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DARE **to**
Imagine



Advent 2021 to Epiphany 2022
At Home Worship Guide



Mennonite
Church
USA



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- If you want to, sing or listen to some songs about light and the journey of the Magi. Here are some ideas:

Oh Beautiful Star of Bethlehem (VT 275)

We Three Kings (an oldie, but fun and simple to sing)

As with Gladness (VT 277)

Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star

Whenever God Shines His Light (by Van Morrison)

Hope is a Candle (VT 211)

Ya Vienen Los Reyes Magos

Advent to Epiphany At Home 2021
November 28, 2021 through January 6, 2022

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Epiphany Ritual

Week of January 9

Focus Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12

“Epiphany” means realization. Here’s the dictionary.com definition: “a sudden, intuitive perception of or insight into the reality or essential meaning of something, usually initiated by some simple, homely, or commonplace occurrence or experience. a literary work or section of a work presenting, usually symbolically, such a moment of revelation and insight.” It’s like when you suddenly get something. It’s finally clear; it makes sense; you see it; you get it. We often associate Epiphany with a shining light that illuminates Jesus. Jesus is the realization of all that has been hoped for and promised.

Here is a ritual to help you celebrate Epiphany — the journey and arrival of the Magi:

- When it is dark outside, gather up all the candles and flashlights you can find and bring them into one room of your house. Turn off all the lights in the house.
- Light the candles and flashlights, one at a time, beginning with the advent wreath. Say your advent words with the wreath, then notice the difference all these little lights make.
- By the light of your candles and flashlights, read and imagine the story found in Matthew 2:1-12.
- Optional: “Imagine the Journey:” Bring the Magi to see Jesus.

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Introduction to Advent at Home

Advent to Epiphany, Nov. 28, 2021-Jan. 6, 2022

Dare to imagine!

The world was a mess. The ruling powers were corrupt and greedy and violent. Nations raged. Times were uncertain at best. God's shalom was elusive. And yet ... the people dared to imagine. They imagined a Messiah, God's love incarnate, who would come to lead the people in the way of peace.

The world is a mess. A pandemic that refuses to go away has thrown the already turbulent world into chaos. Earth is rebelling against years of abuse, and the nations are raging. And yet ... we dare to imagine. We imagine God's love incarnate, a baby coming to reveal God's shalom, peace to all the earth.

During the Advent and Christmas seasons this year, we invite you to dare to imagine and join in God's shalom made flesh through the birth of Jesus Christ.

What is Advent?

It is a season of preparation, in which we recreate the longing people felt before the birth of Jesus. Christians prepare for the celebration of Jesus' birth by remembering the longing for a Messiah.

The word "Advent" comes from the Latin word "adventus", which means "coming" or "visit." During the Advent season, we keep in mind both "advents" of Christ: the first one in Bethlehem and the second one yet to come.

During Advent, we move from darkness to light — right at the time of the year when the days are reaching their shortest, and when the world is going from light to darkness leading up to the winter solstice. We don't do this to equate light with goodness and darkness with evil. Rather, light is a symbol of illumination, helping us to see more clearly.

• Verse 10 says, "yet the world did not know him." Jesus is the source of everything, even our lives, yet we don't recognize him.

• Read verse 18. It's in Jesus that we know God. Through Jesus, we begin to understand God.

Imagination Station: How did this story prompt you to imagine and create?

Daily worship ritual

- Light two purple candles, then the pink candle, the last purple candle, and the center candle, then say something like, "Jesus brings God's hopeful goodness! Jesus brings God's peaceful embrace! Jesus brings God's joyful song! Jesus is God's loving face! Jesus is God incarnate!" If you want to keep it simpler, say, "Jesus is born! Jesus brings hope. Jesus brings peace. Jesus brings joy. Jesus brings love."
- Read part or all of Luke 2:1-20; or read one of the other lectionary Scriptures.
- "Imagine the Journey:" Begin moving the Magi closer to the Nativity scene.
- Prayer: God, you are hope, peace, joy and love. In Jesus, you revealed all these things to us in all their fullness. Make us bold enough to join your dance. Amen.
- Blow out the candles.
- Sing a song of light.



In the Gospel of John, instead of telling the story of Jesus' birth, the author uses poetic language to introduce the life of Jesus on earth. The author reminds us that Jesus ("the Word") has always been with God and of God and ties Jesus with creation. Jesus, called the "Light of the World," ties all of the past, present and future together in a celebration. In this Scripture, we are invited to **dare to imagine God's dance**.

Tell the story: John 1:1-18

Talk about it: Choose a few of these prompts to explore:

- In this dark season of the year, when the days are at their shortest, we can really understand the difference that light makes. Play with light a bit (hint: do this when it's dark outside for maximum effect!). Use different types and amounts of light. Play with shadows. Have some fun. Maybe even have a (battery-operated) candlelight dance party. Jesus as Light of the World isn't just about flooding the world with light, but is also about revealing what is hidden and illuminating the shadow places.
- The writer of John wrote this "prologue" to the Gospel. A prologue is something we read before the main story. Usually, it helps the main story make more sense or helps us read it differently. This prologue introduces the story of Jesus' life on earth. It has lovely poetic language, but it sure is confusing! It's okay if it's hard for you to understand what this Scripture means. People of every age struggle with understanding it. Like all poetry, it's meant to help us feel things, ask questions and see things differently. It's not meant to explain everything but it points us in a direction.
- "In the beginning was the Word..." Does that phrase remind you of anything? This Scripture mirrors and quotes a lot of other Scriptures, and Genesis 1 is one of those Scriptures. Read Genesis 1:1-5 and John 1:1-5 and notice the similarities and differences.
- This Scripture describes Jesus as "the Word," or in Greek, "Logos." Logos means way more than "word" as we think of it. Here, it's being used to describe divine (of God) wisdom and order. It's a word that makes things happen, that can create.

Why celebrate Advent?

The four weeks of Advent help us make sure we are making Christmas about Jesus and more than a present-opening party.

Living in the Advent season slows us down and helps us remember that December is not just about frantic preparations for Christmas.

Advent is actually the beginning of the Christian calendar, and walking through Advent gives shape to our entire year.

How to use this worship guide

This resource accompanies the worship planning materials in *Leader* magazine. The themes and Scriptures are the same, which will connect your worship at home to your worship at church. If your congregation is not following the *Leader* resource, that's not a problem; this worship guide will still make sense to you.

This guide refers to the *Shine On* story Bible from MennoMedia. If you have this resource, you can find correlating stories in it. If you don't have it, no problem. Reading straight from the Bible or from another story Bible resource is also great!

This guide refers to the *Voices Together* and *Sing the Journey* resources, both of which are from MennoMedia. Again, having these resources is not necessary for using this resource.

This guide can be used weekly, daily or a combination of both.

Choose the rituals offered in this guide that are helpful for your household and skip the ones that aren't.

No need to be perfect; aim for persistence. If "daily" means "every few days," that's fine.

Fit these materials into your schedule. If the only thing your household can manage is a daily lighting of candles and singing a song or saying a quick prayer, *that is enough!*

Imagination Station

The theme “Dare to imagine” just begs for an opportunity to be creative! Set up an “imagination station” in your home for the seasons of Advent and Christmas. Let this be a daily self-guided opportunity, used whenever inspiration or the need for creativity arises. This is not just for households with children. Adults are called to imagine just as children are and, perhaps, have an even greater need for this break from productivity! If your congregation is doing the “zines” or children’s time dress-up box (suggested in *Leader*), this is a good place to mirror those worship elements at home.

1. Designate a spot in your home to be the Imagination Station, a dedicated space for creativity in the Advent season.
2. Equip the station with imagination tools that make sense for your household. Make sure you throw in a few that may stretch your comfort zone a bit — dare to imagine! Here are some ideas:
 - Dress-up box, with robes, scarves and other things that could help you act out the stories of Advent.
 - Nativity sets.
 - Mirror.
 - Paper.
 - Coloring supplies, such as crayons, markers, pens, pencils, watercolors, etc.
 - Scissors.
 - Glue and tape.
 - Other craft supplies.
 - Clay and/or playdough.
 - Candles (battery-operated ones if your household includes small children).
 - Paper bags.
 - Things bound for the recycling bin (lids, cans, etc.).
 - Bible atlas.
 - Reference books that help you imagine the world Jesus lived in.
 - Story Bibles.
 - Blocks and other building materials.

Dare to imagine God’s dance!

Week of January 2

Focus Scripture: John 1:1-18

Additional Lectionary Scriptures: Jeremiah 31:7-14; Psalm 147:12-20; Ephesians 1:3-14

WEEKLY WORSHIP RITUAL

Connect to the “big story”:

God created a good world. We were created to live peacefully, but we often miss the mark. When that happens, we have to deal with the consequences, but God sticks with us. Our whole story is a story of God sticking with us. In the Bible, God called Abraham and Sarah’s family to be a blessing to the earth, and even when they missed the mark, God stuck with them. When the people were in slavery and cried out to God, God stuck with them by sending Moses to lead them. When the people of God had a hard time understanding how to live God’s law of love in community, God sent leaders like Joshua, judges like Deborah, and prophets like Samuel to bring the people back to God.

The people wanted to be ruled by kings. Things didn’t always go well under kings, and the kingdom divided in two. Both of these kingdoms were eventually invaded by other nations. Some people were taken away into exile, and some were left in the ruins of the land. God continued to stick with the people, often through calling prophets, who pointed the people back to God and back to a community of shalom. Eventually, the exiled people were allowed to return home. They began to hope for a Messiah.

That Messiah was announced to a young Galilean woman named Mary, when an angel told her she was to bear the Christ. She courageously responded with, “Let it be,” and it was so. Jesus was born, proclaimed by angels and visited by shepherds. God incarnate, a tiny baby.

Daily worship ritual

- Light two purple candles, then the pink candle, the last purple candle and the center candle, then say something like, "Jesus brings God's hopeful goodness! Jesus brings God's peaceful embrace! Jesus brings God's joyful song! Jesus is God's loving face! Jesus is God incarnate!" If you want to keep it simpler, say, "Jesus is born! Jesus brings hope. Jesus brings peace. Jesus brings joy. Jesus brings love."
- Read part or all of Luke 2:1-20; or read one of the other lectionary Scriptures.
- "Imagine the Journey:" Put Jesus in the manger and bring the shepherds to see him!
- Prayer: God, you are hope, peace, joy and love. In Jesus, you revealed all these things to us in all their fullness. Make us bold enough to imagine the miracle of Jesus' birth. Amen.
- Blow out the candles.
- Sing a song about Jesus' birth.



3. Kick off your Imagination Station with one household imagination session, to give everyone a taste of how to use it. Read one of the Scripture passages, then let everyone use the tools to imagine and create, inspired by the Scripture. If someone is struggling to come up with a creative idea, try pointing them to a section of the Scripture that might inspire them.

4. Keep the Imagination Station set up through Epiphany (January 6).
**Note: The purpose here is to explore the process of imagining! If there are finished projects, things to "show," that's fine, but the emphasis is on process! Dare to imagine!*

The Advent Wreath:

Create your own version of an Advent wreath that looks similar to this:



The wreath is circular like God's eternal love. It has no beginning and no end.

Wreaths are traditionally dressed with evergreens, symbolizing endless life and rebirth. Since actual evergreens are highly flammable, consider using some artificial greenery, or decorate your wreath in a different way.

The purple candles represent both repentance and royalty, and the pink candle, used the third week, is Mary's candle.

We often use a word for each week of advent as we light each candle. Week 1 is "hope," week 2 is "peace," week 3 is "joy," and week 4 is "love."

The white candle in the center is the "Christ candle."

There are many stories recounting the history and symbolism of the Advent wreath and even multiple colors that are used. If you're intrigued, look it up!

Imagine the journey

This optional element of the daily ritual is one that people of all ages have found meaningful! A lot of anticipation and effectiveness is packed into one simple and quick practice.

1. Set up your Nativity scene with all the elements except Mary, Joseph, Jesus and the Magi.
2. Place Mary and Joseph somewhere in your home to the north of the manger and place the Magi somewhere to the east. Hide Jesus for now.
3. Each day of Advent, move Mary and Joseph a little closer to the manger, letting them land there on December 24.
4. You may want to also place your shepherds nearby instead of at the manger, so that you can move them in to worship Jesus on Christmas Day.
5. On December 25, Christmas Day, add Jesus.
6. After Christmas, begin moving the Magi closer each day, letting them arrive to worship Jesus on January 6, Epiphany.

Note: If you don't have a Nativity set, make a simple one! You can paint rocks for different characters or create them out of sticks/clothespins and fabric scraps. Find a free downloadable Nativity set to print and cut out, as well as other child-friendly Nativity set options at www.MennoniteUSA.org/adventathome.

the census, and while they were there, Mary gave birth to Jesus. Angels proclaimed his birth to shepherds, who came to visit the newborn Messiah. We read this story and **dare to imagine God incarnate: a tiny baby.**

Tell the story: Luke 2:1-20

If you have the *Shine On* story Bible, this passage is part of the story on page 165-166.

Talk about it: Choose a few of these prompts to explore:

- Tell this story, then read it. What did you add to the story, and what did you leave out? As this story has been told in many cultures for thousands of years, it has taken on a life of its own. That's okay! And it's also good to go back to the story in the Bible.
- Shepherds often appear as a positive character or image in Scripture. God is often depicted as a shepherd as well (perhaps most well-known in Psalm 23). Shepherd is a royal image, believe it or not, an incredible juxtaposition of earthy and kingly! How does this knowledge change your reading of the story?
- This is the first of three times that Luke's gospel says Mary "treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart." What do you think that means?
- Go outside when it's dark. Imagine the world around you suddenly filled with angels, singing and proclaiming!
- This is an earthy story. It includes animals and common people and a woman in labor and a newborn with all its needs. Imagine the things you would see, hear and smell in this place where Jesus was born. Sometimes we try to sanitize the story, but doing that takes away from the beauty of God "incarnate," which means "embodied in flesh"!

Imagination Station: How did this story prompt you to imagine and create?

Dare to imagine God incarnate!

Christmas Day and the Week of December 26

Focus Scripture: Luke 2:1-20

Additional Lectionary Scriptures: 1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26; Psalm 148; Colossians 3:12-17; Luke 2:41-52

WEEKLY WORSHIP RITUAL

Connect to the “big story”:

God created a good world. We were created to live peacefully, but we often miss the mark. When that happens, we have to deal with the consequences, but God sticks with us. Our whole story is a story of God sticking with us. In the Bible, God called Abraham and Sarah’s family to be a blessing to the earth, and even when they missed the mark, God stuck with them. When the people were in slavery and cried out to God, God stuck with them by sending Moses to lead them. When the people of God had a hard time understanding how to live God’s law of love in community, God sent leaders like Joshua, judges like Deborah, and prophets like Samuel to bring the people back to God.

The people wanted to be ruled by kings. Things didn’t always go well under kings, and the kingdom divided in two. Both of these kingdoms were eventually invaded by other nations. Some people were taken away into exile, and some were left in the ruins of the land. God continued to stick with the people, often through calling prophets, who pointed the people back to God and back to a community of shalom. Eventually, the exiled people were allowed to return home. They began to hope for a Messiah.

That Messiah was announced to a young Galilean woman named Mary, when an angel told her she was to bear the Christ. She courageously responded with, “Let it be,” and it was so.

Mary and her fiancé, Joseph, traveled to Bethlehem to participate in

Weekly worship ritual:

Four Scripture passages will be listed for each week. We encourage you to read all of them at some point during the week! The weekly worship ritual will focus on one Scripture passage each week.

Connect to the “big story”: We begin by remembering that the Bible tells one big story that leads to Jesus. By reading this section each week, we can learn where this week’s Scripture belongs in the big story.

Tell the story: Read the Scripture passage from your Bible and/or a corresponding version in a story Bible.

Talk about it: Choose a few “Talk about it” prompts, provided in this guide, to explore.

Imagination Station. Imagine it! You may find that you want to “Talk about it” together at your Imagination Station, while you play and create.

Daily Worship Ritual:

Light the candle(s) of the Advent wreath, saying that candle’s Advent word.

Read one (or part of one) of the week’s Scripture passages, or read the story of Jesus’ birth from Luke 2:1-20.

Optional: “Imagine the Journey” ritual

Pray the simple suggested weekly prayer or another prayer of your choosing.

Blow out the candles. Maybe you would like to sing a song here. “He Came Down” (#239 in the *Voices Together* hymnal and #31 in the *Sing the Journey* songbook) is a simple song that can be altered for each week by using that week’s Advent word in the lyrics. For example, the first week’s version would be, “He came down that we may have hope...”

Dare to imagine God's hopeful goodness!

Week of November 28

Focus Scripture: Jeremiah 33:14-16

Additional Lectionary Scriptures: Psalm 25:1-10; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36

WEEKLY WORSHIP RITUAL

Connect to the "big story":

God created a good world. We were created to live peacefully, but we often miss the mark. When that happens, we have to deal with the consequences, but God sticks with us. Our whole story is a story of God sticking with us. In the Bible, God called Abraham and Sarah's family to be a blessing to the earth, and even when they missed the mark, God stuck with them. When the people were in slavery and cried out to God, God stuck with them by sending Moses to lead them. When the people of God had a hard time understanding how to live God's law of love in community, God sent leaders like Joshua, judges like Deborah, and prophets like Samuel to bring the people back to God.

The people wanted to be ruled by kings, and God sent the prophet Samuel to anoint the first two kings of Israel. The second king was David, who was from the tribe of Judah. During the time of the third king, David's son, Solomon, the kingdom divided into two: the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah. God kept speaking through prophets in both kingdoms, sticking with the people, even as the Northern Kingdom fell to Assyria.

About a hundred years after the Northern Kingdom fell, Jeremiah was a prophet in Judah. The people of Judah were anxious that they would also be overtaken by a foreign nation, and Jeremiah was prophesying while Jerusalem was under siege from Babylon. In the middle of this intense, scary, chaotic time, Jeremiah spoke the word of hope that we hear in this week's Scripture. In the middle of all this trauma and chaos, there

Imagination Station: How did this story prompt you to imagine and create?

Daily worship ritual

- Light two purple candles, then the pink candle, then the last purple candle and say something like, "Jesus brings God's hopeful goodness! Jesus brings God's peaceful embrace! Jesus brings God's joyful song! Jesus is God's loving face!" If you want to keep it simpler, say, "Jesus brings hope. Jesus brings peace. Jesus brings joy. Jesus brings love."
- Read part of Luke 1:39-55 or one of the other lectionary Scriptures for the week. Alternatively, read the story of Jesus' birth from Luke 2:1-20.
- "Imagine the Journey:" Move Mary and Joseph a little closer to the Nativity scene.
- Prayer: God, you are miraculous and mysterious. You do big and powerful things and small and intimate things. Make us bold enough to imagine your loving face looking upon us with favor! Amen.
- Blow out the candles.
- Sing a song of love.



us to imagine God's loving face.

Tell the story: Luke 1:39-55

If you have the *Shine On* story Bible, this passage is part of the story on page 161.

Talk about it: Choose a few of these prompts to explore:

- This passage provides us with some interesting time markers. Verse 26 says, "in the sixth month." What is this the sixth month of? It's the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy. Imagine time is being measured by gestation. Then Mary leaves three months later. Do that gestation math.
- Get out your map and find Galilee, then find the hill country of Judea (the area around Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Hebron). Trace Mary's travels as a young pregnant woman in first century Palestine.
- Like the song of Zechariah, this passage is full of quotes and references to Jewish Scripture. If you're curious, break out the study Bible and look up a few of these references!
- Mary's song paints a picture of a powerful and good God. It's also a very political song. Mary's God is a threat to the establishment!
- There are a lot of woman-to-woman connections here. Mary-Elizabeth, of course, but also Mary-Hannah-Deborah (all women who sang some similar songs), and Mary-Sarah ("Nothing will be impossible with God," from Luke 1:37 is a direct quote of what was said about Sarah's pregnancy with Isaac).
- Notice in Mary's song all the bodily references to God: God looks, has arms, scatters, brings down, lifts up, feeds, sends and helps. This is an active God!
- God became flesh. God developed inside a woman's womb. A mother waited with anticipation to see the face of her baby. This is miraculous and mysterious, and a little bizarre!

is deeply rooted goodness! In time, the people of God would come to understand this prophecy as pointing toward a future Messiah. Jeremiah's words prompt us to **dare to imagine God's hopeful goodness.**

Tell the story: Jeremiah 33:14-16

If you have the *Shine On* story Bible, this passage is part of the story on page 144.

Talk about it: Choose a few of these prompts to explore:

- Jeremiah wasn't the most popular prophet. He spoke to the people about the ways they weren't following God. In particular, they weren't following God's way of justice. He was especially upset with the people for worshiping other gods. People didn't like what he had to say, and they sometimes threatened to kill him or put him in prison. Given all this, we can imagine why he might not have lived a very happy life. He was sometimes called the "Weeping Prophet." Yet, he kept on telling the people what God was calling him to say! God's call is often joyful, but sometimes it's painful, too. Can you think of any times when following God wasn't so fun?
- The chapter before this one describes Jerusalem under siege by Babylon. It was a desolate and hopeless time, and God told Jeremiah to go buy a field! In such a tumultuous time, buying a field would have seemed like a foolish thing to do to many people. Imagine - how might this seemingly foolish act have been an act of daring hope? That's like buying property in a country at war — it makes no sense! Think about it: how might this ridiculous act be an act of daring hope?
- Notice the names and places in this passage: David, Israel, Judah. Given what we know from connecting to the big story and thinking about other parts of Scripture, how do you think the people might have heard this? Why are these the names used?
- This new dwelling will be called "the-LORD-Is-Our-Righteousness." Why? What does it mean for a place or a people to be called that?

- The Bible was written by people whose lives were lived very close to nature, and sometimes reading it outside makes us read it differently. Go read this passage outside. Look at the sleeping natural world around you. Do you see anything sprouting from the ground? If you're in a northern climate, the world around you may be sleeping, and it may be hard to imagine a branch or shoot coming out of the ground. But we know that, in time, it will. What does this have to do with hope?

Imagination Station: How did this story prompt you to imagine and create?

Daily worship ritual

- Light one purple candle and say something like, "Jesus brings God's hopeful goodness!" Or, if you want to keep it simpler, say, "Jesus brings hope."
- Read Jeremiah 33:14-16 or one of the other lectionary Scriptures for the week. Alternatively, read the story of Jesus' birth from Luke 2:1-20.
- "Imagine the Journey:" Move Mary and Joseph toward the Nativity scene.
- Prayer: God, even when the world around us seems to be full of chaos and violence, you are at work. Make us bold enough to imagine and see your hopeful goodness springing up! Amen.
- Blow out the candles.
- Sing a song of hope



Dare to imagine God's loving face!

Week of December 19

Focus Scripture: Luke 1:39-55

Additional Lectionary Scriptures: Micah 5:2-5a; Psalm 80:1-7; Hebrews 10:5-10

WEEKLY WORSHIP RITUAL

Connect to the "big story":

God created a good world. We were created to live peacefully, but we often miss the mark. When that happens, we have to deal with the consequences, but God sticks with us. Our whole story is a story of God sticking with us. In the Bible, God called Abraham and Sarah's family to be a blessing to the earth, and even when they missed the mark, God stuck with them. When the people were in slavery and cried out to God, God stuck with them by sending Moses to lead them. When the people of God had a hard time understanding how to live God's law of love in community, God sent leaders like Joshua, judges like Deborah, and prophets like Samuel to bring the people back to God.

The people wanted to be ruled by kings. Things didn't always go well under kings, and the kingdom divided in two. Both of these kingdoms eventually were invaded by other nations. Some people were taken away into exile, and some were left in the ruins of the land. God continued to stick with the people, often through calling prophets, who pointed the people back to God and back to a community of shalom. Eventually, the exiled people were allowed to return home. They began to hope for a Messiah.

That Messiah was announced to a young Galilean woman named Mary, when an angel told her she was to bear the Christ. She courageously responded with, "Let it be," and that's the beginning of God becoming God incarnate — forming as an infant in her womb, with a body to be born into the world. This last week before Christmas, the Scripture **dares**

Daily worship ritual

- Light two purple candles, then the pink candle and say something like, "Jesus brings God's hopeful goodness! Jesus brings God's peaceful embrace! Jesus brings God's joyful song!" If you want to keep it simpler, say, "Jesus brings hope. Jesus brings peace. Jesus brings joy."
- Read part of Zephaniah 3:14-20 or one of the other lectionary Scriptures for the week. Alternatively, read the story of Jesus' birth from Luke 2:1-20.
- "Imagine the Journey:" Move Mary and Joseph a little closer to the Nativity scene.
- Prayer: God, you stick with us and love us. You gather us in and bring us home, again and again. Make us bold enough to imagine your joyful song, shouting your love for us! Amen.
- Blow out the candles.
- Sing a song of joy.



Dare to imagine God's peaceful embrace!

Week of December 5

Focus Scripture: Luke 1:68-79

Additional Lectionary Scriptures: Malachi 3:1-4; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6

WEEKLY WORSHIP RITUAL

Connect to the "big story":

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The people wanted to be ruled by kings. Things didn't always go well under kings, and the kingdom divided in two. Both of these kingdoms were eventually invaded by other nations. Some of the people were taken away into exile, and some were left in the ruins of the land. God continued to stick with the people, often through calling prophets, who pointed the people back to God and back to a community of shalom.

Eventually, the exiled people were allowed to return home. They rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem, so we call this the Second Temple Period. They began to hope for a Messiah.

But before that Messiah came, God sent someone to go first, someone to prepare the people. Baby John, cousin to Jesus, was born to Zechariah and Elizabeth, an older couple who thought they couldn't have children.

This week's Scripture is the prophecy that Zechariah spoke when John was born. Sometimes we call it "Zechariah's song." These words describe what we sometimes call "shalom." It means peace but also so much more than peace: wholeness, harmony, the community of all God's creation in right relationship. The writers of the resource found in *Leader* magazine call it "God's all-encompassing embrace." When this little baby is born, his father speaks of God's shalom of the past, present and future. He sees that this helpless little one is going to play an important role in what God is up to. Zechariah's words prompt us to **dare to imagine God's peaceful embrace.**

Tell the story: Luke 1:68-79

If you have the *Shine On* story Bible, this passage is part of the story on page 158.

Talk about it: Choose a few of these prompts to explore:

- These words were actually the first Zechariah had spoken for several months. Read Luke 1:5-25 to find out why.
- Zechariah catches God's vision, one that is full of hope and peace, and his heart is so full that he bursts out with this song! When he does this, he becomes part of a long tradition. Miriam and Moses sang out in Exodus 15, Deborah and Barak did similarly in Judges 5, Hannah cried out in 1 Samuel 2, as did many others in Scripture! In Luke 1-3 alone, we have three songs (sung by Mary, Zechariah and Simeon). Look some of these up and note the similarities and differences.
- Notice that there are two distinct parts to this song. A big proclamation (vv 68-75), then a specific blessing (vv 76-79). Try reading it dramatically, with a shift at that spot, and see what new things you notice.
- This passage is commonly called the "Benedictus." The name comes from the first couple of words, "Blessed be." It has been an important part of worship for many Christians, including Anabaptists, throughout

with singing, and they can live in hope. The prophet invites us to **dare to imagine God's joyful song.**

Tell the story: Zephaniah 3:14-20

Talk about it: Choose a few of these prompts to explore:

- During Advent, we anticipate what has been and what will be. The birth of Jesus and the return of Jesus. This passage helps us live into the "now and not yet" of Advent. The joy that is and the joy that will be. Christ who was, is and is to come.
- One of the images of God in this Scripture is as a warrior who gives victory, a common theme in Scripture. Sit with that image. How does it feel to you? Is this a way you often imagine God?
- Read verse 17b out loud. Better yet, act it out! This is a boisterous God, singing loudly and joyfully!
- There's a confusing phrase in verse 18 that the NRSV seems to skip over. What's translated "as on a day of festival" may more accurately mean, "those sorrowing from lack of festivals." ¹ The people are sad, because they haven't been able to celebrate and have rituals like they used to! Many of us are still not "back to normal" right now, and like the people in exile, we know we will emerge from the pandemic with new ways of doing things. And we mourn that, even as we look forward to what is to come.
- What would God's joyful song be for your community right now?

Imagination Station: How did this story prompt you to imagine and create?

¹ Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*, Vol.2 (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018), 1350.

Dare to imagine God's joyful song!

Week of December 12

Focus Scripture: Zephaniah 3:14-20

Additional Lectionary Scriptures: Isaiah 12:2-6; Philippians 4:4-7;
Luke 3:7-18

WEEKLY WORSHIP RITUAL

Connect to the "big story":

God created a good world. We were created to live peacefully, but we often miss the mark. When that happens, we have to deal with the consequences, but God sticks with us. Our whole story is a story of God sticking with us. In the Bible, God called Abraham and Sarah's family to be a blessing to the earth, and even when they missed the mark, God stuck with them. When the people were in slavery and cried out to God, God stuck with them by sending Moses to lead them. When the people of God had a hard time understanding how to live God's law of love in community, God sent leaders like Joshua, judges like Deborah, and prophets like Samuel to bring the people back to God.

The people wanted to be ruled by kings. Things didn't always go well under kings, and the kingdom divided in two. God kept speaking through prophets in both kingdoms, sticking with the people, even as the Northern Kingdom fell to Assyria. Zephaniah, the prophet we're reading this week, is believed to have been a prophet in the Southern Kingdom, probably right before the time of King Josiah.

The Southern Kingdom, as we learned last week, eventually fell to Babylon, and many people were taken "into exile," which means that they were moved to an unfamiliar place. Many scholars think this final part of the book of Zephaniah was written by a prophet who was with the people in exile. The people felt far from those they loved, far from home, far from everything familiar. The prophet gives them words of joy: restoration of the people! God is sticking with them, loving them, rejoicing over them

the centuries. For a contemporary Anabaptist take on the passage, check out this article by Mary Shertz (<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/sunday-november-21-2010>).

- Most of Zechariah's song quotes and references Jewish Scriptures (what we call the Old Testament). If you're intrigued, get out your study Bible and start looking them up!
- Notice what baby John's job is going to be (vv 76-77). How can we prepare the way for Jesus in our daily lives?

Imagination Station: How did this story prompt you to imagine and create?

Daily worship ritual

- Light two purple candles and say something like, "Jesus brings God's hopeful goodness! Jesus brings God's peaceful embrace!" If you want to keep it simpler, say, "Jesus brings hope. Jesus brings peace."
- Read part of Luke 1:68-79 or one of the other lectionary Scriptures for the week. Alternatively, read the story of Jesus' birth from Luke 2:1-20.
- "Imagine the Journey:" Move Mary and Joseph a little closer to the Nativity scene.
- Prayer: God, you surprise us and inspire us. Give us courage to sing your song and prepare the way for Jesus. Make us bold enough to imagine and see your peaceful embrace breaking into our world! Amen.
- Blow out the candles.
- Sing a song of peace.

