

LEADER GUIDE: Navigating Mystery



**BELOW IS THE WEBLINK & PASSWORD
NEEDED TO ACCESS
THE STUDY RESOURCES**

WEBLINK: <https://prayerbench.ca/navigating-mystery-advent-small-group-study/>

PASSWORD: 22Mystery (*case sensitive; no spaces*)

Welcome to this Prayer Bench Group Study for Small Groups.

Things to think about in Planning Your Sessions:

- For *groups*, each session is designed for 60-75 minutes 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.*
- If using this resource for *personal retreat*, please see the Guide for Personal Study/Retreat, which is also on the study webpage. You are welcome to print and share the personal guide with those who may wish to participate but not able to come to a group study.

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

All your resources are on the Navigating Mystery study webpage. (See above for weblink and password.) Here is my email. Please be in touch if you have questions or issues accessing the resources. janice@prayerbench.ca

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Preparation for Session 1

The Times

Leader Notes and Preparation for Session 1

Creating Your Space:

- With a group, it is helpful to have a circle of chairs for participants and a small table or bench in the centre to create a focal area.
- You may want fabric/cloth on 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.
- You may want to light a candle or Advent wreath during the session.
- For this session you may want to place a clock or watch on the altar table as a symbol of time. You will also use this clock/watch during the group spiritual practice.

Things to do Before You Gather:

- Decide if you want to gather with a cup of tea/coffee or another beverage.
- Download Audio Recording #1 from the Study webpage. Test to see if you need speakers for your laptop so all can hear. It is highly recommended you download the audio recordings even if you have internet in the meeting space. See the Study webpage for direction.
- Download and print a copy of Script #1 for each participant. The audio scripts are in the back of this Guide. Many participants appreciate following along using the script.
- Decide if you would like to have another voice read the scripture and ask this person in advance so they have time to practice the reading.
- *You will need:* a bible, a small clock or watch for the group spiritual practice.
- Read over the Group Spiritual Practice so you are familiar with it and can introduce and lead it smoothly. Prepare your response to the question, “*It is time for me to*”
- Decide if you want to sing or listen to an Advent song for the closing. There are suggestions on the study webpage.

Session 1: The Times

Gathering

Welcome participants as they arrive.

When it is time to begin the session, you might want to light a candle with the words:

Now is the time to begin.

Clocks and calendars tell us what time it is,

but not what time is for.

Advent tells us what time is for.

Welcome to this Advent Small Group Study.

Invite the group to enjoy the light for a moment or you might want to sing or read an Advent hymn or open with a prayer.

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. Here are some prompts. Choose **ONE** that works for your group. It is often very helpful if you as leader begin.*

- What is something you would love to do if you had the *time*?
- What did you have *time* to do this week that nourished your heart?
- Share one experience of when you had “the *time* of your life.”
- When you “run out of *time*” in your day what usually doesn’t get done?

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.

Praying the Scripture Story Mark 13:24–37

You might want to introduce the scripture story by saying something like this:

Praying scripture is like reading a poem, you don’t need to understand every word to learn or be inspired by it. We can listen for a word or phrase that means something to us in this time. I will

read the scripture slowly and you listen. I'll read it a second time and you listen again for a word or phrase that speaks to you, interests you, seems to call out to you today. When you hear a word/phrase you might want to write it down. We'll come back to it later if you want to share.

Read the scripture slowly. Pause. Read it a second time or invite a participant you've asked in advance to read it so it can be heard in a different voice.

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

Here are several questions. Some are the same question from a different angle. Choose one or two questions most relevant to your group:

1. What did you find most useful in the audio presentation? What will you take away to accompany you this Advent?
2. Consider the two phrases: "living with uncertainty" and "navigating mystery." What invitation is there for you in learning to navigate mystery?
3. What was your response to hearing the signs of the time reading in Mark? What word or phrase meant something to you?
4. What helps you recognize divine activity amid human messiness? How might you bring more love and delight to the tasks of Advent?
5. Share a Kairos moment you have experienced in your life. Perhaps they are more common than we imagine. What do you think?
6. Janice says, "When we are navigating mystery, our personal experiences of this world are ripe with possibility and goodness." With all that is going on in your life, and in the life of the world, what invitation is there in these words for you? Where might you look for hope in this Advent?

Group Spiritual Practice

The Practice of Prayerful Listening

The leader might introduce this group practice by sharing words like this:

We live in a time of upheaval and change. A gift we can offer one another is prayerful listening as a way of navigating mystery. We listen without judgement. We listen in silence. We listen, not

offering advice, but simply cherishing the words of another spoken from the heart. We begin by listening to a poem. Then we'll sit in silence for one minute

I'll start and when I am finished, we will be silent for a moment, and I'll pass the clock/watch to the person on my right, and you may respond in words aloud or in silence. Then the clock/watch is passed to the next person, and we continue round the circle. Pray for each one as they hold the clock/watch. Let us trust that our prayerful listening might birth possibility and goodness for each one.

Here is the order for the leader to follow.

- Read the poem by Madeleine L'Engle, "This is no time for a child to be born." (*There is a link to this poem on the study webpage.*)
- Invite the group to sit in silence for one minute and listen to what comes when they ponder: "It is time for me to" (*It is helpful to set a timer, so the time is not too long or too short.*)
- The leader picks up the clock/watch and begins by sharing, **aloud**, "It is time for me" (*Sharing aloud models creates safe space for words.*)
- The leader passes the clock/watch to the participant on the right inviting this person to respond in words or silence. Remember silence is a response and we prayerfully listen during silence and words.
- The clock makes it way around the circle. The leader helps maintain a generous, quiet, listening presence. At the end, remind the group of the final words of the poem "Yet Love still takes the risk of birth." End with the Lord's Prayer or another prayer of your choice and/or sing (or read or listen to) a song that celebrates expectation and hope. (*See the suggested song list on the study webpage.*)

One Minute Check Out

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.

Go around the circle and ask participants to share one word or phrase that describes a gift or learning they are taking away from this session.

Preparation for Session 2

The Wilderness Way

Leader Notes and Preparation for Session 2

Things to do:

- Set up your space as before to welcome participants. For this session you may want to place a symbol of “seeing” on the focal table, perhaps glasses or binoculars. Decide if you will light a candle, sing/listen to a carol or open with a prayer.
- You’ll need a bible for the scripture story. Practice reading the guided meditation.
- Download Audio Recording #2.
- Read over the Group Spiritual Practice. Make sure you can play the music. If you can’t connect to the internet, check out the possibilities on the study webpage.

Session 2: The Wilderness Way

Gathering

Welcome participants as they arrive.

When it is time to begin the session, you might want to light a candle offering these words:

Now is the time to begin.

The Divine is desiring a new way of coming into our hearts,
indeed, coming into our world.

Advent invites us to see in a new way.

We slow down, listen and look.

Welcome to the second session of our Advent Small Group Study.

Invite the group to enjoy the light for a moment. You might want to sing or read an Advent hymn or open with a prayer.

Check-In

This is a time for participants to check in, make themselves present to the group and share their voice. If there are new participants who don't 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.

Here is a prompt you can use, or you can make up one of your own. Again, as leader you might want to begin.

In “The Hobbit” Gandalf says: “Some believe it is only great power that can hold evil in check, but that is not what I have found. It is the small everyday deeds of ordinary folk that keep the darkness at bay. **Small acts** of kindness and love.”

Where have you seen small acts of kindness and love this week?

Norms

Review the norms established in last week and ask if there are questions or other norms to add.

Praying the Scripture Story Mark 1:1–8

Read the scripture once slowly. Pause. Share this guided meditation:

Imagine getting packed up to leave the city/town/community for the weekend. What one thing would you be sure to take on a wilderness weekend? Think about this. [Pause]

Imagine arriving and being part of a crowd. [Pause]

Imagine John. Really imagine what he looked like, what his eyes were like, what his bearing says about him. [Pause]

Imagine a long line of people down to the water. Imagine joining them. [Pause]
Imagine what need or desire would cause you to be drawn to this place. [Pause]

Imagine it's your turn and John asks what you are longing for? What do you say?
[Longer Pause]

Listen, John says: The One who is coming brings Presence to your longing.
You are not alone. Imagine this. Seek to hold it, body, mind, and spirit. [Pause]
Amen.

There will be opportunity to share responses to the meditation in the discussion time.

Listening to the Audio Recording

Before listening to the Audio Recording #2, 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

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

1. What did you hear in the audio presentation that feels particularly important to you right now, either in your own journey or in your community of faith, or our global experience.
2. Who would you say is a John-like prophet in our midst lately? Who are the truth-tellers, the good news bringers in our time?
3. It was longing that brought people into the wilderness. What are the longings of people today? What are your longings? *(This is where those who wish can share their experience of the guided scripture meditation.)* What are some ways our community of faith offers support or challenge to the longings of this time? What else might we do?
4. The mystics teach that **how** we see affects **what** we see. What sense do you make of this? The hymn writer says, "Open my heart that I may see glimpses of truth you thou hast for me" (Voices United #371) What are some ways we go about "opening our heart?" How might this help us re-frame "living with uncertainty" into the more hopeful work of "navigating mystery"?

5. Janice says that navigating mystery in a wilderness way calls for a “willingness to let go expectations, to accept the possibility that our efforts may not bear fruit – or at least in the way we have been hoping they will.” (quoting Douglas Christie). What good failures has your community of faith tried? What did you learn? What will you do now?
6. What are some ways you pray when confronted with the “world’s suffering and joy, despair and hope?”

Group Spiritual Practice

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 a piece from 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 <https://youtu.be/7NCO6UzZ2R8> or choose a version you prefer.

- 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:

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.*

One Minute Check Out

The leader can say something like this:

Reflecting on our session today, what did you notice about today’s conversation?

Go around the circle and ask participants to share one word or phrase.

Preparation for Session 3

Gesture of Opening

Things to do:

- Set up your space as before to welcome participants. For this session you may want to place symbols of everyday objects on the altar-table (mugs, towel, knitting, hammer, water bottle, vase of flowers, wrapped gift, laundry detergent etc) These act as symbols of God entering our daily lives through ordinary things. Get creative with this for your own context when you read over the session. Decide if you will light a candle, sing/listen to a carol or open with a prayer.
- You'll need a bible for the scripture story. Decide if you will read the story a second time in another translation or use a poem or share art. (*See the study webpage for examples.*)
- Download Audio Recording #2.
- Read over the Group Spiritual Practice. The practice suggests holding a cup of tea, but you can also use coffee or hot chocolate. If necessary, you can adapt the prayer to holding an empty cup by inviting participants to imagine the fragrance of their warm drink etc. (Be sure to check out the link to Kereru Publishing and Caroline's ebook: [5 Senses to Prayer](#))
- You might also want to serve refreshments after the group spiritual practice.
- You will need pens and a post-it note for each participant for the check out. This final check out will take more than one minute.
- As this is the last session you might want to download and print the evaluation. Please consider offering your feedback as a leader using the online Leader feedback page. See study webpage.
- If you are hosting the All-Ages event, *All Creation Sings*, you might want to enlist volunteers from this group to help. See the study webpage to download this extra resource.

Session 3: Gesture of Opening

Gathering

Welcome participants as they arrive.

When it is time to begin the session, you might want to light a candle with the words:

Now is the time to begin.

“Upon entering, Gabriel greeted Mary:

Good morning! You’re beautiful with God’s beauty,

Beautiful inside and out! God be with you.”

We open our hearts to the possibility of healing our world.

Welcome to the second session of our Advent Small Group Study.

Invite the group to enjoy the light for a moment or you might want to sing or read an Advent hymn or open with a prayer.

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. Here is a suggested prompt.

What’s one ordinary activity in Advent that helps nourish or ground you?

Praying the Scripture Story Luke 1:26–38

You might want to read this story first in a translation like NRSV. [Read the story here.](#)

Pause.

Read a second time from The Message translation. [The Message](#):

Or you might choose to read a poem on the Annunciation after reading the story from Scripture or pass around a print of art of the annunciation. (See the study webpage for suggestions.)

“Gabriel’s Annunciation” by Jan Richardson/

“The Annunciation” by Denise Levertov.

“Annunciation” by Katherine Cole/

Or hand out or around a copy of Annunciation Art for silent reflection: and enter Luke 1:26-38 in the scripture reference search block. (see study webpage)

Listening to the Audio Recording

Before listening to the Audio Recording #3, 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

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 at this time 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?

Group Spiritual Practice

The Practice of Praying with a Cup of Tea
(or Coffee or Hot Chocolate)

The leader might want to introduce this practice with words like this:

Drinking a warm beverage is one of the most daily of activities in our life. Caroline Bindon at Kereru Publishing in New Zealand suggests a practice of opening our heart to this ordinary pleasure and allowing our hearts to turn to prayer.

Hold your cup of tea (coffee or hot chocolate) in your hand. Take a moment to relax in your chair and observe your hot drink and what is happening in your body as you hold it in your hands. Take a sip and observe what happens when you drink your tea. We pray in silence.

God this cup of tea is warm to touch...
I pray for your warmth to bring comfort in these things in my life.... *(silence)*

God this cup of tea is warm to drink...
I pray for your warmth to fill me and provide me strength in these things in my life...
(silence)

God this cup of tea is fragrant to smell....
I pray for your fragrance to permeate these things in my life... *(silence)*

God this cup I'm holding is breakable....
I pray for these fragile and breakable things in my life... *(silence)*

God this cup of tea is heavy in my hands....
I pray for these things which are heavy in my heart right now... *(silence)*

God this cup of tea tastes familiar...
I pray with thanks for these familiar things in my life right now... *(silence)*

God this cup of tea makes me feel.... *(silence)*
and I give these feelings and my thoughts to you.

The leader might want to ask at the end of the prayer practice:

What word or phrase would you use to describe this experience of experiential prayer?

Check Out & Evaluation

You will need a pen and post-it note for each participant. You will also find an group evaluation in the study web page.

Ask the participants to take a pen and a post-it note.
Offer one minute to reflect upon this session (or all sessions)

Invite each person to write a note-to-self about something they want to post on the fridge as a soul reminder for the rest of Advent.

Go around the circle and ask participants to share (if they wish) what is written on the post it notes.

Handout the group evaluation form.

Closing

Review plan for the “All Creation Sings” event designed for all ages. Share refreshments if you have chosen this option. Or close with a carol.

Audio Scripts for All Sessions

*You may wish to photocopy the audio scripts
so your participants can read and listen.*

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 blog: <http://day1.org/1018-apocalypse-then-and-now>)

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.

AUDIO SCRIPT for Session 2: The Wilderness Way

By Janice Maclean

Every Advent needs a truth-teller. In Advent we welcome John the Baptist, son of Elizabeth and Zechariah and cousin to Jesus. John is “the wilderness one.” He is a popular figure camped outside the city and living the simple life.

John offers a “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” Baptism was a well known symbol in ancient times. It was a response to the desire to enter a new beginning, to turn your life around, to change from the inside out, to stand in the centre of your own soul.

Bare and wild, the wilderness is a potent metaphor for the place of navigating mystery. The wilderness way is vital to the human spiritual journey; demanding we open to the flow of life around us with all its times. The wilderness way demands being present with our whole self.

Wilderness is created sometimes by choice -- when we go on a retreat, or make choices for a simple life, or through the intentional practice of a contemplative life. We learn who we are and what our work is in the world through such choices, and it is not always easy.

Wilderness experience comes without choice too – provoked by external events like grief, anguish, disappointment, loss, or anger. We find ourselves thrust into an unknown way. This intense and unexpected suffering plunges us into liminal space (another word for wilderness.) It is in these thin and wild spaces that the Divine does Her best work. When we are present to the bare self, God is lingering about, always desiring a new way of coming alongside our heart.

Cynthia Bourgeault in her early book, *Love is Stronger than Death* quotes her teacher Rafe: “If only you can stay present in that bare self you’ll begin to discover the absence of God is the presence of God.”

This practice of attention requires commitment and courage and, perhaps, seeing in a new way. Here is a story that illustrates this seeing.

Douglas Christie writes about travelling a great distance with a friend to search for an elusive wild bird. They searched the forest for days, and the time they had was ending. “We have spent three days here, walking, looking, listening, comparing notes, hoping for a sighting of the Green-Tailed Towhee—so far, with nothing to show for our efforts.”

As they wait for a bird that is only going to show on its own terms, Douglas revises his sense of time. (We talked about this in the last session.) He lets go the sense they have “wasted” time and sees this way of seeing as “short-sighted, so narrow and unimaginative — and yes, ungenerous.” Instead, he recollects all that they saw while immersed in a wild world where the rare bird lives but hasn’t been seen. Christie is present now to that bare self and understands:

What is being asked of [me] in this moment is patient attention; a willingness to slow down, listen, and look; a willingness to let go of [my] expectations, to accept the possibility that [my] efforts may not bear any fruit — or at least not in the way [I] have been hoping that they will.

I don't think there is a better map for navigating mystery, seeing the signs of the times, than these words.

What is being asked of us in this moment is patient attention; a willingness to slow down, listen, and look; a willingness to let go of our expectations, to accept the possibility that our efforts may not bear any fruit — or at least not in the way we have been hoping that they will.

Advent is a good time to make a commitment to finding some small way to practice patient attention, a willingness to slow down, to listen and look.

“The dream of my life,” says poet Mary Oliver,
 “is to lie down by a slow river
 and stare at the light in the trees —
to learn something by being nothing
 a little while but the rich
 lens of attention.

In these days of Advent wilderness, we make ourselves “a rich lens of attention.” How we see affects what we see, and this is a core practice in navigating mystery.

Navigating mystery, in the words of Douglas Christie, calls for a “willingness to let go expectations, to accept the possibility that our efforts may not bear any fruit — or at least not in the way we have been hoping that they will.”

This is hard work. It suggests a relinquishment of control that most of us, if we are being honest, find difficult to practice. There is so much risk, so much vulnerability. Yet even the desire to let go control opens us to the Mysterious Unknown.

“As I stand in the tragic gap between reality and possibility,” reflects Parker Palmer, “this small, tight fist of a thing called my heart can break open into greater capacity to hold more of my own and the world's suffering and joy, despair and hope.”

Pause. All you need is a moment. Take a deep breath. Exhale an even deeper breath.
 Breathe in the gift you most need: *(decide what you need most today: peace, calm, strength, endurance, patience, healing, hope, other?)*

Breathe out a gift for others: *(decide what prayer to offer your family, a friend, your church, a neighbour, someone in the newspaper, other. It might be hope, love, calm, rest, faith, strength, excitement, energy, other?)*

Breathe in the gift you need | Breathe out the gift you offer.

This is the wilderness way, a way of merciful exchange, where we receive a gift we most need and offer to another what they need, together holding “the world's suffering and joy, despair and hope.” It is the beginning of active re-creating.

Douglas Christie <https://cac.org/news/wasting-time-conscientiously-by-douglas-e-christie-oneing-unveiled/>

AUDIO SCRIPT for Session 3: Gesture of Opening

By Janice Maclean

In advent we read the story of the Annunciation - the announcement of the messenger Gabriel to young Mary. The story is so familiar to some. We may have heard it every Advent for years.

Yet, a year has passed since we heard it last, and we bring this year's experiences and another year of aging to the story. What might we hear that is fresh for us this Advent, especially we re-frame 'living with uncertainty' into a practice of 'navigating mystery'?

Announcements break into human messiness. Our work is to learn to recognize these moments of divine activity and to appreciate the meaning, the fragrance, the mystery of these announcements.

We turn today to a Middle Age spiritual practice that outlines the five "laudable conditions" in the human spiritual journey. Each condition is a potential opening where Mystery may enter.

The five laudable conditions are taught by Fra Roberto Caracciola de Lecce (c.1425 – 6 May 1495), a Franciscan friar and famous Italian preacher. They are often applied to Mary and her experience of Mystery's announcement entering her daily life.

1. Disquiet- This is the gulp we all make when something unexpected enters our life. Mary is perplexed and troubled when the angel visits.
2. Reflection – This is when we try to make sense of whatever has entered our lives whether disturbing or unsettling, distracting or uplifting. Mary listens to the invitation and searches for meaning.
3. Inquiry – Our questions come as we try to work this new thing into our life. We long for integration. "How can this be?" Mary asks.
4. Submission – This is a Middle Age devotional term. I prefer the word surrender or letting go. We reach a place of "consenting to the presence and action of God." Sometimes we still don't understand but we find hope in letting go and this lets us move on. This is Mary's "Let it be."
5. Merit – This is another Middle Ages devotional term. It means we are now able to see *grace* in whatever situation is happening. Our circumstances may not change, but there is a readiness to receive the creative energy of God. There's something driving us forward making us deeply conscious of God and the mysterious working of the Spirit. The angel departs, Mary stands alone and begins living out her acceptance.

Take time to imagine Mary as she moved through each of these emotional and spiritual states: Disquiet, Reflection, Inquiry, Surrender, Merit (what we might call acceptance.)

Recall times in *your* spiritual journey when you have known these spiritual states....
Disquiet, Reflection, Inquiry, Surrender, Merit (what we might call acceptance.)

Each one a “laudable condition.” It is worth reflecting on this. We often give more value to acceptance than we do disquiet or questioning. But all are laudable conditions. Each one is part of navigating mystery. In a lifetime we move back and forth, in and out, of each laudable condition. Each condition has its own value and grace. Each condition has its own merit.

As we journey through each condition, in whatever order they come to us, they take the shape of a spiral. Each twist, each turn taking us deeper into the Mystery of God. It is a journey that values questioning and wonder, seeking and finding, rest and doing. When there is a commitment to welcoming and living within each laudable condition, there is a transformation of being,
an ever-opening consciousness.

Are we willing to yield to the immensity of which we are a part?

Sometimes there is only the gesture of allowing oneself to become vulnerable, a gesture of opening. We navigate Mystery and it moves us beyond ourselves, outside our ego, past our story. And this gesture somehow creates possibilities for healing and hope within the larger community.

As we become part of a divine exchange, what Cynthia Bourgeault describes as:
“an inter-abiding round dance of self-giving love. We become part of helping fulfill the deep yearning of the Divine.

This is our Advent story. We make room
in ourselves -- and in the world.
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.
We learn who we are and where we are called to serve
as part of the divine exchange.
Love endures.
We are Navigating Mystery.