

# Outside the Box

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## The Gift that Can't be Contained

**Advent 2011**

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This document contains the sermon series with video reflections for small groups, youth and young adult engagement, children activities and family worship ideas. Included throughout are adaptive tips for including those with intellectual or developmental disabilities.

## Table of Contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| About the Writers .....                                  | 1  |
| Adaptive Tips.....                                       | 2  |
| <i>FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT – November 27, 2011</i> .....  | 4  |
| Opening Prayer .....                                     | 6  |
| Benediction .....  | 6  |
| Social Media .....                                       | 7  |
| Adaptive Tips.....                                       | 7  |
| Video Reflections .....                                  | 7  |
| Adaptive Tips.....                                       | 8  |
| Car Talk.....  | 8  |
| <i>SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT– December 4, 2011</i> .....   | 9  |
| Opening Prayer .....                                     | 12 |
| Benediction .....  | 13 |
| Social Media .....                                       | 13 |
| Video Reflections .....                                  | 13 |
| Adaptive Tips.....                                       | 14 |
| <i>THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT, December 11, 2011</i> .....   | 15 |
| Opening Prayer .....                                     | 18 |
| Benediction .....  | 18 |
| Social Media .....                                       | 18 |
| Video Reflections .....                                  | 18 |
| Car Talk.....  | 19 |
| <i>FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT - December 18, 2011</i> ..... | 20 |
| Opening Prayer .....                                     | 23 |
| Benediction .....  | 23 |
| Social Media .....                                       | 23 |
| Video Reflections .....                                  | 24 |
| Outside the Box Advent Wreath Lighting .....             | 25 |
| Advent Wreath Lighting, Week 1 .....                     | 26 |

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Advent Wreath Lighting, Week 2 .....                 | 28 |
| Advent Wreath Lighting, Week 3 .....                 | 30 |
| Advent Wreath Lighting, Week 4 .....                 | 32 |
| Advent Wreath Lighting, Christmas Eve .....          | 34 |
| Small Group Resource – Week 1 .....                  | 36 |
| Study and Discuss.....                               | 36 |
| Live the Word.....                                   | 37 |
| Active/Experience Element.....                       | 37 |
| Adaptive Tips.....                                   | 37 |
| Video Options .....                                  | 37 |
| Adaptive Tips.....                                   | 38 |
| Small Group Resource – Week 2 .....                  | 39 |
| Study and Discuss.....                               | 39 |
| Live the Word.....                                   | 40 |
| Active/Experience Element.....                       | 40 |
| Adaptive Tips.....                                   | 41 |
| Video Options .....                                  | 41 |
| Study Group Resource – Week 3 .....                  | 42 |
| Study and Discuss.....                               | 42 |
| Live the Word.....                                   | 43 |
| Active/Experience Element.....                       | 43 |
| Video Options .....                                  | 43 |
| Study Group Resource – Week 4 .....                  | 44 |
| Study and Discuss.....                               | 44 |
| Live the Word.....                                   | 45 |
| Adaptive Tips.....                                   | 45 |
| Active/Experience .....                              | 45 |
| Adaptive Tips.....                                   | 46 |
| Video Options .....                                  | 46 |
| Week 1 Do-votional: <i>Unexpected Surprise</i> ..... | 47 |
| Adaptive Tips.....                                   | 49 |

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Family Friendly Worship Response .....              | 49 |
| Adaptive Tips.....                                  | 51 |
| Week 2 Do-Votional: <i>Joseph’s Wild Card</i> ..... | 52 |
| Adaptive Tips.....                                  | 55 |
| Family Friendly Worship Response .....              | 56 |
| Week 3 Do-Votional: <i>Special Delivery</i> .....   | 58 |
| Adaptive Tips.....                                  | 61 |
| Family Friendly Worship Response .....              | 61 |
| Adaptive Tips.....                                  | 62 |
| Week 4 Do-Votional: <i>Too Much To Do</i> .....     | 64 |
| Family Friendly Worship Response .....              | 66 |

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## About the Writers

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**Patty Smith** (Children Activities and Family Worship) is currently the Director of Children and Family Ministries in the Tennessee Conference of the United Methodist Church where she inspires and motivates leaders and laity to think differently about reaching children and families for Jesus Christ. Prior to this role, she was the Senior Product Developer for Children's Ministry Resources at Group Publishing. Patty has also served as Interim Director of Children's Ministry at Broomfield United Methodist Church in Broomfield, Colorado, and Minister to Children and Families at Christ Church United Methodist in Fort Lauderdale, FL. She's been a contributing author to Abingdon's It Worked For Us and Events That Worked for Us, and has developed children supplements for Rethink Church's Fearless, A Life-Giving Christmas, Thrive and Change the World campaigns. Patty is mother to three boys—Zack, Connor, and Patch.

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**Rev. William M. Williams, Jr.** (Sermon Series) has served as the senior pastor of Rockbrook United Methodist Church in Omaha, Nebraska since 2005. Prior to his present appointment, he was a district superintendent in the Nebraska Annual Conference. Williams, an ordained Elder since 1986, has served churches in the Northwest Texas and Nebraska Annual Conferences, has served as an alternate delegate to General Conference and delegate to Jurisdictional Conference. He is a graduate of Bishop College and Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University.

## Adaptive Tips

### Toward Engaging Folks of All Abilities in the Story

Jesus came to us as a weak baby, to an ordinary family without power. The manger that cradled him was as far “outside the box” of the expected as one could imagine. Likewise, folks *without* disabilities may not expect to receive God in those *with* disabilities.

As we expect the unexpected Jesus this Advent, we are also called to get to the work of building the kingdom that Jesus announced in body and in word. We are called to **become the unexpected body of Christ in the world.**

As in 1 Corinthians 12, we are a body made up of many diverse members. And if “the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable” (v. 22), we should seek to make this body of Christ whole—one “weak” member at a time.

One step is to **reach out** beyond our own boxes, to invite folks with varied abilities and disabilities to gather in the same space, at the same time.

- Chances are, folks with disabilities are already worshiping with folks without disabilities. This may be a time for your congregation to “reach in,” to take note of the beautiful diversity of members of its body.
- Chances are also that many others with disabilities stay home during worship times—for fear of funny looks, for the sake of tired caregivers, because “church” has already proven itself an unsafe or uncomfortable space for folks with disabilities. This may be a time for your congregation to consider ministry beyond the walls of the church—where might we follow the Holy Spirit, already in the midst of those with disabilities?

Another step is to **engage** each member in your gathered space, so that the body of Christ may be made whole. If we are to welcome those “outside the box” to truly engage in the worship and formational moments of the church, we will need to adapt our space and usual approaches to those gatherings.

In this Advent worship package, we have included **Adaptive Tips** along the way. When you see “Adaptive Tips,” this is an invitation for you to consider how to better engage folks of all abilities and disabilities in the story.

Most of these tips center around folks with intellectual and developmental disabilities, and may also be helpful for engaging persons who have other types of “brain disorders.” Other tips focus on adapting around visual, hearing, and mobility impairments. These tips are clearly not exhaustive, but suggested as starting points for thinking in new ways about how to engage your congregation.

If your congregation is especially interested in continuing to venture “outside the box” with persons with disabilities—in worship and other aspects of its life together—try these resources:

The Access Ministry of McLean Bible Church offers downloadable resources for churches seeking to engage persons with disabilities of all sorts. A good starting place is “Welcoming Those with Disabilities: A Brochure for Church Staff, Ushers, and Volunteers”, a PDF document available at

[http://www.mbctyson.org/pages/page.asp?page\\_id=105972](http://www.mbctyson.org/pages/page.asp?page_id=105972).

Friendship is an inter-denominational ministry (including United Methodist), whose mission is “to share God’s love with people with intellectual disabilities and to enable them to become an active part of God’s family.” Their website, <http://www.friendship.org/>, has information about how to start a Friendship Program at your church, as well as a variety of curriculum series available for purchase for classes for youth and/or adults with intellectual disabilities.

## ***FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT – November 27, 2011***

*Scriptural Focus: Mark 13:32-37 (CEB)*

“But nobody knows when that day or hour will come, not the angels in heaven and not the Son. Only the Father knows. Watch out! Stay alert! You don’t know when the time is coming. It is as if someone took a trip, left the household behind, and put the servants in charge, giving each one a job to do, and told the doorkeeper to stay alert. Therefore, stay alert! You don’t know when the head of the household will come, whether in the evening or at midnight, or when the rooster crows in the early morning or at daybreak. Don’t let him show up when you weren’t expecting and find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to all: Stay alert!”

*Consider this:*

- Advent begins with an unexpected theme – the “end of time.”
- We have decorated the church, our homes and the local stores have been ready for Christmas for weeks. The Christmas spirit is all around us.
- And now, we have Scripture that speaks about the end when we are just beginning. Using this Scripture will catch your parishioners off-guard; they are ready to sing Christmas carols. Now we must refocus.
- This text speaks of expectations and waiting. Often times we focus on the waiting – the difficulty of waiting and why we must wait.
- Rethink: we are called to act in the midst of waiting.
- What can or will we do while we wait? We must do more than sitting and waiting.
- Be alert. Keep awake. What will we do while we wait?
- Often times we can get lost in the waiting and forget to be the Church. The Gospel of Mark is calling for us to be alert, attentive, ready to act, to do something, to be the Church.
- This year instead of focusing on the waiting, be the Church.
- This Christmas, think outside the box! Be bold and daring in your Advent / Christmas planning.

*Theme: Open up...expectation*

Today's message is pregnant with possibilities. Advent is a time for great expectations of things to come. We live in between Christ having come and yet coming again. We must be alert and ready. We must look toward a future of kingdom living, yet participate in a very real kingdom-building while on Earth.

As you prepare your message, begin thinking about what you and your congregation will take out of the box this year. While some will be expecting the ordinary – gifts purchased from stores, Christmas parties, and ultra-busy schedules – encourage those around you to be expecting the extraordinary. What about feelings instead of things...true joy instead of festive superficiality?

Turn toward the nativity story as a thread to weave Christ's coming into this year's lectionary. This week, look at Mary, and how God worked unexpectedly in her life; how Mary was an ordinary young woman whose life became extraordinary; and how God can't be contained by society's rules and customs. God works outside human conventions to create bridges where we cannot even imagine them.

*Expectations (further Scriptural reflection: Luke 1:26-38)*

Use your religious imagination as you consider the following.

Joseph proposed and Mary said yes. Now, Mary was in planning mode. She began counting the days until she and Joseph would start a new life together. They shared their dream, hopes and expectations.

In the midst of their planning, life took a strange twist: Mary found out she was pregnant! An angel visited her, told her that God has found favor with her she will give birth to God's son. Even though Mary's life was turned upside down, God was ready to bless her.

Christmas is just naturally a hectic, harried, and chaotic time of the year. Sometimes we find it hard to believe that God can bless this chaotic and congested time, or that God can be found.

Imagine Mary. Her mental state must have been even more jumbled. She was unexpectedly expecting.

Joseph was understandably confused and conflicted (more about Joseph next week). None of this had gone according to plan or even according to reasonable expectations. Mary had been looking forward to marriage and the chance to set up a household with Joseph, and *then* maybe look forward to a baby. But now, everything was happening at once.

Mary also had to cope with those strange visits from angels, and the stunning news about the identity of this baby. It was an outrageous time in her life. Events and emotions were swirling around her in a cloud of confusion.

Yet in the midst of chaos, Mary responded with incredible faith. She opened herself to unexpected divine presence in the midst of the chaos.

1. Name some places of unexpected stress, chaos and strange twists in the world today.
2. How can people of faith respond?
3. How can we be more alert and expectant of God's unfathomable ways?

### Opening Prayer

Gracious God, we pause from our busyness and our waiting to worship you this day. We admit it is difficult to wait, especially when we are excited. Help us to open our hearts and ready ourselves to be used by you to serve others, just as Mary was ready. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

### Benediction

We have been challenged to be wide awake and ready. Don't sit idly by waiting for Christmas to happen; rise up and go make Christmas happen in the lives of others. Amen.

## Social Media

Be sure to use Facebook and Twitter to reach beyond your church building. Here are some messages for the week (pre- and post-sermon). Feel free to edit and make your own!

### *Pre-Message*

Facebook: What is your greatest expectation this Christmas?

Twitter: "Uncertainty and expectation are the joys of life." William Congreve  
#quote

### *Post-Message*

Facebook: Getting ready for Christmas is a whole lot different than getting ready for Christ. One may leave you depleted...the other fulfilled. How can you do both?

Twitter: "We can do no great things, only small things with great love." Mother Teresa #quote

## Adaptive Tips

For those who do not usually use Internet or online social media (whether for lack of easy access or a decision to limit overstimulation), consider engaging these folks by...partnering individuals to find, read, and explore the questions together, printing off the pre- and post-message questions to have available as take-home items before/after worship, or posting the questions on a sign outside the church. If printing the questions, be sure to offer them in large type for any who have vision impairments.

## Video Reflections

Special Needs Noel (*included in the multimedia bundle*)

1. Jesus takes us just as we are. He gives us unconditional love and acceptance that calls us to become all he created us to be. Likewise, we are called to see others not simply as they appear, but for who they are beyond the physical. What is it in us that makes this type of living and seeing difficult?

2. Read Matthew 20:24-28. One of the ways we feel accepted and part of a loving community is when we are able to serve in a meaningful way. When we have great expectations of others and invite them to serve, we experience community in the best sense. Name various groups who are often served, and not invited to serve in return. How does this diminish their giftedness?
3. How can you open up opportunities for new persons to participate in meaningful service?
4. In what ways are the people featured in this video similar to Mary? To Joseph?
5. Those who care for persons with special needs may rarely get time to care for themselves. How can you and your congregation provide assistance for their self-care?

### **Adaptive Tips**

Any time scripture is to be read, group leaders can suggest pairing up to help with finding and reading scripture passages together. Even if a person does not read at all, he or she may want to do the page-searching. This can be a team effort!

### **Car Talk**

Be sure to distribute your “Car Talk” hangers during today’s worship. This piece (included in the multimedia bundle) will help your congregants strike up meaningful conversation with passengers throughout Advent.

***SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT- December 4, 2011***

*Scriptural Focus: Isaiah 40:1-6a (CEB)*

"Comfort, comfort my people!  
says your God.

Speak compassionately to Jerusalem,  
and proclaim to her that her  
compulsory service has ended,  
that her penalty has been paid,  
that she has received  
from the LORD's hand  
double for all her sins!

A voice is crying out:

'Clear the LORD's way in the desert!

Make a level highway in the wilderness for our God!

Every valley will be raised up,  
and every mountain and hill  
will be flattened.

Uneven ground will become level,  
and rough terrain a valley plain.

The LORD's glory will appear,  
and all humanity will see it together;  
the LORD's mouth  
has commanded it.'

A voice was saying:

'Call out!'"

*Consider this:*

- "Comfort, comfort my people." These are life-giving words. What a joy to know God desires to comfort us, even when we wander and stray.
- We are celebrating the second Sunday of Advent and we have been challenged to think outside the box as we wait. And, we are still waiting. Waiting is never easy. Sometimes in our journeys, we stumble into the wilderness. Not only can we find ourselves in wilderness settings, we may find ourselves in new, unfamiliar territory. This text and the text from Mark

both mention the wilderness or desert. What happens in the wilderness? Recall the Israelites. Remember Jesus' temptation. Deep spiritual transformation can happen in the wilderness. Think about those who are new in your community. Think about those who are new to our country. Think about the homeless and those who live in the margins of life. They too, are living in the wilderness.

- Hear the Good News that Isaiah proclaims: God is here. God is present, and God is reality in this life.

### *2 Peter 3:8-9 (CEB)*

“Don’t let it escape your notice, dear friends, that with the Lord a single day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like a single day. The Lord isn’t slow to keep his promise, as some think of slowness, but he is patient toward you, not wanting anyone to perish but all to change their hearts and lives.”

- The author is writing in response to concerns about the slowness of Christ's return. Waiting...we know how difficult that can be. People are ready and waiting for Christ to come again. We must be aware that our time and God’s time are different. What a challenge this realization is, but also important to keep in mind. The writer goes on to share with us that the longer it takes for Christ to return, the more opportunities we have to serve each other. God doesn't want anyone to perish! How will you challenge your congregation to give life? To give comfort?
- We have been challenged to think outside the box this Christmas. How will you live in ministry outside the box this Christmas?

*Theme: Open up...acceptance*

Even when we venture into uncharted territories, we are challenged to accept the things we cannot change and move forward as best we can. During the holidays, many feel broken in spirit as they remember the past and what was, or lament what could have been. The Christmas season can be difficult for many in your

community – beyond your congregation. Forced gaiety casts an even greater pall over the pain of loss and unmet expectations.

As you turn toward the nativity this week, think about Joseph – the unmet expectations he had and the wilderness in which he found himself. Joseph turned his mind to God, opening himself up to increased faith during an almost unbelievable situation. Although what he faced was not what he had imagined or desired, Joseph accepted what he couldn't change and followed God's path for his life.

As you think about your community, consider the wilderness settings they may be experiencing. What word might God speak to them? What vision might need to be cast so they can move forward in acceptance...and new expectation? Think about newcomers who are unknown to your faith family. As Joseph is a background character in Scriptural portrayal of the holy family, so may newcomers (and perhaps many others) feel in a church setting. How can we respect their distance? How can we move them forward?

*Acceptance (further Scriptural reflection: Matthew 1: 18-25)*

Use your religious imagination as you consider the following:

Joseph had worked up enough courage to ask Mary to be his wife. He fumbled his way through the proposal and she said yes. They ran with smiles on their faces and joy in their hearts to tell their families, "We're going to be married!"

Joy, happiness and celebration filled their souls. Can you remember a time when such joy filled your soul? Maybe it was a marriage proposal, landing your dream job or finding out you are going to be parents for the first time.

We shared last week that the wedding plans were going smoothly until something unexpected and strange happened. Mary is with child – pregnant, and not by Joseph. Her story is bizarre and borders the unbelievable. Joseph perhaps considers walking away or ignoring Mary. Imagine Joseph's internal struggle.

We, too, have been faced with moments in life when we have choices to make: reject or accept.

The easy way out is to reject – to set someone or something aside. Imagine these scenarios:

- We arrive at a family function and see the one relative who struggles with addiction. We know the story – we’ve heard it a million times. They walk toward us. Do we walk away?
- You are on your way to the company party, and you’re running a bit late. You are in a hurry. You see the homeless couple in the cold with their sign; your eyes catch their eyes. You see more than a homeless couple – what do you do?
- A new family comes to church – but this time they are different. In broken English, they tell you they are hungry, homeless and new to the community. You have skepticism. Are they there with their hands out trying to beat the system? We offer reasons why we can’t help, but feel an inner tugging as we walk away.

1. Joseph accepted his challenge as an opportunity to grow in faith and love.
2. Accepting others provides an opportunity for us to grow.
3. How is God calling you to grow individually and as part of community?
4. Who is God calling us to accept?
5. May God help us accept each other as Christ accepts us.

### Opening Prayer

Lord, we come this morning faced with choices and events that try our souls. We fear, and apprehension fills our living. We cry aloud, “I am scared!” May our hearts and spirits hear a word of hope and assurance. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.

## Benediction

We came with fear and apprehension, and heard God speak words of comfort and hope. Go, spreading the comfort and hope of God with others in your celebrations. Amen.

## Social Media

Be sure to use Facebook and Twitter to reach beyond your church building. Here are some messages for the week (pre- and post-sermon). Feel free to edit and make your own!

### *Pre-Message*

Facebook: When something is out of your control, how do you cope with it? Who do you turn to?

Twitter: “Things of the spirit differ from things material in that the more you give the more you have.” Christopher Morley #quote

### *Post-Message*

Facebook: None of us have experienced this Christmas season before. What new things are you planning that are “outside the box?”

Twitter: “Dare to reach out your hand into the darkness, to pull another hand into the light.” Norman B. Rice #quote

## Video Reflections

Christmas for Day Laborers (*included in the multimedia bundle*)

1. When we get caught up in the politics of issues like immigration we lose sight of the human and very personal aspect of it. We can lose sight of the fact that, regardless of their immigration status, they are our brothers and sisters. How can faith and politics balance and challenge one another?
2. Right after the wise men left, Jesus and his family fled (immigrated) to Egypt. How can we use this piece of our history to connect and minister with this population?

3. Many of our churches do not connect at all with the immigrant population. What do you think is the cause of this? How can we offer inclusion in the body of believers to this group?
4. This ministry began with a conversation between the church and two of the day laborers. What simple step might you take to form relationships with those “outside” your church?
5. Who is your neighbor? How does acceptance fit into this story? What might be some things we need to accept within ourselves so we can accept others more fully?

### Adaptive Tips

Those with hearing and vision impairments have likely already seated themselves at the front of the room. Let us make sure those who need these seats find them.

If the church has special hearing implements available for amplifying the audio for individuals, make sure these are made available.

The videos are closed-captioned on playback from a DVD player. (Digital files are not closed-captioned.) Select closed-caption playback, or hire a person who signs. Be sure to seat those folks who are deaf or hard of hearing and who rely on reading sign language close to the interpreter—and if possible, get the video to the interpreter ahead of time, so she or he may prepare to interpret the video pieces as well.

***THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT, December 11, 2011***

*Scripture Focus: Isaiah 61:1-4 (CEB)*

“The LORD God’s spirit is upon me,  
because the LORD has anointed me.  
He has sent me  
to bring good news to the poor,  
to bind up the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim release for captives,  
and liberation for prisoners,  
to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor  
and a day of vindication for our God,  
to comfort all who mourn,  
to provide for Zion’s mourners,  
to give them a crown in place of ashes,  
oil of joy in place of mourning,  
a mantle of praise  
in place of discouragement.  
They will be called Oaks of Righteousness,  
planted by the LORD to glorify himself.  
They will rebuild the ancient ruins;  
they will restore  
formerly deserted places;  
they will renew ruined cities,  
places deserted in generations past.”

*Consider this:*

The third Sunday of Advent is here, and soon we will be celebrating the birth of Christ. Advent reminds us that we are still in waiting for the birth. Isaiah proclaims that God’s spirit has come upon him. We are called to step into, and live outside, any boxes that attempt to contain our faith. That includes living outside society’s materialistic approach to Christmas. Consider interviewing parishioners about some of their family traditions. Challenge them to tweak those traditions to include new persons and make Christ central.

- Reference Luke 4:18-19 to see the prophet Isaiah's words echoed and realized through Christ.
- The phrase, "bind up the brokenhearted," gets at the heart of the church being the church. Rethinking church involves *being* in mission, and *being* the ministry that we espouse even as we seek to gather and cultivate new believers.
- What new tradition can your congregation or family start?

*Theme: Open up...family*

While many enjoy the family aspects of Christmas – the gatherings – holiday meals, etc., others become anxious about these obligations. While we are taking things “out of the box,” consider rethinking family – beyond blood relatives.

Through Christ, we are formed into a new body with new, extended family. Existing family remains, new family members are found. Sisters and brothers, mothers and fathers bring additional love into our lives, sometimes filling existing voids.

This week, spend time contemplating on and praying for your church members. Consider how they will spend their holidays. Think about those who may have lost a spouse, a child, another loved one this year. How will God bind their wounds? How can you prepare the bandages? Think about the gatherings your congregation can provide to strengthen the church as family. Plan a Blue Christmas/Longest Night Service to recognize the pain of those hurting during “the most wonderful time of the year.” This [article](#) by Daniel Benedict will assist you in your planning.

As we segue into the story of the shepherds, consider how they might have been family to one another. As outsiders to some, they understood one another. When it came time to respond to the angels' chorus, they responded together – leaving their livelihood and traveling to see the miracle that awaited.

*Family (further Scriptural reflection: Luke 2:8-20)*

Use your religious imagination as you consider the following.

The annual Christmas pageant is near, or perhaps has already happened. Everyone wants a lead role. Mary, Joseph, the innkeeper, the angel. Then there are the shepherds. Who wants to be a shepherd, when they are not the stars?

Yet, the shepherds are the only ones in the crèche scene who are there because they've been invited.

It's easy to think of the shepherds the way we generally see them in Sunday school Christmas pageants – as mop-haired, bright-eyed children, dressed up in dad's old bathrobes. They look sweet and cute.

In the real world, shepherds were looked down on by polite society. Yet these folks, the equivalent of today's transient drifters or street people, receive an invitation to the first Christmas. God even sends an angel chorus out to them.

This is a witness that God has a special concern for the dispossessed, the marginalized, the poor, and the forgotten.

Who in our families, churches, school and neighborhoods are forgotten people? Who has been pushed aside to the edges of society? How do we respond?

How do we respond to God's call in our lives?

Are we willing to leave behind the comfortable and familiar to venture to places new to us? God calls us individually and as a congregation to new places to mission and witness.

We are to witness God's love, compassion and concern.

We are to witness the birth of Christ again, again and again.

This season, remember that the shepherds – the "forgotten ones," people of "low regard" – were God's special and honored guests. God cares for the poor. And so must we.

## Opening Prayer

God, Christmas is just around the corner. In our celebrations and merriment we pause to remember those living in loneliness, those with fresh wounds of grief and those with no sense of family. As we worship today, we open ourselves to be challenged to “bind up the brokenhearted.” Amen.

## Benediction

Go in peace and in grace. Go making a difference in the world. Amen.

## Social Media

Be sure to use Facebook and Twitter to reach beyond your church building. Here are some messages for the week (pre- and post-sermon). Feel free to edit and make your own!

### *Pre-Message*

Facebook: When you think of the word “family,” who is included? Is it just “blood” relatives? How can we expand the concept of family?

Twitter: “What we have done for ourselves alone dies with us; what we have done for others and the world remains and is immortal.” Albert Pike #quote

### *Post-Message*

Facebook: If you’re lonely this season, think about someone else who may be even lonelier. How will you form new community?

Twitter: “The greatest good you can do for another is not just to share your riches but to reveal to him his own.” Benjamin Disraeli

## Video Reflections

Holiday Warmth for Armenia (*included in the multimedia bundle*)

1. Read James 1:27. How does this go against the norms of what we may consider “church?”
2. The people in this video had known of the need in Armenia before their daughter died, but because of their grief they became more passionate

about it. Share a story when you have seen something similar happen in your own life or others.

3. We tend to think of family as “blood relatives.” In Christ, our family is expanded. How can we be intentional about including new persons as family?
4. What is it about poverty and simple needs that cause us to turn away?
5. What are some simple needs you know of in your community and the world?
6. What are two or three simple steps that you could take to be part of meeting those needs in the name of Jesus?

### Car Talk

By now, those who’ve been using Car Talk hangers (included in multimedia bundle) should have some interesting stories to share. Encourage testimonies in worship or on Facebook.

***FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT - December 18, 2011***

*Scriptural Focus: 2 Samuel 7:1-3 (CEB)*

“When the king was settled in his palace, and the LORD had given him rest from all his surrounding enemies, the king said to the prophet Nathan, ‘Look! I’m living in a cedar palace, but God’s chest is housed in a tent!’

Nathan said to the king, ‘Go ahead and do whatever you are thinking, because the LORD is with you.’”

*Consider this:*

- David is resting and relaxing in his palace. He was enjoying the many gifts he had received from God. After taking inventory of his blessings, he expressed a sense of embarrassment...thinking, *I am living in a palace while God lives in a tent.*
- His spirit and heart are so moved, he offers to build God a cedar house. And God replies, "Who says I need a house? I've been doing just fine without one!"
- In just one week we will celebrate Christmas...the birth of Christ. The wait is almost over. We even breathe a sigh of relief. The menu is set, the decorations are in place and all the gifts are bought. Now we can sit back, relax, and wait just a few more days. While in our “palaces” or prayer time, God speaks to us, reminding us that there are others living in tents. There are those who cannot afford health care. There are those who are sick and hurting. God is in them too. Where is there room in the inn?
- David's impulse should be ours this Christmas, to think about giving God our best, not necessarily in the form of a temple, but perhaps in meaningful shelter for outsiders.
- Get outside the box of your traditions and rethink Christmas with ‘the least of these’ in mind.

*Theme: Open up...yourself*

Throughout the series, we've woven the story of the nativity into aspects found in the lectionary. Nativity sets are often on display around town – on private and church lawns. They are set up within individual households. How much care and thought do we give to the lives represented? How much care and thought do we give to those who are not represented, yet whose lives are part of the story of Christ's birth? The innkeeper is one of those unseen characters whose actions played a key role in Christ's birth setting. You and I are unseen characters who are a part of the story...we are the beloved for whom God sent God's son.

This week, pay careful attention to letting people see themselves as a part of this story. While we remember the typical persons who are "outcast," many others feel they too are outcast from the church as disenfranchised outsiders who can't imagine being a part of a circle of love.

This Christmas, we have a new opportunity to open up once again for Christ's birth in our lives. We have a chance to come into the light and be seen for who we are and know we are in the story too. Christ came for those on the outside, so that they could be brought into the circle. Even as we step into that circle, we are to share the story so others may come close too.

*The Innkeeper (further Scriptural reflection: Luke 2:7)*

Use your religious imagination as you consider the following.

Scriptures don't tell us anything about the innkeeper. All we know is that there was no room in the inn. Instead, Mary and Joseph were consigned to the animals' living quarters, to stay among them and their feeding troughs. The couple would have used their own robes and extra blankets to shield themselves from the elements.

Can we really fault the innkeeper? It wasn't this person's fault that there was no room, and they did allow Mary and Joseph to stay in the stable. The innkeeper never knew the significance of the baby Mary was carrying. To this person, it was just another baby, until the events of that evening began to unfold. Standing afar,

the innkeeper was witnessing something significant and magnificent happening. The son of God was born.

The innkeeper was so physically close to God, yet so spiritually far away.

Can you really blame this person? The innkeeper was just trying to earn a living... trying to keep things running at the inn...wanting to keep everyone happy. Keeping an eye on all the needs of the guests. In short, he or she was busy...busy running the business. Maybe it was “out of sight—out of mind” with Joseph and Mary. Can we really blame this person for missing out on the first Christmas?

*Are you missing Christmas? What is our excuse?*

The weeks and days before Christmas have dwindled down to hours. We are busy buying those last-minute gifts, encountering the congested streets and jam-packed stores. We have parties, celebrations and family gatherings to attend – perhaps the children’s school program to attend, cards to address and mail. We have cookies and pies to bake and the traditional dish to prepare for the potluck. We are busy. We have so much to do. There is not enough time. We are too busy to get into the “Christmas Spirit.”

The circumstances have not changed. No room in the inn and no room for Christ in our homes or in our hearts. We’ve filled them already with all sorts of other stuff.

I want to remind you of the innkeeper. He missed Christmas because of the hustle and bustle of what was going on. Don’t let the hustle and bustle or the secular call of Christmas keep you from experiencing the birth of Christ.

How can we experience the birth of Christ?

1. Slow down. Be still and experience God.
2. Know what is and what is not important.
3. Have family/personal devotion time.

Now rethink the innkeeper. The innkeeper at least gave what he (or she) had. It may not have been much, but it was something. After all, it kept Mary and Joseph from being on the streets. We can imagine the innkeeper watching from afar to observe what was happening. One would think that there was excitement around the delivery – such a blessing to any family. The innkeeper had a story to share – how was it told? Perhaps he or she grumbled to friends about how inconvenient it was to have people intrude and disrupt. Perhaps he or she said they were happy about giving what was available, even if it only was a place for animals. Perhaps they even spoke about how they wished they had come closer.

Now, how can we see ourselves in this unseen character? We have something to give – some space to open up for God. Are we willing to give that space, no matter how messy it is? Do we stand at a distance watching God’s work in other lives without getting our own hands dirty? When we think of God, do we grumble about the inconvenience, or are we wistful – wishing we could come a little closer?

Provide space for differing interpretations. The broader your range, the more people may see themselves reflected and feel called to step a bit closer this year.

### **Opening Prayer**

Gracious God, the day we hope for is near. In just hours we will celebrate the birth of your Son, yet there is so much we must do to get ready. Slow us down Lord, so we won’t miss the arrival of Jesus into our world and into our lives. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.

### **Benediction**

God, you have called us to see you as we look into the eyes of others. Help us to accept the call to live Christmas in words and deeds, this season and everyday. Amen.

### **Social Media**

Be sure to use Facebook and Twitter to reach beyond your church building. Here are some messages for the week (pre- and post-sermon). Feel free to edit and make your own!

### *Pre-Message*

Facebook: Out of all the things that you will take out of the box this season, God is the most important. What are some new discoveries you've had? What are your struggles?

Twitter: "God has not called us to see through each other, but to see each other through." #quote

### *Post-Message*

Facebook: Some think that they have to be "shined up" before they can go to church or be accepted by God. God simply asks that we give what we have and who we are. Where have you seen transformation this Christmas season?

Twitter: "Do not let what you cannot do interfere with what you can do." John Wooden #quote

## **Video Reflections**

Latino Christmas Journey *(included in the multimedia bundle)*

1. It's interesting that though the actual birth of Jesus was in a stable with all the sounds, smells and textures that implies, we often think of his birth as a serene, clean event. Imagine yourself really there. What are some aspects of the nativity that you usually overlook? How does this differing reality change the way you think about the first Christmas?
2. As we could see in the video, there's something about celebrating Christmas outside the box that engages people. How might you do things differently with your family this Christmas morning?
3. The kids in the video said that the innkeeper turned Jesus away because he thought Jesus was a robber. Sometimes we think of Jesus as one human stereotype or another to make it easier to reject the difficult message he often delivers. What stereotypes do we use during the holidays to do that?
4. The video concluded with children joining in the nativity and exploring by becoming a part of it. How could you open up one of your services at church this Advent or Christmas Eve to allow even the littlest ones to experience and explore this mysterious event?

## Outside the Box Advent Wreath Lighting

Set up stations with stones to be removed prior to each service of Advent. You'll need to decide how many stations to have based on the number of persons you expect. You may use a bowl or mangers (this could be a fun craft project). The stones removed each week can become a symbol of making room for Christ's birth. This engagement piece will conclude on Christmas Eve, when persons will be invited to leave something behind as a sign of giving oneself as a "manger" for Christ's birth.

If possible, involve your youth group in the preparation. A word from the four themes, (expectations, acceptance, family, yourself) may be written in permanent ink on the stones. Helpers will enjoy being part of the activities and may feel honor in "setting the stage" for God's work to be done.

## Advent Wreath Lighting, Week 1

Theme: Expectations; Illustrated by: Mary

As people enter the sanctuary, invite them to remove a small stone from a manger. If your stones have been marked, this week's stone is "expectations."

The advent wreath lighting should begin with a Scripture reading:



Luke 1:26-38, Common English Bible

"When Elizabeth was six months pregnant, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a city in Galilee, to a virgin who was engaged to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David's house. The virgin's name was Mary. When the angel came to her, he said, "Rejoice, favored one! The Lord is with you!" She was confused by these words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. The angel said, "Don't be afraid, Mary. God is honoring you. Look! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and he will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of David his father. He will rule over Jacob's house forever, and there will be no end to his kingdom."

Then Mary said to the angel, "How will this happen since I haven't had sexual relations with a man?"

The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come over you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the one who is to be born will be holy. He will be called God's Son. Look, even in her old age, your relative Elizabeth has conceived a son. This woman who was labeled 'unable to conceive' is now six months pregnant.

Nothing is impossible for God."

Then Mary said, "I am the Lord's servant. Let it be with me just as you have said."

Then the angel left her."



**Advent Reader: The common person waits for a new thing to happen, perhaps thinking that it may never be. Yet God comes in unusual ways, giving new life and breaking through societal conventions.**

**Advent Reader 2: God came in the form of man to show us what love can do. Through ordinary people, God accomplished extraordinary things. Like Mary, may we expect new life and be ready to say, "Let it be."**

The candle is lit and the congregation responds by holding stones and praying together: **Holy God, through you all things are possible. May we dwell in the expectations of your heart rather than settling for the expectations in our own. Amen.**

## Advent Wreath Lighting, Week 2

Theme: Acceptance; Illustrated by: Joseph

As people enter the sanctuary, invite them to remove a small stone from a manger. If your stones have been marked, this week's stone is "acceptance."

The advent wreath lighting should begin with a Scripture reading:



Matthew 1: 18-25

"This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. When Mary his mother was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Joseph her husband was a righteous man. Because he didn't want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly. As he was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

Now all of this took place so that what the Lord had spoken through the prophet would be fulfilled:

Look! A virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son,

And they will call him, Emmanuel. (Emmanuel means "God with us.")

When Joseph woke up, he did just as an angel from God commanded and took Mary as his wife. But he didn't have sexual relations with her until she gave birth to a son.

Joseph called him Jesus."



Advent Reader: **At times, our greatest expectations turn into something quite different. Yet God is there, still breaking through in ways that our imaginations cannot fathom.**

Advent Reader 2: **God came in the form of man to show us what love can do. Through ordinary people, God accomplished extraordinary things. Like Joseph, may we accept those things that are different from our expectations and claim a higher purpose.**

The candle is lit and the congregation responds by holding stones and praying together: **Merciful God, let us come to accept those things we had expected to be different. Move us beyond acceptance and into a life committed to your higher purposes. Amen.**

## Advent Wreath Lighting, Week 3

Theme: Family; Illustrated by: the shepherds

As people enter the sanctuary, invite them to remove a small stone from a manger. If your stones have been marked, this week's stone is "family."

The advent wreath lighting should begin with a Scripture reading:



Luke 2:8-20, Common English Bible

"Nearby shepherds were living in the fields, guarding their sheep at night. The Lord's angel stood before them, the Lord's glory shone around them, and they were terrified.

The angel said, "Don't be afraid! Look! I bring good news to you—wonderful, joyous news for all people. Your savior is born today in David's city. He is Christ the Lord. This is a sign for you: you will find a newborn baby wrapped snugly and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great assembly of the heavenly forces was with the angel praising God. They said, "Glory to God in heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors."

When the angels returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go right now to Bethlehem and see what's happened. Let's confirm what the Lord has revealed to us."

They went quickly and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. When they saw this, they reported what they had been told about this child. Everyone who heard it was amazed at what the shepherds told them. Mary committed these things to memory and considered them carefully. The shepherds returned home, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. Everything happened just as they had been told."



Advent Reader: **We are born into one family, but through Christ, new family is found. God continues to expand who we are through those with whom we unify.**

Advent Reader 2: **God came in the form of man to show us what love can do. Through ordinary people, God accomplished extraordinary things. Like the shepherds, may we unite in purpose to seek the unbelievable that when it is found we may point to the sky and praise the One in whom we believe.**

The candle is lit and the congregation responds by holding stones and praying together: **Unifying God, ignite within us the desire to travel the journeys of life together, seeking you and leaving behind things less important. Amen.**

## Advent Wreath Lighting, Week 4

Theme: Yourself; Illustrated by: the innkeeper

As people enter the sanctuary, invite them to remove a small stone from a manger. If your stones have been marked, this week's stone is "yourself."

The advent wreath lighting should begin with a Scripture reading:



Luke 2:1-7, Common English Bible

"In those days Caesar Augustus declared that everyone throughout the empire should be enrolled in the tax lists. This first enrollment occurred when Quirinius governed Syria. Everyone went to their own cities to be enrolled. Since Joseph belonged to David's house and family line, he went up from the city of Nazareth in Galilee to David's city, called Bethlehem, in Judea. He went to be enrolled together with Mary, who was promised to him in marriage and who was pregnant. While they were there, the time came for Mary to have her baby. She gave birth to her firstborn child, a son, wrapped him snugly, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the guestroom."



Advent Reader: **We stand aside, watching from afar as God works miracles in the world. God works with the little we give, no matter how messy or small it may be.**

Advent Reader 2: **God came in the form of man to show us what love can do. Through ordinary people, God accomplished extraordinary things. Like the innkeeper, may we give what little we have knowing that God isn't afraid of our lives' chaos.**

The candle is lit and the congregation responds by holding stones and praying together: **Creator God, you bring order to chaos. Help us not to keep distance from you, but to move closer to touch the sacred and be transformed. Amen.**

## Advent Wreath Lighting, Christmas Eve

Note: You will have guests tonight who were not a part of the entire series. You do not want them to feel like outsiders, so pay careful attention to any assumptions that go into tonight. Move your congregation towards welcoming the outsider.

Theme: Self-Giving; Illustrated by God through Christ

As people enter the sanctuary, include a small piece of paper in the bulletins. It should be blank, and there should be plenty of pencils located in pews for use.

The advent wreath lighting should begin with a Scripture reading:



John 1: 1-5, 14, Common English Bible

In the beginning was the Word  
and the Word was with God  
and the Word was God.  
The Word was with God in the beginning.  
Everything came into being through the Word,  
and without the Word  
nothing came into being.  
What came into being  
through the Word was life,  
and the life was the light for all people.  
The light shines in the darkness,  
and the darkness doesn't extinguish the light.  
The Word became flesh  
and made his home among us.  
We have seen his glory,  
glory like that of a father's only son,  
full of grace and truth.



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Advent Reader: **Words ring true when embodied rather than simply spoken. Christ is God's loving word spoken to creation – embodied by self-giving and light that shines even in the darkest places.**

Advent Reader 2: **God came in the form of man to show us what love can do. Through ordinary people like those depicted in the nativity scene, God accomplished extraordinary things. May we, like them, give our lives over to the One of hope, peace, joy and love.**

The candle is lit and the congregation responds by praying together: **Reconciling God, you have bridged the gap between darkness and light. May we move closer to the light of Christ with each passing breath. Amen.**

Following the message, you may invite persons to write on their slips of paper and come forward to place them within an empty manger. They may write their own or a loved one's name, a situation that needs God's light, or something they want to give up to make way for Christ.

## Small Group Resource – Week 1

### Focus

As we celebrate Advent, we recall the time Mary was expecting Jesus. We know Mary didn't walk around with a halo around her head. Pregnant and unmarried, she likely was the subject of gossip and scorn. Her pregnancy was a social scandal, and it had to be quite scary for her. Without a husband, Mary would be an outcast. She might not be able to support her child.

But Mary had hope. It was hope brought by an angel who declared to be blessed by God. It was hope brought by a fiancé who stood by her and believed in her. It was hope brought by a cousin who rejoiced with her. As Mary awaited the birth of the Son of God, the people who surrounded her helped stave off the fear that the rest of the world tried to push on her.

Expectation is like that. Even though the future offers promise and hope, there is the uncertainty of the unknown. As we wait for Christmas, we must remind ourselves that we await an even greater day. We are waiting for the day when God delivers a new heaven and a new earth, remade in His image.

### Study and Discuss

Read Luke 1:26-38 and Acts 1:4-5

Here we see the two parts of expectation: waiting and promise. For Mary, it was awaiting the promised birth of the Son of God; for the disciples, it was the promised coming of the Holy Spirit. Mary had to wait nine months, the disciples 50 days. All had a long time to wait. However, they believed enough to keep waiting. All had expectation.

1. What are some promises of God that excite you?
2. What are some promises of God that you believe deeply?
3. What are some things you are waiting for from God?
4. What kinds of things can we do to help keep expectation from turning into boredom or distraction?

## Live the Word

The people who have the most in common with Mary during this season are women who are unexpectedly pregnant in some socially taboo way. Like Mary, they need to be surrounded by people who support them and feed their hope. Consider throwing a manger shower for an unexpectedly expectant mother or mothers this Christmas. Find organizations that serve these women and go from there.

## Active/Experience Element

Make sure you have enough pieces of candy to give at least one to each participant. Begin the lesson by letting the group know that you will have a gift for each of them to enjoy at the end of the meeting. Be sure to make a comment or two about the gifts throughout the meeting. At the end, give them the candy and discuss the experience. Use these questions to help the youth think about other times of expectation they have experienced.

1. Did you believe that I had something for you when I told you about the gifts at the beginning of our time together?
2. Did any of you begin to doubt that I actually had something for you?
3. What did it feel like to wait?

## Adaptive Tips

Be aware of any allergies or individual needs to avoid sugar (processed or otherwise) or other ingredients altogether. Either have an alternative ready on hand for those individuals or consider an alternative gift for the whole group: other food treats (fruit, sugar-free candy, etc.) or another fun gift (whatever the “in” thing is that folks in your group are collecting these days).

## Video Options

Consider opening your time with the Christmas story told through social media. Find “The Digital Story of the Nativity” on YouTube or through this shortened link: <http://tinyurl.com/dig-nativity>.

Use a video meditation on the annunciation to tell Mary’s story in an interesting way. A Roman Catholic group produces it, and you may want to stop before the

end due to its length. Find it on YouTube or through this shortened link:  
<http://tinyurl.com/modern-annunciation>.

### **Adaptive Tips**

The content of “The Digital Story of the Nativity” video is primarily text. Make sure those with vision impairments are seated near the screen. Allow partners to read each message to them as it appears. You can also supply printouts with the messages in large type to be read during the video.

Have partners read to those who are completely blind the messages as they appear, or sign the messages to those who are both blind and have hearing impairments.

## Small Group Resource – Week 2

### Focus

Last week we mentioned that if Mary did not have a husband, she would have a very difficult time taking care of her child. That very nearly happened. Faced with a fiancée who was pregnant with someone else's child, Joseph decided to call off the wedding. To his credit, Scripture says he planned to do it quietly. Joseph was dealt a hand that he thought he knew how to play. He was ready to fold. Then God intervened. After his encounter with the angel, Joseph chose to accept rather than reject. He stood by Mary and protected her and Jesus – even by moving to a foreign land to escape death threats.

This sort of acceptance embraces people and circumstances around us. Rather than running from problem people or problem situations, we learn to take them as they come and to experience God bringing beauty out of what seems to be ashes. Teens often find their world full of rejection. What they wear, what they drive, how much money they have – it seems that every detail of life offers grounds for rejection. Most teens either are rejected or often reject others.

But, what if they chose to reverse that? What if this Christmas they chose to find ways in which they could accept and include more people in their world?

### Study and Discuss

Read Matthew 1:18-25 and 1 Corinthians 9:19-23

Here are two examples of living a life of acceptance. We focused on Joseph's example earlier. Paul offers a broader perspective as he lists many categories and characteristics that were used by some to reject others. Paul urges using them as criteria to accept others and to become accepted by them.

1. List some of the categories or characteristics people in your world use to reject others.
2. What makes it harder to accept others than to reject them?
3. Is there ever a time place where rejection is the right way to live?

4. Using Paul's example, how can you use those things we listed to respond to the first question to accept people and be accepted by them?

### Live the Word

It's easy to go help others, then retreat back to a safe space. Think about those you can invite to come into your space this week. Maybe that place will be a group at school or church, or worship. As you come to know those different from you, you'll probably see more things that you can accept than those you used to reject.

### Active/Experience Element

It's time for UNO!

Get enough decks of UNO for everyone in the class to play a short game (give each player only four cards), or play a short game in front of the group by having each player explaining why they are playing each card. For example, someone playing a red three on top of a red five would say, "I'm putting this card down because it is the same color."

The goal of UNO is to reject all of your cards. Now, let's reverse the game. Let's make the point of the game to accept as many cards as possible.

Give each player four cards and put the remaining deck face up with the other half face down. The players take turns and use the same rules eventually to pick up the entire deck. If the card on the top of the stack is a green three for example, the player needs either a green card or a three in their hand to pick it up. If a "draw two" card is received, the person must take two cards from their hand and put them at the bottom of the pile. If everyone has a turn and no card can be played, the top card is placed on the bottom of the stack. The person with the most cards at the end wins.

This is what Paul was doing. He took the rules that were used to reject and turned the whole game upside down, using those same rules to accept people.

1. What did it feel like to swap the goal and rules of the game?

2. Was it hard to remember the rules were swapped the second time you played?
3. What was the hardest part about playing the game in reverse?

### Adaptive Tips

It may be difficult for those who are color-blind to distinguish between colors. You may ask how they usually adapt to this sort of game, or consider playing the game as partners instead of individuals (either for those particular individuals, or the whole group).

Some with intellectual disabilities may not recognize or respond to numbers, or may need reminders to help identify which number is which. Others may need reminders for keeping track of whose turn it is. Partnering and reminding may be helpful strategies to keep these folks in the game.

### Video Options

To see a vivid contrast of rejection and acceptance, view the “Woman at the Well.” Find it on YouTube or by using this shortened link:  
<http://tinyurl.com/rejectwoman>.

If you prefer music, consider using Dave Matthews’ telling the story of Jesus in his “Christmas Song.” Find it on YouTube or by using this shortened link:  
<http://tinyurl.com/dmb-christmas>.

## Study Group Resource – Week 3

### Focus

Being part of a family is interesting. As you learn and think about your extended family, you may find some unusual characters. Some families hide the odd or embarrassing, but God is quite different.

The shepherds were outsiders, loner-types who spent weeks on end in the wild. Most likely, they looked and smelled like their environment, too. They were not the honored guests of kings. They were probably not the honored guests of their extended families, either.

However, when Jesus is born, to whom does God send an angel-delivered singing invitation to meet him? To King Herod? To Caesar? To the Wise Men? No – the honored guests are the stinky, wild, awkward shepherds. The people God makes sure are present to see the King of Kings are the lowest. This sets the pattern for Jesus to include all people, especially those rejected by others. It depicts one of the great mysteries of the Christian faith: “He who is least among you – he is the greatest.”

### Study and Discuss

Read Luke 2:8-20 and Luke 4:16-21

1. What is it about the shepherds that may make God send them an angelic invitation?
2. What do the verses in Luke 4 indicate about to whom was Jesus sent?
3. Think about those who are rich, powerful and content. Was Jesus sent to them as well?
4. After thinking about the second and third questions, would you change how you would answer the first one?

## Live the Word

How many of your Christmas traditions include people like the shepherds? Think of some way to honor the shepherds in your life this Christmas. Use these steps to plan a specific way to honor them.

1. Identify several groups of people or individuals in your world who would be considered shepherd-like.
2. Think of some traditions in your family or church.
3. To which of these traditions could you invite shepherd-like people to come as honored guests?
4. How can you echo the purpose of Jesus' ministry and be a living invitation (like the angels) to one or more of the shepherds you identified?

## Active/Experience Element

Give everyone a Band-Aid. Talk about how hurt the shepherds must have felt to be constantly left out and how healing it must have been to be valued so highly. Jesus was about healing bodies, hearts and souls, and that is what we are supposed to do as his people. Ask the youth to wear the Band-Aids this week as a reminder of our call to be agents of healing in the world.

## Video Options

Try opening with a fun Christmas song by Relient K. Find the animated music video "Sleigh Ride" on YouTube or use this shortened link:  
<http://tinyurl.com/relient-sleigh>.

The Peanuts do a good job of telling the shepherds' story. Find "True Meaning" on YouTube or by using this shortened link: <http://tinyurl.com/peanuts-shepherds>.

## Study Group Resource – Week 4

### Focus

It's a hectic time. Herod has ordered a census, and many are travelling. Every hotel is booked. The innkeeper's task list is longer than it has been in months. It's good for business, but bad for customer service.

Some have suggested that the innkeeper was being kind when he offered the stable to Mary and Joseph. That he was! Delivering a child out in the open, even in a city, was dangerous. The innkeeper did the best he could. But, had he known that the son of God was being born that night, he most certainly would have given up his own bed. He would most likely have provided a better place for Jesus to come into the world.

But, the innkeeper didn't know. Most people can identify with his overloaded, busy state. We've all experienced the feelings that come when our available time isn't even close to what is needed to do everything required of us. In those moments (and in every moment), we need discernment. We need to be able to distinguish the important from the urgent and to see the path of God stretching before us.

### Study and Discuss

Read Luke 2:1-7 and Luke 10:38-42

1. How are the innkeeper and Martha similar?
2. Martha missed the blessing of listening to Jesus' teaching. What blessing did the innkeeper miss?
3. Someone has to prepare a meal; someone has to manage the inn. What happens if everyone chooses "the better thing" and focuses on Jesus?
4. Most often, we talk about discernment as the ability to distinguish between good and bad. Here we are talking about the ability to tell the difference between good and better. Which of these delineations is harder for you to make?

## Live the Word

This season of the year is filled with plenty of good things to do. Even so, too many good things to do can cause Jesus to be pushed aside and relegated to the lowly mangers of our world. Take a moment to write a list of things that you hope to do before Christmas. Then, write the things that you need to do with God in that same period. Pray over those lists. Then cross some things off the first list that you are willing to leave undone so the second list is given priority in the last days before Christmas.

## Adaptive Tips

Invite individuals who do not write, or do not write with ease, to draw pictures of the items on their lists—or again, consider partnering. If someone has a special instrument or gadget for drawing or writing, be sure it is out and ready for this activity.

## Active/Experience

Take the group outside to a storage shed or parking lot. Talk about the ways these places are similar to the manger. Talk about how humble, common and inhospitable they are. Close your time with meditation and this responsive reading:

Leader: Dear God, tonight we ponder the mystery that the savior of the world was born in a leftover space. While humankind received its savior that night, the first to see you were the animals. We see the mistake of the innkeeper. We want to learn from it.

People: Lord, help us to put you first in our lives.

Leader: Though our culture demands a tree with perfectly wrapped presents beneath for Christmas,

People: Lord, help us to put you first in our lives.

Leader: Though the Salvation Army bells remind us briefly of the poor whom you are among, we often forget as soon as we walk through the doors of the mall.

People: Lord, help us to put you first in our lives.

Leader: Though our calendar is full of family gatherings and parties,

People: Lord, help us to put you first in our lives.

Leader: Though we spend time on our wish list pining after those things that moth and dust will destroy,

People: Lord, help us to put you first in our lives.

Leader: Though we spend time opening gifts for ourselves on the morning that we celebrate the greatest gift ever given,

People: Lord, help us to put you first in our lives.

### Adaptive Tips

Encourage everyone, including those with disabilities that affect speech, to communicate the sentiment “Lord, help us to put you first in our lives” in whatever way most natural for them.

This could be accomplished by using sign language; vocalizing other than those specific words; focusing simply on the word “first”; operating a gadget that vocalizes a typewritten phrase; or making a simple gesture of holding one finger up, noting that Jesus is “first.” Since this is a repetitive response, there will be opportunity to practice communicating the phrase each time.

### Video Options

The David Crowder Band tells you “Merry Christmas” with a special holiday fountain outside its tour bus. Find “A Very Crowder Christmas Greeting” on YouTube or by using this shortened link: <http://tinyurl.com/dcb-christmas>.

For a video emphasizing the messiness of the manger, try “He Came to Get Messy” by the Skit Guys. Find it on YouTube, purchase a higher quality version on SkitGuys.com or use this shortened link: <http://tinyurl.com/messy-nativity>.

## Week 1 Do-votional: *Unexpected Surprise*

Scripture: Luke 1:26-38

### Supplies:

- A flashlight with a green bulb and a flashlight with a red bulb, both wrapped in a gift box (You can also cover the lenses of white-bulbed flashlights with green and red cellophane. Secure the cellophane with a rubber band.)
- A nativity set in a box
- A Bible

Gather the children in a circle and place the wrapped box in the center.

Say: **Christmas is a special time of year that's full of wonderful surprises and blessings. We decorate our homes, sing carols and eat lots of holiday treats. We also exchange gifts with each other. What are some gifts you've received at Christmas?** (Repeat what each child shares.) **Let's see what's in this gift box.** (Open the box and remove the two flashlights.) **We have a red light and green light. Our gift is a game! Let's play Red Light/Green Light.**

Choose one player to be Red Light. Hand that person the red and green flashlights. Tell Red Light to stand 10-15 yards from the other players with his back turned to them. Have the other players line up shoulder to shoulder behind Red Light. Their goal is to try to get close enough to tap Red Light on the shoulder, but they can move only when Red Light says, "Green Light."

On go, have Red Light close his eyes, raise the green flashlight and yell, "Green Light!" Players then move toward him — USING BABY STEPS —until he yells, "Red Light," raises the red flashlight and turns around as fast as he can. The instant the other players hear "Red Light," they must stop running. Anyone Red Light sees still moving when he turns around must return to the starting line.

Continue playing until a player gets close enough to tap Red Light on the shoulder when his back is turned. This player wins and becomes the next Red Light.

After a player tags Red Light, gather kids in a circle and ask:

- 1. What are some things that you expected to happen in this game?**
- 2. What happened that was a surprise?**
- 3. How would the game have changed if you knew when Red Light was going to shout Red Light and Green Light?**

**Say: We didn't know when Red Light would shout Red Light and Green Light. Each time we had to stop and go it was unexpected. We had to be ready and listen for the directions.**

Bring out the unwrapped box and remove the Bible and Mary from the nativity set. Set them in the center of the circle.

**Say: The Bible tells us about an unexpected surprise blessing that a young woman named Mary received.** Read Luke 1:26-38 and ask:

- 1. What unexpected things happened to Mary?**
- 2. Why do you think she responded to the angel's visit that way?**
- 3. If you were sitting next to Mary during the angel's visit, what would your response have been?**

**Say: Mary was ready and willing to receive God's blessing—the baby Jesus. At Christmas we can be ready to receive and share God's blessings too! Think of some ways you might bless others this Christmas. Maybe you could surprise someone with cookies or collect food for a homeless shelter.**

Have the kids form a circle and then stand in the center of their circle. Tell them you are going to shine the flashlight on each of them. As the light shines on each person, he or she will share a way he or she will bless others this Christmas. Remind the children to be ready because it will be an unexpected surprise when you shine the light on them!

Begin by shining the light on yourself and say, **“This Christmas I will bless someone by...”** and then fill in the blank. Then continue by shining the light on each child and listening to his or her response.

Close in prayer.

### **Adaptive Tips**

It may be difficult for those who are color-blind to distinguish between colors. You may ask how they usually adapt to this sort of game, or consider playing the game as partners instead of individuals (either for those particular individuals, or the whole group).

For those with other vision impairments or who are completely blind, partnering may also be a good strategy for keeping these folks in the game.

Especially for children with seizure disorders, and for all children, be sure to remind Red Light to avoid shining the light in people’s faces; shine the flashlights a little lower down, but where people can still see which one is shining.

Be sure to allow space for those with physical disabilities to use any extra equipment he or she may need. Or, again, consider partnering, so that children help each other to reach Red Light.

Partnering may also be helpful for children who tend to be distracted or tempted to leave a game for another task or object in the room.

### **Family Friendly Worship Response**

#### **Preparation:**

1. String Christmas light sockets around your worship space, wrapping them around the altar railing or a Christmas tree or draping them over your nativity. Be sure you have one empty socket for each person in worship.
2. Place baskets of red and green Christmas light bulbs at the entrance of your worship space. As people enter, have each pick up a bulb.

The congregational response will build on the red/light green light analogy.

## During Worship

During an appropriate time, recap what happened during the Red Light/Green Light game and how the children had to be ready to stop and go unexpectedly. Invite the people to think about times in their lives when they have to deal with the unexpected, to be ready to stop and go. Use the example of waiting at traffic lights. We know they're there, but we can't predict what color they'll be. When we're in a hurry, we wait anxiously for them to turn green. Some of us may even shout and make gestures to try to change the light. When they're red and we're multi-tasking, we wish they'd stay red just a little longer. This Christmas we can employ that same type of alertness and readiness that we naturally use at most other times in our lives.

Have people pick up their bulbs and think about the following:

1. *What do we need to stop doing or be aware of so we can receive the blessings that God has for us? Where do we need to go to bless others?*
2. *How can we be an unexpected surprise in the lives of those around us?*

After a few moments of reflection, invite people to come forward and screw the bulbs into the string of light sockets as a way of showing their willingness to be ready, to welcome the unexpected and to bless others in surprising ways this Christmas.

After the people have added their bulbs, point out how the string of lights — the sign of commitment of our readiness — has changed the worship space just as Mary's commitment in Luke 1:38 changed our lives and the world: "I am the Lord's servant," said Mary, 'may it happen to me as you have said.' And the angel left her."

### **Adaptive Tips**

Encourage folks to help one another, including those with physical or mobility needs, in getting to the front of the space.

You may consider having one or two people stationed near the light sockets to help those with limited or diminishing fine motor skills with screwing in the bulbs.

## **Week 2 Do-Votional: *Joseph's Wild Card***

Scripture: Matthew 1:18-25

### **Supplies:**

- A deck of UNO cards wrapped in a gift box
- A nativity set in a box
- A Bible

Preparation: Open the box of UNO cards and practice playing the game.

Remove a Wild Card from the deck and place it on top. When you deal the cards to the children during the do-votional, deal this card to yourself first, then continue dealing the cards around the circle.

Gather kids in a circle and place the wrapped box in the center of the circle.

Say: **Christmas is a special time of year that's full of wonderful surprises and blessings. Last week we learned that Mary had a surprise visit from an angel who told her she would give birth to the baby Jesus. Let's see what we can discover about Christmas this week. What's in this gift box?** (Open the box and remove the deck of cards.)

Say: **It's a deck of UNO cards. How many of you have played UNO? How do you play it?** (Take some responses.) **Let's play a quick round of UNO now.** (Quickly deal the cards to the children. As you pass out the cards, recap how to play the game. Play one round of the game then "play" your Wild Card and change the color of round. For example, if the color red is in play, use the Wild Card to change to the color green. Play one more round and stop the game. Gather the cards.)

Ask:

- 1. How did you feel when I changed the color in play in the game?**
- 2. How did that change affect what you did next?**

Say: **When I played the Wild Card, you had to make a decision to either accept the new color in play or reject it and draw more cards. We face similar situations in our lives. We can choose to accept the changes and challenges we face or reject them.**

Ask:

- 1. Describe a time you had exciting plans to do something with a friend or family member and all of sudden those plans changed.**
- 2. How did you respond to those changes?**

Bring out the unwrapped box and remove the Bible and Joseph from the nativity set. Set them in the center of the circle.

Say: **The Bible tells us about a big change that a young man named Joseph faced. Let's see what happened.** Read Matthew 1:18-19.

Ask:

- 1. What big change did Joseph face?**
- 2. How is what happened to Joseph like or unlike what happened to all of you when I played the Wild Card in our UNO game?**

Say: **Joseph received a Wild Card that changed his life. Mary, his bride-to-be, became pregnant before they were married! He had a choice at that moment. Joseph had to accept Mary's pregnancy or reject it and not marry her.**

**Let's see how Joseph played his Wild Card.**

Read Matthew 1:20-24.

Ask:

- 1. Why do you think Joseph chose to accept Mary's pregnancy and marry her?**
- 2. What might have happened if he rejected it?**

### **3. When are changes in life easy to accept? When are they difficult to accept?**

Say: **Just like Joseph, our lives are filled with wild cards – unexpected challenges and changes. How we accept or reject changes and challenges shows others our faith in God. Think of a “wild card”—a challenge or change that you need to accept instead of reject. For example, there is someone in your class who’s lonely and doesn’t have a friend or your mom has a new job and you need to help around the house more.**

Tell that challenge or change to a friend nearby, then work together to brainstorm ways you could deal with that challenge.

Allow a few minutes for kids to discuss.

Ask:

- 1. What are some of the ideas you shared to deal with your partner’s challenge?**
- 2. When we accept challenges and changes in our lives, we can be sure that God will be there to help us face them.**

Say: **Let’s pray and thank God for being with us as we accept and deal with our challenges and changes.**

Give each child an UNO card.

Say: **We’re going to use our UNO cards to help us pray. Pretend your card is a Wild Card and represents the challenge or change you’re facing. When it’s your turn, place the card on the floor in front of you and say, “I accept...then name your change or challenge.” Then say, “Thank you, God, for helping me face it.” I’ll start and then we’ll go around the circle.** Begin and then go around the circle. After everyone has shared, close in prayer.

Allow kids to keep their cards as a reminder of Joseph, his Wild Card, and how we can be like him and accept the challenges we face because God is with us.

## Adaptive Tips

Again, take note of any with color-blindness. Ask them how they usually adapt to this sort of game, or consider partnering.

Some with intellectual disabilities may not recognize or respond to numbers, or may need reminders to help identify which number is which. Others may need reminders for keeping track of whose turn it is. Partnering and reminding may be helpful strategies to keep these folks in the game.

You will want to make sure that children are prepared to listen with patience to kids with disabilities that affect speech as they may take longer to complete sentences, may need a signing interpreter to help with communication, or if they use a type-talk gadget.

Do ask nonverbal children the same questions for discussion that are posed to the rest of the group, even if they do not always sign or respond specifically to such questions. Try to keep them present in the discussion as much as possible, even if the same kind of verbal feedback is not reciprocated.

Be aware of children who are not quick to partner with other children. You will want to observe and make sure those connections are initiated by another child or by you. Or consider another way for these children to communicate their “wild card” challenge (drawing pictures, writing, telling an adult instead of another child).

## Family Friendly Worship Response

### Preparation:

Scatter UNO cards around your worship space. Stick them in Bibles, in the pews, along windowsills, on the floor. They can be visible but don't acknowledge them. Be sure there are enough cards for everyone.

### During Worship:

During an appropriate time, recap what happened during the UNO game and how the game changed when you played the Wild Card. Have people think about times in their lives when they are thrown wild cards, when things change unexpectedly or challenges crash before you. For example, maybe someone has experienced a loss of a job or a move, or a new neighbor who's a little too noisy has moved next door. It could even be that a child didn't get into college. Talk about the discomfort of accepting those challenges and changes. Then read Matthew 1:20-24. Have people think about Joseph and his response.

Point out that in verse 23, the angel proclaims the baby's name, Immanuel – God is with us. Talk about this proclamation as holy reassurance for the wild cards in our lives. No matter what we face, God is with us.

Have people find an UNO card and exchange it with a person nearby. As people exchange cards, have them say, "You've been given a Wild Card."

Then tell people their Wild Card comes with the ability to accept rather than reject something in life. If appropriate, have people turn to a partner and share what challenge or change (could be a person) in their life they have difficulty accepting.

After people share, challenge them to "play" or use their Wild Card in the coming week. Where can they choose to accept rather than reject? How can they model Joseph's acceptance of pregnant Mary? Tell people to keep their card in their wallet, purse or another place where they'll see it as a frequent reminder of the challenge.

Invite people to place their cards in the palms of their hands and lead an eyes-open prayer, thanking God for Joseph and his acceptance of pregnant Mary, and for being with us as we choose to accept rather than reject the changes and challenges around us.

### **Week 3 Do-Votional: *Special Delivery***

Scripture: Luke 2:8-20

#### **Supplies:**

- A phone or cell phone wrapped in a gift box
- 2 x 2 inch pad of sticky notes
- A nativity set in a box
- A Bible
- Three white or gray inflated balloons in a plastic bag\*
- A pad of sticky notes
- Pens or pencils

#### **Preparation:**

\*IMPORTANT: Roll the balloons in dirt or mud to make them dirty and smelly—like sheep!

Gather the children in a circle and place the wrapped box in the center.

Say: **Merry Christmas! Last week we learned that a man named Joseph had a surprise visit from an angel. This angel told him that his bride-to-be, Mary, would give birth to the baby Jesus. Joseph accepted what the angel said and married Mary. Let's see what we can discover about Christmas this week.**

**What's in this gift box?**

Open the box and remove the phone.

Say: **Hmmm. A phone. What do phones help us do?** (Take some responses.)

**Phones help us call people, talk to friends and share good news with others.**

**Describe a time you shared some important news with someone. For example, you earned an A on a test and you called your best friend and told him or her, or maybe you hit a homerun in baseball and you sent your grandpa an email.**

**Ask: How did you choose the person to tell your good news?**

**Say: We share our good news in different ways and we share it with people we care about and love.**

Bring out the unwrapped box and remove the Bible and the shepherds from the Nativity set. Set them in the center of the circle.

**Say: The Bible tells us about some news that was shared with some shepherds. Before we hear the message, let's explore what it may have been like to be a shepherd in the fields.**

Have kids stand in a circle and hold hands.

**Say: You are now shepherds. Shepherds have an important job. They cared for sheep in the fields far away from other people. It was dirty, smelly, lonely work. (Hold up a dirty, dusty balloon.) This balloon represents a sheep. In this game, you'll care for the sheep by keeping the balloon safe in the air. You can bat it with your hands, heads, or arms, but you cannot let go of each other's hands as you care for your sheep.** Toss the balloon into the center of the circle. Have kids work together to keep the balloon afloat. After a few seconds, add another balloon to the circle. Wait a few seconds and add another. After a minute, stop the game.

**Ask:**

- 1. What do you think it was like to be a shepherd in the field?**
- 2. If someone asked you to be a shepherd right now, how would you respond?**

**Say:** Being a shepherd was hard, dirty, stressful and lonely work! Sometimes people forgot they even existed, but not God. He knew the shepherds were special. Let's see what special message was shared with them.

**Read Luke 2:8-12.**

Ask:

- 1. Why do you think God used angels to announce the birth of Jesus?**
- 2. Why do you think God chose the shepherds instead of kings to be the first to hear the news that Jesus was born?**

**Say:** God chose the shepherds because he wanted everyone to know about the birth of Jesus – not just the important people like kings and other royalty. Jesus is a gift to all of us from God. He is God's special gift to ... (Point to a few children and say their names.). He's also a gift to everyone in our church, our community and the world.

Give each child a sticky note and a pen.

**Say:** Let's see what the shepherds did after they received the news about Jesus' birth. (Read Luke 2:15-20.) When the shepherds heard about the birth of Jesus they ran to town and began telling others what they had seen and heard. We can tell others the good news of Jesus, too.

Think of someone you know who needs to know that Jesus is God's gift to him or her. For example, you may have a friend at school that is lonely, or maybe there is someone in your family that you haven't seen in awhile.

**On your sticky note, write or draw a special message that tells that person that Jesus is born. (Allow time.)**

**Now turn to a friend nearby and share your message and who it is for. (Allow time.)**

**Let's pray and ask God to help us share the good news of Jesus with others. Dear God, thank you for the gift of your son Jesus. Help us to tell others about him today and everyday.**

**This week remember to give your message to the recipient. When you share it, tell that person about the angels, the shepherds and how they learned about God's gift to all of us—Jesus!**

### **Adaptive Tips**

For children who do not write letters and words, emphasize the drawing of a special message. For those who need assistance holding an object like a pencil in hand, encourage helping one another, or have an assistant available for this task. For those who use type-talk devices, encourage them to use these devices for this activity. If these individuals also want a sticky note but do not write, you may suggest that someone else write the message onto the sticky note for them.

### **Family Friendly Worship Response**

#### **Preparation:**

Provide a 2 x 2-inch sticky note for each person. You can place them inside your church bulletins, stick them on pews, or distribute them as people enter your worship space. Have pens and pencils in the pews.

#### **During Worship:**

During an appropriate time, hold up a sticky note. Tell the people how the children used sticky notes earlier to help them remember to share good news of Jesus' birth with someone special. Then talk about how people use sticky notes as a tool for remembering the items on their to-do lists. (As you mention these examples or some of your own, record them on the notes.) At Christmas, our to-do lists probably include purchasing last-minute gifts, buying ingredients for Christmas meals, or mailing cards. Our lists may also include other traditions that we follow during the holidays like caroling, using Advent wreaths and decorating. Invite people to think about what's on their sticky notes or to-do lists this year. If

possible, have people turn to a person nearby and share their lists. Why were the items on their lists worth remembering? What made them important?

Remind people how God sent the angels to deliver the news of Jesus' birth to seemingly unimportant, lowly, dirty outcasts. These were forgotten people that God saw differently, that God saw as special.

Instead of overlooking them, God chose to put them first and front and center.

What if this Christmas we moved outside our normal traditions and we intentionally tried to remember the things we often overlook and forget? What would it look like if we remembered the forgotten, ostracized and disenfranchised in our personal lives and our communities?

Tell the people to each find a sticky note. Then have them write on their notes the name of someone in their family, church, school or neighborhood who would be considered forgotten or pushed to the edge of society. Then have the people pray silently, asking God to help them reach out to that person in tangible ways this Christmas. After a few moments of writing and reflection, challenge the people to stick the note in a place where they'll see it during the coming week as an ongoing reminder to remember the forgotten this Christmas.

In closing, remind people of how, after the shepherds saw the baby Jesus, they ran and told everyone about what they'd experienced. How would our communities be different if everyone could experience that type of joy this year?

### **Adaptive Tips**

Try (as much as possible) to have individuals without disabilities—adults and children alike—in worship ready either to intentionally connect with persons who might not be prone to reach out to others for discussion, or with folks who other parishioners may not be sure how to engage, such as persons who are nonverbal or who prefer to write or draw their responses. Try to make sure interpreters are available for those who sign and that these individuals are seated in the same area as interpreters.

Just as in the children's setting, encourage parishioners to either write or draw their messages, and if anyone needs assistance holding an instrument like a pencil, encourage folks to help one another with the activity. A person who type-talks can get a partner to transcribe the message onto a sticky note, if he or she desires.

## Week 4 Do-Votional: *Too Much To Do*

Scripture: Luke 2:7

### Supplies:

- Two bottles of bubble solution with wands wrapped in a Christmas box
- A nativity set in a box
- A Bible

Gather the children in a circle.

Say: **Christmas is coming in just a few days. There are still many things left to do as we prepare for the birth of Jesus. What are some things that you still need to do to get ready for Christmas? For example, maybe you need to decorate your house or you still have some homework to do because school is still in session.**

**Perhaps you are still practicing for a Christmas play. Turn to a friend nearby and talk about the things you still have to do to get ready for Christmas. (Allow time then have a few kids share.)**

Say: **Wow! We do have a lot to do.** (Place the wrapped box in the center of the circle.) **Another thing we have to do is open our box!** (Open the box and remove the two bottles of bubbles.) **Bubbles! Let's use our bubbles to see what it is like to do all of those things we mentioned in such a short period of time.** (Invite an adult volunteer to come forward and hand that person a bottle of bubbles.) **We are going to blow several bubbles and your job is to pop all of them in 30 seconds.**

**Ready, go!**

Ask:

1. **How did you decide which bubbles to pop first?**
2. **How is choosing which bubbles to pop and popping them like what is happening as we get ready for Christmas?**

### **3. What might happen if we focused only on Jesus this Christmas?**

**Say: The Bible tells us about the busy time when Mary and Joseph went to Bethlehem. Read Matthew 2:7.**

**Ask:**

- 1. What do you think an innkeeper with no vacancies might have been busy doing?**
- 2. How might focusing on all of those things have caused him to miss the birth of the baby Jesus?**
- 3. What things in our lives may keep us so busy that we miss what's most important at Christmas?**

**Say: At Christmas, we have to focus on the birth of Jesus and share that special time with family and friends. We can also invite new friends to learn about Jesus' birth.**

**Think of one way you could focus more on Jesus during these last few days before Christmas. For example, you might pray more or spend time reading about Jesus' birth in the Bible. You could even play with your nativity set and retell the Bible stories we've learned the last few weeks. (Pause and allow time for kids to think.)**

**Say: We are going to blow more bubbles. Choose one bubble to follow with your eyes. Watch it as it travels through the air and whisper the one thing you've decided to do over and over again. (Blow more bubbles and pause as kids watch them.)**

**Ask:**

- 1. What helped you stay focused on one bubble?**
- 2. How can you use those same things to stay focused on Jesus this Christmas?**

**Say: Let's pray and ask God to help us stay focused on Jesus this Christmas. Dear God, there is so much for us to do as we get ready for Christmas. Help us to realize what is most important, the birth of your son, Jesus! In Jesus' name, amen.**

### **Family Friendly Worship Response**

#### **Preparation:**

Set up prayer stations around the room. Place a few bottles of bubble solution and wands at each station.

#### **During Worship:**

To close your worship time, invite people to go to the stations, blow a few bubbles, and choose one to watch as it travels through the air.

As they follow the bubble with their eyes, have people think about how our lives would change if we focused more on Jesus at Christmas and experienced the peace his presence brings during this time and all year long. Challenge people to share that peace with others who may be enveloped by the chaos of the trappings of a secular Christmas.

Have people exit in silence.