

An Advent Bible Study Series for Youth



Block print by Rev. Mary Allison Cates

Welcome to the Advent Bible Study Series for Youth

“O come, let us adore him...” the familiar chorus sings out and our voices are full of adoration and excitement. This is one of the most exciting and holy times of the Christian year. The days and weeks leading up to Christmas are often marked with extra busyness, stress, and extra activities. It is a time when students are stressed out with projects and papers as they get ready for break, and a time when they want to be able to celebrate the season too.

The curriculum that follows will help youth leaders and youth to celebrate the season of Advent, the season of preparation. Advent is that Christian season of preparation for the joyful celebration of Christmas. Advent invites us into a time of waiting and preparation, so that we may more fully appreciate the fullness of the Christmas event and the impact this season has on the lives of Christians year-round. It is observed the four Sundays before Christmas with each Sunday focusing on one of the themes of Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love. The following plans may be used for Sunday School class or evening youth meetings.

Each week’s lesson plan includes a lectionary text that connects with the weekly theme, activities, discussion starters, and suggestions for worship. We hope that you will enjoy these materials and that you have a blessed Advent and Christmas.

“O come, let us adore him, Christ, the Lord!”

Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love.

Advent Bible Study for Youth- Week 1: Hope

Scripture: Mark 13:24-37

Background:

The book of Mark follows Jesus through his course of teachings and debates with authorities regarding the law and God's will. When Jesus enters Jerusalem, nonbelievers continue to doubt with great enthusiasm. Mark 13 moves Jesus from the past into the future, cautioning believers to always stay aware of the return of the Son of God. Only God knows when the return is to happen, but believers are to keep hope that it will.

Mark 13:24-37 can be easily separated into three separate sections.

Mark 13:24-27 can be identified as "The Coming of the Son of Man." This section is filled with apocalyptic images, (definition of apocalypse by Merriam-Webster Dictionary: *evil forces are destroyed*), and concerned with the coming Son of Man.

Mark 13:28-31 can be identified as "Certainty of End-time salvation." This text helps readers understand that the Son of Man is in fact Jesus himself. Christians expect Jesus to come in the role of God. This is evident in the statement of Jesus coming "in clouds with great power and glory," which is Old Testament language for God's own manner of appearing. At the core of these verses is the revelation that God is the one who controls all creation and its destiny. These verses warn against the destruction of Jerusalem. It is not meant to be a threat, but a warning. These scriptures are meant to provide hope for the future not negativity in its demise.

Mark 13:32-37 can be identified as "Watchful Waiting." The end will come in due time. The only one who knows when this time is, is God. Jesus, as well as the reader, are not given a clue as to when the end will be coming. Believers are to prepare themselves for this time and live in expectation for the coming end. Be hopeful for the ending, not fearful. This is good news!

Bibliography:

¹Preaching The Revised Common Lectionary, Soards, Dozeman & McCabe

²The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume Eight

Discussion Questions:

1. Mark's account of Jesus follows Jesus through many debates and confrontations in Galilee, Judea and Jerusalem. What are some of the stories in the Bible that you have read where Jesus' teachings were questioned?

2. Why would some scholars believe that Mark 13: 24-37 can be separated into three sermons, “divine judgment”, “the promise of fulfillment,” and/or “the call to readiness.”
3. The description of the return of Jesus is quite descriptive. Do you believe that this description is literal or symbolic? Why?
4. In verse 30, Jesus is credited with saying, “I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.” Does it bother you that those “end times” did not happen in the given generation as Jesus predicted? Does that make the passage any less true or is there still a “truth” that we are to learn from the verse? What is that truth?
5. In verse 32, Jesus is credited with saying that not even “the Son” knows when the end time will come. Are you surprised that Jesus wouldn’t know when the end time would fall?
6. Many Christians today assume that the warning of watchfulness does not concern them, yet we all know that human life is precious and can be taken. How can we be better prepared for the coming of the end? Does being a faithful Christian just happen?
7. This passage is about hope, about something God wants to provide for us that is more wonderful than we can even imagine. In the midst of your own difficult times, how is this passage helpful for you?

Activities:

1. Read the account of or watch the movie about Rosa Parks refusing to give up her bus seat on December 1, 1955¹. Discuss how this example can be used as a good example of active waiting.
2. Play a game that encourages active listening. Such as the telephone game or blindfold each other having the blindfolded participant follow spoken directions. This can be used as an example of having blind faith in the teaching of and waiting for Jesus.
3. Do an Amazing Race on Mark 13:24-37. Have three checkpoints.

At checkpoint one, have the participants read Mark 13:24-27. They will then be given 10 constellations. They must identify all of them correctly before they will be given the next checkpoint clue. –OR- They will be given a puzzle of the moon and stars/constellations that they must complete. After they complete the task the participants will be given the clue to find the next checkpoint.

At checkpoint two, they will read Mark 13:28-31. The Christian expects Jesus to come, not merely in behalf of God, but indeed acting in the role of God. This is clear from his mention of his coming ‘in clouds with great power and glory’, which is Old Testament language for God’s own manner of appearing. (*Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*). Participants must find an example of these words in the Old Testament. Each of these scripture examples will include the word cloud. (answers: Exodus 16:10; Psalm 104:1-3, Isaiah 19:1, and Ezekiel 30:1-3) After they complete the task the participants will be given the clue to find the next checkpoint.

At checkpoint three, they will read Mark 13:32-37. The participants can be given an obstacle course to complete. –OR- The participants can be given a scavenger hunt to complete which can be made up of objects of Advent/Christmas. Once they complete the challenge they will be given the clue to find the end of the race. They can be given the option to accept the clue in the envelope for where the final end line is –OR- incur a 5 minute waiting penalty and be given a separate envelope. The first envelope will have a very vague clue of where the end is. The second envelope will have the exact location written, participants will be unaware of what is in each envelope.

When the participants arrive at the end they will be given the option to wait for the rest of the group or finish. If they choose to finish they will be given an individual prize. This prize will only be a box that contains a note that reads, “And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake. (Mark 13:36)” If participants decide to wait for the whole group they will be given a prize of your choice. This should be a prize that can be enjoyed by all participants and something that they may have been looking forward to for a while.

After the game, have them explain what they learned and how waiting at different points was good or bad.

Worship:

Gather: Gather the group in a circle, invite everyone to be comfortable and relax. Light a candle in the middle of the circle to represent the presence of Christ. Christ is always with us, but sometimes we light a candle so that we can see the light and be reminded of that presence.

Sing or Listen: Begin by singing a few songs together. You may wish to look in a youth camp song book for such titles as "El Shaddai", "Jesus is the Rock", "Koinonia" or "The Lord is My Light." Another spin would be to sing a few Christmas songs like, "O Holy Night," or "Silent Night".

Lectio Divina: Ask the students to join you in a lectio divina, or "sacred reading" of the scripture. This way of hearing scripture is different than reading or listening to study, instead you are listening in the passage for what God is trying to say specifically to you, or to your group as you hear the words of scripture. Before reading the scripture ask the youth to assume the "position of the cross." The "position of the cross" is a method to enhance prayer where they would lay on the ground extending their arms and legs in manner Jesus hung on the cross. They should extend their arms so they feel a bit of a strain, which helps them reflect on the suffering of Jesus on the cross. Read Mark 13:24-27 three times. Each time the passage is read allow a short 10-15 second time of silence. After the third break of silence bring the group back together. Ask the youth what God may have been trying to communicate to them or to the youth group through these words of scripture. After everyone has shared- simply close with an "Amen".

Closing Prayer:

Ask the youth: "Who do you know who needs to experience God's hope?"

All: **God is with us.**

Leader: God is with us in Jesus, who came into this world and gave his life to lead us to God's hope.

All: **In Jesus, God is with us.**

Leader: We give thanks for the ways God has been with us in our lives through Jesus, so that we could have hope.

All: **In Jesus, God is with us every day.**

Leader: We pray for the people here, for those we know, and for people all around the world, that everyone could experience God's hope in their lives.

All: **In Jesus, God came to save the whole world. Amen.**

Be strong and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord. -Psalm 27:14

“Preparing the Way for Peace” Advent Bible Study for Youth- Week 2: Peace

Scripture: *Mark 1:1-8*

Background:

The Gospel of Mark, the earliest of the four gospels, is apocalyptic literature, aimed to reveal God’s ultimate purpose for human history. The sayings and stories of Jesus have been told by word of mouth years before Mark was written. The composition of Mark’s narrative includes basically two parts, Galilee (1:16-8:21) and Jerusalem (11:1-15:47), with an introduction and conclusion. In this Gospel, Mark presents the saving acts of God revealed through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. At the same time, Jesus represents the weakness and vulnerability of the Suffering Servant (second part).

The reading for the second Sunday of Advent, Mark 1:1-8, is part of the introduction, with Mark’s beginning grounded in the Old Testament and prefaced with the proclamation of John the Baptist. This passage can be easily divided into three sections: verses 1-3, verses 4-6, and verses 7-8.

(Verses 1-3) Mark does not open his Gospel with the baby Jesus, as Matthew and Luke do in their nativity narratives. Instead, Mark begins with “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (1:1). “The beginning” refers not only to the following section about John the Baptist as the beginning of the Jesus story, but also points to the whole as the beginning of the story, starting with creation, continuing through the Old Testament, the life of Jesus into present day. The “Son of God” is a significant title for Jesus in Mark. Here in the second and third verses, Mark uses a combination of Exodus 23:20, Malachi 3:1, and Isaiah 40:3, putting Mark’s narrative in salvation history.

(Verses 4-6) Mark moves from prophecy to fulfillment by presenting us with John the Baptizer crying in the wilderness, who has good news to tell. Here, John is described as a successful preacher and baptizer, as people listened to him and confessed their sins. The image of Elijah may come to mind as one listens to the description of John’s clothing and eating habits (2 Kings 1:8), once again putting the past in front of his readers.

(Verses 7-8) In these two verses, the focus shifts to the future as John calls attention to the one who is coming after him. In Mark, John’s role is not to threaten but to serve as herald of Jesus. John the Baptizer has prepared the way in the wilderness for Jesus. Following these verses in Mark, Jesus will emerge from the wilderness to begin preaching the good news and return several times to the wilderness.

Discussion Questions:

1. Mark writes in verse 1, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Gospel means “good news.” What is the “good news”...for Mark in this passage and for us today?
2. Mark quotes the prophet Isaiah in the second and third verses (refer to Isaiah 40:3). This passage from Isaiah (40:1-11) brings words of hope to those discouraged by years of exile. Here in Mark, those hopes have finally been fulfilled. Where are the places of “exile” today? How is the hope found in this part of Mark also fulfilled today?

3. John the Baptizer draws people from the countryside and from the city, and asks them to prepare for the one who is to come. In this season of Advent, the season of anticipation and preparation, what does it mean for us to anticipate and prepare for the coming of the promised one?

4. Repentance, the reorienting one's life by turning back to God, was central to the Old Testaments prophets and in first-century Judaism. John proclaims a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." First, discuss what repentance and confession mean. Then answer the question, "How do you find peace in that which John calls us to: repentance and confession?"

Bibliography:

The People's New Testament Commentary by M. Eugene Boring and Fred B. Craddock
Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 1 by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds.
The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume VIII.

Activities:

1. Personal Peace: Preparing our hearts for the coming of Jesus:

In our scripture from Mark, John the Baptist was preparing the way for the coming of Jesus into the world. He quotes the book of Isaiah saying, "prepare the way of the Lord, make paths straight for him." Part of making a straight path for someone to travel might mean clearing out everything that is in the way, the brush, the debris, and the junk! Part of what John the Baptist was asking people to do was to prepare their hearts for the coming of Christ. How do you prepare your heart? Well, one way is to think about what is weighing you down, or holding you back from being ready for Christ to come in to your heart. Part of that are the burdens we carry, or the sin; which is anything that separates us from the love of God. What do we need to clear from our hearts to be ready for Christ to come in?

Think about your own life- what are the burdens on your heart? What is stopping you from having a close relationship with God? What mistakes or sins are you sorry for? What do you need to let go of and turn over to God so that your heart can be at peace? Peace comes inside of us when our minds and hearts are clear and ready to receive what God has to give us (like the gift of Jesus!)

Have each person write down on a small slip of paper (post-it note would work), a sin, a worry, or a burden that is holding them back or weighing them down. While students are writing, you might have some music playing in the background. When everyone has had time to write, take the slips of paper and place them in a large metal bowl. Step outside briefly and light the papers on fire, watching them turn to ash. At this point what you were worrying about is turned over to God, and your heart can be free from that burden and ready to welcome Jesus Christ.

Forgiveness: John was offering people a baptism for “the forgiveness of sin.” Let us never forget that God forgives us when we sin. We no longer need to carry our burdens because we have given them up, and God forgives! As a forgiveness reminder, take a large bowl of water, and allow students to take turns marking each other on the forehead with a watery sign of the cross. They can take turns saying to each other, “you are forgiven.” This act reminds us of our own baptism (or helps us look forward to it in the case of your younger youth).

2. World Peace:

In the prophet Isaiah we hear a beautiful description of “the lion dwelling with the lamb.” As we celebrate the birth of Christ we can acknowledge that there are many in our world who will not know peace this Christmas season. There are many for whom war and violence are an every day reality. In response to this, we can pray for peace. As a symbol of our prayer for peace in God’s world, we can make a *peace pole*.

A peace pole is basically a piece of wood with four sides, that has the phrase, “may peace prevail on earth,” written on each side. Each side is written in a different language to symbolize different people coming together to pray for peace. Your youth group can make one large peace pole, that can be planted in the ground outside your church. Or, using smaller pieces of wood, each person could make their own peace pole.

Here are a couple of websites that give you directions on how to make a peace pole:

General Information about Peace Poles: <http://www.worldpeace.org>

How- to instructions: <http://www.peacepoleproject.org/pdf/peacepolehowto.pdf>

(These are instructions on how to make a larger pole. On these directions there are plaques referred to that are available for purchase in a variety of different languages with the prayer, “may peace prevail on earth.” You do not have to purchase them, but might find it helpful).

Where to purchase: <http://shoppeace.org/peacepoles.aspx>

(This site has all you need to put together a peace pole if you didn’t want to get the materials from a local store).

Worship:

Gather: Gather the group in a circle, invite everyone to be comfortable and relax. Light a candle in the middle of the circle to represent the presence of Christ. Christ is always with us, but sometimes we light a candle so that we can see the light and be reminded of that presence.

Sing or Listen: Begin by singing a few songs together (suggestions: “I’ve Got Peace Like a River” or “Let There be Peace on Earth”), or listening to a few Christmas songs like, “O Holy Night,” or “Silent Night”, (there are all kinds of artists who have recordings of these but let me recommend Third Day as a modern voice).

Lectio Divina: Ask the students to join you in a lectio divina, or “sacred reading” of the scripture. This way of hearing scripture is different than reading or listening to study,

instead you are listening in the passage for what God is trying to say specifically to you, or to your group as you hear the words of scripture. So read Mark 1:1-8 three times. Invite the students to get comfortable, even close their eyes if they'd like. The first time through, they should just listen to the words. The second time you read it, ask them to listen to a word or phrase that stands out in their minds as you read. After the second reading and a short pause of silence, allow them to share these words and phrases. Then, read the scripture the third time. After allowing some silence, ask the youth what God is trying to communicate to them or to the youth group through these words of scripture. After everyone has shared- simply close with an "Amen".

Closing Prayer:

Ask the youth: "Who do you know who needs to experience God's peace?"

All: **God is with us.**

Leader: God is with us in Jesus, who came into this world and gave his life to lead us to God's peace.

All: **In Jesus, God is with us.**

Leader: We give thanks for the ways God has been with us in our lives through Jesus, so that we could have peace.

All: **In Jesus, God is with us every day.**

Leader: We pray for the people here, for those we know, and for people all around the world, that everyone could experience God's peace in their lives.

All: **In Jesus, God came to save the whole world. Amen.**

Be strong and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord. -Psalm 27:14

“Make Straight the Way of the Lord”
Advent Bible Study for Youth- Week 3: Joy

John 1: 6-8, 19-28

Background:

The Gospel of John is written for two basic purposes. The first purpose is to tell the story of Jesus and his ministry. However there is also a second intent for the writer of this Gospel. The basic intent of this beautifully crafted Gospel is to convince the readers of this book that Jesus is the Messiah the long awaited savior of the world.

As such, when we read the Gospel of John we should always keep in mind what is written near the end of the Gospel. “Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name” (John 20: 30-31).

The opening of the Gospel focuses on who Jesus is and his relationship with the God of Israel, and the purpose of his mission on earth.

John 1: 6-8

The prologue of John, verses 1-51, generally are written to give the reader of clearer idea of who Jesus is and what his ministry is all about.

In verse 6, we see a new person introduced into the story. John has a slightly different function that in the other Gospels. He is never identified as the “Baptist” and he is not identified as the forerunner of Jesus. Instead he has one function in the Gospel: to witness to Jesus (v. 8).

The witness of John is full of promise because it contains the seeds of faith (v. 7). It is also important to understand that John is not seen as a messianic figure but purely a witness.

John 1: 19-28

One of the main purposes of the Gospel of John starts to be played out in this section. The identity of Jesus is being more defined in this passage by John telling his interrogators who he is not.

The interrogation of John is important to the rest of the Gospel and revolves around the question of “Who are you? (v. 19). The issue of John’s identity must be resolved before the central question of Jesus’ identity can be addressed. It is interesting to note that John in verse 20 says, “I am not the Christ” despite the fact he was not asked that question. This response by John is in stark contrast to what Jesus says about himself in the later chapters of John when he makes his famous “I am” statements about who he is.

As the interrogation goes on, John's answers become shorter and more terse. In verse 24 the questioning turns to the subject of baptism. As the Pharisees ask him why he baptizes, John deflects the questioning and uses his answers to point to Jesus and offers some hints as to who he will be.

Bibliography:

The New Interpreters Bible

John: Interpretation Bible Studies, Mark Matson

Discussion Questions:

1. Compare John 1: 1-18 to Genesis 1: 1-23. What themes appear in both accounts? Why do you think the author of John may have wanted to make this comparison?
2. The first part of John tries to identify who John isn't and who Jesus will be. Who is Jesus to you? Do think Jesus may mean different things to you as you grow up?
3. Why do you think it was so important for John to tell people who he wasn't?

Suggestion:

Watch the movie "The Gospel of John" and look at the first part of the movie that relates to this passage. Sometimes it's helpful for kids to watch something in order for them to understand the context.

Activities:

1. One of the most familiar clichés that we hear during the advent season with regards to the idea of joy is that "it is better to give than to receive". All too often we spend a lot of time and money going from store to store to try and live up to this cliché and find just the right gift for just the right person. A suggestion for the youth group would be to take the idea of giving just a bit further this year and combine with the notion of sacrifice that goes beyond the idea of simply spending money.
 - Have each member of the group look around at home and prayerfully select one possession that is very dear to them. It can be anything, but try to avoid picking an item that one is looking to get rid of or never uses. It should be something special that is given.
 - During the next youth group meeting, have everyone bring these items in. Assign a number to each item and then have the members of the group draw numbers. When the item you are "giving" is drawn, tell the person who is receiving the item what that item has meant to you and how it has brought you joy over time. Tell the history of the item and do your best to express the joy you will have in seeing someone else enjoy having it over time.
 - Another possibility would be to contact another youth group from another church and share your gifts with them. It would be a good idea to figure out how many items would need to be joyfully given ahead of time.

Bibliography – Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens

The Face of Joy



2. Look closely at the picture of the person above and meditate for a few minutes.

- Why is she laughing?
- What is it that she has just seen that has made her react?
- What is it that she has heard that has made her react?
- Have you ever experienced the same joy that appears on her face?
- What about your faith brings out this reaction in you?
- Take out a piece of paper and write a paragraph about her. Write it as a letter to a friend where you share the good news that has come to your mutual friend. Try to identify where God is in the story.

Worship:

Worship through Singing

Have your group begin its worship time singing favorite carols such as “Hark the Herald Angels Sing”, “Joy to the World” or “O Come All Ye Faithful”. Try using contemporary arrangements or a new accompaniment to give them a fresh feel.

Opening Prayer

Have a student lead the opening prayer thanking God for all the joy that his Son our Savior, Jesus Christ has brought to all humans. Ask God to challenge them so they may

bring joy to others in their lives. Solicit prayer requests from students to be included in this prayer.

Meditation

Read out loud John 1: 6-8.

The Starlit Darkness

In the scripture you just read the writer of the Gospel of John talks about John who came to testify to the light. In order for the light to be effective and powerful, there must have been some type of darkness. This meditation is designed to think about darkness and also the light of Christ that shines into all of our lives.

Take a few breaths to relax and settle into a rhythm of steady breathing. Ask God to lead your imagination.

When you hear the word darkness what does it conjure up in your mind?
What images do you remember?
What feelings does it awake in you?

Imagine yourself walking down an alley at night that is pitch black and you can't even see your hand in front of your face. As you slowly continue down this path you're not sure what to expect next because something or somebody could be lurking in the shadows. As your heart rate begins to increase your breathing gets shallower, you see a small light ahead. You're not sure what the light is but as you get closer to it, the light begins to draw you closer and you start to feel more relaxed, more confident. With each step you start to feel the warmth of the light, almost like the light is telling you it's going to be ok. As you come to the end of the alley, the light engulfs you completely.

What are you feeling when the light completely surrounds you?
Where is the light in your life?

How do you find that light during the dark times in your life?

Closing Prayer and Songs:

Ask the youth: "Who do you know who needs to experience God's joy?"

All: **God is with us.**

Leader: God is with us in Jesus, who came into this world and gave his life to lead us to God's joy.

All: **In Jesus, God is with us.**

Leader: We give thanks for the ways God has been with us in our lives through Jesus, so that we could have joy.

All: **In Jesus, God is with us every day.**

Leader: We pray for the people here, for those we know, and for people all around the world, that everyone could experience God's joy in their lives.

All: **In Jesus, God came to save the whole world. Amen.**

Be strong and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord. -Psalm 27:14

Closing Song: *Silent Night*

Bibliography:

Worship Services for Youth Groups- Jim Marian
Alternative Worship- Johnny Baker and Doug Gay

“The Least, the Last, and the Loved”
Advent Bible Study Series for Youth- Week 4: Love

Luke 2:1-20 – The Candle of Love

Background:

Luke's gospel consistently focuses on Jesus as coming from and ministering to the poor, downtrodden, and outcasts, and this text is no different. Matthew's genealogy in chapter 1 lists as Jesus ancestors a long lineage of kings, whereas Luke, beginning at 3:23, gives a list of unknowns; Matthew 5:3 has Jesus say "Blessed are the poor in spirit," and Luke 6:20 "Blessed are the poor;" in Matthew 2 the visitors at the manger are wise men with expensive gifts, while in Luke they are lowly shepherds. It is in Luke 4:18-19 that Jesus says the Lord "has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free;" in Luke chapter 15 only do we find the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son.

The passage begins by noting Emperor Augustus' call for a census of "all the world." Augustus was highly respected for his peacefulness and virtue and was even given the title "savior." His mention in the text is partly to contrast his savior status with that of Jesus; while Augustus' progressive social reforms were limited and short-lived, Jesus' salvation and mercy are eternal and create a deeper peace.

While Augustus enjoyed all the benefits of being Caesar, the baby Jesus could not even get a room at the Inn, a foreshadowing of his future rejection by the world. Instead, Mary wraps him in bands of cloth and lays him in a manger. Notice that the passage is very sparse in its description of this scene. Contrary to our common depiction of the nativity, which is a combined portrait from Luke and Matthew, in Luke there are no angels singing overhead (they only appear to the shepherds), and there is no mention of any stable or cave to serve as shelter. It's just Jesus with his parents, wrapped in cloth in a manger.

Jesus is not only born into a very lowly situation, but he also ministers to the lowly. The shepherds serve the purpose of connecting Jesus to the shepherd King David. But in Jesus' time, shepherds were much-disliked figures, for they were considered wandering, untrustworthy vagabonds who let their sheep graze on land that belonged to others. The shepherds were the forerunners to the tax collectors, prostitutes, and other "sinners" Jesus evangelized. These are not the sort of characters you would normally want on your side.

Or are they? For after they are initially afraid of the angels, once they hear the message, the lowly shepherds act as though they have won the lottery and rush to be at Jesus' side. They may have even left their flocks in the fields, as there is no mention of the sheep traveling with them. The shepherds become Jesus' first evangelists, and after visiting Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, they tell anyone who will listen about their good news, jubilantly "glorifying and praising God." The shepherds are just the kind of servants for

which God is looking. They return Jesus' and God's love of the outcasts with great love of their own.

Bibliography:

New Interpreter's Bible, Luke
"Texts for Preaching" Year C
Interpretation Luke

Activity:

Average American (Middle/Junior High/Senior High) School

Have the class create a list of the "groups" that are a part of their school (jocks, nerds, "cool," band geeks, etc.). Allow them to use the terminology that would be understood by most students at their school. Write each of these group names on an index card, and then distribute them to individuals or groups in the class so that each individual or group has at least one group name card.

Let groups talk about their cards and write down 2-3 things that describe that group at their school. These could be "good" or "bad" statements. (Ex: teacher's pet, good at sports, rebels, bullies, etc.) Share these descriptions with the class and write down any added suggestions. Have the class rank the groups in order of popularity. Using these stereotypes and group designations, read and discuss the following scenario. If your group is large, you may have youth discuss in smaller groups and then share their responses with the whole group.

The Scenario

You are all students at Average American (Middle/Junior High/Senior High) School. Your school has just received word that a very special new student will be coming to attend your school. The student's father is an important diplomat from a foreign country and he wants his daughter to have the "true American experience." Your school principal will choose one group from your school to have the special responsibility of welcoming Amana to your school.

Who will your principal choose and why?

Who would you choose and why?

Which group(s) would be the last ones assigned to this important task and why?

Which group or groups would do the best job of welcoming Amana to your school?

Read scripture: Luke 2:1-20

Discussion Questions:

Have the youth look at some of the texts described in the background. What kind of savior is Jesus, according to Luke? How does that differ from Matthew?

Tell the youth about the background concerning the shepherds. Why did God choose the shepherds to be Jesus' first evangelists? Would you have chosen them? Why or why not?

What group or groups at your school do you think God/Jesus would choose to welcome Amana? Why? (Help the youth to make the connection between the shepherds and the comparable "unlikely" groups at their school, such as the bullies, the goths, the geeks, etc.)

Do you have difficulty relating to some of the groups or individuals at your school? Who and why? As a Christian and follower of Jesus, with whom do you feel called to build a better connection, and how might you do that?

And if you have extra time:

Tell the youth about the background concerning Augustus. Who is called a savior or hero in the world today? Who has been a savior or hero to you? (Could include political leaders, pastors, teachers, firefighters, the police, the military, doctors, athletes, actors, musicians, family and friends). How are the saviors/heroes of our world similar to and different from Jesus – in terms of privileged background; personal character and ethics; relationship with God; people with whom they associate; ways they try to make the world a better place; and their potential to save the world?

Worship:

Gather: Gather the group in a circle, invite everyone to be comfortable and relax. Light a candle in the middle of the circle to represent the presence of Christ. Christ is always with us, but sometimes we light a candle so that we can see the light and be reminded of that presence.

Sing or Listen: Begin by singing a few songs together (suggestions: "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing" or "Go Tell it On the Mountain"), or listening to a few Christmas songs like, "Jesus, Light of the World," by Third Day or "What Child is This" by Sarah McLachlan or any of the other many artists who've recorded this song.

Lectio Divina: Ask the students to join you in a lectio divina, or "sacred reading" of the scripture. This way of hearing scripture is different than reading or listening to study, instead you are listening in the passage for what God is trying to say specifically to you, or to your group as you hear the words of scripture. So read Luke 2:1-20 three times. Invite the students to get comfortable, even close their eyes if they'd like. The first time through, they should just listen to the words. The second time you read it, ask them to listen to a word or phrase that stands out in their minds as you read. After the second reading and a short pause of silence, allow them to share these words and phrases.

Then, read the scripture the third time. After allowing some silence, ask the youth what God is trying to communicate to them or to the youth group through these words of scripture. After everyone has shared- simply close with an “Amen.”

Closing Prayer:

Ask the youth: “Who do you know who needs to experience God’s love?”

All: **God is with us.**

Leader: God is with us in Jesus, who came into this world and gave his life to lead us to God’s love.

All: **In Jesus, God is with us.**

Leader: We give thanks for the ways God has been with us in our lives through Jesus, so that we could have love.

All: **In Jesus, God is with us every day.**

Leader: We pray for the people here, for those we know, and for people all around the world, that everyone could experience God’s love in their lives.

All: **In Jesus, God came to save the whole world. Amen.**

Be strong and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord. -Psalm 27:14