

St. Jerome Catholic Church
Small Faith Communities



**READY FOR
JOY!**

**FAITH-SHARING REFLECTIONS ON THE
SUNDAY GOSPELS**

Introduction

Let every heart prepare Him room

Welcome to our St. Jerome Parish Advent program for Small Faith Communities (SFC). We are called, especially during this Advent Season, to “Get Ready for Joy.” Participating in a seasonal group is a great way to truly experience the Joy, not only of Advent, but of the Christmas Season that follows. Are you new to Small Faith Communities? Our introduction includes a primer on SFC’s, and some guidelines for participation. If you are a returning SFC member, welcome back! We look forward to journeying with you, preparing room in our hearts for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in History, Mystery and Majesty.

About this Advent SFC Program

“Ready for Joy” is a seasonal SFC, planned for groups to complete five sessions, 1-2 per week, beginning just prior to and during Advent. Existing SFC’s, Parish Ministry Groups (Music, Liturgy, Hospitality, etc.) and Parish Service Organizations are welcome to form seasonal group(s). Meetings typically last 60 to 90 minutes and take place in the home of one of the members. Alternate meeting sites can be found in local parks, libraries and community centers (public or private). Parish meeting space may be limited due to other ongoing programs.

There are five sessions in this e-book, beginning with the Feast of Christ the King, and ending with the 4th Sunday of Advent. Groups are encouraged to meet once weekly on the week prior to the scheduled Gospel reading, so that the five sessions may be completed starting November 19 and ending December 17. For example, a group meeting on Sundays would start with Session 1 on Sunday November 19. The topic, Feast of Christ the King, is celebrated the following Sunday, November 26th. There is flexibility for groups to consider finishing early, before the last session written for the 4th Sunday in Advent (December 24).

The materials will guide you through each session. The meeting format consists of:

- Gather and pray
- Proclaim the Gospel
- Reflect
- Share
- Act
- Pray and Go Forth

One faith tradition that has been used since the early days of the Church is “Lectio Divina.” Lectio Divina is Latin for “Divine Reading”, and is a beautiful way of praying through the scriptures. Our Advent sessions have infused the steps of Lectio Divina, including:

- **Lectio**- reading aloud and studying each week’s gospel;
- **Medatio**- meditating or reflecting;
- **Oratio**-praying and opening our hearts to what God may be saying to us; and
- **Comtempatio**-resting silently in the Word, listening for how God may be calling us to respond before we conclude and return to daily lives.

What is a Small Faith Community (SFC)?

An SFC is a face-to-face gathering of six to twelve people who invest time with one another for the common purpose of sharing faith in a supportive environment for spiritual growth. Together, each member of an SFC is challenged to deepen prayer, reflection, provide mutual support, learn more about their faith, and participate in the mission of the Church. SFC’s are modeled after the ways that grew the Early Church.

“They devoted themselves to the teaching (didache) of the apostles and to the communal life (koinonia), and to the breaking of the bread (leitourgia, koinonia) and to the prayers (leitorurgia).

All who believed were together (koinonia), and had all things in common (diakononia); they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one’s need (diakononia). Acts 2:42-45

In the tradition of the early church, today’s SFC’s share these same essential elements. Members:

- Recognize the centrality of God’s presence and power in each person, and in the community: **prayer** (leitourgia)
- Talk freely about God and life experiences in light of scripture readings and church tradition: **faith sharing** (kerygma);
- Are faithful to the gospel and support one another: **mutual support** (koinonia)
- Gain a fuller understanding of the gospel, Church and its teachings in relation to life’s circumstances: **faith sharing and learning** (kerygma, didache)
- Participate in a meaningful way in the life of their parish, performing some form of apostolic mission to the wider society: **mission** (diakanonia)

What an SFC is not...

SFC's build community and help members grow in Christian faith and life. SFC meetings are *not* formed to have as a main focus:

- Discussion- to exchange helpful ideas, problem solve or plan an activity;
- Bible study- where primary focus is learning facts or asking academic questions;
- Psychotherapy or group counseling;
- Teaching or preaching- where one person speaks and all others listen.

SFC's emphasize listening, quiet reflection, and faith sharing. Members are open to how the Holy Spirit together with SFC members may be inspiring them. They listen to one another, express their experiences in a safe and sacred space. They accept, support and learn from each other.

Faith Sharing Principles and Guidelines:

Principles of Theology related to SFC's are:

- God leads each one of us individually on our spiritual journey.
- Faith sharing refers to shared reflections on the action of God in one's life experience, in relation to Scripture and Church Tradition. It is "being aware of a moment of grace when God touched my life and sharing that with others."
- Faith sharing contributes to the vitality of the whole Church. SFC's unite us with Christ and one another. We receive guidance from the Church's leadership. We are nurtured in the sacramental life, and supported by the larger Christian community to help carry out our mission.
- ***The entire faith-sharing process is, in itself, a prayer.***

Guidelines for SFC meetings:

- Remain attentive to giving respect and honoring each member's unique faith journey.
- Attend regularly. Contact the SFC Host or another member if you will be late or absent.
- While the entire group is invited to and responsible for faith sharing, members share when they feel comfortable to do so. It is ok to "pass", when not feeling ready yet to share.
- Silence is a vital part of the process of faith sharing. Consider use of an egg timer or stop watch assure moments of silence are set aside and adequate for the group.
- Members are encouraged to wait before all others have shared, before sharing a second time.

- Confidentiality is essential, creating safety for each person to share.
- Reaching out beyond the group, in response to the experience of SFC meetings is vital for the growth of each member, the group, and the Church.

Role of Facilitator:

- Prepares for and guides the SFC meeting;
- Helps SFC meeting stay on topic;
- Gently encourages and invites all members to speak;
- May invite members to read aloud, lead prayer or other parts of the SFC session, as they are ready;
- Follows up, if needed, with any questions from the group that need guidance from Parish staff;
- Helps create a warm, accepting, safe environment for members to grow in faith together;
- Helps group to evaluate meetings, what is going well, what can be improved. Shares results with parish SFC core team;
- Mentors others interested in serving as a group facilitator for purposes of “back up” or for start up of a new SFC.

Role of Host:

- Arranges for meeting location, either in their own or another member’s home, or an alternative site; communicates meeting location to members and provides his/her contact information;
- Arranges room set up for members to see and listen to each other (chair arrangement, lighting);
- Welcomes arriving members and makes sure they are comfortable;
- Sets up meeting space, includes simple décor in keeping with liturgical season. (for example-candle or advent wreath, lit at start of meeting; Bible on table with purple or pink cloth);
- Refreshments for after meeting-optional, if members wish; usually served at meeting conclusion; coordinates planning, rotating this duty between member;
- Accepts phone calls from members who may be running late or need to be excused, keeps group informed;
- Above functions may be shared between members, depending on the needs of the SFC.

Thank you for committing your time to participating in this seasonal SFC. The benefits of are abundant! They:

- help connect our faith to daily life;
- empower us to discover and nurture our spirituality;
- connect us to each other and God's word, building community;
- create new and strengthen existing relationships;
- encourage us to act according to Christian values;
- make a difference in our lives and in the world;
- cultivate our ability to share the Love of Christ, and to serve in the mission field-right where we live, and around the world!

“Never doubt that small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.” -Margaret Mead

The following pages include the SFC material for each week. We have been given permission to use small group sessions from “Prayer Time,” a publication of Renew International. We are grateful for help from Deacon Charles Paolino, Managing Editor for Renew International, the assistance of Diane Kledzik, director of Marriage and Family Life for the Dioceses of St. Petersburg, and for the guidance of our own Sister Lucia Brady, Director of Pastoral Care and Lifelong Faith Formation at St. Jerome's.

And now, with God's Grace, Lets “Get Ready for Joy!”

Maranatha,

Lorna Sly, Jeff and Geralyn Kirklichter,
Kathleen Moreau, Mark Kantzler, Mary Ellen Smith
and Sister Lucia Brady

The St. Jerome SFC Advent Planning Team

OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST THE KING

Last Sunday in Ordinary Time

Selfless Love Is the Sign of Christ's Reign

Gather and Pray

Warmly greet one another and, when ready begin with The Sign of the Cross and a moment of silence to enter more deeply into God's presence among us.

Prayer: Psalm 23 verses 1-3, refrain, verses 5-6 refrain.

Refrain(all): The Lord is my sheperd, there is nothing I shall want.

Proclaim the Gospel

Matthew 25:31-46

"Whatever You Did...You Did for Me."

***Lectio Divina step one:** pause in silence 2-3 minutes after proclaiming the gospel to savor a word or phrase that rises up in you. You may choose to briefly share your word or phrase before going forward.*

Reflect

Separating sheep from goats was a familiar routine for the herders in Jesus' day. Each night, the mixed herds would have to be separated. The hardy sheep could sleep outdoors in the cold Palestinian evenings, while the goats had to be sheltered for warmth. Today's passage is yet another story on divine judgment. Matthew's Gospel is peppered with images of separating: weeds from wheat, fish in the dragnet, trees that bear fruit from trees that are barren, wedding guests with garments from those without, and good servants from abusive ones. The most striking thing about today's separation of goats and sheep is that Matthew introduces this with the words, "When the Son of Man comes in his glory ... he will sit upon his glorious throne" (v. 31). These words signify the final separating, the glory of Jesus' kingship over all, and the judgment of the nations by the shepherd-king.

Judgment--the separating of the nations--is left to the harvest time, the end time, by the shepherd-king who judges with a focus upon the basis of loving the "least." The least are those in need. Simple acts of love, kindness, and compassion are required of humankind. In these simple acts of providing food, water, clothing, shelter, company, and solace, the believer discovers the presence of Christ who reigns in the hearts of all people. These small, somewhat insignificant deeds have eternal implications upon which we shall be judged in the end time.

Only active, overflowing love can prepare for the reign of Christ the King. The caring, seeking, and embracing love of the shepherd for his flock characterizes this kingship. Thus, the circle of love and care for others is the only way to unleash the kingdom, the reign of Christ the King, in this time and place. Care and compassion toward one another are the actions whereby Jesus' authority and power are exerted over humankind today. As followers of Jesus, we are moved to honor our king by the simple deeds of love that witness the power of God's kingdom.

Lectio Divina step two: Proclaim the gospel once again. Pause in silence 2-3 minutes after proclaiming the gospel, considering the above written reflection and your further thoughts on the word or phrase that spoke to you earlier. You may choose to share your personal reflection and questions before proceeding to the share questions below.

Share

1. As I reflect upon this passage, what do I find the most challenging?
2. Together determine the many ways people are hungry, thirsty, naked, imprisoned, or sick. How have I helped to meet these material, emotional, and spiritual needs?
3. What are some ways our parish community and our civic community meet these simple needs of the least in our midst?
4. How can I engage more effectively in sharing God's love?

Act

Lectio Divina step three: Proclaim the gospel once again. Pause in silence 2-3 minutes after proclaiming the gospel considering all you have heard and learned from the readings and each other.

Determine a specific action (individual or group) that flows from your sharing. This should be your primary consideration. When choosing an individual action, determine what you will do and share it with the group. When choosing a group action, determine who will take responsibility for different aspects of the action. The following are secondary suggestions:

1. Share your love concretely with one person this week.
2. Visit the homebound in your neighborhood, bringing them food, laughter, and your company.
3. Offer your time and talents to prepare someone for a job, to assist with budgeting, or to share your skills with someone in need. If there is transitional housing in or near your community, you may find someone in need there.
4. Sponsor a refugee family in your parish by providing clothing, jobs, housing, and household items.
5. Spend a few minutes each night in prayerful gratitude for those who have shown kindness to you throughout the day.

Pray and Go Forth

Pray

Give thanks to God (aloud or silently) for insights gained, for desires awakened, for directions clarified, for the gift of one another's openness and sensitivity. Conclude with the following:

Christ, our King, grant that we will see you in the eyes of the poor and sick, those who are disregarded in our society.

We ask, too, that these, the least among us, might find you in our simple deeds of love.

May we be your eyes and ears,
your feet and arms,
your loving embrace to all we meet.

We ask this under the grace of your Holy Spirit in the power of your kingship.
Amen.

Go Forth

Before we go our separate ways, let's take a few moments to re-cap our meeting.

How did it go? What worked well? What can we improve?

Did our materials help our reflection, learning and prayer? How so? What could be better?

What one thing stands out as your "take home" message for the week?

Thank you for your feedback, let's go forth, a little more ready for joy!

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Hope and Vigilance

Gather and Pray

Warmly greet one another and, when ready, begin with The Sign of the Cross and a moment of silence to enter more deeply into God's presence among us.

Prayer : Psalm 80 verse 2-3 refrain; 15-16 refrain; 18-19 refrain.

Refrain (all): Lord make us turn to you; let us see your face and we shall be saved.

Proclaim the Gospel

Mark 13:33-37

Be Watchful!

Lectio Divina step one: *pause in silence 2-3 minutes after proclaiming the gospel to savor a word or phrase that rises up in you. You may choose to briefly share your word or phrase before going forward.*

Reflect

There is a temptation to go through life waiting for some special, life-altering event to take place, whether it arrives by mail in a sudden, unexpected, climactic experience or in the arrival of a new, meaningful person on the scene. It can be a bit like waiting for the magical moment of winning the lottery.

We want to be watchful in avoiding sinfulness or preoccupation with unnecessary distractions that take our focus away from Christ. 'The Advent call expressed in today's Gospel to "Be watchful! Be alert!" (Mark 13:33), must be more than a passive waiting. Active watchfulness challenges us to put our spiritual lives in order. It challenges us to have Christ be primary in our lives over all other pursuits, ambitions, or involvements.

Advent is a time for prayerful reflection, a time to be particularly alert to the promptings of God's grace. In what specific ways are we being called to change our lives? It is a time for generous good works in which our kindness and care for others displace excessive self-absorption and concern. Openheartedness, through engagement in good works, creates room for Christ's vital presence.

Too passive a waiting for the coming of Christ may find Christmas coming and going with little change in our lives. Active alertness and receptivity to the coming of Christ bring fulfillment of the promise: "I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly" (John 1:10).

Lectio Divina step two: Proclaim the gospel once again. Pause in silence 2-3 minutes after proclaiming the gospel, considering the above written reflection and your further thoughts on the word or phrase that spoke to you earlier. You may choose to share your personal reflection and questions before proceeding to the questions below.

Share

1. In what ways is God's grace urging me to a more conscious awareness of the presence of Christ and a deeper relationship with him?
2. How am I being called to make this Advent different from Advents past?
3. What place will prayer play in my Advent preparations?

Act

Lectio Divina step three: Proclaim the gospel once again. Pause in silence 2-3 minutes after proclaiming the gospel considering all you have heard and learned from the readings and each other.

Determine a specific action (individual or group) that flows from your sharing. This should be your primary consideration. When choosing an individual action, determine what you will do and share it with the group. When choosing a group action, determine who will take responsibility for different aspects of the action. The following are secondary suggestions:

1. Set aside a certain amount of time each day this Advent for prayer.
2. Make an Advent wreath and begin each meal during the season by lighting the appropriate number of candles and saying grace before eating. If you need some direction for your Advent prayer, see what materials are available from your parish or from a local Catholic bookstore.

3. If you have children (or grandchildren who live nearby), spend time with them during the often busy days and weeks before Christmas. Though they may not say it, children want your time even more than they want the Christmas gifts you're buying for them.
4. If you don't already have some, develop customs or traditions for Advent that include sharing with others who may not have been remembered or who are in more need than yourself.
5. Set up the stable from a nativity set and add a piece of straw to the manger each time a member of the household does a good work. By building up the place where the figure of the Christ Child will rest come Christmas Day, children and adults alike learn about preparing for the Lord by living out the Gospel's call to love and service of others.

Pray and Go Forth

Pray

Give thanks to God (aloud or silently) for insights gained, for desires awakened, for directions clarified, for the gift of one another's openness and sensitivity. Conclude with the following:

Leader God of all times, you alone know the time when Christ will return
in glory.
We thank you for bringing us together today around your Word.
Set our hearts this Advent on using well the time you have given us
on earth.
Keep us alert to your presence in those around us, and fill us with
hope as we strive to live in your reign.
We ask this through Christ our Lord.

All **Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.**

Go Forth

Before we go our separate ways, let's take a few moments to re-cap our meeting.

How did it go? What worked well? What can we improve?

Did our materials help our reflection, learning and prayer? How so? What could be better?

What one thing stands out as your "take home" message for the week?

Thank you for your feedback, let's go forth, even more ready for joy!

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Patience and Forgiveness

Gather and Pray

Warmly greet one another and, when ready, begin with The Sign of the Cross and a moment of silence to enter more deeply into God's presence among us.

Pray: Psalm 85 Verses 9-10, refrain; 11-12, refrain; 13-14, refrain

Refrain (all): Lord let us see your kindness, and grant us your salvation.

Proclaim the Gospel

Mark 1: 1-8

Make Straight the Paths of the Lord

Lectio Divina step one: *pause in silence 2-3 minutes after proclaiming the gospel to savor a word or phrase that rises up in you. You may choose to briefly share your word or phrase before going forward.*

Reflect

With clothing of camel's hair and a diet of locusts and wild honey, John the Baptist is certainly one of the more colorful characters in the Bible! This Gospel opens with a declaration of Jesus as the Son of God and then promptly introduces John as the messenger who points to Jesus. John's method of preparing for Jesus was as unreserved as his appearance. He called people to repent, acknowledge their sins, and undergo baptism for forgiveness.

Unlike Lent, Advent is not primarily a penitential season. It does, however, invite us to acknowledge what in our lives, as individuals and as Christian communities, stands in the way of God's reign. Unlike John the Baptist, we do not look forward to Christ's first coming among us, but rather to his coming to us anew each day and to his return in glory at the end of time, when God's reign will be fulfilled. John's call is nevertheless still valid—repentance and forgiveness are essential for those who would prepare the way of the Lord.

Our journey through Advent also teaches us another value needed by those who await the fulfillment of God's reign, and that is patience. Like the child struggling to resist the temptation to unwrap presents under the tree before Christmas arrives, we sometimes find ourselves wanting to "get through" Advent and get to Christmas. We want Christmas and we want it now! So it is with the glory of God's reign. We naturally want to enjoy it fully here and now, but Advent feeds us the wild honey of joyful expectation, reminding us that the reign of God is already being experienced but not yet complete.

Lectio Divina step two: Proclaim the gospel once again. Pause in silence 2-3 minutes after proclaiming the gospel, considering the above written reflection and your further thoughts on the word or phrase that spoke to you earlier. You may choose to share your personal reflection and questions before proceeding to the questions below.

Share

1. What things try my patience? How do I ask God to help me? What might God be telling me about my response to situations that try my patience?
2. What in me needs to be forgiven? Whom do I need to forgive? How can I make forgiveness real in my life this Advent, as a means of preparing the way of the Lord?
3. Where are forgiveness and reconciliation necessary within our parish? Are we part of a group that needs to seek forgiveness and reconciliation with other parish groups? How might we go about doing this?

Act

Lectio Divina step three: Proclaim the gospel once again. Pause in silence 2-3 minutes after proclaiming the gospel considering all you have heard and learned from the readings and each other.

Determine a specific action (individual or group) that flows from your sharing. This should be your primary consideration. When choosing an individual action, determine what you will do and share it with the group.

When choosing a group action, determine who will take responsibility for different aspects of the action. The following are secondary suggestions:

1. Celebrate forgiveness by participating in any penance services that may be planned in your parish this Advent. Check with the pastor or liturgy committee to see if your small community might be able to assist at the service as greeters or by hosting a reception after the service.

2. Reach out in forgiveness and reconciliation to groups in the parish with whom you may have had some conflict.
3. In their journey toward Christian initiation, catechumens are living witnesses to the role of patience, reminding us that true conversion happens over time. If you don't know the catechumens in your parish, make Advent the time to introduce yourself to them. Remember them in your prayers. Participate in any rites that celebrate the stages of their initiation. Consider offering to serve as a sponsor for a catechumen.

Pray and Go Forth

Pray

Give thanks to God (aloud or silently) for insights gained, for desires awakened, for directions clarified, for the gift of one another's openness and sensitivity. Conclude with the following:

Leader God of the prophets, you sent John to prepare the way for Christ through his baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Inspire us to prepare the way for Christ's return in glory by reaching out in forgiveness and patiently living out the Gospel. We ask this through Christ our Lord.

***All* Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.**

Go Forth

Before we go our separate ways, lets take a few moments to re-cap our meeting. How did it go? What worked well? What can we improve? Did our materials help our reflection, learning and prayer? How so? What could be better? What one thing stands out as your "take home" message for the week?

Thank you for your feedback, lets go forth, really getting even more ready for joy!

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Peace and Justice

Gather and Pray

Warmly greet one another and, when ready, begin with The Sign of the Cross and a moment of silence to enter more deeply into God's presence among us.

Pray: Luke 1 Verses 46-48, refrain; 49-50, refrain; 53-54, refrain

Refrain (all): My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord. And my spirit exults in God my Savior.

Proclaim the Gospel

John 1:6-8, 19-28

There is One Among You Whom You Do Not Recognize

***Lectio Divina step one:** pause in silence 2-3 minutes after proclaiming the gospel to savor a word or phrase that rises up in you. You may choose to briefly share your word or phrase before going forward.*

Reflect

Have you ever heard the expression that someone has a "messiah complex"? Usually, it means that the person believes or acts like he or she is capable of saving the world or at least solving all the problems of a particular group. Based on today's Gospel, John the Baptist seemed to have every right to have a messiah complex. Priests, Levites, and Pharisees all ask him what many Jews were wondering: "Who are you? . . . Are you Elijah? . . . Are you the Prophet?" (John 1:19-21). John's response to the questions is adamant: "I am not the Messiah... I am not [Elijah]," but rather, "I am 'the voice of one crying out in the desert, 'Make straight the way of the Lord'" (John 1:20-21, 23). John denies any special role for himself and instead portrays himself as pointing toward "the one who is coming after me" (John 1:27).

John models the kind of attitude and behavior that each individual Christian and each Christian community are called to imitate. All that we do is meant to point to Christ and to direct others to Christ, not to call attention to ourselves or to heighten our own importance. We practice this when we reach beyond ourselves to help others live life to the fullest. Models of this kind of selfless love are still found amidst the often-overwhelming evils of our world. They are found among parents, spouses, friends, colleagues, parish staff, public officials, and those who transcend their own self-importance so that others might move forward. They include those whose charity and work for justice "bring glad tidings to the lowly, [and]. heal the brokenhearted" (see Isaiah 61:1, which is this Sunday's first reading). They illuminate our world as the holiday lights illuminate the darkness of December nights. May we be numbered among them!

Lectio Divina step two: Proclaim the gospel once again. Pause in silence 2-3 minutes after proclaiming the gospel, considering the above written reflection and your further thoughts on the word or phrase that spoke to you earlier. You may choose to share your personal reflection and questions before proceeding to the questions below.

Share

1. Who are the people who have allowed their self importance to recede so I might grow and develop into the person God is calling me to be? How can I thank or acknowledge them?
2. In what ways do my attitude and actions point to Jesus Christ? In what ways do they point to me or try to call attention to my own importance?
3. How do my actions as a Christian and our actions as a Christian community "bring glad tidings to the lowly, [and] . . . heal the brokenhearted?" Isaiah 61:1). How are my acts of charity during the holidays connected to my work for justice all year long?

Act

Lectio Divina step three: Proclaim the gospel once again. Pause in silence 2-3 minutes after proclaiming the gospel considering all you have heard and learned from the readings and each other.

Determine a specific action (individual or group) that flows from your sharing. This should be your primary consideration. When choosing an individual action, determine what you will do and share it with the group.

When choosing a group action, determine who will take responsibility for different aspects of the action. The following are secondary suggestions:

1. Remember that any ministry or service you do is intended to help people experience the loving presence of Jesus Christ. If others thank or praise you for your service, be grateful for their appreciation and rejoice that the Lord has worked through you.
2. The second reading for this Sunday speaks of "the God of peace" (1Thessalonians 5:23), yet peace is often overshadowed by stress in the days before Christmas. Help alleviate some of this stress for others by organizing a weekend afternoon of activities for children at the church or in the neighborhood, so that parents can take care of Christmas preparations, or by offering to help a homebound person do the same.
3. Some of the people who receive our charity during the holiday season cannot break out of poverty because of inadequate education or training. Contact the local Catholic Charities office to see how your group or parish might be able to assist someone to receive the reception or training necessary for a higher paying job, or perhaps help a person who doesn't yet have a job.

Pray and Go Forth

Pray

Give thanks to God (aloud or silently) for insights gained, for desires awakened, for directions clarified, for the gift of one another's openness and sensitivity. Conclude with the following:

Leader God of justice and peace, your servant John testified to the light that came into the world's darkness in Jesus Christ the Lord.

God, our Father, may our charity to the poor and our work for justice for all people make straight the way that leads to you.

We ask this through Christ our Lord and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

All Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.

Go Forth

Before we go our separate ways, let's take a few moments to re-cap our meeting. How did it go? What worked well? What can we improve?

Did our materials help our reflection, learning and prayer? How so? What could be better? What one thing stands out as your "take home" message for the week?

Thank you for your feedback, let's go forth, really, really getting even more ready for joy!

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Mary as Model Disciple

Gather and Pray

Warmly greet one another and, when ready, begin with The Sign of the Cross and a moment of silence to enter more deeply into God's presence among us.

Pray: Psalm 89 Verses 2-3, refrain; 4-5, refrain; 27 and 29, refrain

Refrain (all): Forever I will sing the goodness of the Lord.

Proclaim the Gospel:

Luke 1:26-38

Behold, You Will Conceive in Your Womb and Bear a Son

Lectio Divina step one: *pause in silence 2-3 minutes after proclaiming the gospel to savor a word or phrase that rises up in you. You may choose to briefly share your word or phrase before going forward.*

Reflect

"How can this be?" It's a perfectly normal reaction when we're faced with something that doesn't seem to make sense. It was certainly an understandable reaction from Mary in this Gospel. An ordinary, humble Jewish girl, she is visited by an angel who tells her she will conceive a son without benefit of a husband, and this child will be the Son of God, the Messiah her people have longed for. How can this be, indeed!

What follows Mary's initial reaction, though, is what elevates her to the status of model disciple. She doesn't try to bargain with the angel ("Just let me get married first, and then I'll be happy to be the mother of God!"), nor does she resort to what we might call a "take charge attitude" (*If I'm going to give birth to the Son of God, then we've got some planning to do!"). Rather, her response is one of complete acceptance of God's will: "I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). Mary's "yes" with no conditions finds a parallel years later in her Son's acceptance of God's will on the night before his crucifixion: "not my will but yours be done" (Luke 22:42). Her unconditional "yes" reveals her discipleship.

In the classic holiday film "Miracle on 34th Street," a single mother and her daughter come to see that faith involves believing in something you can't see. As wonderful as that film is, it pales in comparison to the story of faith in today's Gospel. Despite any assurances of what the future will hold, Mary places her complete trust in God and does what God asks. This is the model we are called to emulate. God does not give us a script for our lives so that we might see what lies ahead. Jesus' birth, death, and Resurrection did not mean that we would never face suffering or difficulty. God simply promises never to abandon us, no matter what we face in life. God's power, which overshadowed Mary, will also come upon us in the joys and challenges we encounter. That's the miracle for those who trust in God, and it doesn't just happen on 34th Street!

Lectio Divina step two: Proclaim the gospel once again. Pause in silence 2-3 minutes after proclaiming the gospel, considering the above written reflection and your further thoughts on the word or phrase that spoke to you earlier. You may choose to share your personal reflection and questions before proceeding to the questions below.

Share

1. In what ways do I see Mary as a disciple of Christ? As a model of Christian discipleship?
2. Am I alert and open to God's call? How is God calling me to be a disciple in my life? What holds me back from accepting what God is asking?
3. How much do I trust God? Do I believe that God, whose power overshadowed Mary, will be there for me in the joys and challenges of my life?
4. How might we embrace Mary's model of discipleship and let it influence our own lives? Our family life?

Act

Lectio Divina step three: Proclaim the gospel once again. Pause in silence 2-3 minutes after proclaiming the gospel considering all you have heard and learned from the readings and each other.

Determine a specific action (individual or group) that flows from your sharing. This should be your primary consideration. When choosing an individual action, determine what you will do and share it with the group.

When choosing a group action, determine who will take responsibility for different aspects of the action. The following are secondary suggestions:

1. Recall times in your life when you consciously put your trust in God and were aware that God was present to you and watching over you. Thank God for those times. Thank the people who were a sign of God's presence to you.
2. Read more about Mary and her role in our faith. At Prayer with Mary (RENEW International, 888-433-3221 or www.renewintl.org) focuses on Mary's faith, her humanness, her poverty, and her struggles as a model of Christian living. See also the following Catholic Updates: Mary of Nazareth: Jesus' Mother, as well as other Mary titles (St. Anthony Messenger Press, 800. 188.0488 or www.americancatholic.org).
3. The Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God is celebrated on January 1. Check with the pastor or liturgy committee to see if your small community might be able to assist at the holy day Mass as greeters or by hosting a reception after the Mass to honor Mary and celebrate the New Year.

Pray and Go Forth

Pray

Give thanks to God (aloud or silently) for insights gained, for desires awakened, for directions clarified, for the gift of one another's openness and sensitivity. Conclude with the following:

Leader Let us pray:
All Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you!
Blessed are you among women,
and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.
Holy Mary, mother of God,
pray for us sinners,
now and at the hour of our death. Amen.
All Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.

Go Forth

We did it! Are we ready for Joy?

Before we go our separate ways, lets take one last moment to re-cap our meetings.

Where do we go from here?

What has worked well? What can we improve?

Did our materials help our reflection, learning and prayer? How so? What could be better?

What one thing stands out as your “take home” message for the Christmas Season?

Thank you for your feedback, lets go forth, we are now really, really, really, ready for joy!

So... where to we go from here? Here's a few suggestions...

- *keep meeting! Check in with the St. Jerome SFC Advent planning team for available meeting materials;*
- *check the dosp.org website:*

<https://www.dosp.org/marriage-and-family/small-christian-communities/>

- *make plans to return for a seasonal lenten group;*
- *"Pray-in" the New Year together, attending Mass on New Years Eve or Day, together as a group;*
- *Meet up after Mass for coffee and donuts;*
- *Plan a service project together;*
- *Give feedback to the SFC Core Team for planning future programs and Parish SFC gatherings.*

Joy to the World

