

DISCUSSION GUIDE

WHAT  Christmas MEANS TO ME



ADVENT

2021

SERIES OVERVIEW

Christmas is supposed to be "the most wonderful time of the year", but if we're honest, sometimes Christmas feels a bit stale. And what do mutant reindeer or murdered trees have to do with the birth of Jesus anyway? Could some of the classic American Christmas traditions inadvertently make it harder to see Christ at the center of it all?

This year we want to help you see Christmas, and Christ, in new ways by learning from other cultures that have developed their own ways of celebrating Christmas. Each Sunday in Advent one of our Revelation 7 faculty will invite us to see Christmas through their eyes. As they share more of the mystery and beauty of Jesus' birth with us, we will experience how Christmas truly is good tidings of great joy for ALL people!

TEXT & Preacher

Week 1 Pastor Richard Lee, Phil 2:5-8

Week 2 Pastor Kristian Hernandez, Matt 2:1-18

Week 3 Pastor Dani Kilgore, Luke 2:15-20

Week 4 Pastor Michelle Sanchez, Matt 2:13-18

Week 5 Pastor Dave Swaim, Christmas Eve

Dec. 26, Pastor Walt Quick

Week 6 Congregational Pastors, Psalm 126

Appendix

4 weeks of advent reflections

Advent Reading: Staff Recommendations

HOW

This guide offers a progression of sections to help you reflect first on what you bring to this discussion, the topic, and group dynamics. The Prep Work questions prime you to engage with the series through custom questions for each series. The Conversation Covenant establishes a framework and posture for small group discussion.

Engaging with Difficult topics

Our lives and backgrounds vary widely from person to person. These topics can all be vulnerable, some maybe more than others for you. If the perspective in the sermon or book doesn't resonate with you or reflect your experience or views, what did you learn from hearing their story and bearing witness to their experience?

As you read the chapters or listen to the sermon for that week consider what you might learn about the person/ author who is sharing. If you don't find yourself aligning with their ideas, can you hold a posture of curiosity for the author/ speaker? Can you listen or read while holding onto the image of God in that person?

Please pay attention to how you respond in your heart, mind, and body as you read and listen during this series. Allow those to inform you about where your boundaries are and what discussions are useful. If you would like to talk with any of our pastors or are looking for support after these conversations, please reach out to smallgroups@highrock.org and they will help connect you to a pastor.

PREP WORK

Before you begin this series, take 10-15 minutes to complete this short self-check in.

1. What do you hope to get out of this series?
2. What are some of your favorite Christmas traditions? What is meaningful about it?
3. What traditions have you let go of and why?
4. How is your faith drawn into the celebration of Christmas?
5. Advent invites reflection on the reality of the light in the darkness. The holidays can be a difficult season, are there difficult things you would like to name?
6. Where do you long to experience the Light of Christ (Love, Joy, Peace, Hope) in this season?

CONVERSATION COVENANT

I pledge:

To act in good faith, with curiosity. I will assume the best about my conversation partners when entering into our groups. I will give the benefit of the doubt recognizing that they may know something I don't.

To show respect. I will show respect. I will be polite and give due regard for the feelings and traditions of others. I understand that I do not have to agree with someone to show them respect.

To speak the truth. I won't use rhetorical tricks to try to win an argument. I will speak what I genuinely believe is the nuanced truth.

To aim to discover the truth. I will not enter into a conversation with the purpose of changing the mind of anyone to my way of thinking.

To focus on what we can change. I will focus on what we can do differently in the future since we cannot change what we did in the past.

To take responsibility for the conversation. I will take responsibility for the quality of the conversation and the abidance of the rules both in principle and in spirit.

To follow the covenant even when others fail to do so. I will abide by the rules regardless of whether another person breaks them.

To lighten-up and approach the conversation in good humor. I recognize that humor is a hallmark of a constructive, generative conversation and take the conversation in good humor.

Facilitator Notes

- A. Before each gathering star 2-3 questions you want to be sure your group addresses incase you run short on time.
- B. Be mindful of the "room" and creating a posture for folks to show up as they are in accordance with the Conversation Covenant.
- C. The topics covered will not be neutral territory for folks. The work of moving beyond an US vs. THEM mindset can be a life-long journey.
- D. Because bi-nary thinking can often come out of a place of there being hurt or need of self-preservation or "rightness" always encourage a posture of curiosity when strong feelings and perspectives arise. There is usually more going on under the surface and it is up to the participant to lead the way in self-disclosure as well as personal transformation.
- E. It is not the work of this group or the facilitator to *make* anyone change their minds. But rather through following the Conversation covenant, show up honestly and authentically to work through the material as a community on the journey together.
- F. If discussion of topics becomes too Big Picture, remind people to move back toward "I statements".
- G. You always have support and resources available: smallgroups@highrock.org

SERMON NOTES

DATE _____

SCRIPTURE READING _____

PREACHER _____

TOPIC:

INITIAL REACTIONS TO THE TOPIC

CURIOSITIES/QUESTIONS/INTERESTING POINTS

DOES THIS WEEKS SERMON SHIFT/EXPAND YOUR PICTURE OF GOD OR OTHERS?
HOW SO?

NOTE ANY INVITATIONS YOU SENSE FROM GOD

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Advent Reflections

Adapted from Highrock Family Advent Experiences
Created by the NextGen Team

Week 1, Pastor Richard Lee, Food and Singing

Read: Luke 1:46-55

Singing and food are two of the most common features in Advent and Christmas traditions around the world. People from many countries sing Christmas carols at church, in their homes and all around their neighborhoods. Regarding food, in verse 53 Mary rejoices in how God has filled the hungry. Jesus later talks about being the bread of life (John 6:35) who doesn't just give physical food, but spiritual food that meets our desire to be known, forgiven and loved. Preparing and enjoying physical food throughout the Christmas season can be a reminder of the spiritual food we also hunger for that God has provided by sending his Son! Fasting (from food or something else) during advent and then feasting on Christmas is a common tradition that helps Christians around the world celebrate Jesus coming to us as the bread of life.

- What are your favorite Christmas Carols and Christmas Foods?
- What are some ways we can use music and food to draw closer to God and to Each other
- Throughout Advent and Christmas, are there ways we could bless others at some point during this season with music or food to remind them of God's goodness and love?

Pray: "Jesus, we praise You for coming to earth. As we start this season of Advent we want to remember how hungry we are for Your forgiveness, healing, and love. We need You and ask for guidance in how we can come closer to You through all our regular traditions and maybe some new ones that connect us to You and each other more. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen."

Week 2, Kristian Hernandez, Gifts

Read: Matthew 2:1-12

In Spain and Latin America, this passage has its own special holy day (the word holiday comes from holy days which used to only refer to days set apart for focusing on God as a community in some way). This holy day is called Three Kings Day (Dia De Reyes). Three Kings Day happens on January 6th, 12 days after Christmas, to celebrate the wisemen coming to honor Jesus with gold - a gift for a king,

frankincense - a divine gift used by priests, and myrrh - a perfume for burial, pointing to Jesus' sacrifice. Children in these countries often write their gift wish lists to the Three Kings. Then on January 5th they put out shoes, kind of like stockings, for the wisemen to bring them gifts. Children will also put hay, grass or salt in their shoes to feed the wisemen's camels, similar to the milk and cookies put out by children in the U.S. as you prepare to give and receive gifts on Christmas, this bible story and holy day can be a helpful guide. What can the Three Kings teach us about gifts? The Three Kings (also called the Wisemen) traveled from far away to see Jesus and give their treasures away to honor him. Jesus was the gift they were searching for and people celebrate the Three Kings to remember the gifts they gave, not the ones they received. The wisemen didn't seem to give out of guilt, though. Their gifts came out of joy at finding the future King. As you think about your giving and receiving practices this year, ask God to show you where He's inviting you to experience Christ-centered joy as well.

- What do you like about our gift-giving traditions?
- When you think about giving a gift that could honor Jesus, who or what comes to mind?
- Are there any ways you'd like to focus more on receiving Jesus as a gift and/or giving away your "treasures" in honor of Him?

Pray: "Jesus, You are truly the greatest gift we could ever ask for. Thank You for the chance to give and receive gifts in Your honor during Christmas. Help us to create gift-giving traditions that focus us on You and loving others the way You love us. In Jesus' Name. Amen!"

Week 3, Pastor Dani Kilgore, Stories

Read: Lude 2:8-20

In England during the 1800's they had a tradition of telling ghost stories during Christmas. The most famous is A Christmas Carol which is a story about a man named Ebenezer Scrooge who went from being a greedy, selfish miser to becoming a generous, loving friend to the poor. His life was changed by being visited one night by three ghosts who showed him how horribly his life and others were being affected by his mean ways. A Christmas Carol is a made-up story, but it does have some similarities to the true story of the shepherds being visited during the night by angels. They were terrified, thinking they might be seeing a ghost! The angels assured them they had nothing to fear and then told them how to find a baby who would change their lives and others forever. Sure enough, that's what happened when they found Jesus in the manger and went on to tell many others the great story of his birth. Story-

telling is a tradition and practice that people of all ages, cultures and time periods have enjoyed. Telling our stories of faith, struggle, joy and healing can connect us to God and one another in powerful ways. Good stories help remind us of who God is, how we are loved by Him, and how we can love one another the way Jesus came to love us. As you watch movies, read books and share stories together this Christmas, look for good ones that help you say with the shepherds, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom His favor rests." And then be like Mary who pondered these amazing stories in her heart!

- What are some of your favorite Christmas movies or books?
- Are there any good Christmas movies or books that really help you understand more about God, yourself or loving others? How do they do that? And when might you watch or read those stories this Christmas?

Pray: "Lord, thank you for stories that remind us of who You are, how we are loved by You and how we can love others. Help us to tell these stories of your goodness, faithfulness and healing to remind us and others of the hope we have through your Son, Jesus."

Week 4, Pastor Michelle Sanchez, Light

Read: Matthew 2:13-18

Did you know that there are still countries today where Christmas celebrations must be done in secret? North Korea, Afghanistan, Somalia, Libya, and Pakistan are the top 5 hardest countries to follow Jesus today (and there are many others as well - look up "the 10/40 window.") Christians there can be sent to prison or killed for being a Christian or even having a Bible. We can pray for Christians in these countries to keep having courage and faith to shine Jesus' light in the darkness. In the Philippines, they have a special tradition that focuses on the need we all have for light in the darkness, both literally and spiritually. Beginning each year on December 16th, Filipino Christians attend church services for 9 days, to represent the 9 months that Jesus was in Mary's womb. These services take place between 3am and 5am so lights are needed to light the path to church in the darkness. Parols (derived from the Spanish word for "lanterns") are hung outside homes in the shape of a star to light people's way to church, just like the Star of Bethlehem lit the way for the wisemen. In some places people also hang parols outside their homes as a sign that their hearts are ready and awake (since it's early in the morning) to receive Jesus. The priest, or sometimes people dressed up like Mary and Joseph, then know to come knock on their door and invite them to join the procession to church. People hang their parols on bamboo sticks to guide their way, just like the Star of Bethlehem first led people to

Jesus. Christmas lights are common ways to celebrate in the U.S. as well. We enjoy many amazing light displays on homes, in shows and in churches. As you see beautiful Christmas lights this year, consider how Jesus is the Light of the World (John 8:12) and the ways we need Him to shine in the darkness that's in our lives and around the world.

- What are your favorite kinds of Christmas lights and where do you want to go to see some this year?
- How do you feel about Christmas being dangerous to celebrate in many parts of the world still today?
- Are you "awake" and ready to receive and shine Jesus' light? What could help you? Where might you want to shine Jesus' light?

Pray: "Jesus. Light of the World. Help our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world who can't celebrate Christmas freely. Give them courage and wisdom to know how best to shine Your light in those dark places. And we invite You to shine in the dark places in our lives too. Help us to be awake and ready to follow You wherever You want us to go, too. Amen."

Advent Reflection Resources

[Biola University Advent Series](#)

[Sarah Cowan Johnson Family Advent Devotional](#)

[Reclaiming my Theology's Advent booklet](#)

[Preparing for Christmas, Richard Rhor](#)

[Prayer of Examen for Advent, Ignatian Spirituality](#)

[PaxCenter Advent Emails \(sign-up\)](#)

[PaxCenter Day Apart Retreat](#)