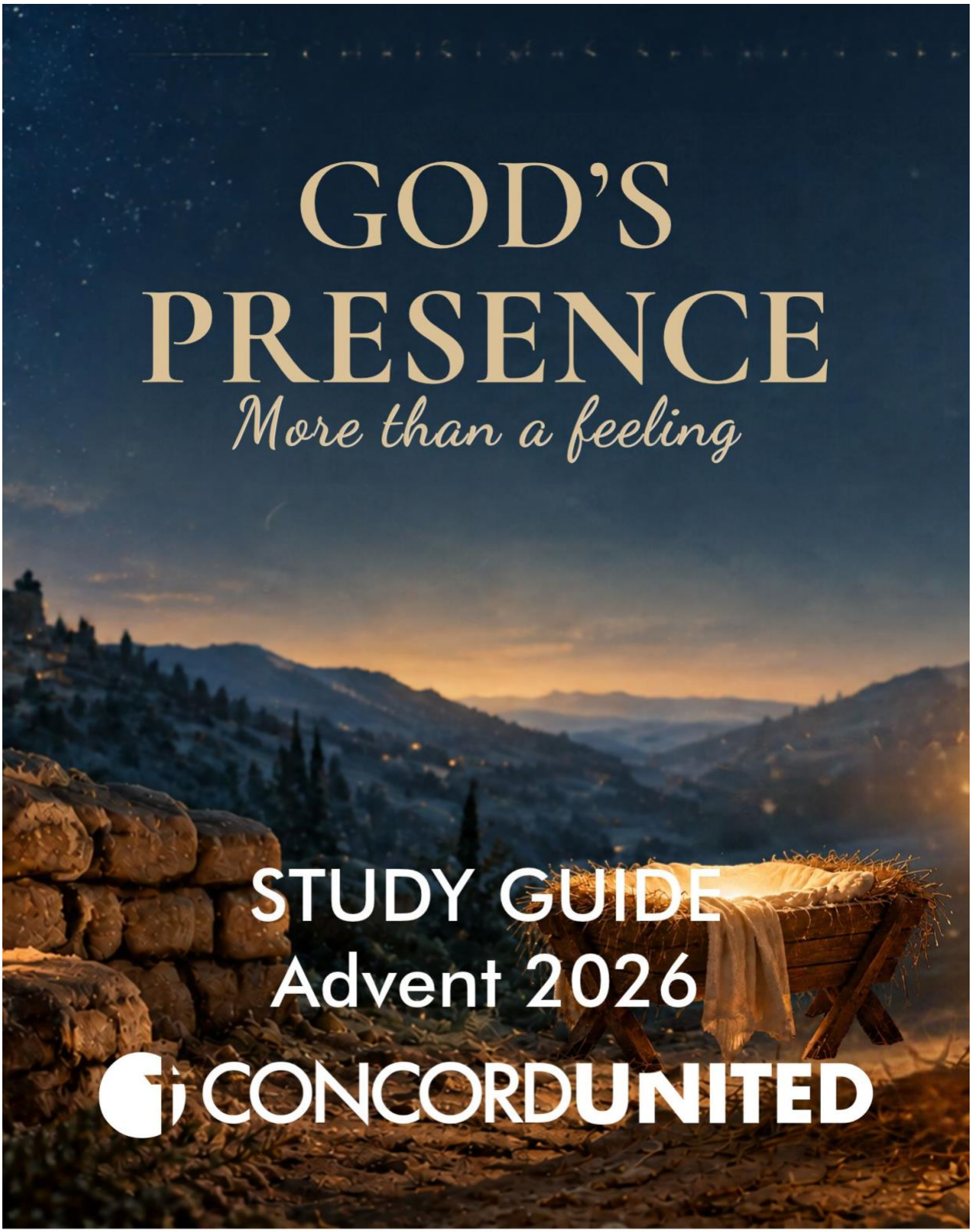
GOD'S
PRESENCE
More than a feeling
STUDY GUIDE
Advent 2026
CONCORDUNITED

Introduction

The Presence of God: More Than A Feeling

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord has said through the prophet: "the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" which means "God with us". Matthew 1:22-23

Christmas elicits expectations of "the most wonderful time of the year" or "the best Christmas ever", yet the reality is that there are gifts to wrap, parties to attend, meals and treats to prepare, empty chairs at the table, and loneliness that remains. The reality of Christmas is that it is more than the feelings we experience; it is the presence of our God through Jesus Christ, born in the manger, fully God and fully human. Christmas is way more than a feeling. It is the presence of God, our God coming to be with us through Jesus Christ.

How to Use This Guide

This study guide is designed for both groups and individuals. The sessions are designed to provide guidance through discussion, scripture, and prayer.

Each session includes:

- *Prayer -* Prayer is a powerful way to begin and conclude each session. Be sure to take time to share prayer requests for the group to be praying with and for each other.
- *Conversation Starters* – Conversation Starters provide a way for the group or individual to begin to consider the topic of the session through sharing about the questions or statements.
- *Background Information* – The background information section parallels the video component, providing background information about the topic and scripture.

- *Scripture Connection* – This section allows the group and/or individual to engage with the scripture for the session with questions and conversation.
- *Next Steps Connection* – This section provides the group and individuals with guidance about how to take what has been learned and discuss and apply to our lives in the week ahead.
- *Resources* – This section includes books and scriptures that are used in the development of the study guide, as well as suggestions for further reading by group leaders or those using the study guide.

Additional Resources

The following additional resources are available to enrich your personal study as an individual or as a group leader.

Bible Reading Plan

- Use Concord United's series Bible Reading Plan, which includes scriptures that align with our weekly focus. Advent Bible Reading Plan Link

Videos

- Study Guide videos created by Concord United, found on our YouTube channel, that align with the study guide. Advent Study Videos

Books

- Harrison Warren, Tish. *Advent: The Season of Hope.*
- Hamilton, Adam. *The Journey: Walking the Road to Bethlehem*
- Rutledge, Fleming. *Advent: The Once and Future Coming of Jesus Christ.*

Session 1

Week of November 29, 2026

The Presence of God Through Generations

Prayer

- Begin and close with prayer
- Consider asking various members of the group to lead the prayer.

Conversation Starters

- What do you most look forward to during the Christmas season? What do you most dread about the Christmas season?
- What feelings do you have about the Christmas season?

Background Information

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord has said through the prophet: "the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" which means "God with us". **Matthew 1:22-23**

These words of Scripture anchor our journey through Advent this season: God with us. We seek God's presence beyond the feelings of Christmas.

God's presence is more than a feeling.

Christmas can be filled with expectations of feeling happy, joyful, and excited, yet the season comes with anxiety, disappointment, fear, grief, and all the stuff. As we enter this Advent season, our focus is God's presence in and through the incarnation of Jesus Christ. That is where we center ourselves as we journey through Advent – God's presence. God with us.

Advent is a season that goes deeper and wider than the secular view of Christmas.

For some of us, we were raised in Christian traditions that observed the church liturgical calendar. The church liturgical calendar guides us through the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, as well as the birth of the early church through the Holy Spirit. Two prominent seasons of the liturgical calendar are Advent and Lent.

Advent is the beginning of the church calendar, which begins four Sundays prior to Christmas. The season of Advent is focused on waiting, with the word Advent deriving from the Latin word *adventus*, which means "coming". We prepare for the coming of the birth of Jesus and for the second coming of Jesus.

We begin with the beginning: Jesus' family tree.

The birth narratives of Jesus are found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Matthew begins his telling of the birth of Jesus with the genealogy of Jesus, which traces Jesus' lineage back to Abraham. Matthew 1:1 says the following:

This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham. **Matthew 1:1**

Genealogy is the study of family history and lineage as traced through generations. The original audience of the book of Matthew was from Jewish tradition and beliefs. The Jesus' genealogy found in the book of Matthew establishes the importance of the promises made to Abraham, the role of King David, and how Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah.

Also found within the genealogy are several women who are noted, which is unusual for a genealogy within scripture. The culture in which Jesus lived, and the Bible was written, is one of patrilineal, meaning that lineage is traced through the male line. Examples of this are "father of". We see the number of times that "father" is noted in the genealogy. Yet interspersed within the fathers are the following:

- Matthew 1:3 – "mother was Tamar"

- Matthew 1:5 – “mother was Rahab”, “mother was Ruth”
- Matthew 1:6 – “mother had been Uriah’s wife”
- Matthew 1:16 – “Mary was the mother of Jesus”

Five women are noted in Jesus’ lineage.

The genealogy concludes with the following words:

Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Messiah. **Matthew 1:17**

The names listed in Matthew 1 reveal another important pattern: God’s presence over the generations. Generation after generation, name after name, God’s presence is evident: a promise to a people to be their God, to be with them.

God’s presence through the generations.

The truth of God’s presence over the generations is evident in our own genealogies. Likely, as with Jesus, our family tree has challenges, yet God’s presence is evident. God’s presence through the generations is more than a feeling; it is the truth of the promise of God coming to be with us through Jesus Christ.

Scripture Connection

Read Matthew 1:1-17

Questions about the scripture:

- Share unique aspects of your family tree.
- Which names stand out to you in Jesus’ genealogy?
- What questions do you have about Jesus’ genealogy?
- How do the words in these verses tell us about the presence of God over the generations?

Next Steps Connection

- During the upcoming week, be mindful of God's presence through your family.

Resources

- Harrison Warren, Tish. *Advent: The Season of Hope.*
- Other Scriptures: Luke 3:23-28; Genesis 12:1-8; Genesis 38; Joshua 2:1-24; 6:25; Ruth 2:8-13; 4:13-22; 2 Samuel 7:8-16; 12:24

Session 2

Week of December 3

The Presence of God Through the Routine

Prayer

- Begin and close with prayer
- Consider asking various members of the group to lead the prayer.

Conversation Starters

- Share the parts of our lives that feel routine and mundane.
- Consider the following question: In the midst of the routine and mundane, does God's presence seem close or far away?

Background Information

Life can feel routine and mundane.

Life can feel routine, mundane, or a grind. The announcement and birth of John the Baptist is evidence that God's presence is in the midst of the mundane and routine. John's birth comes to parents living their routine lives, with disappointment and faithfulness. It is John who prepares the way for Jesus, and in doing so, God's presence is evident. God's presence through the routine is more than a feeling.

Luke begins with the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth.

Luke gives an account of their roots, just as Matthew did with Jesus. The author of Luke is giving context to the original readers, and to us as well.

Luke 1:5-18 (NIV)

*5 In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah,
who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also
a descendant of Aaron. 6 Both of them were righteous in the sight of God,
observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. 7 But they
were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were
both very old.*

*8 Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest
before God, 9 he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the
priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. 10 And when
the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers
were praying outside.*

*11 Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of
the altar of incense. 12 When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was
gripped with fear. 13 But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah;
your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and
you are to call him John. 14 He will be a joy and delight to you, and many
will rejoice because of his birth, 15 for he will be great in the sight of the
Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled
with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. 16 He will bring back many of the
people of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 And he will go on before the Lord,
in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their
children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make
ready a people prepared for the Lord."*

Zechariah is noted as belonging to the "priestly division of Abijah". This division of priests was the eighth out of twenty-four groups of priests that King David had assigned the responsibilities at the sanctuary, then of the temple in Jerusalem. The divisions rotated the responsibilities within the temple, including sacrifices, tending to the lamps and incense, and taking care of the daily tasks. This information gives us context to Zechariah's background, his faithfulness, and how he was tending to his routine responsibilities when we meet him in Luke 2.

Elizabeth is noted as being a “descendant of Aaron”. Aaron is Moses’ brother. This information about Elizabeth gives context to her lineage.

For both Zechariah and Elizabeth their roots are in the lineage and story of God found in the Old Testament.

The author of Luke also notes that Zechariah and Elizabeth were unable to have kids and that they observed the commandments of the Lord and were “blameless”. This information is important as well, to set the context of the parents of John the Baptist. Luke is setting the stage for what is to come.

It is into the routine that God’s presence exists.

Zechariah and Elizabeth were living their lives. They were dealing with the challenges that had been part of their lives, while continuing the daily responsibilities of work and home. It is in this routine that God is present.

Zechariah and Elizabeth’s baby boy will play an important role in the life and ministry of Jesus. He will prepare the way.

The role of John the Baptist in preparing the way for Jesus is significant. Luke 2:17 states this of Zechariah and Elizabeth’s son, “And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous- to make ready a people prepared for the Lord”.

We see John the Baptist do just this in Luke 3:1-18.

John the Baptist is the spotlight for Jesus.

Fleming Rutledge uses the analogy of John the Baptist as a spotlight for Jesus. She notes, “You don’t actually see the spotlight. What you see is the beam of light and the object that is illuminated. John himself disappears; his preaching is the beam, and the light falls upon Jesus only” (Rutledge, 297). She continues by noting that the analogy is not flawless. Yet the image still highlights the significance of Zechariah and Elizabeth’s son. In the midst of the routine and the ordinary of their lives, God’s presence steps in, preparing the way for the good news of Jesus Christ, which steps into our ordinary lives as well.

Scripture Connection

Read Luke 1:5-17.

Questions about the scripture:

- Share how you think you would be described if the author of Luke were writing foundational information about you, just as he did with Zechariah and Elizabeth.
- Do you relate to Zechariah and Elizabeth?
- How does the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth connect with our routine lives, and God's presence within it?

Next Steps Connection

- During the upcoming week, note how you experience God's presence in the midst of the routine.

Resources

- Rutledge, Fleming. *Advent: The Once and Future Coming of Jesus Christ.*
- Additional Scriptures: Luke 3:1-18; Isaiah 40:1-5

Session 3

Week of December 13

The Presence of God Through Vision

Prayer

- Begin and close with prayer
- Consider asking various members of the group to lead the prayer.

Conversation Starters

- Share about a time when your plans did not go as planned. Did you have to make decisions that you were not expecting? If so, how did you determine which actions to take?

Background Information

A man who is engaged to be married finds out that his soon-to-be wife is pregnant. He has a decision to make, one of great significance. There is fear. He wrestles with the decision. God's presence for Joseph comes through reassurance in words of hope, "God with us". Joseph resists the cultural draw, the fear, and chooses the vision that God gives him. Joseph is obedient to God's promise. Joseph example guides us as we seek God's presence, resisting, trusting, and following. God's presence through vision is more than a feeling.

What do we do when plans do not go the way we planned?

Joseph knew something about plans not going as planned. Mary was betrothed to him, to be married to him, when she found out that she was pregnant through the Holy Spirit. With this, Joseph was presented with a decision: how does he respond to Mary's news? To stay with her comes with cultural implications, and so does not marrying her.

The author of Matthew describes the restless night of Joseph's decision in Matthew 1:18-25.

Matthew 1:18-25 (NIV)

18 This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. 19 Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

20 But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 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."

22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 23 "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").

24 When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. 25 But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

The presence of God addresses fear.

There is a quote that describes fear as an evil and corroding thread that weaves its way through our lives. Fear is not bad or wrong. It is a God-given feeling. It does protect us from harm, yet fear can be paralyzing. Joseph's restless night is not foreign to us. We have such nights, where the evidence is clear, and there is no easy solution to the challenges we face. God's presence steps into the fear, into the not knowing.

God's presence through vision does not mean that the road ahead will be easy; it is a promise of God's presence in the midst.

God's presence guides Joseph to go forward with marrying Mary. The angel tells Joseph that not only to be unafraid of marrying Mary, but that

“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”, Matthew 1:21. God’s presence in the midst of vision. God’s vision is beyond anything that Joseph or we can envision or imagine. The babe born in the manger is more than a child; he is God incarnate: God coming to be with us, fully human and fully divine. God’s saving love and grace through Jesus.

This scripture is also the place where God’s presence is articulated through Immanuel, “God with us”.

God’s presence through vision to Joseph includes a description of how “this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet”, that God is with us. The prophet who declares these words is Isaiah, and the words are found in Isaiah 7:10-14.

God with Joseph. God with us through Jesus. God with us.

Scripture Connection

Read Matthew 1:18-25

Questions about the scripture:

- Describe how you see God with us through Matthew 1:18-25.
- Note the realities Joseph dealt with in deciding whether to marry or to divorce her.
- Share decisions you are facing at the present time. How is God’s presence giving you vision in your decision?

Next Steps Connection

- Through the upcoming week, consider when you have to make decisions and how God’s presence guides your vision in your decisions.

Resources

- Additional scriptures: Isaiah 7:1-14; Proverbs 29:18.

Session 4

Week of December 20

The Presence of God in the Unlikely

Prayer

- Begin and close with prayer
- Consider asking various members of the group to lead the prayer.

Conversation Starters

- Share parts of your life story that include unlikely events, people, places, or opportunities.
- Share about an unlikely situation you have found yourself in.

Background Information

A story of the most unlikely cast of characters.

The telling of the birth of Jesus is filled with an unlikely cast of characters. We do not hear that the Messiah is born to the elite, the most educated, or a leader. The birth of Jesus is through the unlikely, such as Mary. Mary, a young girl living in a town that likely wasn't even a dot on a road map, is chosen to give birth to the Messiah.

Mary was from the town of Nazareth. At the time of Jesus' birth, a neighboring city, Sepphoris, was better known than the town of Nazareth. Sepphoris, which was four miles from Nazareth, was a major Roman city that served as the capital of Galilee. Mary was from the lesser-known town of Nazareth.

Mary was also a young girl. It is believed that Mary was likely in her teenage years. She did not come from a family of the elite or the educated. She was an average young lady, living an average life, when the unlikely happened.

Luke 1:26-38 (NIV)

26 In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel
Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, 27 to a virgin pledged to be married
to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was
Mary. 28 The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly
favored! The Lord is with you."

29 Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of
greeting this might be. 30 But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary;
you have found favor with God. 31 You will conceive and give birth to a son,
and you are to call him Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son
of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father
David, 33 and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his
kingdom will never end."

34 "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

35 The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of
the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be
called the Son of God. 36 Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a
child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in
her sixth month. 37 For no word from God will ever fail."

38 "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be
fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

God's presence is in the unlikely.

No matter our background, Mary is likely someone we have heard of. Despite the familiarity of her role in the birth of Jesus, how unlikely it is that she would be chosen as Jesus' mother is astonishing. And God's presence is so evident in the midst of the unlikely. A young girl from the unknown town of Nazareth is visited by Gabriel, who tells her she is with child and will give birth to the one who will be called the Son of God. Talk about God's presence in the most unlikely of circumstances.

Mary was “greatly troubled” with good reason. God’s presence steps in: “The Lord is with you.”

As we see the words of reassurance to Zechariah in the midst of his fear by being visited by Gabriel, Mary too is reassured. We see words of reassurance in multiple ways within our scripture reading for this session. Luke 1:28, “The Lord is with you.” Luke 1:30, “Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God.” Luke 1:37, “For nothing is impossible with God.” These words of assurance speak to us as well, in the midst of our unlikely experiences. God is with us.

Mary’s response is one of surrender: “I am the Lord’s servant”.

In the midst of the unlikelihood of Mary’s role is Mary’s unlikely response, “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said.” Mary surrenders to God. She offers up herself and the circumstances to God. Her response is unlikely. God’s presence in the midst of the unlikely is beyond Mary’s feelings, and ours too.

Scripture Connection

Read Luke 1:26-38.

Questions about the scripture:

- Discuss the unlikeliness of Mary’s background.
- Discuss the unlikeliness of Mary’s response.
- Discuss the unlikeliness in our own lives and the importance of God’s presence in the midst of the unlikely.

Next Steps Connection

- Be aware of how you notice God’s presence in the midst of the unlikely.

Resources

- Hamilton, Adam. *The Journey: Walking the Road to Bethlehem*
- Additional scriptures: Luke 1:39-45; Luke 2:1-20

Session 5

Week of January 3, 2027

The Presence of God Through Seeking

Prayer

- Begin and close with prayer
- Consider asking various members of the group to lead the prayer.

Conversation Starters

- What is something you are seeking in the new year?

Background Information

Seeking is part of our human condition.

Seeking seems to be part of the human condition. Our desire to seek. We search. We look for. Over the span of our lifetimes, we seek. We seek fulfillment, relationships, and security, to name a few.

It is in our seeking that we conclude our Advent series, as we journey from the Magi who are seeking the King of the Jews.

Matthew 2:1-12 (NIV)

2 *After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem* ***2*** *and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."*

3 *When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.* ***4*** *When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born.* ***5*** *"In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:*

6 “‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel.’”
7 Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. 8 He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”

9 After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. 11 On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

For the Magi, finding was an event, yet it took a journey. Often, the journey is likely to be more of a process.

How far did the Magi travel? Estimates suggest that the Magi likely traveled 500-1000 miles to get from “the East”, likely Persia, to Bethlehem. This journey took from weeks to months. For the Magi, their seeking took effort, a journey, rather than an event.

This is true of our seeking as well. Our seeking is not an event, but a process.

Finding prompts a response: worship and offering of gifts.

The Magi demonstrate a response that includes both worship and offering of gifts. They worshipped Jesus and offered gifts. This example is effective in our own seeking and finding. We are to worship Jesus and offer our gifts to him. Just as the Magi sought and found, we too seek and find. God is present in the midst of our seeking.

Wesleyan Covenant Prayer

John Wesley was not only influenced by the Moravians, but also by the Puritans. The Puritan influence can be traced to Wesley's upbringing and the influence of his mother, Susanna, who was raised a Puritan. Within the Puritan influence, we find a devotional that Wesley adapted in 1755 as a prayer that we now know as the Wesleyan Covenant Prayer. Wesley encouraged the Methodist church to pray this prayer at New Year's services.

We conclude this series with the Wesleyan Covenant Prayer, as we seek God's presence in this new year. Pray the Wesleyan Covenant Prayer as a group or individually as you conclude this session.

Scripture Connection

Read Matthew 2:1-12.

Questions about the scripture:

- Share what you know about the Magi, or Wise Men.
- What were the Magi seeking?
- What did they find?
- How did they respond?
- How do we see God's presence in the midst of their seeking?

Next Steps Connection

- Prayerfully consider the following question for the new year: "How can I seek Jesus in the new year?"

Pray Together the Wesleyan Covenant Prayer.

Wesleyan Covenant Prayer

I am no longer my own, but thine.
Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.
Put me to doing, put me to suffering.
Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee,
exalted for thee or brought low for thee.
Let me be full, let me be empty.
Let me have all things, let me have nothing.
I freely and heartily yield all things
to thy pleasure and disposal.
And now, O glorious and blessed God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it.
And the covenant which I have made on earth,
let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.