

Book Study Guide for *The Season of the Nativity: Confessions and Practices of an Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany Extremist* by Sybil MacBeth

This study guide invites adults to explore the *Season of the Nativity* in a group setting. Through the exchange of ideas and mutual encouragement, study of this book can enhance Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany for both individuals and families. The four one-hour sessions suggested by this guide will focus mostly on Advent but will segue into Christmas and Epiphany in the last session. The first of the sessions could begin the week prior to the first Sunday of Advent.

Since the book of *Season of the Nativity* mixes playfulness and prayerfulness in its chapters, the sessions will attempt to create the same spirit and atmosphere in its exercises and activities. Some of the activities in the sessions will give participants a chance to try out some of the ideas in the book.

These sessions will work best if a leader or convener has a copy of the book and prepares ahead of time. Preparation is important, though not time-consuming. The leadership could change from week to week. The class works best if each participant has a book and brings it to the session.

At the end of each session, there are suggested activities for the week. These suggested activities could be printed out for people. The ones with a “C” next to them are both child and adult-friendly.

These guidelines are just suggestions. Feel free to include parts of the book not mentioned in these sessions. Invent creative ways to present *The Season of the Nativity*. Use whichever Scripture verses you like; write your own prayers. Learn, study, pray, worship, play, and celebrate this glorious season of the liturgical year!

Week One—Preparing for Advent

Supplies--tables and chairs, an easel and markers for leader, pen and paper for participants, *The Season of the Nativity* books for each person.

Scripture Reading: “For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you.”
(Isaiah 60: 2)

Prayer: Holy God, in the darkness of Advent, you grow the seeds of our longing and our desire for you. Help us to feel your presence moving within us and waiting to be born anew.

1) Start with a song. The leader or convener learns the “Advent Chant” on page 90 and teaches it to the group line by line. When the groups know the individual lines, sing the whole chant several times until it is comfortable. Divide the group in half and sing the song as a round as suggested on the sheet music. OR use a different verse from “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” on page 89 each week.

2) As a way to warm up and loosen up the group, reflect on previous holiday experiences in the following way: On a piece of paper ask each person to list 25 things they remember from last Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany. Don’t edit; just brainstorm any thing that comes to mind—silly or serious, happy or sad.... Give people about 5 minutes to do this. Tell them they have 5 minutes. (It doesn’t matter whether they actually have a list of 25 things at the end.)

Examples:

The tree dropped all of its needles by December 20.

Everyone in our house drew an Advent calendar.

I received 3 bags of gummy worms.

We only lit the Advent wreath once.

Charley got drunk at Christmas dinner.

The carols at Midnight Mass were beautiful.

Mom made her delicious poppy seed cake and Polish sausage.

None of the clothes I received as gifts fit me.

It was 41 degrees and rainy on New Year’s Day.

At the Christmas pageant, the baby who played Jesus cried the whole time.

We had an artificial silver tree.

We went to see the Nutcracker Ballet.

Our dog died three days before Christmas....

After the writing, get into groups of 3-8 in a circle. Go around the circle saying one thing from your list using a format called “I could tell you about _____, but I won’t.”ⁱ Fill in the blank with one of the things from your list. For example: “I could tell you about the poppy seed cake and Polish sausage my mother made for Christmas—but I won’t.” Do this at least 3 or 4 times around the circle.

After this exercise, convene everyone together and ask them what they “noticed”ⁱⁱ during the writing and the sharing.

3) Read out loud Chapter 8: “Advent: The Season of Hope” on pages 49-53. Have several different people read a few paragraphs each. Ask what were the words or phrases that jumped out at you? Write them on an easel or whiteboard. Break into small groups again. Have each group chose a word to discuss for 5 or 6 minutes. Tell them in advance about the time frame. After the 5 minutes are up, give the groups another 1-2 minutes to write a three-sentence summary of their thoughts. Each group will read their summary aloud to the whole group.

4) Talk about the importance of the Nativity season as three parts—Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany. (see pages 6-7) In the liturgy the “mystery of the faith”

was proclaimed as “Christ has died; Christ has risen; Christ will come again.” The mystery of the Nativity season is the Incarnation—God coming to dwell among us. This could be proclaimed as “Christ is imagined (Advent); Christ is born (Christmas); Christ will spread like wildfire.”

5) Suggest some activities from the book for people to do at home for the upcoming week. Some Advent activities are time-sensitive and are best started the first Sunday of Advent.

- Read Isaiah 40:1–11, 42:1–9, 61:1–3, 63:16–64:9a. Write three things that intrigue you or trouble you from these passages. Bring them to the class next week.
- Hang purple in the house.
- Advent Calendars—pages 61-66 Bring to class next week. **C**
- Advent Wreaths—pages 67-71 **C**
- Advent/Christmas Tree—pages 72-76 **C**
- Plant Bulbs—pages 77-80 **C**
- Progressive Crèche—pages 80-81 **C**
- Read all of Chapter 10 if time permits. Participants might want to incorporate some activities at home that are not mentioned in the sessions.

6) Hand out 8 ½ x 11 templates for an Advent calendar from Sybil’s blog post entitled “Advent Calendars 2014” www.prayingincolor.com/blog or tell them about the link.

7) Close with a prayer or sing the song you used at the opening again or read the 4-line Madeleine L’Engle poem on page 43.

Week Two--Advent

Supplies –tables and chairs, an easel and markers for leader, pen and paper for participants, **thin colored markers (Crayola Supertips) or colored pencils for participants**, *The Season of the Nativity* books for each person.

Scripture: “Stir up your might, and come to save us! Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.” (Psalm 80:2a–3)

Prayer: Saving God, in the midst of the excitement and glitter of this holiday season, ground us. Give us peace in our hearts and sanity in our lives that we may know you as the source and restorer of our true joy.

1) Start with the “Advent Chant” or the second verse of “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.”

2) Have several minutes of reporting back about last week’s activities at home. What worked? What was difficult? Share Advent calendars, if appropriate. 5 minutes

3) Choose part of the reading for last week to read aloud. Isaiah 40:1–11, 42:1–9, 61:1–3, 63:16–64:9a. Have people tell about the three things that intrigued or troubled them.

4) At tables provide a big piece of paper—this could be a piece of easel-sized or white butcher paper to cover the table. Ask people at the table to cover the paper with all of the words they associate with Advent. Each person writes words anywhere on the paper. This is a brainstorming exercise. Tell them not to edit their thoughts; just write. Give them 3 minutes. Hang the sheets on the wall and give people a couple of minutes to see what others wrote.

5) Back at their tables ask them to choose one word from the pages of word they've seen. Then do the exercise on page 86-88 of the book called "Pray an Advent Word." The leader can walk participants through each step using a timer. Describe the first step, then give people 3-5 minutes to do the step. Ring a bell or set a timer. Then move to the next step. This can take about 15-20 minutes. At the end ask people to share at the table about what they learned or heard about the word. This is an activity they can do at home with teens or adults.

6) Talk about things you can do for others during Advent as individuals or families. Look at pages 82-83 together. Ask the group what other kinds of things they would suggest.

7) Suggest activities for the coming week at home.

- Read Luke 1: 5-80 alone or with family members. With young children read it over several days. **C**
- Create some quiet time this week. Read pages 98-101. **C**
- Come up with your own Advent breath prayer, page 98. **C**
- Do something kind for someone this week without them knowing about it. Invite the others in your household to do the same. **C**
- Pray another Advent word or pray a word you choose from the Luke 1 reading.
- Continue using your Advent calendar, wreath, progressive crèche or other ongoing practices. **C**

Week Three--Advent

Supplies –tables and chairs, an easel and markers for leader, pen and paper for participants, thin colored markers (Crayola Supertips) or colored pencils for participants, *The Season of the Nativity* books for each person.

Scripture: "This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" (Matthew 3:3)

Prayer: God in the wilderness and in the darkness, we thank you for the prophets

and teachers who guide us on our journey to you. Clear our paths and open our eyes to see you in every step of our lives.

1) Start with the “Advent Chant” or the third verse of “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.”

2) Have several minutes of reporting back about last week’s activities at home. What worked? What was difficult? Share Advent calendars, if appropriate. 5 minutes

3) Read Luke 1:5-80 aloud. Divide the room in half and let the two sides take turns reading two or three verses responsively.

3) The Luke 1 reading mentions the famous characters of Advent—The Angel, Zechariah, Elizabeth, and Mary. Teach the Zechariah or Mary movement piece from pages 94-97. If the leader is not comfortable doing this, he/she can appoint someone else to prepare for this ahead of time. Do the piece at least two times.

4) After the movement piece on Zechariah or Mary, have people sit at a table and write a “tweet” about the person. A “tweet” is a piece of writing that is 140 characters or less counting the punctuation and spaces. (Page 92) This is a way to summarize what they heard about Zechariah or Mary. Ask for volunteers who are willing to read their “tweets” to the whole group.

5) Suggest activities for the coming week at home:

- Teach the members of your household the movement piece you learned. Try the other one at home also. **C**
- Read Matthew 1 **C**
- Try some of the assorted activities on pages 103-109: eat dinner by candlelight, look at the stars, hang a map of the Holy Land and trace the journey of Joseph and Mary.... **C**
- Read the Christmas and Epiphany sections of the book on pages 111-146.
- Continue using your Advent calendar, wreath, progressive crèche or other ongoing practices.

7) Close the session with the whole group saying the *Magnificat* together. It is written in the book on page 93 or can be found In Luke 1: 46-55. It could also be printed out ahead of time for each person. Make sure everyone has the same version.

Week Four—Preparing for Christmas and Epiphany

Supplies –tables and chairs, an easel and markers for leader, pen and paper for participants, thin colored markers (Crayola Supertips) or colored pencils for participants, *The Season of the Nativity* books for each person.

Scripture: “To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” (Luke 2:11-12)

Prayer: God of Love, as the dark days of Advent draw to a close we prepare to receive the gift of light you bring to us in Jesus. Open our arms to receive the newborn child; open our hearts to receive the transforming power of the Christ.

- 1) Start with the “Advent Chant” or the fourth verse of “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” OR Sing a Christmas carol.
- 2) Have several minutes of reporting back about last week’s activities at home. What worked? What was difficult? Share Advent calendars, if appropriate. 5 minutes
- 3) Get into groups of 3-8 in a circle. Go around the circle using the form from Week One called “I could tell you about_____, but I won’t.” This time, however, the topic of the circle is “things I love about the way we celebrate Christmas Day.” Go around the circle several times. When each person has had at least three (or whatever number the leader chooses) turns, go around the circle again with the topic as “things I wish would disappear from our Christmas celebration.”
- 4) At tables provide a big piece of paper—this could be a piece of easel-sized or white butcher paper to cover the table. Have each person draw a large Christmas tree about 8 inches tall. Around, on, or below the tree, draw rectangles/rectangular boxes about 2 in. by 3 in. representing gifts. Ask them to write the name of a person in the each box, a person to whom they will give a Christmas gift. Then ask them to write a spiritual gift they would like each person to have—serenity, peace, joy, sobriety, hope, freedom.... Using their pens and colored markers ask them to draw or doodle around the name and in the box, keeping the intention of the prayer in mind. If words come, pray them. If not, continue to draw. Add color with markers or colored pencils. Think of each stroke as a wordless prayer, as a time you spend with God and the person. (pages 65 and 144—This is the practice called Praying in Color.)
- 5) As a whole group, ask the question: How can you remind yourself, neighbors or friends that you are still celebrating Epiphany after January 6? Brainstorm together.
- 6) Suggest activities for the coming weeks of Christmas and Epiphany at home:
 - Read the Christmas story aloud during the week before Christmas Matthew 2 or Luke 2. Have people in your family share the reading.
 - Work on ways to “disappear” the things from your Christmas celebration that you do not like.
 - Continue using your Advent calendar, wreath, progressive crèche or other ongoing practices until Christmas.
 - Hang your Advent calendars so everyone can see them.

- Mark family or personal celebratory activities on the calendar for each of the Twelve Days of Christmas (page 125)
- Decide which of the Christmas and Epiphany activities you will use this year. Don't try to guzzle them all at once; choose ones that will make your holiday time feel joyful and playful not chaotic. (pages 111-146)
- Commit to leaving up the tree, Christmas decorations, and lights until at least January 6.
- During Epiphany tape a big piece of butcher paper on a bare wall, draw stars using a cookie cutter, and ask people in your house to pray for others using the star template—doodle and color. Keep the cookie cutter nearby and add more stars as needed.

7) Close the session with a prayer or a Christmas carol or four verses of “O Come, O Come Emmanuel.”

ⁱ The exercise “I could tell you about__but I won’t” is from Interplay, a practice of community building and body awareness through play. Learn more about Interplay: <http://www.interplay.org/>.

ⁱⁱ Interplay