

Simple Sundays

**What is
Advent?**



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Main Idea

God shows Mary that nothing is impossible. It is true for us as well—with God, nothing is impossible in our lives.

Faith Statement

We trust in Jesus Christ, fully human, fully God.
—A Brief Statement of Faith

You Will Need

Art supplies, Bibles, pencils

Background

Advent means “coming.” In Christian terms, God is always coming—to create, to free, to redeem, to save. In the story for this session, God comes to a girl named Mary, who is told that she will have a child who will be given the throne of David and will even be called the “Son of the Most High.”

The birth announcement to Mary fits the pattern of other birth announcements in the Old Testament. Gabriel greeted Mary by name, told her not to be afraid, and assured her of God’s favor. He announced the child who was to come and called him by name (“Jesus,” the Greek form of the old Semitic name, “Joshua,” which means “the Lord is Salvation”). He told what role the child would play in the world and gave Mary a sign to authenticate his words: Elizabeth, who was long past the age of child-bearing, was now in the sixth month of her pregnancy.

Mary was not yet married, but she was betrothed (or engaged). The marriage had been arranged by her father, but she was still living in her father’s house during the one-year period between the agreement/engagement and the actual marriage. Legally, the marriage was sealed, even though there had been no ceremony and she was not yet living in Joseph’s house. If Joseph had died before the ceremony, Mary would have been considered a widow. So, all the laws of adultery applied to her situation. Socially and legally, this announcement would create a problem.

Mary took Gabriel at his word. Like Hannah, the mother of the Old Testament prophet Samuel, she said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord” (compare Luke 1:38 with 1 Samuel 1:18). God had called Mary and she accepted the blessing, even though it was risky business for her.

The birth of Jesus is called “incarnation” in Christian theological language. The word comes from a Latin phrase meaning “in the flesh.” It reminds us that God came into this world in the flesh, as a human being. The baby born to Mary was the Son of God. He brought light and life and salvation into a sinful, sorrowing world. The reality of the Incarnation is that in Jesus of Nazareth, God became human for the salvation of the world.

You and Your Youth

Even in today’s world, many teens remain blissfully ignorant about reproduction. So, don’t assume too much. Even youth who understand the biology of conception probably have no clue about the mystery and wonder of human love. Human participation is vitally important, but the birth of a child is still a gift from God. Be prepared to respond to the mixture of knowing and not knowing that learners will bring to the session. Be content to leave space for the mystery, even as you consider Mary’s humanness.

Some youth may respond to the story (at least inwardly, if not openly) by saying, “Yeah, right!” Be aware of the possibility of skepticism. Don’t chastise anyone who raises this issue, but invite the learners to explore the story with open minds and discover meaning for themselves.

Think ahead of what you believe about the virgin birth, what your church teaches, and how you will talk to the group about the fact that some Christians honestly disagree about this issue.

 **Enter**

Learn names, encourage interaction, and laugh together as the session begins.

Advent and Christmas Traditions*Art supplies*

As you arrive, make a representation of a place that has meaning for you at Advent and Christmas (the church sanctuary, home dining room table, grandmother's house, etc.). Talk freely with one another. Just being together is an important aspect of this activity. Share your creations and stories, one at a time, as a prelude to the Opening Prayer.

Opening Prayer

Holy God, your Word took flesh among us when Mary entrusted her life to you. Strengthen us by the example of her humility and courage, that we may always be ready to do your will and welcome Christ into our lives, who lives and reigns forever and ever. Amen.

 **Explore****Study the Bible***Bibles*

Invite youth to listen as a volunteer reads Luke 1:26–38. After they hear the story, ask:

- What did the angel promise Mary?
- Who was the child who would be born to her?
- The angel said that nothing is impossible for God. What do you think about that statement?
- What questions do you have about this story?

Ask youth to work in teams of three or four.

One team should make a list of all the promises that Gabriel made. Include the "greeting" in verse 28 among the promises.

A second group should make a list of all the questions and reactions that Mary had ("much perplexed" would be included with questions/reactions).

If you have more than two teams, assign promises and questions to more than one team.

When the groups have finished, ask for reports. List the responses on a large sheet of paper. Then ask:

- Do the promises and the questions match up? That is, does Gabriel deal with Mary's questions? How do his promises raise more questions?

- If you add up all the promises, what does Gabriel say (in one sentence)?
- How does Mary's final word (verses 38) reflect the whole conversation?

Mary, an Ideal Disciple

Tell the group that for many Christians, Mary is the ideal disciple, the one we should all follow as a model. Part of the reason they believe that is found in this story. Ask:

- What is there about Mary in this story that makes her an ideal disciple, one we should try to be like?
- What qualities does she show?
- What would it take for us to live out those qualities in our lives?
- How could we help each other become more faithful disciples?

**Express**

These discussions are an opportunity to apply the Scripture to our lives. If you do not seem to relate to these situations, then change them to make them relevant to your own life.

Youth Issue

God's people hoped and longed for a renewal of the covenant with the arrival of a Messiah. The powerful hopes and prayers for a better life were answered when Mary heard an answer to her question—"How can this be?"—with the good news that God would even make the impossible happen. God has also made the impossible happen in our lives by extending the promise to us, through Jesus Christ who brings us life in power and abundance, so that we might fully live as empowered people of God.

Think of your own life. What do you hope for? What would be good for you? What would you hope to do with your life? It can only begin to form into a possibility when we are brave enough to express it.

Write your hopes and dreams on a sheet of paper. Take a full seven minutes to think about and write your responses to these questions.

- What would you like to do in the ten days? (*pass Biology, go to college, make first chair in the band*)

- What would you like to do in the next ten years? (*independence by the time I'm twenty-five, a car of my own when I turn eighteen, be an astronaut, have a happy home, have a place of my own to live*)
- What needs to happen to make our world a better place? (*more understanding among different ethnic groups, the end of poverty, everyone able to read*)

Action Steps

Form pairs. Pick two or three things from your list to discuss. What could you do to work toward the goal? How worthwhile is it? Does it create a sense of excitement in you? Help one another focus on what would be good, no matter how distant the goal might seem. Make a commitment to pray to God about it. Remember that with God, nothing is impossible.



Exit

Closing Prayer

Tell the group that you are going to offer a short prayer, thanking God for Mary's willingness to be the Mother of Jesus. Invite them to respond by saying, "Thank you, God, for Mary, the mother of Jesus."

Then tell them that you will do sentence prayers about Jesus. Each sentence will begin "Jesus, thank you for _____" and then say something about Jesus' life and ministry.

Then you will invite others to give sentence prayers about Jesus. After each sentence, the group will respond, "Thank you, God, for Mary, the mother of Jesus."



Main Idea

People of faith can see God's coming, or Advent. Simeon's search for God is answered when Simeon sees the Christ child. The opportunity to discover, see, and know God is also possible in our lives.

You Will Need

Graph paper, art supplies, Bibles, pencils

Faith Statement

We trust in Jesus Christ, fully human, fully God."
—A Brief Statement of Faith

Background

Luke has confused two different elements of the Jewish law in this story. First, each firstborn male had to be "redeemed." The Levitical law said that firstborn males were consecrated to God, who had spared the firstborn of Israel when the angel of death passed over Egypt. The redemption was a gift of money and could have been paid directly by Joseph. They did not have to take the baby to the temple for the "redemption."

The sacrifice of purification was for Mary, because the blood of childbirth had made her ritually unclean. As part of being made ritually clean and therefore a member of the community again, she was required to offer a sacrifice in the temple. The sacrifice she offered (two pigeons) was what was required of the very poor in Israel. So we learn, incidentally, about the economic situation into which Jesus was born.

While they were in the temple, they met a man named Simeon who spent his days looking for God. Simeon worked in the temple, where he helped the rabbis with the ritual of presentation. Young couples brought their babies to the Temple, and he brought the babies to the rabbi. Simeon must have loved this simple job, and he must have loved those children. They were signs of hope and signs of the promises of God unfolding. He affirmed that Jesus would be the source of salvation for many, and would also be a source of division and contention in Israel.

You and Your Youth

Our culture tends to write off the wisdom, experience, and contributions of older people. Members of your group are no exception. They may quickly dismiss the story of an "old guy" as having nothing to say to them. Help them to take a second look. Encourage them to make connections with their own experiences. Chances are, many of them have relationships with older adults who play an important role in their lives.

The story of Simeon calls for the young people to wonder about seeing God's Advent in their own lives. Perhaps they have come to know God through the preaching and teaching of others or from their own reading and studying of the Bible. The question being considered is whether there is an experience of God within their world.

How about for you? In what ways do you know God and in what ways do you experience God? In advance of this lesson, pray that you and your youth might see the Advent of God.



Engage

Learn names, encourage interaction, and laugh together as the session begins.

Advent and Christmas Traditions

Art supplies

As you arrive make a representation of an Advent activity you particularly like (caroling, buying presents, going to a relative's home, etc.). Talk freely with one another. Just being together is an important aspect of this activity. Share your creations and stories, one at a time, as a prelude to the Opening Prayer.

Opening Prayer

○ Christ, perfect image of the Eternal One who begot you, we praise you for the infinite love which sent you among us; we confess you as the light and life of the world; and we adore you as our Lord and our God, now and forever. Amen.



Explore

Study the Bible

Bibles

Slowly read Luke 2:22–35. Ask youth to imagine what sounds they hear as you read the story. Reread the story. This time ask youth to imagine what Simeon was feeling. Reread the story again. Ask:

- What was Mary doing while Simeon was holding her baby in his arms?
- What was Joseph doing?
- What were other people in the temple doing?

Ask for volunteers to be Mary, Joseph, and Simeon. Other class members can be the crowd in the temple. Have Mary and Joseph leave the room, or at least stand inconspicuously in a corner. This will not be a traditional skit, but one for which the youth make up the lines and feelings as they proceed.

Begin the skit with others noticing Simeon in the temple.

- What would they say about Simeon?
- Have they gotten so used to Simeon that they hardly notice him?
- Does Simeon's face look different today as if he somehow knows something special will happen today, or is it the same as always?

Then have Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus enter. What emotion is on their faces when Simeon looks at Jesus? Ask the person who is playing Simeon to read Simeon's words from the Bible. After Simeon's pronouncement, invite Mary, Joseph, and the others to react to Simeon.

- Would the others who saw Simeon holding Jesus have laughed at Simeon?
- Would they have been skeptical?
- Would they have believed?



Express

These discussions are an opportunity to apply the Scripture to our lives. If you do not seem to relate to these situations, then change them to make them relevant to your own life.

Youth Issue

Graph paper

Invite youth to make a graph of their Advent and Christmas experiences that plots the highs and lows of the season for them. Invite them to label the key events.

Use the following questions to help youth reflect on this time:

- What are some of the highs and lows of the season for you?
- When did you experience a sense of wonder or joy at God's gifts?
- When did you experience feeling close to God or other people?
- Think about Simeon. How did he help prepare himself to notice what God was doing?
- What do you think can help you to look for and give thanks for what God is doing in your life?

Action Steps

Write down one way you want to look for God this week. Make a commitment to carry through with this. Choose three people you will talk to this week and seek their ideas. Make a commitment to pray to God about it. Remember that with God, nothing is impossible. Share your hoped-for vision with the rest of the group as a way of beginning to say aloud what it is you might want to see.



Exit

Closing Prayer

Remind the learners how Simeon waited with prayer and patience for God's Messiah. Invite learners to think about something important (not a material possession) that they are waiting or hoping for in their lives. Ask them to write this on a piece of paper and to fold the paper (this is for them only). Close with the following prayer:

God, we wait for many things. We wait for joy, we wait for peace, we wait for love, we wait for things to change. Help us to be aware, like Simeon, of the ways you are present in our lives and our world. Amen.



Main Idea

As the elderly prophet Anna blesses the child Jesus, she bears witness to the character and piety of her life. We can bear witness to the presence of Christ in the world, and bless those around us, as we show our own strength of character and depth of piety.

You Will Need

Art supplies, newsprint, markers, Bibles, pencils

Faith Statement

We trust in Jesus Christ, fully human, fully God.
—A Brief Statement of Faith

Background

The Bible story for this session is the counterpoint to the story in the last session. The newborn Jesus is brought to the temple, and he is first blessed by Simeon, who speaks words of enduring meaning. The words spoken by Anna are not given, but instead the strength of her character is revealed.

Anna married young, widowed seven years later, and was now eighty-four. She is described as a prophet, certainly one of the long line of God's prophets, both male and female. Certainly, the fact that she is female is also important. In a time and place where men did most of the speaking, it is important that Anna is a prophet, and that her blessing of Jesus is just as significant as the blessing by Simeon.

She is described as worshiping and praying with such an ardor that it became her whole life. Anna's blessing, though not recorded, is characterized as praising God, and speaking about the child. We are left to assume that her message was like Simeon's blessing, but certainly, the implication is there that her words, just as her life, carried a depth of spirituality and power, coming from a prophet who devoted her life to worship and prayer.

This story shows the importance of Jesus as the promised Messiah. And yet it is a pious woman who, with the very character of her life, blesses the presence of God in the world. How might we with our own strength of character, with our own acts of worship and prayer, bear witness to the presence of Christ in the world and bless those around us?

You and Your Youth

The session calls for the youth to consider what traits of character and piety they wish to have. The ones expressed by Anna are examples, but there are many traits that are seen in the life of Jesus and advocated by the apostles in the New Testament letters. The real key to this session is the importance of actions, rather than words. Just by agreeing to be with the youth for this session, you are putting your own faith into action. That's a good model for them to see. You could act in piety by praying that each youth might begin to grow in their own character and piety before God.

 **Engage**

Learn names, encourage interaction, and laugh together as the session begins.

Advent and Christmas Traditions*Art supplies*

As the youth arrive, make a representation of a Christmas gift you have enjoyed giving to a grandparent or another older person, or that you are giving this year. Talk freely with one another about relationships with older adults. Just being together is an important aspect of this activity. Share your creations and stories, one at a time, as a prelude to the Opening Prayer.

Opening Prayer

God of grace, ever faithful to your promises, the earth rejoices in the hope of our Savior's coming and looks forward with longing to his return at the end of time. Prepare our hearts to receive him when he comes, for he is Lord forever and ever. Amen.

 **Explore****Study the Bible***Bibles*

Ask a volunteer to read Luke 2:36–38 and answer the questions below.

1. Who witnesses to the Christ child?
2. How would you describe the one who witnesses to the Christ child?
3. What response is given to the Christ child?
4. Is the witness male or female? Does it matter?

Once Again, with Feeling*Bible, newsprint, markers*

Divide the learners into three groups and give each group one sheet of newsprint and a marker. Assign each group one of the following to print on the top of the page: Mary and Joseph; Simeon; or Anna.

Next, have them divide the page into three columns labeled as followed: Scripture; Action; Feelings.

Their task is to review the story carefully and note the different feelings they think the characters had throughout the story. (See example at top of page.)

Scripture

Luke 2:22

Action

Mary and Joseph take Jesus to the temple

Feelings

proud, happy, excited

When the groups are done, allow each group to retell the story from the perspective of their character(s) by reviewing the actions and feelings. Afterward, lead a discussion. The following questions may be helpful:

- If God was at work offering the Messiah to the world, why was there some sadness mixed with the happiness in the story?
- What would you have felt if you had been there that day?
- Simeon and Anna were very old. They did not live to see Jesus grow up, let alone see his ministry complete. Yet, they praised God. Why do you think they were able to celebrate?

**Express**

These discussions are an opportunity to apply the Scripture to our lives. If you do not seem to relate to these situations, then change them to make them relevant to your own life.

Youth Issue

You don't like the word "spiritual." It sounds too "goody-goody," like someone is trying too hard to look religious, to appear a certain way, but without the actions that follow through. What good is it to go to church, if you don't act like a Christian on Monday morning? What good is it to pray, if you don't try to follow the way God leads? You would rather be someone who lives a life with strength and character, than one who lives in church. You wonder what is good about including spiritual practices in your life anyway.

Action Steps

Write down one character trait from your discussion. Make a commitment to explore it. Choose three people you will tell about it this week and seek their ideas. Make a commitment to pray to God about it. Remember that with God, nothing is impossible. Share your one desired character trait with the rest of the group as a way of beginning to say aloud what it is you might want to do.



Exit

Closing Prayer

Close with the following prayer:

God of young and old, babies, teens, parents, and grandparents, we are each on a journey toward you. Help us be wise in the journey no matter what our age. Open our hearts to what others may teach us along the way. Amen.



Main Idea

Through Isaiah, God promises the coming of a righteous king for Israel. The characteristics described show the kind of leader God calls to bring hope amid hopelessness, imagined as peace between natural enemies in nature. Many Christians see Jesus Christ as the righteous ruler when reading Isaiah 11.

You Will Need

Art supplies, Bibles, index cards, pencils

Faith Statement

We trust in Jesus Christ, fully human, fully God.
—A Brief Statement of Faith

Background

Looking back over the ages to Isaiah 11:1-9 from the twenty-first century, we are inclined to see this passage as a prophecy about the coming Messiah we know as Jesus Christ. However, the intentions of the writer(s) of Isaiah do not seem to point to this. They are concerned about a real and living king. To limit our application of this text to Christ is to miss the richness of Isaiah's oracle (message inspired by God) of immanence.

The opening oracle of Isaiah 11:1-9 refers to the "stump of Jesse," expressing Israel's undying hope that God will restore them under a Davidic king. This salvation prophecy (verses 1-5) points to the ideal, but unnamed, ruler. It gives voice to the hopes of the people for a monarch who will reunify Israel and bring peace and harmony to the nations. This ruler will have wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, and the spirit and knowledge of the fear of God.

The second section of this oracle (verses 6-9) describes an almost mythical scene of harmony in nature, a consequence of the ideal rule of the hoped-for king. Isaiah paints a portrait of the kind of society one can expect with the reign of a righteous ruler. The ideal king, God with us, will bring forth peace and justice.

You and Your Youth

Advent calls us to focus on our hope in Christ. What signs of hope do you see among the young people in your group?

The media are full of examples of what is wrong with today's youth. That image may be the most prominent among people in your community as well. Teenagers may dress outlandishly. Their music may be unsettling (or unnerving). They may make lots of noise.

Look back at some pictures from your own middle school or junior high days. If those memories don't humble you, then probably nothing will! The truth of the matter is that the youth of every generation have tested the boundaries of the systems in which they live. This generation probably has more opportunity than any other before them. But they are also exposed to more of life's hardness than many earlier generations. And often they grow up with little support or direction from significant adults—parents and teachers, as well as models in society.

For many young people, peace and hope are scarce. Be patient with the youth. Give them guidance and support. Help them discover the peaceable kingdom of God.



Engage

Learn names, encourage interaction, and laugh together as the session begins.

Advent and Christmas Traditions

Art supplies

As you arrive, make a representation of a Christmas gift you enjoyed getting. It could be from any time, like a bicycle when you were six years old or a new coat last year. Talk freely with one another. Just being together is an important aspect of this activity. Share your creations and stories, one at a time, with one another as a prelude to the Opening Prayer.

Opening Prayer

All-powerful and unseen God, the coming of your light into the world has brightened weary hearts with peace. Teach us to proclaim the birth of your Son, Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.



Explore

Study the Bible

Bibles

Divide into groups of no more than three. Each group is to read Isaiah 11:1–9, and then write headlines for newspaper articles that would appear the day after the leader of whom Isaiah speaks was installed. How would they tell the world about the news in as few words as possible?

Play a Game

Assign youth the roles of as many of the animals mentioned in Isaiah's text as possible.

Select two or three persons and tell them their task is to move the animals from one part of the country (your learning area) to another. Of course, their work will be full of frustration because wolves won't just agree to lie down with lambs, and lions don't usually graze on straw!

See what creative options your animal caretakers can design to move their flocks and herds. What frustrations do they face? How do they deal with them?

When the activity falls apart (as it probably will), talk about what happened. Ask:

- How would the situation be different if the different groups involved were humans instead of animals?
- Is our ability to reason a help or another frustration?
- Why is it so hard to get different groups to work together?



Express

These discussions are an opportunity to apply the Scripture to our lives. If you do not seem to relate to these situations, then change them to make them relevant to your own life.

Youth Issue

Divide a sheet of paper into two columns by drawing a line down the middle of the page. In the left column, describe the places of hopelessness you see in the world (war in the Middle East, absent parent, lack of friends, etc.). In the right column, describe the hope you see in the world (a friend who cares, a church school teacher who teaches good things, a gift for music, etc.). Fill the whole page. Take a full seven minutes to think and write.

Form pairs. Pick two or three things from your list that bother you the most. Then pick two or three things from your list that give you the greatest hope. Help each other reflect on the possibilities.

Action Steps

Index cards, pencils

Invite the youth to create and sign pledges to act in response to what they have learned from Isaiah. Explain that a pledge is a promise that its maker intends to honor even though no one will require him or her to do so. Use pledges to the church budget or to other agencies in the community (public radio or public television) as examples. The pledges your group members make should be specific plans to do something different based on their experience with Isaiah's writing. For example, some may choose to broaden the scope of their relationships at school or at church. Others may promise to learn more about another culture. Let individuals decide about their own commitments. Encourage the youth to keep or display their pledge cards where they will be sure to see them and be reminded of the commitments they have made.



Exit

Closing Prayer

Close with the following prayer:

God who made us all, we are not all the same, but in you we find unity of faith and purpose. Help us to celebrate the diversity among us and to treasure the ways we come together in peace. In Jesus' name. Amen.