

A close-up photograph of several lit candles in various colors (white, purple, red) against a dark, blurred background with some greenery and warm lights, creating a cozy, festive atmosphere.

Advent Landscapes

Advent Landscapes Series - Group Conversation Options

With quite a few of our groups taking a short break over Christmas, here are a few ways you can shape a meeting or two if your group decides to meet through December.

These are our Scripture texts for Advent 2023:

Dec 3: *Valleys and Low Places* - Isaiah 7:10-16; Matthew 1:18-25 (Joseph)

Dec 10: *Plains and Flat Places* - Isaiah 11:1-11; Luke 1:5-25; 39-45 (Elisabeth and Mary)

Dec 17: *Mountains and High Places* - Isaiah 2:1-5; Luke 1:26-38 (Mary)

Dec 24: *Forrest and Dense Places* - Isaiah 35:1-10; Luke 2:1-7 (Baby Jesus)

Dec 31: *Light and Dark Places* - Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12 (The Magi)

Option One - Conversation

In this series we're tracing the landscapes of our lives and allowing the season of Advent to situate us in them. So, if you want to keep tracking with the series, here are some questions you can use for each of the sermons.

- Can you share a personal experience of the landscape talked about in the sermon? Looking back at your year, what was your valley or low place? (choose according to the week we're in: your plain, your mountain, your forrest, your light or dark place).
- How being in that place impacted you? How did it change you?
- What did you learn about the main character that the sermon looks at? What was surprising, inspiring, intriguing, or discomforting about them?
- What did the Sunday message have to offer you personally in the current season of your life?
- How do the the scripture texts or/and the reflections on it in the sermon expand or inform your personal or our communal observance of Advent? Or, our celebration of Christmas?
- How can the group keep you in prayer as you look forward to the new year?

Option Two - *Lectio Divina*

Let the stories speak to you this Advent.

Use the spiritual practice of *Lectio Divina* to sit with them and listen to what emerges in you in response.

Here's how you can lead your group through *Lectio Divina*:

Lectio Divina has many names: "divine reading" (literal meaning), "spiritual reading," "scripture prayer," "contemplative Bible reading." I personally like calling it "*holy listening*."

It is essentially a way to prayerfully engage Scripture in order to hear God's personal word to you. With roots in Judaism, *lectio divina* was firmly established in the early church and later became a central practice in Western monasticism. Its importance to the individual spiritual formation has been rediscovered in the 20th century.

Process:

Traditionally Lectio Divina has 4 steps:

- Reading
- Reflecting
- Responding
- Resting

The practice utilizes an alternating rhythm of hearing the text and then being in silence for reflection.

There are no expectations. Sometimes we receive insights, sometimes we are comforted, sometimes we have more questions.

Invite your group into the experience

"You will hear the text several times today during our practice.

Every time after I read it, we will have 2 or 3 minutes of silence to engage with what we just heard."

Help your group prepare

"Take a few deep breaths, settle in, quiet your heart and mind by focusing on your breathing. Relax. We will be here for a minute and you are welcome to quietly repeat a short prayer: "Here I am, Lord." Or, "Come, Holy Spirit", Or "God, open my eyes to see truly, open my heart to hear your voice."

Read

[Chose one of the texts preached on]

"I am going to slowly read our scripture for today twice.

When I read it first time, I invite you to just listen and become familiar with the text, listen with the ear of the heart, not just with your mind.

When I read the second time, I will invite you to listen attentively, paying attention to a word or a phrase that lights up for you. A word or phrase that catches your attention or resonates with you.

Just notice that word or phrase and be open to it. Don't analyze or judge it. Just acknowledge it."

Reflect

"I am going to read our text again. And I invite you to enter the story using your imagination. Envision the situation. Watch the people, pay attention to the sounds, smells, surroundings. What do you hear and experience, where do you see yourself in the scene? Notice how the word you chose in our first step lights up for you again.

And this time, I invite you to listen to where that word or phrase connects with your life right now. Why is it important? Why do you think this word is for you? What invitation is God extending to you in this word?"

[Read the text and invite the group into another moment of silence to reflect on that word or phrase that stood out to them]

Respond

[Invite people to share their responses to the text, maybe the words or phrases that stood out to them and why. Anything they received from the experience.]

Rest

"I will read the text for us one last time and this time I invite you to just listen and rest. This is your time to be still before we emerge from this experience." [After reading, simply finish with an Amen, or Thanks be to God]