

OPENING HYMN

"Each Winter as the Year Grows Older" (ELW 252)

OPENING PRAYER

Stir up your power, Lord Christ, and come. You have promised a future filled with restoration and healing. Open our hearts to hear the visions of the prophets. Awaken us to see your dreams for us and this world, so we can work to bring them into reality. Align our aspirations with your hopes for life and the flourishing of creation. Expand our imagination. Strengthen our faith to pursue the dreams you place in our hearts, even when the path is uncertain. In you, we hope and pray, for you reign with the Father and Holy Spirit, now and forever, Amen.

FOCUS VERSE

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Bibles (NRSV)
- Hymnals (ELW)
- (optional) A notebook/journal or paper, pens or pencils

Practicing Advent imagination

This Advent, we accompany Matthew's dreamers and Isaiah's visions

BY SARA OLSON-SMITH

INTRODUCTION

The season of Advent invites us into a time of dreaming, waiting, watching and anticipating. Every year, during these weeks, we prepare once again to experience the joy and hope that comes from Jesus' birth into this world. We also anticipate that great someday when all will be made right in the world, when God's dream for humanity and all creation will be realized. Despite the commercial rush to Christmas, Advent creates space for us to slow down and to ponder God's hopes for the world and aligning our lives with this vision.

Over breakfast recently, my 13-year-old daughter shared a strange and wandering dream she'd had about school. My son, who is a few years younger, commented: "Dreams are so weird. Where do they even come from?" Although I'm not a dream expert, I attempted to provide an answer, mentioning both REM sleep and the subconscious. What I thought of as talking probably sounded like droning to my daughter. In her adolescent need to end the conversation, she said: "They're from God. Dreams come from God."

A TIME FOR DREAMING

Throughout history, human beings have looked to their dreams for direction, encouragement or guidance from God. Dreams or visions can come in times of deep prayer or in the quiet darkness of night. Psychologists, neurologists and spiritual teachers often try to help us make sense of our dreams. People

of faith are invited to see some dreams as messages from God. Dreams, in their strangeness, open us up to new ways of seeing ourselves and the world.

If you think about it, Advent, the start of the church year, is also a time for dreaming, a time for creating space in our lives to imagine. For those of us in the Northern Hemisphere, Advent coincides with long winter nights that provide opportunities to slow down, rest and dream. During these weeks of Advent, we'll study Scripture and the visions of the prophet Isaiah, Joseph and the three wise men. Their dreams will help us to pay closer attention to our own dreams, and to find ways we can help build God's great dream of love and flourishing for the world.

Share aloud or reflect:

1. Where do you think dreams come from?
2. How do you envision God having a hand in your dreams?

ISAIAH AND IMAGINING

📖 **Read:** Isaiah 35:1-10 (one of the readings for Advent 3, December 14)

In *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, author Lewis Carroll writes about a conversation between two characters, Alice and the Queen of Hearts.

"There is no use trying," said Alice; "one can't believe impossible things."

"I dare say you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was your age, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

The prophet Isaiah invites us to believe in impossible things too, although not the stuff of Wonderland's watch-wearing rabbits and grinning

cats. Isaiah encourages a community in exile to envision a world beyond the terror and despair of the present reality. He describes a desert bursting with life, the exiles returning home and people experiencing wholeness and healing. Isaiah invites his community to believe in what then seems impossible—that God can and will bring them restoration, healing and new life.

According to scholars, this passage is called a chiasm, a poetic pattern where parallel ideas are presented at the beginning and the end, all of which move like an arrow to the most essential point at the center. In Isaiah 35, the prophet's dream begins and ends with creation, with a desert bursting into joy. At the center of the chiasm we find God's action to steady, strengthen, heal and restore the people: "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. God will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. God will come and save you" (verse 4).

God's faithfulness allows us to trust that the despair of the desert is not the end of the story. We can believe in impossible things because God is at the center. We look with hope to God, who comes to save us. Isaiah's visions teach us what it means to believe in what seems impossible. As we listen to Isaiah, we can begin to shape our community in ways that make those dreams a reality. The preacher Barbara Lundblad, in her commentary on these readings, shares this modern-day dream of God's saving ways:

*Then the blind woman and her dog
shall process with the choir;
the deaf man who sees what we often miss
shall paint the text on the sanctuary walls;
the veteran in the wheelchair
shall break the bread of life,
and the homeless man who cannot speak
shall sign the hymns for everyone to see.*

Like Isaiah's vision, this, too, is possible when God is at the center of our lives, shaping how we live together in community, how we open our hearts and

how we transform our perspectives. When we believe that with God all things are possible, we can begin to live in ways that make the visions of the prophets become real. In this way, divinely-inspired dreams become guides—north stars that direct our decisions and bold actions.

Share aloud or reflect:

3. What impossible things do you believe God will do in your community? In your life?
4. List one step you can take to help make even a small part of these dreams possible.

ASPIRATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

📖 **Read:** Isaiah 11:1-9

When we affirm someone's faith on their Confirmation Day, we often pray words taken from Isaiah 11:

Stir up in this beloved one the gift of your Holy Spirit: the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, the spirit of joy in your presence, both now and forever. Amen. (ELW 236).

This prayer reminds us that wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge, fear of the Lord and joy in God's presence are not acquired by study or accomplishment, but as gifts from God. These divinely given qualities are stirred up in us by the Holy Spirit.

Yet we can open ourselves to them and practice our way into them. When we pray these words over our confirmands, we hope that they live into those qualities, just as we also want to embody these

qualities. Instead of focusing our ambitions on more success and wealth, we can pursue wisdom, bravery, deeper understanding and humility in the face of God. Instead of finding joy in sugary, quick, shallow things, we can find true joy in the company of God and God's people.

As we live into these characteristics, we'll find our way into the vision so beautifully painted by Isaiah. Practicing wisdom and living in our proper place in our relationships with God and others move us toward the peaceful image of lambs taking naps with lions. As one old song declares, "let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me." Becoming peacemakers means diminishing the predatory parts of ourselves so we can claim the tender, childlike gentleness of Jesus.

The peaceable kingdom is a powerful image that invites us to imagine a time when predator and prey play with one another. It's important to remember that Isaiah wrote these words during a time of great violence and fear for God's people. A powerful army approached, and the king lacked both faith and ability. The future seemed terrifying, and their hopes appeared to be as dead as a stump. And yet, Isaiah dared to believe that a sprout could, and would, emerge from that stump. Isaiah dreamed, and hope persisted.

We too can trust that God will continue to make good, even where only awfulness seems present. God will bring peace where there is violence. God will bring healing where there is division. Prophets like Isaiah help us to expand our imagination: When we can imagine the growth of God's dream, our actions and our love can grow, too. We participate with God in bringing about this vision of a peaceable world, as we live into God's dream of what we can be too.

Share aloud or reflect:

5. Which of those aspirational qualities

come easy for you? Which are the hardest? What is something you dream of becoming? What are small things you can do to live toward this vision?

6. Where do you see the vision of the peaceable kingdom lived out, even in small ways? Where does this vision seem too far away?

REMEMBERING AS HOPE

📖 **Read:** Isaiah 63: 7-9

I'm not a boat person, but I do know that to row forward, you need to sit backward. Similarly, dreaming means remembering. In this reading, Isaiah invites his community to remember all that God has done for them in the past. The same God who liberated God's people from slavery will tend to them in the future. As the gospel hymn reminds us: "We've come this far by faith, leaning on the Lord, trusting in his holy Word. He's never failed me yet." God has never failed us yet. By recounting the stories of God's faithfulness and remembering the courage of those who have gone before us, we can step courageously into the future. Looking back gives us courage to move forward

Share aloud or reflect:

7. What story do (or could) you tell yourself, again and again, about God's faithfulness? Where, in the past, has God's presence sustained and carried you? How might looking back give you courage to face an unknown future?

JOSEPH'S DREAMS

📖 **Read:** Matthew 1:18-25

Share aloud or reflect:

8. This passage describes how the birth of Jesus took place. What is included? Who is missing? What surprises you about this story?

As a righteous man, Joseph has two options when he discovers his betrothed is pregnant. Neither option is good. He can publicly shame her, dragging her before the court and the crowd, which could likely lead to her death. Or he can dismiss her quietly, protecting her from being stoned, but abandoning her and the child she bears.

Imagine Joseph lying in bed that night, after learning about Mary's child and her seemingly impossible encounter with the angel. (Even Mary thought it impossible, asking: "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" Yet the angel responds: "Nothing is impossible with God." See Luke 1:34, 37). Is Joseph caught between emotions like anger, worry, fear and shame? Can you picture him tossing and turning, unsure of what to do, considering all the options, trying to figure out just how to care for the woman he loves, yet remain faithful to his religious tradition and culture?

Eventually, Joseph falls asleep. In a dream, God responds, giving Joseph clarity. Joseph dreams of an angel (literally, a messenger) who tells him that the child was Spirit-conceived and will be the Savior, Immanuel, God-with-us. The angel instructs Joseph to wed Mary and name the child "Jesus," which means "the Lord saves."

Joseph—like his namesake in the Hebrew scriptures—was a dreamer. Like Joseph before him, he saw God's hand in his dreams. Instead of dismissing or forgetting his dream, "arose from sleep, and did just as the angel commanded" (Matthew 1:24). Dreams can help us see ourselves and our situations in new ways. Through dreams, God may sometimes guide us to a new option, one

we hadn't previously considered.

Share aloud or reflect:

9. Has a dream (or a conversation with another person) ever been an invitation for you to change or do something new? Has a dream ever answered one of your questions?

THE WISE MEN

📖 **Read:** Matthew 2:1-12

One of my favorite paintings by Chinese American artist He Qi depicts the Three Wise Men, cuddled together under a candle-lit Christmas tree. Spooned together, their bare feet poke out from under a too-small quilt. Two of the sages sleep soundly. But an angel hovers over them, and with a single finger, awakens the third. The third Magi's eyes are wide open, as if he just woke up. The angel points her other finger toward the star, directing them to get on the move.

The Magi, a priestly class from Persia, were exceptionally gifted at interpreting dreams and reading stars. They could make sense of mysteries that baffled many, mysteries that others ignored. With their unique openness to the less obvious ways that God speaks, they found their way to the Savior of the world.

We tell this story on the festival of Epiphany (January 6). The word "epiphany" means revelation or manifestation. When we have an epiphany, we come to a realization. It's an "aha!" moment. The Magi were among the first to realize the divinity of Jesus. In fact, God revealed this, not to insiders, but to foreigners, practitioners of a strange religion who could not be more different from that holy family in Bethlehem! Yet these outsiders were open and ready to receive God's unexpected news. They paid attention to their dreams and watched for heavenly signs.

Sometimes epiphanies happen in obvious ways. More often, God speaks quietly, with a gentle touch as we sleep, in the easy-to-miss wonders of the stars, in the subtle movements of our lives, and in interactions with people who are different from us.

Today, God continues to show up in our lives, manifesting in all kinds of ways, but we are often too distracted or busy to see or notice. Sometimes we are convinced that we have all the answers and that "those people" (the ones we dismiss, disregard or disagree with) could never have any insights. The story of the Magi reminds us to keep our eyes and hearts open to the different and surprising ways God shows up to guide us.

Share aloud or reflect:

10. Share briefly about a time that you had an epiphany or realization about God's presence in your life. What happened?
11. How can you develop your watchfulness and openness to God?
12. Share a time when you learned something good from (or were changed by) someone very different from you. During this Advent season, how might you build a bridge with someone with whom you disagree? How could you open yourself up to hearing their story?

JOSEPH'S SAVING DREAM

📖 **Read:** Matthew 2:13-23

After the wonder and goodness of that first Christmas Day, the story takes a sharp, very human turn. King Herod, threatened by the possibility of a more powerful king, goes on the hunt for Jesus. Like the generations before him and the generations after him, the young Jesus must face the reality of violence. In a dream, God warns Joseph about what

is to come. Like refugees today and for centuries before us, the holy family flees to another country—Egypt. To protect his family from the tyrant and his ruthless violence, Joseph leaves everything behind. But many other families remain. In an angry tantrum, Herod kills the young boy children in the whole region. The gospel writer Matthew recalls the words of the prophet Jeremiah, about Rachel weeping and lamenting, inconsolable at the death of her (and all) children. Today, Rachel and many mothers are still weeping as so many children are killed. Today, too many fathers are still sacrificing to protect their children.

Amid the joy of Advent and Christmas, we cannot forget the suffering of so many in our world. The incarnation of Jesus shows us not only God's intimate love for the world, but the face of our Savior in all who lament, flee and suffer. There are countless ways to live in the present and respond to the suffering in our world. We are called to remain engaged through advocacy, service, prayer and active resistance to the tyrants of the world who continue to stomp around destroying and dehumanizing God's people.

During Advent and beyond, we can claim space in our days to dream, imagine and rest. In her book, *Rest is Resistance*, womanist theologian Tricia Hursey describes how nearly every day, her grandmother Ora would lie down on her plastic-covered yellow couch for a nap. Moving north with thousands of other African American people during the Great Migration, Grandmother Ora had raised eight children while working and facing the daily onslaught of a world with poverty and racism. But each day, she would pause, just a bit, to rest.

For Grandmother Ora and her granddaughter, Tricia, resting was a bold act of faith and resistance. "Every shuteye ain't sleep," Tricia remembers her grandmother telling her. "I'm resting my eyes and listening for what God wants to tell me." Grandmother Ora listened to the dreams God had

for her, imagining a world beyond the voices that tried to limit and confine her, hearing God remind her that she was beloved and precious.

In our Scripture reading, Joseph also stops long enough to rest, sleep and dream. In those dreams, he hears God telling him to act, to move, to go. His rest ensures the future of the Savior of the world. Even in a world where so much is demanded of us, we have divine permission to rest—not just because rest is holy, but because rest offers us space to dream, to imagine new futures, and to listen to what God wants to tell us.

Share aloud or reflect:

13. How do you make space to listen to God's voice when news of the world is loud and chaotic?
14. How might you find space to rest and to dream?

CLOSING PRAYER (PSALM 23)

Take some time to pray for these dreams and your hopes for the world and for your own life. Respond, aloud or silently, to this prayer:

Gracious God, as we wait for the birth of your Son Jesus and the coming of your great and glorious redemption of the world, hear our prayers. Hear our hopes for our families (name these aloud, or silently in your heart). Hear our hopes for our congregation (name these aloud or silently). Hear our hope for our community (allow space for responses...). Hear our hopes for the whole world (allow space for responses).

Wrap up your prayer by praying together the Lord's Prayer. At the end, tell participants (and remind yourself) that the words, "Thy will be done," could also be understood as "Your dreams come true." Amen. 🌸

Practicing Advent imagination

Matthew's dreamers and Isaiah's visions

BY SARA OLSON-SMITH

SESSION GOALS

- Expand our imaginations about what is possible when God is at work in the world
- Look forward by looking back at God's faithfulness through dreams, hopes and realized promises in Scripture
- Grow an Advent hope that leads us to present, faithful action

OVERVIEW

Here's a fancy church word for you: *eschatology*. Eschatology (*eh-skuh-tah-luh-jee*) is the study of the end times. It originates from a Greek word, *eschaton*, that means the last, the end or the final. Christian eschatology refers to the time when all things are drawn into Christ's goodness and healing, when the vision we trust in Revelation (the last book of the Bible), with the tree of life and the redemption of the universe, comes to fulfillment. You can tell participants that the end is the hope we "believe beyond believing," as we sang in our opening hymn (*ELW* 252). We trust that life will ultimately win and resurrection joy will be known by all people and the whole cosmos.

Our Christian eschatological hope gives us a dependable dream: Someday all tears will be wiped away. Guns will be transformed into garden tools. Grizzly bears and squirrels will play with toddlers. There will be the most fantastic family reunion. Our hope isn't just about trusting in a longed-for someday. This hope can shape our actions today.

We can trust that life is stronger than death, that in Christ peace will indeed dismantle the tools of war, and that all people will be drawn together

in shared goodness. Jürgen Moltmann, a German theologian, asked: "How should we really get involved in this life with its conflicts, pains, and disappointments, if we don't trust life more than death, and if we don't with every breath confess life, and stand up to the powers and conditions which disseminate death?" Envisioning that holy eschaton of someday shapes our actions today.

During Advent, we spend a great deal of time anticipating the birth of Jesus. This devotional study invites us to also expect that Jesus' birth, death and resurrection promise eschatological goodness for the healing of the nations and the renewed life of the cosmos. God's great dream, realized in Jesus and imagined by the prophets, is still longed for in our own lives. We get glimpses now, but trust that this dream will come true. In the words of novelist Arundhati Roy: "Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing."

INVOLVING OTHERS

1. Invite, invite, invite. Don't say "everyone is welcome," because nobody thinks they are "everyone." Instead, make it personal. Call, send an email or text, grab folks at church, etc. Tell them what you honestly love about Bible study, such as "I always like learning something new/getting to hear others' ideas/ the brunch, it's great!"
2. Encourage regular participants to offer to pick up a newcomer or go and Zoom together with someone who can't get out. It's okay to invite friends, neighbors, relatives, and even those of a different denomination or generation (please!)

or those who aren't "church people." We need and want their perspectives.

3. Wear name tags and make introductions so that first-time participants can feel more comfortable. Expect to have people who aren't familiar with the Bible or with your group's usual way of doing things. Explain things as you go along.
4. If the established group meets at a time that doesn't work for you, ask one or two people who also can't meet at that time to join an experimental "micro-group." Maybe you each do the Bible study individually, then meet over coffee (or a brew?) to discuss the highlights of what you liked/learned/questioned/wondered about. Make sure to let other WELCA or Gather groups in your congregation know what you are doing—let this be a synergy rather than a competition!
5. Make sure there is food! Keep it simple, though, and always assure people they're fine to bring just themselves.
6. Consider giving others designated roles such as readers, music leaders and small group "conversation hosts" who have the gift of engaging others.
7. Welcome everyone.
8. Gently remind participants that the conversations and stories shared are sacred and confidential to the group.

OPTION: USE THIS DEVOTIONAL FOR WEEKLY DEVOTIONS

Want to use this devotional for personal weekly devotions? Each week, ask: 1. What does this reading tell me about God's dreams for the world? 2. What are our human ways of hindering or helping those dreams? 3. How can I align my life to God's hopes?

Here's a weekly reading plan:

- **Advent 1, week of Nov. 30**
Read Isaiah 2:1-5. Read the reflections about eschatology in this leader guide. What are your dreams of that great someday? How do you "hear her breathing"? Where do

you see a glimpse of that dream today?

- **Advent 2, week of Dec. 7**
Read and reflect on Isaiah 11:1-9, "Aspirational Qualities"
- **Advent 3, week of Dec. 14**
Read and reflect on Isaiah 35:1-10, "Isaiah Imaginings"
- **Advent 4, week of Dec. 21**
Read and reflect on Matthew 1:18-25, Joseph's Dream
- **Christmas, week of Dec. 28**
Read and reflect on Matthew 2:12-23, Joseph's Saving Dream
- **Epiphany, Jan. 6**
Read and reflect on Matthew 2:1-12, The Wise Men

SHORTENING OPTIONS

Here are some suggestions for what to keep and what to skip, depending on the time you have. If you do skip things, invite participants to read all the scripture passages at home and journal their responses.

SHORT STUDY (30 MINUTES)

1. Read the "Introduction."
2. Read "Isaiah's imaginings" and Isaiah 35:1-10. Do Q.2.
3. Read "Joseph's dreams," Matthew 1:18-25. Do Q.8 and Q.9.
4. Read "Joseph's saving dream" and Matthew 2:13-23. Do Q.13, 14.
5. Do the "Closing prayer."

A LITTLE LONGER (45-60 MINUTES)

Follow directions for "Short study," and add "The Wise Men" and "Remembering as hope."

EVEN LONGER: (60-90 MINUTES)

Follow directions for "A little longer," and add "Aspirational Characteristics." 🌿