

Small Group Prayer and Study Guide

for

Do Not Be Afraid

2021 Advent Devotional



Introduction

This companion small group prayer and study guide is intended to facilitate conversation around the 2021 Advent devotional, *Do Not Be Afraid*. There are six sessions total, one for each Sunday of Advent through Epiphany. Each week, you will find a focal scripture that corresponds to that week's devotional readings, although other scriptures from the week can certainly be added and discussed.

Toward the beginning of each session, there will be a time for small group sharing of *fears* and *moments of peace* (what we Brethren might call joys and concerns), and at the end a guided, active prayer will lift to God's light those items shared at the beginning.

It is my prayer that the time spent in small groups nurtures and deepens your relationship with Christ and with one another. "For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them" (Matt. 18:20, *NIV*). Do not be afraid.

—*Angela Finet*

Week 1

Jeremiah 33:14-16

Gathering Prayer

To begin, offer a breath prayer. The leader reads the prayer, inviting folks to inhale as the plain text is spoken, and exhale as the bold text is spoken. Read slowly, with intentional space in between.

Gathered and scattered . . . **God is with us.**

In work and in rest . . . **God is with us.**

In fear and in peace . . . **God is with us.**

This day and always . . . **God is with us.**

Check-in Questions

The leader will want to take note of the items shared to lift in prayer at the close of the session.

1. What moments this past week fostered a sense of fear, uncertainty, or dis-ease?
2. Where did you sense God's presence and peace this week?

Scripture Study

1. Read Jeremiah 33:14-16. What stood out to you in this reading of the text?
2. What does it mean to live in a community called "The LORD is our righteousness"?
Based on this title, what might God be calling us to do?
3. The prophet speaks these words of hope while in prison. What modern-day prisons are we experiencing or aware of today (related to inequality, etc.)?
4. How might this promise inspire fearlessness in us?
5. Based on the answers above, what plans might you make in the coming year to "release the captives"?

Closing Prayer

Each week, close with this active prayer, incorporating the moments of peace and the fears that were shared in the time of gathering. Instruct participants that as the leader says the word “cup,” they should cup their hands together as though the specific prayers were being poured into them.

When the leader says the word “lift,” the participants should raise their cupped hands as if to say to God, “Here are my prayers to you.”

When the leader says the word “release,” the participants should pull their hands apart so that the concerns and praises are out of their hands and placed into God’s tender care.



Let us pray:

Loving God, just as you have illumined our path for centuries, lead us this day to walk in your light as we offer our prayers to you.

We **cup** our hands and pour into them our gratitude and prayers for those who are sitting around us, and for your larger body gathered in community in this place. *(Perhaps have each person go around the room and name the person sitting next to them, if appropriate and not disruptive.)*

We **lift** our prayers to you, and **release** them into your care.

We **cup** our hands and pour into them our prayers for the fears and concerns that have been spoken. *(Briefly name them.)* We also pour into our hands those cares that remain unsaid. *(Pause for a few moments.)*

We **lift** our prayers to you, and **release** them into your care.

We **cup** our hands and pour into them our gratitude for the awareness of your presence, and the way we’ve experienced your peace. *(Briefly name them.)*

We **lift** our prayers to you, and **release** them into your care.

We come before you as a church, as a people, as a worldwide community and gather all our prayers together, knowing that the Light was promised, the Light has come, and the Light is shining still.

Thank you, Lord.

Amen.

Week 2

Luke 1:39-56

Gathering Prayer

To begin, offer a breath prayer. The leader reads the prayer, inviting folks to inhale as the plain text is spoken, and exhale as the bold text is spoken. Read slowly, with intentional space in between.

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Check-in Questions

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2. Where did you sense God's presence and peace this week?

Scripture Study

1. Read Luke 1:39-56. What stood out to you in this reading of the text?
2. Mary was not commanded to visit Elizabeth, yet she went with great haste. What emotions would have prompted such urgency?
3. In verse 41, we're told Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and in verse 42 she speaks. These are the actions of a prophet. What new understandings of God can be gleaned from the story of Zechariah's speechlessness (vv. 20, 22) versus Elizabeth's proclamations?
4. This could have been a scary time for Elizabeth (pregnancy in advanced years) and Mary (young and racked with scandal). How did gathering in community ease their burdens? How could gathering in community help alleviate your burdens?
5. There are many people in a broken and hurting world in need of community. How might you exit the confines of the church building to form a welcoming and inclusive community with those in need?

Closing Prayer

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Week 3

Zephaniah 3:14-17

Gathering Prayer

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Check-in Questions

The leader will want to take note of the items shared to lift in prayer at the close of the session.

1. What moments this past week fostered a sense of fear, uncertainty, or dis-ease?
2. Where did you sense God's presence and peace this week?

Scripture Study

1. Read Zephaniah 3:14-17. What stood out to you in this reading of the text?
2. John Lennon is quoted as saying, "Everything will be okay in the end. If it's not okay, it's not the end." Do you believe that? Why, or why not?
3. If you are a parent, how do you deal with your fears for your children?
4. In this passage, the remnant is restored—not to the way things were, but to a new future. How does this passage encourage you to move ahead after all the loss associated with the pandemic? Can you joyfully anticipate the future, even if it's different from a beloved past?
5. Verse 15*b* in *The Voice* paraphrase says: "The True King of Israel, the Eternal One, is standing right here among you; you have no reason to be afraid ever again." How does this promise impact your faith?

Closing Prayer

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Week 4

Matthew 1:18-25

Gathering Prayer

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Check-in Questions

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Scripture Study

1. Read Matthew 1:18-25. What stood out to you in this reading of the text?
2. The heading for this text is often called "Joseph's obedience." Has there been a time when you have felt that being obedient to God (doing the "right thing") was entirely counter-cultural, and therefore fear-inducing? How did you resolve your conflicting feelings?
3. Mary is young, female, unwed, and pregnant. All of these characteristics place her firmly in the camp of the marginalized. Joseph's actions sought to preserve her dignity. How might you seek to preserve the dignity of the marginalized in today's society?
4. Jesus is identified as conceived by the Holy Spirit (by divine presence). We, too, are called children of God. Jesus didn't live a trouble-free life. How might the reminder that we are children of God make us fearless in frightening times?
5. Joseph's final act of obedience in this text is the naming of Jesus. To this day, we continue to pray and to meet "in the name of Jesus." How does that recognition inform or challenge the things you say and do?

Closing Prayer

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Week 5

John 1:1-5

Gathering Prayer

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Scripture Study

1. Read John 1:1-5. What stood out to you in this reading of the text?
2. This text starts, "In the beginning . . .," which echoes the creation story found in Genesis. Yet, creation isn't mentioned in this text until verse 3. How does the idea that God is eternal—predating creation—provide comfort in fearful times?
3. Utqiagvik, Alaska, is in the middle of more than sixty days of darkness. Located north of the Arctic Circle, this town doesn't see the sun for more than two months. Conversely, from early May to early August, the sun never sets. What life changes might come from a life of endless days? Is there any correlation to a life of faith lived in boundless light?
4. The Greek word *logos* is translated in verse 1 as "word." It also means principle of divine reason and creative order. In a world searching for order and purpose, how might this understanding of "the Word" bring hope?
5. As you think about the coming year, how might you reflect the light and love of Christ and make the "Christmas spirit" last?

Closing Prayer

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Amen.

Week 6

Philippians 4:4-7

Gathering Prayer

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Scripture Study

1. Read Philippians 4:4-7. What stood out to you in this reading of the text?
2. Paul was filled with joy, even as he sat in prison awaiting his execution. When in a time of fear or discomfort did you experience an unexpected sense of joy? Why?
3. What is the "peace of God"? Can we experience the peace *of* God without having peace *with* God?
4. Reading this passage shortly after Christmas, how does this intentional focus on an incarnational God inform this phrase from verse 5: "The Lord is near"?
5. How might you live into the commands to rejoice, be gentle, let go of anxiety, and be thankful in the coming year?

Closing Prayer

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Amen.