**ADVENT 2015 ADULT LESSONS**

**WEEK 1**

**LOVE Revealed: To Bring Justice**

**Purpose:**

To become a person who practices Christ-centered justice.

**Scripture Focus:** Isaiah 42:1-9

**Introduction:**

Imagine waiting 50 years for justice. The Jewish people had been in Babylon almost 50 years when this word of deliverance and justice came. In a time of waiting, we can lose focus on justice and focus on revenge, instead. The promise of God for justice was ultimately fulfilled in Jesus—meaning that the Jewish people had to wait a lot longer than 50 years. Sometimes we will have to wait for justice, too. How do we focus on being a people of justice while waiting on God’s ultimate justice?

**Questions:**

1. Have you ever had to wait for justice? Did you receive justice or not?
2. What was the experience like?
3. What did you learn?
4. Why do you think Advent—a time of waiting before celebrating the initial coming of Jesus—is a good time to think about justice?

**Lesson:**

***Read*** Isaiah 42:1-9.

***Ask*** these questions about the passage:

* What stands out to you?
* What are the key phrases, statements, ideas, themes, or words?
* There is a strong theme of justice in this text. What seems to be God’s role in justice?
* Verses 2-3 speak about God’s person of justice being gentle—he does not shout or scream; he does not draw attention to himself. How does this contrast from so many examples of leadership today?
* Three examples of justice are given in verse 7: sight is restored, prisoners are released, and the isolated are rescued. We can think of these as physical justice, political justice, and communal justice. Which of these strikes you most deeply?
* In verse 9, God says that before He brings things into being, He announces them to us. How does this kind of advance knowledge make you feel? What responsibilities does it bring?

***Discuss***

* There is a lot of talk about justice in our wider North American culture. Some of it aligns with Christian values and some of it might not. How can the church be a community of justice to help reclaim this vital role in the church’s mission?
* The vision for justice is for the whole world. How can Christians balance working for justice where they are planted—their family, their work, their community, etc.—with working for justice around the world?
* Is your church known for anything related to justice in your community? How can you continue that legacy? How can you begin a new one?

**Next Steps:**

1. What have you learned from this lesson?
2. How will you respond?
3. What do you feel challenged to do as a result?
4. How will you follow up on your progress next week? What is a shared goal your group can set and work toward?

**WEEK 2**

**LOVE Revealed: To Give Life**

**Purpose:** To reflect on ways that we avoid the life God offers to us and to grasp the connection between new life and new family.

**Scripture Focus: John 1:1-18**

**Introduction:**

 Every day is full of communication for each one of us. We speak and listen, write and read, email, telephone, text—and that’s the part of communication for which we use words. Not only do we use words in communication, but we use the body—with movements, postures, and gestures; we use the voice—with varying tone, volume, and speed; and we use facial expressions—all to help the other understand our words. Perhaps we supplement our words because we are distrusting of words: We worry that something sounds “too good to be true.” We ask whether or not someone has read the “fine print.” We are told to choose our words carefully. Interesting, then, that John’s unique Gospel begins with a declaration about the *Word*.

For John, the *Word* had both Old Testament context and cultural context. The *Word* was the powerful means of God’s activity in the Old Testament, such as in creation. For the Greek, the *Word* was the rational principle behind the universe. John combines both these concepts of God’s activity and the rational principle behind the entire universe to tell us the story of Jesus.

**Questions:**

1. Have you ever miscommunicated with someone? How did you fix it?
2. Have you ever misunderstood someone? How was this misunderstanding resolved?
3. What was the difference between miscommunicating and misunderstanding?
4. Why is it hard for us to communicate with each other?
5. John says that all things were created through the Word. Even *you* were created through the Word. You are part of God’s expression—part of God’s communication. What do you think of this idea?

**Lesson:**

***Read*** John 1:1-18; Psalm 33:6; 119:89; 119:25 together

***Ask*** these questions about the passage:

* What are the key phrases, statements, ideas, themes, or words? Write these down on a white board/paper.
* Why do you think that John the author wove in the story of John the Baptist?
* John says that life was in the Word (v. 4) and the Word was light (v. 9). Which of these words (life or light) stands out to you? Which captures the difference God makes in your life?
* In the Old Testament, God led the Israelites by a cloud and pillar of fire above the tabernacle. (Read Exodus 40:34-38.) John uses the equivalent of the Hebrew word tabernacle (*dwelling*) to describe the result of the Word being made flesh. Why might John do this? What does John want us to grasp about Jesus and about God?

***Discuss***

* John says that the darkness has not overcome the light. We are later warned in this Gospel that we should not let the darkness overcome us (John 12:35). The only way we are not overcome is by being in the light. How do you stay in the light?
* John 1:11 says that the world did not receive the true light. The word ‘receive’ means to join to one’s self. We are to make Jesus a companion. Instead, as part of the world, we do not receive Jesus. We keep Jesus at arm’s length. How do you keep Jesus at arm’s length? How do you keep Him close to you?
* John 1:10 says that the world did not recognize Jesus. Paul, in 1 Timothy 4:2, describes us as having a seared conscience. This means that the conscience does not work as it is supposed to because it has been damaged. Were there times in your life that you did not recognize Jesus although in hindsight you now see how He was at work?
* John writes that to those who receive Jesus that we are given the right to become children of God. The word ‘right’ can also be translated ‘power.’ It’s like John is saying that we couldn’t survive the process of becoming God’s child without Jesus being close to us. Is it difficult for you to think of yourself as God’s child? What does it mean to you that God gives you strength to become His child?
* God’s active presence by His Word in the Psalms is written into the story of Jesus because John teaches us that Jesus is the Word of God. How do you feel, knowing that God wants to be known so clearly that God’s Word takes on flesh in Jesus?

**Next Steps:**

1. What is one idea that you have taken away from this lesson?
2. Who is one person that you need to speak with about what you’ve learned?
3. What is one area of your life in which listening to God and/or being close to Jesus would make a difference?
4. Who will keep you accountable to speaking to someone about what you’ve learned?

**WEEK 3**

**LOVE Revealed: To Forgive Sins**

**Purpose:** To explore the theme of forgiveness through the season of Advent, seeing how it relates to our own experience of being forgiven and forgiving others.

**Scripture Focus:** Matthew 1:18-23

**Introduction:**

 Have you ever experienced the silent treatment? A time when someone refused to speak with you to let you know just how angry they were? It can be painful, difficult, and make the one being shunned feel powerless as they are forced to *wait* until the silence is broken. Sometimes the period between the Old and New Testament is called the 400 years of silence. The phrase suggests that it was a time when God was not speaking to His people. While this is not the most appropriate understanding of God—God was *not* giving a kind of silent treatment—it does communicate how the people of Israel were waiting for God to speak in a fresh and definitive way. (You can read Luke 2:22-40 for two instances of waiting—Simeon and Anna.) For some, it may have felt that God was far off, holding sins against the people. In the birth of Jesus, though, the silence is broken. The cries of a newborn symbolize the fresh voice of God, the silence is over, and sins are forgiven. In due time, God unfolded His plan.

**Questions:**

1. What have you gained from the first two weeks of lessons through Advent?
2. What have you learned in the practice of waiting that is part of the season of Advent?
3. What is the longest you have had to wait for a plan to develop? How did you feel when it finally came to reality?
4. Think of a difficult time in life. How did people show you compassion? Did you have anyone who demonstrated caring through their consistent presence? How did that make you feel?

**Lesson:**

***Read*** the story of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus together.

***Ask*** these questions about the passage:

* What stands out to you?
* What are the key phrases, statements, ideas, themes, or words?
* In first century Jewish culture, a person’s honor was crucial to their ability to thrive socially. Joseph’s honor would have been lessened by aligning with Mary because of this unexpected pregnancy. While Joseph does not play a prominent role in the rest of the story, what kind of person do you think he was from this encounter?
* Why do you think God intervened to keep Joseph and Mary together?
* Joseph was given the opportunity to name Jesus. While Mary carried and birthed a son, Joseph was to give Him the name Jesus. While this was first century custom, it was also a way that Joseph was drawn into the activity of God. How do you think this made Joseph feel?
* Matthew says that God had initiated this plan through the prophet Isaiah’s words, which had been spoken over 700 years earlier. To carry out this plan, God entrusted a baby to a virgin and a man who were not yet married to each other. Why would God entrust Jesus into the care of this couple?

***Discuss***

* Part of God’s act of saving people from their sins is forgiveness. This whole act of forgiveness involves God’s presence with His people in Jesus. How does presence communicate forgiveness?
* How would being raised in a family help model forgiveness for Jesus? How does this impact how we think of our own families?
* Matthew writes that Jesus is the one who will save from sins. When we think about this in terms of forgiveness, it means there was a period of waiting for forgiveness. Have you ever had to wait for forgiveness from another? How does Advent, a season of waiting, help us reflect on waiting on forgiveness—perhaps even forgiveness that has not yet come?
* Think about a time when you withheld forgiveness from others. Did you give the silent treatment during this period? How did this time end? How does forgiving others bring freedom to the one offering forgiveness?

**Next Steps:**

1. What have you learned from this lesson?
2. How will you respond?
3. What do you feel challenged to do as a result?
4. How will you follow up on your progress next week? What is a shared goal your group can set and toward which you can work?

**WEEK 4**

**LOVE Revealed: Love Is Here**

**Purpose:**

To see that God’s love transforms numerous spaces, just as much today as ancient history, in the story of Jesus’ birth.

**Scripture Focus:**

Luke 2:8-20

**Introduction:**

Have you ever suffered from flood, fire, theft, or vandalism? While the greatest tragedy in any of these events is loss of life, they can all radically change the meaning of a *space*. Homes, businesses, apartments can be turned upside down, leaving occupants disoriented and insecure. On the other side, have you ever been part of a home renovation or an office redecoration? There is a certain pride that comes with seeing a space transformed under your care and attention. Perhaps you have been part of a redesign where the space was finished, but took on new life with a bit of paint, elbow grease, and personal style. New space and redesigned space can increase that sense of home, productivity, and group momentum. Many times the amount of personal investment—especially time and creativity—involved in a project increases the importance and meaning of a space, as well. In the birth narrative of Jesus, Luke mentions different spaces that can all be pointers to the way God’s love in Christ is transforming different spaces, drawing us into new ways of living.

**Questions:**

1. Tell us about a home or office renovation gone wrong/right. What was the result?
2. For a renovation gone right, was it worth the wait and upheaval?
3. Advent is a time of waiting. How did waiting impact your appreciation of the new space?
4. Why do you think waiting is an important part of transformation—whether of a space or a person?

**Lesson:**

***Read*** Luke 2:8-20 aloud together.

***Ask*** these questions about the passage:

* What stands out to you?
* What are the key phrases, statements, ideas, themes, or words?
* What different locations or spaces are recorded in the passage? (Think big and think small.)
* How might you feel as one of the shepherds, entrusted with this message?
* For the women: How might you feel if you were Mary, with all the upheaval around you during such a meaningful, painful, exhausting, joyous, even dangerous moment?
* For the men: How might you feel if you were Joseph, who has been unable to provide stability, accommodation, or quietness for his wife during this birth?

***Discuss***

* Spaces can be transformed not just physically, but emotionally and spiritually because of the presence of new persons or people made new. Tell us about a family, team, or another group that experienced such a transformation.
* What does it say to you that the announcement of Jesus’ birth is in a field rather than a palace? Or, as New Testament scholar Joel Green says, that the announcement comes at the farm rather than at the temple?
* Shepherds were not despised in ancient near east culture as we sometimes hear, but they were part of society’s lower strata. What does it tell us about Jesus’ birth that they are the first to receive its news?
* Notice that the shepherds hear the news and return to the fields. Forever the fields could not just be a regular workplace for them, but a transformed space where they encountered Good News about Jesus. What spaces are prevalent in your life—work, home, coffee shop, restaurant, etc.—that you can help make new because of how you exhibit Good News in your words and through your actions?

**Next Steps:**

1. What have you learned from this lesson?
2. How will you respond?
3. What do you feel challenged to do as a result?
4. How will you follow up on your progress next week? What is a shared goal your group can set and toward which you can work?