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# WHAT'S IN YOUR TEACHING GUIDE

This Teaching Guide has three purposes:

- to give the teacher tools for focusing on the content of the session in the Study Guide.
- to give the teacher additional Bible background information.
- to give the teacher variety and choice in preparation.

The Teaching Guide includes two major components: Teacher Helps and Teacher Options.

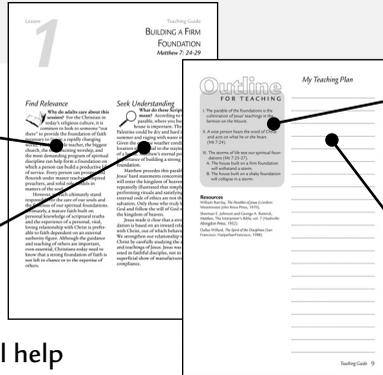
## Teacher Helps

### Find Relevance

helps you zero in on why each session is important for the adults you teach.

### Seek Understanding

presents helpful Bible Background informations and insights that will help you better understand the Scripture.



### Teaching Outline

provides you with an outline of the main themes in the Study Guide.

**My Teaching Plan** is a convenient place for you to make notes for teaching the session.

## Teacher Options

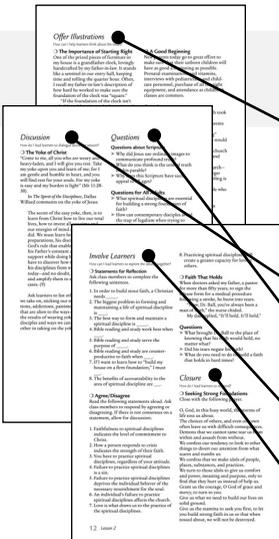
**Offer Illustrations** presents material that will help you paint a picture of the session. This section often presents items from church history, current events, or interesting anecdotes that help introduce the session.

**Discussion** provides teaching activities that will help learners discuss the Scripture text.

**Questions** presents multiple collections of questions for various kinds of adults.

**Involve Learners** helps learners become actively involved with the Scripture text for a particular session.

**Closure** gives you a means for wrapping up the session.



## You Can Choose!

There is more material in each session than you can use, so choose the options from each section to tailor the session to the needs of your group.

### Prepare Before the Session

Read the session for today in the Study Guide. Then read the options in this Teaching Guide, placing checkmarks beside the activities you plan to include. After you have decided which options to use, gather the appropriate materials.

# WAITING FOR CHRIST

*Matthew 23:36-44*

## Find Relevance



**Why do adults care about this session?** Taking time to get somewhere is not a pastime many adults relish. Most people want to arrive at their particular destination as quickly as possible. This affinity for conserving time makes people anxious if they must make an extra stop. Even when flying, people want layovers as short as possible, and the closer they can get to a direct flight, the better. But even though airlines generally try to accommodate the hurried pace, most travelers must first go through Dallas, Atlanta, Memphis, Houston, or some other common stopover place before arriving at their final destination.

Similarly, many people want to hurry through life itself. Exclamations such as “I’m really ready to have children,” or “It’s about *time* I got that new job!” or “I really can’t *wait* until I retire!” are common in our culture. Certain milestone events—like graduating, getting married, having children, getting a job, and retiring—are significant markers in adults’ lives, so many people have a tendency to want to rush from one event to another. But travelers must make the journey, and the journey includes waiting. Today, we actively await the second coming of Christ just as people awaited the coming of the Messiah 2000 years ago.

## Seek Understanding



**What do these Scriptures mean?** Two theological terms are often used in connection with Christ’s second appearing. The first is the Greek word *parousia*, meaning “coming” or “presence” and usually referring to the second coming of Christ. When speaking of *parousia*, New Testament theologians have emphasized the conviction that history has an end and a goal and that this fulfillment involves judgement of sin (Harvey, 174-75).

The second word usually associated with the second coming of Christ is *eschatology*, which literally means “discourse about the last things” (Ibid., 80) and refers to history’s end. Interpreted broadly, it includes the study of things such as the *parousia*, immortality, and final judgment of sin. Particularly after Jesus’ Ascension into heaven, Christians believed that this end of time would come almost immediately. In fact, some people did not even work or conduct routine activities, preferring instead to sit and wait on Christ’s return. However, when Christ did not return as expected, Christians began to struggle with their beliefs about the end times.

Books about the second coming of Christ are very popular today as many authors attempt to explain events that will precede Christ’s return. Sometimes,



## Offer Illustrations

How can I help learners think about the issues?

### ○ Reaching Out to International Community

In 1981 Betty Hayes took in an 8-year-old Vietnamese girl named Mia who needed a place to stay. Mia lived there until she went to college, and since then, what began as a single compassionate act has become a full-fledged church ministry for Hayes. Vietnamese children flock to her when she enters the door of First Baptist Church in Festus, Missouri. Within the last two years, the church has begun a Vietnamese worship service.

Hayes is quick to point out that the ministry belongs to the entire church, but she still holds a significant role in that ministry. She stays busy with activities like giving children rides to church and acting as a mediator between Vietnamese adults who can't speak English and their doctors. Hayes does not speak Vietnamese either, but the children who speak English help her communicate.

Over the years, Hayes has housed half a dozen of these Vietnamese children, currently caring for 9-year-old Bethany and 15-year-old David. "She's one of the most marvelous ministers I've ever known," says Hayes's pastor of 29 years, "and she does it in a natural way. She's the picture of sacrificial ministry" (Hendricks, 2 May 2001).

### Questions

- How do you think your church is demonstrating active waiting?
- In what ways is Betty Hayes a sacrificial minister?
- What ministries are you involved in as you actively await Christ's return?

### ○ Risky Business

A commercial that aired earlier this year focused on the enormously successful career of Elvis Presley. While the commercial shows clips from Presley's concerts, with fans screaming in the audience, words flash silently across the bottom of the television screen, telling another side of the story. The first clip informs viewers that radio and television stations were reluctant at first to promote Elvis because of his new music and dance style. Some music stores even refused to sell his records. Meanwhile, yet another clip notes that many people were skeptical about the new music craze. At the end of the commercial, however, the camera flashes back to a concert staged before a packed house as the final words appear across the screen, proclaiming that sometimes the biggest risk is not taking a risk at all.

### Questions

- What kinds of risks do we take along our Christian journey?
- When might not taking a risk at all actually be a bigger risk than trying something new?

## Discussion

How do I lead learners to dialogue about the session?

### ○ Jesus' Use of Parable

Jesus often taught by using parables, short anecdotes that usually included some concept about the Kingdom of God. Some New Testament scholars believe the Kingdom of God is a future event following the second coming of Christ. Most scholars, though, interpret the Kingdom of God as both a future event *and* a present event. According to this view, Jesus ushered in a new manifestation of the Kingdom. Writer John Crossan, on the other hand, proposes a slightly different twist to this interpretation, arguing, "Jesus was not proclaiming that God was about to end *this* world, but, seeing this as one view of world, he was announcing God as the One who shatters world, this one and any other before or after it" (27).

Ask your participants how Jesus' parable of the homeowner and the thief, along with the one about the bridesmaids, might have shattered the world of Jesus' followers. Then, inquire as to how those same parables might shatter our own world today. Finally, before moving on, invite your learners to consider what, if anything, is radical about Jesus' parables.

## Questions

### Questions about Scripture

- How do you interpret Jesus' words about false messiahs and events that will precede the second coming?
- How do Jesus' parables emphasize his point about his second coming?
- Why do you think Jesus used parables as a teaching tool?

### Questions for All Adults

- What kinds of things do you wait for?
- What do you do while you wait for certain events to transpire?
- At what point do certain activities become little more than mere fillers for taking up our time?

### Questions for Mature Adults

- What is the longest time you've ever waited for something?
- In what ways have you waited for the Messiah's coming into your life?
- Do you wait for important events more or less patiently than you did when you were younger?

### Questions for Younger Adults

- What are the biggest risks you have taken so far?
- Currently, what are the most significant activities in your life?
- What kinds of things are you waiting for now?

### Questions for Adults with Children

- How do you react when your children tell you they are bored?
- How do the activities your children are involved in enhance their lives?
- How do you help your children wait for significant days, such as Christmas?

## *Involve Learners*

How can I lead learners to explore the session together?

### ○ **Timeline of Waiting**

Call your participants' attention to the long piece of newsprint you have attached to a focal wall of your meeting area. Invite one of your learners to draw a horizontal line down the middle of the newsprint. Then, ask that participant to write the word "beginning" at the left end of the line. Explain that this diagram is going to serve as a timeline representing someone's life.

Normally, significant events in a person's life would be plotted in intervals along the timeline, with the date of each event noted. Suggest that for this timeline, however, the significant points will be activities that can be considered examples of active waiting for the second coming of Christ. Invite your participants to talk together briefly about some examples before they take markers and write or illustrate those examples along the timeline. Allow about 15 minutes for completion of the activity, finishing up by asking your adults to explain why they chose these particular activities as examples of active waiting.

### ○ **The Waiting Game**

Invite the members of your group to close their eyes and rest comfortably in their chairs. After a few moments, ask them to take two deep breaths. Then, encourage participants to use their imaginations as you relate the following guided imagery: "You have just entered the waiting room of a local hospital's labor and delivery wing. It is 6:00 in the morning. Your youngest sister, who is 25 years old, is there with her husband, along with the rest of your family. You all are awaiting the birth of your sister's first child. What are you thinking? The minutes turn into hours, and by evening you are still awaiting the arrival of this child. What are you doing as you wait? How do you

feel? Finally, at 5:00 that evening your sister's healthy baby boy is born. What do you do now?" Invite your learners to open their eyes and share with the larger group any feelings the guided imagery evoked.

### **Questions**

- How can the feelings generated by this guided imagery compare to those experienced as you await the coming of Christ?
- How might we harness some of that same anticipation even though we do not know exactly when Christ will return?

## *Closure*

How do I lead learners to respond?

### ○ **What Are You Waiting For?**

Ask participants to reflect silently for one minute about their expectations of this Advent season. Pose questions such as this one: "What joys and frustrations accompany waiting?" Then, ask how we might await the coming of the Messiah during Advent. Wonder aloud what joys and frustrations might accompany this waiting, too, inquiring, "What might we do as we wait for the Messiah?" Suggest that focusing our attention on waiting is one important task of this season and that prayer is one of the best ways we can focus. Close the session by encouraging your learners to take turns filling in the following sentence prayer:

"This Advent, I wait for \_\_\_\_\_,  
and as I wait, I will \_\_\_\_\_."

# 2

## PREPARING FOR CHRIST

*Matthew 3:1-12*

### Find Relevance



**Why do adults care about this session?** In a word, preparation is a way of life. Whether it is for a big family reunion, a worship service at church, or a program for an organization, good preparation is something participants value. Similarly, adults prepare for life events as well. For example, young adults must prepare for the work world. Also, a couple generally spends weeks in preparation for their wedding. Likewise, parents-to-be prepare months in advance before their child is born. Furthermore, adults spend much time preparing for transitional events, such as a move to a new location. And, of course, financial advisors encourage adults to prepare for their retirement years before the actual event.

During this season of the year, however, adults scurry about preparing for Christmas. Usually, this includes decorating the house, buying presents, and attending parties. But amidst the rush, adults can also find it refreshing to take time to prepare for the coming of the Christ child.

### Seek Understanding



**What do these Scriptures mean?** When John the Baptist began preaching, the Jews had not heard from a prophet for 400 years. But with John's message, the prophetic voice emerged again, and crowds flocked to hear him. John denounced evil wherever he saw it. If Herod transgressed the law, John confronted him up front. Likewise, John rebuked the Pharisees and Sadducees. He even admonished the crowds of their need for repentance (Barclay, 35).

John called the Pharisees and Sadducees a "brood of vipers," asking who had warned them to flee from the coming wrath. The desert certainly calls to mind dried grasses susceptible to fires. Snakes and other desert creatures would flee before a raging fire sweeping across the wilderness. Meanwhile, a secondary image was one of small animals driven back by the farmers harvesting their fields (Ibid., 38). Both images were ones with which people of the wilderness would have been familiar. Furthermore, John refused to acknowledge that the Jews would gain any advantage simply because they were descendants of Abraham.

John's message ends with a word of hope. Though he baptized with water, the one coming after him would baptize with the fire of the Spirit. The Hebrew word *ruah* means "Spirit," but it also can mean



## Offer Illustrations

How can I help learners think about the issues?

### ○ The Two Natures of the Mountain

For downhill snow skiers, nothing can be much better than several inches of fresh snow—that is, unless it comes as a blizzard. Under blizzard conditions, even the adventure-lover finds skiing difficult, and most skiers will admit that staying on the slopes during a raging snowstorm is quite dangerous. During white-out conditions, weather forecasters warn that driving is risky if not impossible. The best way to cope with such a storm is to stay indoors until the worst is over. But the interesting thing is that when the storm abates and the sun appears, the mountain is actually completely transformed. Avid skiers and beginners alike hit the slopes by the hundreds, claiming fresh snow provides some of the best skiing they've ever known. The mountain is no longer a place of peril but an inviting playground.

### Questions

- What other examples, like the mountain, can you think of that have two very different natures?
- “To repent means to completely change one’s nature.” What do you think of this statement?

### ○ Census Shows Diverse Population

According to preliminary 2000 United States Census statistics, the number of people who identify themselves as multiracial is steadily increasing. Of the nine states that have tabulated complete census results, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin reported three times as many multiracial children as adults, while Virginia and Indiana reported twice as many multiracial children. The statistics suggest that the numbers of multiracial people will likely increase in the future, with the Asian-Anglo American group being the largest. Census results also show that the Hispanic population is growing, almost surpassing the African-American demographic as the nation’s largest minority group. In fact, in Mississippi and South Dakota the Hispanic population growth rate is greater than that of the general population. Also, a growing percentage of children are minorities. The results of this part of the census are particularly interesting because this is the first time the numbers of multiracial people have been reported in such detail (El Nasser, 15 May 2001).

### Questions

- Do you think a sense of equality parallels the growing diversity in the United States?
- In what ways is the Kingdom of God inclusive of all persons?

## Discussion

How do I lead learners to dialogue about the session?

### ○ The Kingdom of God

Frederick Buechner suggests that the Kingdom of God is not a place so much as a condition (49). The Kingdom comes when God's will is done. When God's will is done among us here and now, the Kingdom has already come. At the same time, however, since doing God's will is always incomplete, the Kingdom is also a long way off.

As a poet...Jesus is maybe at his best in describing the feeling you get when you glimpse the Thing Itself—the kingship of the King... It's like finding a million dollars in a field, like finding a jewel, or like finding something you hated to lose and thought you would never find again—an old keepsake, a stray sheep, a missing child. When the kingdom really comes, it's as if the thing you lost and thought you'd never find again is you. (Ibid., 50)

Ask your participants for their reactions to Buechner's words. Inquire particularly into what they think of the last statement: "The thing you lost and thought you'd never find again is you." Invite all your learners to wonder aloud as to what Buechner might have meant by this statement.

## Questions

### Questions about Scripture

- If repentance implies the changing of one's nature, what is our nature like before repentance? What about after?
- How does our Scripture passage for this session describe repentance?
- Why do you think John the Baptist reprimanded the Pharisees and Sadducees?

### Questions for All Adults

- In what ways do we judge others?
- When has a harsh judgment affected you?
- With which character in this story can you identify the most?

### Questions for Mature Adults

- For what kinds of things have you prepared during your lifetime?
- What are you preparing for now?
- For what group of people have you been a leader? In what ways?

### Questions for Younger Adults

- Have you ever participated in a competition at school or work for which you were judged? If so, how did you react to being judged?
- John the Baptist was a strong and apparently charismatic leader. What leaders have been role models for you?
- For what life events have you already begun preparing?

### Questions for Adults with Children

- In what ways do you demonstrate equality in your household?
- How do you prepare your children for significant events like the first day of school, birthdays, or a new brother or sister?
- Have you ever been asked to serve as a judge for some activity in which your child was involved? If so, describe the experience.

## *Involve Learners*

How can I lead learners to explore the session together?

### ○ **Luke's Version of John the Baptist's Story**

Ask a volunteer to read Luke 3:1-20 aloud while the rest of your learners follow along silently in their Bibles. Tell participants that this passage is Luke's version of John the Baptist's story recorded in Matthew 3:1-12. Having explained this, ask another participant to re-read the Matthew passage while the remainder of your group listens for similarities and differences between the two versions of the story.

Invite participants to share their reflections on the two passages, calling particular attention to Luke 3:10-14, words that do *not* appear in Matthew's version. Ask your adults to consider why they think Luke chose to include this ethical advice. After allowing for ample discussion time, suggest that each Gospel writer drew his material both from common sources and sources unique to each writer. Additionally, each writer chose to use certain details to enhance a particular theme of the Gospel. With these things in mind, ask them what they think might be the over-riding theme of the Matthew passage.

## *Closure*

How do I lead learners to respond?

### ○ **Preparing Yourself**

To close the session, ask your group to summarize the ways John the Baptist helped people prepare for the coming Messiah. After brief discussion, suggest that we, too, must prepare for the coming of the Messiah this Advent. Allow for a brief time of reflection before handing each of your participants a note card and a pencil. Then, invite the group to write their own prayers of preparation for Advent. Encourage them to focus on specific ways they can prepare themselves. After allowing about five minutes for the activity, close with prayer.

# EXPECTING CHRIST

*Matthew 11:2-11*

## Find Relevance



**Why do adults care about this session?** Virtually no one will contest the fact that technology dominates the world today. With just the click of a mouse, people from the United States can be in another country—via the Internet, that is—in a matter of seconds. Likewise, e-mail and personal web pages allow family members who are separated by thousands of miles to stay in touch. In fact, according to some, technological advancements have made it possible for people to be more closely connected than they have been in the past. Others, however, argue that with the flood of data now available, people have become so saturated with information that they actually feel more fragmented instead of more closely connected.

Due at least in part to the fragmentation and isolation our technology has brought with it, many adults in today's society are left with more questions than answers. These questioning adults are often called seekers. As this session's Scripture passage notes, John the Baptist's personal world was changing dramatically, so naturally, he felt confused. At least on some level, adults in today's world will relate to John the Baptist's questioning.

## Seeking Understanding



**What do these Scriptures mean?** Theologian Walter Brueggemann describes the “royal consciousness” characterizing Herod's regime at the time of John the Baptist's and Jesus' ministry. Three major tenets of this royal consciousness, Brueggemann contends, are affluence of the ruling class; oppressive social policy regulating the dominated class; and controlled, static religion that serves the purpose of the king (32-34). The possibility of passion—the “capacity and readiness to care, to suffer, to die, and to feel”—is a primary prophetic agenda, and the royal consciousness seeks to eradicate this possibility by blocking the cries of the denied ones so that no one can discern their misery (Ibid., 41).

In this session's Scripture passage, Jesus contrasts King Herod, represented by the reed swaying in the wind and the royal clothing, with John the prophet. Given his oppressive and cruel policies, Herod exemplifies the royal consciousness. John the Baptist, on the other hand, represents the prophetic voice speaking out against that royal consciousness—not only against Herod, but also against other authorities seeking to maintain the religious status quo. In fact, Jesus' words demonstrate that he, too, is a prophetic voice crying out against the royal consciousness.



## Offer Illustration

How can I help learners think about the issues?

### ○ A Generation of Hope

A veteran student minister named Jerry Hendrix claims that today's young people—the “millennials,” or those born since the late 1970s—represent a generation of hope. The second largest generation in United States history, this group numbers about 72 million and will dominate the adult group of the next century.

In characterizing these young people, Hendrix suggests they thrive on change, whether involving images on a computer screen or the norms of society. And although today's young people have seen racial and ethnic division firsthand, they are accustomed to the diversity of a multicultural world. They come from diverse families and they make spontaneous decisions, Hendrix continues, concluding that this current generation of young people also resists claims that one faith system is better than any other, just as much as they resist ethical absolutes.

Yet, again, Hendrix characterizes the millennials as a generation of hope, claiming that in many respects they are closer to the Kingdom of Heaven than other generations. After all, they want to help the world while improving the environment in which they live. The key to reaching them is through mission projects, with mentors asking probing questions while they work (Camp, 8 Mar 2001).

### Questions

- In what ways do you think mentors can reach seekers by asking questions?
- How can your church reach out to this generation?

### ○ Great Expectations

Writer and minister John Killinger tells the story of Dennis, a six-year-old boy who desperately wanted a kangaroo for Christmas and, in fact, was convinced he would get one. Of course, Dennis was disappointed when he received a radio instead, but after recovering from his disappointment, he began tinkering with the radio and discovered a newfound interest in electronics. Interestingly enough, as an adult Dennis became a successful media director (31-34).

Like Dennis, many of us hold unrealistic expectations of the Christmas season. Therefore, when the family gathering doesn't turn out to be the gala we planned, a friend or family member doesn't participate in a traditional activity, or money runs short before we buy all the presents, we are disappointed. In fact, counselors claim that some people build up such impossible hopes for Christmas that their dreams can't possibly come true, so naturally they are disappointed.

But Killinger goes on to suggest that the *real* message of Advent isn't what we expect, but what we *don't* expect (32). Zechariah and Elizabeth, for instance, didn't expect to have a baby in their old age. Mary didn't expect to have a baby either. And Joseph certainly didn't expect Mary to become pregnant. Nor did the shepherds and wise men expect to find the Christ child where they did. In a word, Advent is a time of wonderful surprises.

### Questions

- How are we to cope with unrealistic expectations?
- When has God surprised you?

## Discussion

How do I lead learners to dialogue about the session?

### ○ Living the Question

Although it may sound odd, Frederick Buechner cautions people against turning to the Bible first for answers. Rather, he encourages people to begin by listening to the *questions* the Bible asks (77). Buechner reminds us that people often question things that may matter a good deal today but will hardly matter at all tomorrow. He also contends that in the pile of trivial questions, we tend to lose track of the real “life-and-death” questions, the ones having to do with meaning, purpose, and value.

To lose track of questions such as these is to lose track of who we really are and where we really are going. The Bible already contains the “life-and-death” questions. Some of these include the following: “What have people profited if they gain the entire world and lose their souls?” “Am I my brother’s keeper?” “How can a person who is old be born again?” “Who is my neighbor?” “What is truth?” Buechner concludes that when people hear the biblical questions that resonate with their own, they have begun to hear much (Ibid.).

Ask your participants what they think most Christians are looking for when they read the Bible. After allowing ample time for discussion, ask why some Christians are afraid to ask questions. Finally, conclude this portion of the session by asking your learners to explain what they think about Buechner’s words of caution.

## Questions

### Questions about Scripture

- By asking whether Jesus was the Messiah, in what ways do you think John the Baptist was questioning his original concept of God?
- How can questioning God actually be a beginning point for spiritual growth?
- How does John express his doubt about the coming Messiah?

### Questions for All Adults

- At what times have you experienced disappointment when someone did not live up to your expectations?
- What are some of the most important things you have lost and searched diligently for?
- How would you respond to someone who says we should never question God?

### Questions for Mature Adults

- When have you felt that either life or God was not being fair?
- When have you experienced a faith crisis?
- How have your faith crises driven your growth as a Christian?

### Questions for Younger Adults

- What have you been searching for in your life recently?
- What are the most significant losses you have encountered?
- Under what circumstances do you usually tend to ask lots of questions?

### Questions for Adults with Children

- How do you answer your children when they claim others are not playing fair?
- How do you respond when your children approach you with difficult questions?
- In what ways do you try to educate your children according to your personal value system?

## Involve Learners

How can I lead learners to explore the session together?

### ○ Twenty Questions

Give each of your learners paper and a pencil, asking them to reflect on one of the most confusing times they have ever endured. After allowing about a minute or so of silence, invite them to imagine they could talk face-to-face with God and ask any question they wanted about this particular experience. Then, encourage participants to remain silent but to write their questions on the paper. Suggest that they write every question they think of as quickly as they come to mind.

Emphasize that the goal of this exercise is not to spend too much time thinking about the types of questions they would ask, but simply to ask the questions on the tips of their hearts. No question will be out of bounds, no matter how it sounds.

Allow three or four minutes for everyone to brainstorm before inviting those participants who feel comfortable doing so to share with the larger group any feelings they had as they jotted down their questions. If some do not feel like participating in this part of the discussion, it is important to respect their silence, as this activity can dip into some rather personal subjects.

### Question

- Did you feel confident asking God whatever questions came to mind?

### ○ Question Reality

Mention to your participants that a popular bumper sticker from the 1960s read, "Question Authority!" In fact, a more recent version of that bumper sticker reads, "Question Reality!" Ask your learners to explain what they think the bumper sticker means. Then suggest that the slogan implies that people today don't view their world in the same way as

did people from the past. Society today is more mobile, communication is instantaneous, and people are more prone to ask questions about everything, even things that appear to be concrete and real.

Inquire as to whether your group members think our society is healthier today because people are willing to question things more readily. Invite them also to discuss the potential benefits as well as the drawbacks.

### Question

- In what ways do you think John the Baptist was questioning his own view of reality when he wondered whether Jesus was the expected Messiah?

## CLOSURE

How do I lead learners to respond?

### ○ Faith Symbols

Give everyone in your group a note card, also making available several crayons, markers, or colored pencils. Encourage your participants to think of possible symbols for their faith journey. Suggest that these symbols might be pictures, words, objects, graphs, or anything along those lines. Invite each participant to use the markers and their note card to design a faith symbol that depicts their individual journey. Allow about five minutes for the activity before asking your adults to form pairs or triads and share their symbols with each other. Close the session with a prayer, asking for courage enough to be honest in our relationships with God and with each other.

# ANNOUNCING CHRIST

*Matthew 1:18-25*

## Find Relevance



**Why do adults care about this session?** Although adults sometimes prefer to think of fear as an emotion that only children experience, in reality, adults have plenty of fears of their own. Single adults, for example, may fear living on their own. At some time, too, most adults struggle with fear during a personal crisis such as illness. Parents may be anxious about what the future holds for their children. Later, adults most likely experience some uncertainty as they reach retirement age. Fear of the unknown is a common human emotion.

The Scripture passage for this session relates a story in which two adults faced their fears of the unknown. Likely, adults will easily relate to Mary and Joseph's questioning of their unusual circumstances, hopefully drawing strength from Joseph's response of grace and trust.

## Seek Understanding



**What do these Scriptures mean?** That Joseph is to name the child "Jesus" implies several things. First, Judaism struggled with the fact that it was difficult to discern a child's father. People assumed any man who gave testimony to paternity was indeed the father; after all, what man wouldn't be reluctant to admit parentage to a child who wasn't his? The identity of Jesus as the Son of David established that although Jesus was part of God's plan, Joseph, as a righteous man, must cooperate (Brown, 34).

The name "Jesus" also is reminiscent of Moses' successor, Joshua, who led the Israelites into the Promised Land. Moses, Joshua, and Jesus are all saviors of their people, yet Jesus' people extend beyond just the Jewish descendants of the Hebrews to include *all* nations. Furthermore, Jesus is to be so named because he will save his people from their sins. "The bondage is no longer that of Egypt but of sin" (Ibid., 35).

Joseph's naming of Jesus legitimates Joseph's parentage, but "Emmanuel"—meaning "God with us"—signifies that Jesus was begotten of the Spirit. The name looks forward to Jesus' ministry and the Spirit's enduring presence, for Matthew's final words are Jesus' words: "Low, I am with you always." Thus, the Spirit present in the risen Christ is a



## Offer Illustration

How can I help learners think about the issues?

### ○ Compassionate Grace

Frederick Buechner has the following to say about compassion:

Compassion is the sometimes fatal capacity for feeling what it's like to live inside somebody else's skin. It is the knowledge that there can never be any peace and joy for me until there is peace and joy finally for you, too. (15)

Furthermore, Buechner also contends that grace is a religious concept that still intensely interests people. Even the derivatives “gracious” and “graceful” are not “worn-out” terms. “Grace is something you can never get but only be given. There’s no way to earn it or deserve it or bring it about any more than we can earn good looks or one’s own birth” (33).

Buechner continues by pointing out that good sleep, good dreams, most tears, and love are all forms of grace, and as we know, crucial to the Christian faith is the notion that people are redeemed by grace. There is nothing anyone has to do to earn it; rather, grace can be ours only if we reach out and accept it.

### Questions

- What is the relationship between grace and compassion?
- How does Joseph’s story provide an example of compassionate grace for us today?

### ○ That’s My Family!

Recent years have seen an increased interest in genealogy. Searching the family tree has become a hobby for thousands of people, and technological advances have made the search for roots even more fruitful. In fact, even a cursory surf of the Internet yields more than 4,500,000 web sites devoted entirely to genealogical societies. Included are guides and resources, newsgroups and mailing lists, downloadable software, personal and family genealogical home pages, genealogy societies, libraries, photographs, genealogy event announcements, and commercial search services.

One site in particular, <[www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com)>, features free searches of select databases—not to mention, virtually unlimited searches for a nominal monthly fee. Among other things, the site has a database for US residential White Pages and Federal Census images. One can even search for roots according to country of family origin. Many genealogical services offer web space for creating and displaying family photographs and other memorabilia, while some services even offer to print copies of the “online books.”

### Questions

- Why do you think so many adults today are experiencing a resurgence of interest in their family genealogies?
- Why would people of 1st-century Palestine have been interested in Jesus’ ancestry?

## Discussion

How do I lead learners to dialogue about the session?

### ○ The Spirit of Creation

Jewish thought connected the Spirit of God with creation. In fact, the Hebrew word for *breath* and *spirit* is the same: *ruah*. According to Genesis, in the beginning God's Spirit moved on the face of the waters until chaos became a world. A psalmist also declared that God had sent forth God's Spirit in creation (Ps 104:30). Similarly, Job declared that the Spirit of the Lord had made him, that the breath of the Almighty had indeed given him life.

Being born of the Holy Spirit, Jesus brought God's life-giving, creating power into the world. And the Jews connected the Spirit not only with creation, but also with *re-creation*. For example, Ezekiel's valley of dry bones is grim, but then the prophet goes on to tell how those dry bones came back to life. Ezekiel even hears God say, "I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live" (Ezek 37:14). As yet another rabbinical saying notes, "God said to Israel, 'In this world my Spirit has put wisdom in you, but in the future my Spirit will make you to live again.'" Thus, Jesus also brought the power to re-create life (Barclay, 12-13).

Ask your participants to consider how the Spirit of God stirs within believers today. Inquire further as to what aspects of our lives God's Spirit can revive. Finally, lead the group in dialogue surrounding how the Spirit strengthens them.

## Questions

### Questions about Scripture

- For what other reasons might Matthew have included four women in his genealogy?
- What do you think is the significance of dreams in Matthew's birth narrative?
- What insights do we gain from Matthew's focus on Joseph?

### Questions for All Adults

- At what significant points have you experienced grace in your life?
- What examples of compassion, or lack of compassion, can you cite from today's world? From your community in particular?
- What parts of Joseph and Mary's story echo stories today?

### Questions for Mature Adults

- If you had been Joseph's parents or grandparents, how would you have counseled him in this situation?
- Do you think most Americans are more or less compassionate than they were 20 years ago?
- What is the most miraculous Advent or Christmas season you can remember?

### Questions for Younger Adults

- What difficulties might Joseph and Mary have faced at the beginning of their marriage?
- How do you imagine you might have reacted if you had been Mary or Joseph upon first finding out about Mary's pregnancy?
- How has the meaning of "obedience" changed for you over time?

### Questions for Adults with Children

- How might you react if your children found themselves in Mary and Joseph's predicament?
- What specific challenges might Joseph and Mary have faced as very young parents?
- At what points in the story do you identify with Joseph and/or Mary?

## *Involve Learners*

How can I lead learners to explore the session together?

### ○ **Dear Children**

Read the following to the class:

Give each of your participants a piece of paper and a pen or pencil. Then, provide a brief synopsis of the plot underlying this session's Scripture passage. Remind the group that the angel has appeared to Mary, informing her that she will bear God's Son. When Joseph finds out his fiancé is pregnant, naturally he is confused but nonetheless compassionate, resolving not to accuse Mary publicly. However, the angel instructs Joseph not to be afraid to wed Mary because her child will be the prophesied Emmanuel.

Next, invite your learners to imagine that they are the parents of either Mary or Joseph, and that their children have just announced the news to them. After some consideration, invite each of them to write a brief letter to one or both of their "children," trying to communicate their feelings as a parent. Allow about five minutes for brainstorming, encouraging volunteers to share their letters if they wish and to dialogue as a group.

### ○ **Compassion Index**

Theologian Raymond Brown suggests that Matthew never claims that obedience to the law and love/compassion are opposites. Even before the angel's visit, Joseph understands that the law allows for sensitive behavior, neither assuming the worst in persons nor seeking the maximum punishment for wrongdoing. Brown contends that Matthew's objection to the legalists is not that they keep the law exactly, but that they do not understand the depths of God's purpose in the law. He concludes that the church today encounters legalism because of "unimaginative enforcement by those who should be interpreting" (33).

Having related all this to your learners, suggest that the group reflect on their own capacity for love and compassion in light of Brown's comments.

## *Closure*

How do I lead learners to respond?

### ○ **Commitment to Compassion**

Invite your group to work collectively to summarize the insights they have gained from this session of study. Ask a volunteer to record the group's comments on a chalkboard or sheet of newsprint. After a few minutes of dialogue, give each participant a half-sheet of paper along with a pen or pencil, asking them to reflect on the group's discussion of compassion. Then, invite your learners to compose their own commitments to compassion, especially in specific situations. If you prefer, let the group know that this is an individual activity. In other words, they need not feel pressured to share the specific situations they think of with the group at large. When everyone has finished writing, close the session with prayer.

## 5

# THE ARRIVAL OF CHRIST

*Matthew 2:13-23*

## Find Relevance



**Why do adults care about this session?** We live in a mobile society. No longer do people live out their lives in the towns where they were born. In fact, more than half the adults in the United States will make at least one major move, possibly across the country, and not only that, but they will likely change jobs or careers by the time they are middle-aged. Families do not live as close together geographically as they used to. Usually, both spouses in a marriage work, and some even work two jobs. Adults with children find themselves scurrying back and forth from ballgames to piano lessons. Sometimes in our fast-paced, mobile society, adults may feel like exiles, much like Joseph, Mary, and the baby Jesus in our focal Scripture.

Adults today have various responses to Christ. While many still accept Christ as Redeemer, others are not necessarily willing to do so. Some may be indifferent, while others may accept Jesus solely as a great prophet. Still others may actually express hostility, however unfounded. This session leads adults to grapple with ways of presenting Christ in a world filled with such varied responses.

## Seek Understanding



**What do these Scriptures mean?** Matthew's audience would have naturally believed that God appeared to Joseph as an angel speaking through a dream. In that day, it was widely understood that God communicated in such ways. Even the flight to Egypt would not have been out of the ordinary. Often when persecution arose, the Jews sought refuge in Egypt. As a result, every city in Egypt included a community of Jews, with more than a million in Alexandria. Joseph and Mary may have been exiles, but needless to say, they would not have been entirely among strangers in Egypt.

Furthermore, assassination and murder were commonplace to King Herod. No one expected that King Herod would calmly accept the news of a baby born King of the Jews, yet not even Herod's death lessened the threats he posed. When Herod died, the kingdom was divided among his three sons: Judea to Archelaus, Galilee to Herod Antipas, and the region beyond the Jordan to Phillip. Archelaus opened his rule in a deliberate attempt to outdo his father, starting off by killing at least 3,000 of the most influential people in his region (Barclay, 30). It was certainly not safe for Joseph, Mary, and the infant Jesus to return to Judea, so the angel guided them to the safer region of Galilee.



## Offer Illustrations

How can I help learners think about the issues?

### ○ A Story of Exiles

In his short story “Exiles,” Garrison Keillor describes various people coming home for Christmas to Lake Wobegon, Minnesota, many who attend Christmas worship services at local churches. Some who have not been to church since the previous Christmas usually prepare themselves to hear a “hard sermon.” At another church, a young man becomes so contrite that he repents of the same sins for the 12th time! Other travelers who originally told their families they weren’t coming home for Christmas show up anyway, throwing several households into a frenzy. The story ends when three exiles—husband and wife, along with their daughter, who is home for Christmas—unexpectedly arrive at their preacher cousin’s house just as he and his wife are arguing. With his usual mix of warmth and humor, Keillor depicts characters who come home for Christmas hoping to find peace and safety but discovering themselves a bit unsettled instead. Likewise, the audience is a bit unsettled as well.

### Questions

- What might the characters in Keillor’s short story have in common with the exiles described in today’s Scripture passage?
- How can the joy of Christmas also be unsettling?

### ○ Albanian Cultural Gala

More than two years ago, an Albanian musician arrived in New York to join a sizable number of Albanians already living in the Bronx. A violin teacher, she was to perform a concert at the Albanian American Center. Two missionaries who went to meet her discovered that the Albanian-American Association of New York was staging a music and drama festival at a church in Manhattan. These performers were people of the Albanian diaspora, earning money to aid other Albanians, displaced because of extreme political and economic oppression in their homeland. Another time, the missionaries met a man who had returned to his native land in order to bring his family to the United States. A local church welcomed the family back to the United States, providing clothing and supplies they would need until they found jobs.

Much of the missionary couple’s work is among diaspora people, those who have left their land because of famine, war, or simply the desire for a better way of life. Some find relief from persecution in neighboring countries, but many of them come to the United States seeking sanctuary.

### Questions

- In what ways are these exiles like Joseph, Mary, and Jesus as they fled for Egypt?
- What do you think this story communicates about hospitality?

## Discussion

How do I lead learners to dialogue about the session?

### ○ Biblical Parallels

Matthew's inclusion of the flight to Egypt in his Gospel has numerous parallels with Old Testament stories, the most noticeable being the stories of Moses and Joseph. Matthew's Joseph, to whom the angel appears in a dream, is reminiscent of the Old Testament Joseph, who interpreted dreams and went to Egypt, ultimately saving his father, Jacob, and his brothers by welcoming them to Egypt, too. The New Testament story of Joseph also resembles the Old Testament story of Moses, who escaped from the Pharaoh that killed male infants and who returned after those who sought his death were themselves dead.

Likewise, with the baby Jesus and Mary, Joseph retreats to Egypt to escape Herod, who also killed infants in his pursuit of eliminating Jesus. When the threat is over, Joseph and his family are able to return. Moreover, the name "Jesus" is similar to "Joshua," the name of Moses' successor who guided Israel into the Promised Land (Brown, 34).

Ask your participants why they think Matthew drew so many parallels between the birth narrative of Jesus and certain Old Testament stories. Inquire further about the differences between Joseph's story and the Old Testament stories. Encourage the group to dialogue about possible reasons for both the discontinuity and the continuity among biblical stories.

## Questions

### Questions about Scripture

- What were the various reactions to Jesus' appearance in the world?
- Why do you think Matthew repeatedly refers to the Old Testament prophecies which he says Jesus fulfills?
- How would you characterize Joseph based on Matthew's presentation of him?

### Questions for All Adults

- In what ways do people respond to Christ today?
- With which characters in the Scripture text can you most easily relate?
- Where is your safe place of refuge?

### Questions for Mature Adults

- If you have ever moved to another town or city, how would you describe such a transition?
- How might you have felt had you been the parents of either Mary or Joseph?
- Do you think adults today respond differently to Jesus than adults did 10 or 20 years ago?

### Questions for Younger Adults

- How do you think the young family felt in a foreign land?
- In what ways would you have responded to the magi's visit?
- How do you think many young adults respond to Jesus today?

### Questions for Adults with Children

- How far away do you and your children live from parents and grandparents?
- How difficult would it be to move your entire family to another city?
- What difficulties do you think Joseph and Mary encountered on their journey because they were traveling with a small child?

## Involve Learners

How can I lead learners to explore the session together?

### ○ A Cure for Homelessness

Author Will Campbell refers to people who live on the streets as “houseless,” *not* “homeless,” because after all, their “home” is wherever they happen to be. Campbell relates that every time he visits another city, he asks how many houseless people live there. Then, he asks how many churches are in the city. Interestingly enough, there are usually about as many churches as street people. Campbell then suggests that every congregation adopt one person living on the streets without even asking why that person is homeless (15). The congregation could help the person find a job, secure a place to live, and even make friends.

Relate this story to your group before asking participants how difficult they think it would be for Campbell’s plan to work. Then, ask your learners to what extent they think Mary and Joseph may have felt like a homeless/houseless family.

### Questions

- How do you think the family was greeted in Egypt?
- How do you think they were greeted when they returned to Galilee?

### ○ Get into Character!

Encourage your participants to close their eyes for about five minutes and imagine they are any one of the characters in this session’s story: Mary, Joseph, Herod, an Egyptian, one of the Galilean neighbors, or the angel. After a few moments of silence, guide the group’s reflection by asking questions like the following:

### Questions

- How do you feel about the situation you are in?

- Who are the people with whom you are interacting?
- How will you respond to others around you?
- What will you do about the situation in which you find yourself?

Pause after each question to allow enough time for participants to get into character. After reflection time, form small groups of three to five people, asking group members to share with each other what characters they imagined and how they felt as those characters. Finally, draw the small groups back together as one larger group and ask what insights into Scripture this activity gave them.

## Closure

How do I lead learners to respond?

### ○ Traveling Mercies

Note that on this first Sunday after Advent, we—along with Mary, Joseph, and the Christ child—begin the journey of another season. Mention that writer Anne Lamott, in one of her latest books, says that her friends at church have a blessing they say to anyone who is going to take a trip: “Traveling mercies.” The phrase is a blessing which means, “Love the journey, God is with you, come home safe and sound” (106). Suggest that each of your participants reflect for a moment on the journeys they will travel during the upcoming year, and then when they are ready, offer a traveling blessing of their own to someone nearby.