of "living with uncertainty" whenever our personal plans and hopes come up against changes provoked through a health diagnosis, needs of aging parents, our own aging, death of loved ones or a relationship, or other losses. In times like this we find ourselves at the end of our known world. We are living with uncertainty.

There are so many changes in our world, positive and challenging, that we struggle to keep up and this, too, creates a sense of "living with uncertainty." There are so many events we never imagined we'd witness in our day. There are so many contrary forces in our culture and so many shifts in our institutions that we wonder what's happening to our world.

The words "living with uncertainty" evokes a sense of helplessness. It feels like we are up against something that could potentially overwhelm us. It summons an image of living with an unwelcome guest who has come to stay indefinitely. "Living with uncertainty" may leave us feeling fragmented within and alienated from a greater whole. I am lonely in the universe -- the Divine Presence seems silent or ... uncertain. Does this resonate for you?

What if we re-framed 'living with uncertainty' to 'navigating mystery'?

What is it about "navigating mystery" that evokes a more hopeful image? It locates power in ourselves. We have agency. Navigating mystery implies we have what we need -- even if we are feeling uncertain, or experiencing the unknown, or facing unbearable loss or suffering, or wondering what in the world is happening. When we are navigating mystery, we have inner resources for making our way.

"Navigating mystery" invites a deeper awareness of *who we are in the world*. We live from a sense God made the world and means this world, even now, in our historical moment. A sense of Mystery connects us to a greater whole -- to Divine Presence. When we are navigating mystery, our personal experiences of this world are ripe with possibility and goodness.

To navigate mystery, we need a renewed consideration of time. What better season than Advent to consider time -- when we go to the end-times and start the circle of the church year afresh.

It is always a shock to come to the first scripture reading in Advent and confront the apocalyptic images of darkened night skies, stars falling from heaven, and angels gathering up the chosen handful. What's with these end-time readings?

Over the years I've come to cherish reading these images in Advent. I learned that people who're afraid, vulnerable, and suffering can identify with these end-time images. Where there is a daily experience of racial and economic injustice there is comfort in these stories. There is in them a promise of an end of suffering, and with it, a promise of a new beginning, a re-creating. The advent end-time stories invite us, in the words of preacher Scott Johnson, to be in "solidarity with all those who feel as if the end of the world is on their doorstep." (See website for reference)

Each Advent, we come to the end-time readings because we need to hear, repeatedly, the promise of the Presence of the Human One who is always coming into this world, *especially* when there is suffering and uncertainty or living under the threat of having less than one needs in body, mind, and spirit.

Holding space for Advent in our daily experience and in the world around us, means reckoning with time and learning to navigate within more than one dimension of time.

We have a problem with time. We measure time with clocks, on watches, on calendars. This measurement of "time-in-a-line" helpfully gives us a past, present, and future, a chronology of events. But we are always losing this time or making up this time or running out of this time. And it may leave us assuming each day is steadily bringing us one step closer to the end of all Time. Paying attention solely to this one dimension of time limits what we see and can hope for.

But there is another time. We call this dimension of time -- Kairos – opportune time, favourable time, the right time, the fitting time. This is time breaking-into time. We know it. We taste this time in the "time-of-our-lives" moments. We know the fragrance of this time in silence, stillness, paying attention, being part of a place, part of making meaning with others. We know kairos in the moments when desperation and courage collide.

We live in more than one dimension of time. When we are 'navigating mystery' we will need to read the signs of the time – to recognize divine activity amid human messiness. (We'll get into this in our next sessions.)

In the circle of the church year, the end-times are always tipping over into a new coming, a beginning, a birth, a new time.

There are end-times and new-birth coming.
Perhaps it is far-off, perhaps it is close at hand,
it is within us and among us, even now,
always a circle —winter and summer, night and day, death and life, darkness, and light.
always Time, opening us honestly to the whole of reality.
Waking us to Time ripe with possibility and goodness
And so, we are equipped for navigating mystery.

Session 2: The Wilderness Way

SAMPLE Group Spiritual Practice for Session 2 The Practice of Listening to Music

The leader can introduce the practice with words something like this:

Ann Kulp, a spiritual writer says:

“Music has called us to prayer through the ages: the shofar, psalms, pipes, harp, trumpet, the peal of bells, carillon, symphony, and the sound of human voices. There is the music found in nature that calls us from a gurgling brook, the chirping of katydids or the wind rustling in the trees. We can be touched by sound and vibration in such a way that we feel touched by the holy.” - Ann Kulp, *Spirit Windows, A Handbook of Spiritual Growth Resources for Leaders*, Shalem Institute, 1998.

Today we listen to music as a doorway to prayer. We'll listen to Handel's Messiah.

Listen to the sound of the notes and the words.

Listen and be drawn into the music.

Listen as though it were being performed just for your heart.

Listen and notice if any image, word, emotion, or memory is called forth in you.

Listen Handel: See Study Webpage for video suggestions.

- Invite the group to share any image, word, emotion, or memory called forth for them.

Allow the group to respond as they wish.

When the time feels right, the leader can invite the group to end this practice with words something like this:

Let's close now with time for prayer in words or silences. What are the prayers that are praying in your heart? *Allow space for silent or spoken prayer and end with Amen.*

Session 3: Gesture of Opening

SAMPLE Prompts for Discussion from Session 3

Here are several questions. Choose one or two questions most relevant to your group:

1. What stood out for you in the audio recording?
2. What did you hear in Mary's story that was new? or surprising? or disquieting? or hopeful?
3. The gesture of opening our hearts to risk and relinquishment takes courage. When have you heard a call to birth something new in your life or in the life of the world?
4. Janice says that each of the laudable conditions is a potential opening where Mystery may enter. Where has this been true in your life?
5. When we navigate mystery, "We turn our attention to the deeper purposes of what we do, especially the simple, ordinary things we do. We enlarge our vision of what's possible. We gradually root our actions in soul. Our concern for the world is kindled." When has this been true for you? What are the obstacles to navigating mystery? What one thing could you change to deepen your awareness of what is being birthed within you?
6. How might you respond to question #5 as a community of faith? When we navigate mystery, "We turn our attention to the deeper purposes of what we do, especially the simple, ordinary things we do. We enlarge our vision of what's possible. We gradually root our actions in soul. Our concern for the world is kindled." When has this been true for your community of faith? What are the obstacles to navigating mystery currently in your community of faith? What one thing would you change to deepen your awareness as a community of faith of what is being birthed within you?

You have reached the end of this sample of resources.
If you have questions, please email Janice at Janice@prayerbench.ca

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