



Questions to Ponder or Discuss

Advent week 1—Hope

Watch this commercial: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dKVhv7loWgk>

In this commercial, a young boy waits impatiently for Christmas. He counts down the days on his Advent calendar; watches the clock; and taps his feet impatiently. Finally, on Christmas Eve, he gobbles down his dinner and rushes to bed. He awakes on Christmas morning, and rushes past the presents waiting for him at the foot of his bed. He opens the closet and takes out a clumsily wrapped gift, which he carries into his parents' room. The closing frame reads: "For gifts you can't wait to give."

1. Thinking about the commercial
 - Did the ending surprise you—and if so, why?
 - Why do you think the boy was so excited to give his present to his parents?
 - What are you hoping for most this Christmas?
2. For many people today, the Christmas season is highly predictable. But the first Christmas was very surprising. Read Luke 2:1-20. Try to imagine hearing the Christmas story for the first time. What do you think would be the most surprising part of the story for you, and why?
3. The author Frederick Buechner wrote that once we have seen God in a stable, we can never be sure where God will appear. Perhaps we will meet God in hungry people needing food, or in lonely people needing comfort. Have you ever "seen" God in a surprising place? How can you bring hope to someone this Advent season?

Practice for the week: Practicing Hope

Each day this week, choose a way to practice hope. Here are some ideas to get you started:

- Find creative ways to support those who might be lonely or hurting—open your home, meet up for lunch, bake cookies, send a note, paint a picture, etc.
- Make people smile or laugh today.
- Give generously to all sorts of worthy causes.
- Pray—even when you struggle to believe it makes a difference.
- Sing the songs. Put up the decorations. Tell the stories.

Advent week 2—Love

Watch this commercial: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oeP-PgkVyo>

In this commercial, a young boy looks longingly at a Santa Claus Christmas ornament as he hangs it on the tree. He writes a letter to Santa Claus and keeps asking his parents if "he" is coming and whether they have bought "his" favorite food. He places a sign in the front yard saying, "Please Stop Here" and puts out milk and mince pies as he goes to bed on Christmas Eve. He's awoken by the noise of the front door opening, and runs downstairs to find his granddad has arrived!

1. Thinking about the commercial
 - What did you find moving about this commercial and why?
 - Do you have any friends or family with whom you feel you've become disconnected? How could you reach out and make a meaningful connection with them this Christmas?
 - What if you are the grandfather in this commercial and God is the boy? What do you think God misses most about you? How does this make you want to respond?
2. Santa Claus (Father Christmas) is a magical Christmas character. Why do you think this story has resonated so strongly in our culture? Read the story of Jesus' birth, beginning at Matthew 1:18 and ending at Matthew 2:23. What parts of this story seem ordinary, mundane, or even harsh? What parts of this story seem magical and other-worldly? How do you see love prevailing in this story?
3. What parts of your own life seem harsh or mundane at the moment? How would you want them to change? How could you be more receptive to the wonder of God's love in these areas?

Practice for the week: Practicing Love

Each day this week, choose a way to practice the giving and receiving of love. Here are some ideas to get you started:

- Think intentionally about people you could reach out to and spend time with this Christmas season... and do it.
- Handwrite a personal letter to someone you know would love to hear from you and mail it the traditional way.
- Regard every person you encounter each day as a gift from God, and open your heart to receive them.
- Look for "magic" all around you – in music, nature, people, food, drink, lights, smells, fire, and warmth. Take notice, receive it as a gift, and let it open your heart and mind to a deeper experience of God's love for you.
- Look for a practical way to serve your neighbor or a work colleague this week.

Advent week 3—Joy

Watch this commercial: <https://youtu.be/x2sE2YuheKo>

In this commercial, a young boy looks up into a tree where his football has become stuck. A pigeon lands on the branch next to the ball but the boy is unable to retrieve it until a young girl comes along to help him with her umbrella. As she retrieves the ball the commercial switches to animated mode and there are a series of incidents of people helping one another. The boy makes a balloon for a melting snowman, helping him fly away. The snowman repairs a woman's flat tire and she in turn delivers groceries to an elder gentleman, who shares a giant Christmas cracker with his lonely neighbor across the street. Love is passed on in various ways until a girl is sat on a bus holding her broken glasses. A boy next to her removes a heart shaped sticker from his apple and uses it to repair her glasses. As the girl steps off the bus, the images return to live action, and we see the original boy in the background playing with his football.

1. Thinking about the commercial
 - What did you find moving about this commercial and why?
 - What impact did the change or format from live footage to at least two different genres of animation have on you? Why do you think the creators did this?
 - How did you relate to the acts of kindness in this commercial? In what way are they trivial? In what way are they significant?
2. Read Matthew 13:31-33. How do you think small things can change the world? What small things in your own life bring joy to you (things you are doing or things happening to you)?
3. Read Luke 1:46-55. Why is Mary so joyful? How do Jesus' words in Matthew 11:25-26 correlate to his mother's? How do you relate to these statements personally? How could you rejoice in them?

Practice for the week: Practicing Joy

Each day this week, choose a way to practice celebrating joy. Here are some ideas to get you started:

- Take a moment each evening to reflect on the highlights and positives of the day, and give thanks.
- What do you love and enjoy most about the holiday season? Identify it and then revel in it, unabashed!
- Take time with the people you love most this week, and consciously celebrate and enjoy their presence in the moment.
- Choose a festive meal in which to practice intentional mindful eating. Eat slowly and savor every moment. Enjoy each mouthful and contemplate what you appreciate about this gift.
- Reflect on the people who have shown kindness to you over the years in a way that has impacted the trajectory or your life. Write them a letter of thanks.

Advent week 4—Peace

Watch this commercial: <https://youtu.be/kuRn2S7iPNU>

In this commercial, a family sleeps on Christmas Eve while downstairs, Mog the cat has a nightmare. As Mog flicks her tail in fright, it catches on a string of Christmas lights, knocking items to the floor and switching on the stove. Mog awakes to smoke pouring from the oven. Panicking, she stumbles over pots and pans, accidentally calling the fire department in the process. She knocks chestnuts onto the hot stove that explode, destroying much of the kitchen and further alarming Mog, who eventually stumbles out of the house and finds herself staring down a fire truck. After extinguishing the charred remains of the turkey, the fire fighters give the all-clear and declare Mog a hero for raising the alarm. As the family enters the house, they are shocked and saddened to see black soot covering the kitchen and sitting room. A knock at the door reveals neighbors armed with cleaning supplies, who work to repair the damage, and then return with furniture, food and a new Christmas tree. The neighbors fill the house, sharing their Christmas dinners together, as Mog purrs under the table, eating her favorite snack, a boiled egg.

1. Thinking about the commercial
 - What did you find amusing about this commercial and why?
 - Have you ever had a disastrous holiday? How did you feel about it at the time, and how do you feel about it now, as you think back?
 - This commercial is based on a children's book written by the elderly neighbor (Judith Kerr). It represents a common Christmas theme: coming together in adversity. Why do you think this theme is so meaningful at this time of year?
2. Read Isaiah 40:1-5 & 9-11. Have you ever felt the tender care of God in the midst of a difficult situation? Are you in need of such a sense of God's presence now?
3. Read Luke 2:1-14. In the context of Roman oppression and poverty, what does the angels' message of "peace on earth" mean? In what ways is peace dependent on circumstances, and in what ways is it not?

Practice for the week: Practicing Peace

Each day this week, choose a way to practice peace, whatever the circumstances. Here are some ideas to get you started:

- Spend 5 minutes each day (or longer if you can!) to sit in silence. Quiet your mind and acknowledge God's presence. Let go of any thoughts that pop into your head. Simply rest in God's love for you.
- Determine to say something kind to each person you encounter today.
- Picture any anxieties you are carrying as being contained in gift-wrapped boxes. Imagine yourself placing them by the manger, and leaving them there.
- Take a moment each morning to intentionally switch off your inner critic. Try to refrain from criticizing or complaining throughout the day.
- Recognize that your life is a gift, and mindfully do something you enjoy each day (go for a short walk, read a chapter of a fun book, call a friend, savor a meal, etc.)
- Forgiveness is often a process, but bearing a grudge can eat away at our sense of peace. Ask God to help you as you let go of past hurts.