

The Women of Christmas

Outline for a Three-Session Reading Group

WEEK ONE: Introductions and Beginnings

1. Introductions— Use fun icebreakers that help participants get to know each other, ask participants to share what their expectations from the group are, and share about yourself/leader. Provide information about the plan - to read the book individually, but come together to share learning and encouragement in staying focused on Christ during Advent. Pray. (20 minutes)
2. Reading—Have a pre-selected and prepared reader proclaim Luke 1:1-18 (3 minutes). Explain that this is the text about which the author reflects in the first chapter and that we'll listen to that chapter being read by a pre-selected and dynamic reader (possibly the leader) to give us a taste of what we'll be doing at home. Encourage participants to jot down thoughts that occur to them as they listen. Read chapter 1, possibly with cuts (12-15 minutes). (20 minutes)
3. Discussion—In some groups, asking “What were some of the things that stuck out to you ?” will be enough to get good conversation going. Some groups will need discussion-starting questions; suggestions are on the next page. Bring the conversation back to “what can you / we take away from this text?” Encourage considering a collective response as well as an individual one. Give out the Reading Plan: Chapters 2-5 for next week, 6-8 for the final week.
4. Prayer— Spend at least 10 minutes in prayer. Use guided prayer, if helpful. (10 minutes)

WEEK TWO: Chapters Two through Five

1. Greetings — Open with prayer and sharing about the past week. (up to 10 minutes)
2. Reading—Have a pre-selected and prepared reader proclaim Luke 1:19-79 (5 minutes)
3. Reflection—Encourage quiet reflection (5 minutes)
4. Discussion. - Ask, “What were some of the things that stuck out to you as you read chapter 2?” and progress through chapter-by-chapter, using discussion questions, if they are helpful. Encourage application. (40 minutes)
5. Prayer—Provide time for prayer, perhaps in small groups of three. (10 minutes).

WEEK THREE: Conclusion

1. Greetings — Open with prayer and sharing about the past week. (up to 10 minutes)
 2. Reading—Have a pre-selected and prepared reader proclaim Luke 2:1-40 (5 minutes)
 3. Reflection—Encourage quiet reflection (5 minutes)
 4. Discussion. - Ask, “What were some of the things that stuck out to you as you read chapter 6?” and progress through chapter-by-chapter, using discussion questions if they are helpful. Encourage application. (35 minutes)
 5. Process & Prayer—Ask participants to share what they've learned or how they've changed this Advent, as well as how they experienced participating in this group. Pray as a whole group. Conclude with a song. (15 minutes).
- * Fellowship—Determine if the best time for fellowship is before or after the material. In many cases, it will be afterward, so that it doesn't feel like a “late start”. For the first session, “steal” from this time for the introductions section. Time to fellowship informally helps build relationships!
 - * In November - Invite people to join, make personal invitations and announcements. Provide opportunities to make book payments.

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Discussion Questions

Chapter 1: What struck you in the Luke passage? In chapter 1 of the book? Did you learn anything new from the reflection, if so what? The angel told Zechariah, “Do not be afraid”. What strikes fear in your heart? Despite the disappointment of having no children, which also had implications for their old age and social standing, Zechariah and Elizabeth were faithful to God. Reflect on trials you have been through.

Chapter 2: If you were silent for a day, what could you learn? What do you think and feel when you consider Elizabeth staying at home for the first five months of the pregnancy?

Chapter 3: If you think of Mary as a very young and innocent, perhaps naïve, girl and listen to the text of her interaction with Gabriel, how does it sound different? What were the risks Mary faced upon consent to God’s plan? What assurances and promises does she hear? Do any of them stand out for you as promises that you need to claim for yourself? If you felt God’s favor upon you, what would you be brave enough to do?

Chapter 4: When you think about the practicalities of Mary’s travel to Elizabeth, what insights or feelings do you experience? Do you have a spiritual friend? Do you have a friend who is older—or younger, who builds up your faith? What could you do to cultivate an intergenerational friendship? How does looking at Mary and Elizabeth’s encounter as a Holy Spirit moment illuminate the meaning of it for you?

Chapter 5: Picturing yourself as a neighbor of Zechariah and Elizabeth, what do you think you would have said in your own home after John was born? Considering the fuss around his naming, what do you think the gospel author Luke is trying to tell us? What are some of the important themes for you and your community in Zechariah’s speech? Share some God-praise! What makes Joseph’s obedience remarkable and inspiring?

Chapter 6: The gospel of Luke is the only one that addresses the travel of Joseph and Mary for a census, about which scholars have some debate. Higgs emphasizes the spiritual importance of Jesus’ birthplace and birth conditions. What impacts your heart the most when you think about the travel, lodging and birth? Placing yourself in the role of a shepherd, what are some of the feelings and thoughts you might have had the night of Jesus’ birth? What about the morning after? What comes to mind when you think about the sight and sound of an angelic host?

Chapter 7: For Mary and Joseph, there is a mix of good and bad news in both the Magis’ visit (Matthew) and Simeon’s blessings. What do you think they were feeling at those times? If you are parent, how have you seen the Holy Spirit in times of grief and joy that have to do with your children?

Chapter 8: Anna was a vulnerable person—a widow, and possibly childless, **and** a devoted worshiper. What impressions and inspiration do you take from Anna? Have you had a lonely period that became blessed as an “aloneness with God” time? Have you and your faith community ever pursued a 24/7 prayer commitment? Has fasting been a part of your faith journey? If so, how has it enhanced your spiritual life?

Conclusion: Do any of the three women resonate with you more? What makes her special to you? Are there any women who have helped you welcome Jesus into your life? What can you share about that? Even if you don’t normally send Christmas cards, perhaps you can think of a woman or two to thank or encourage with a specific and heartfelt note. What have you learned this Advent? What would you like to take from this season with you into the next?