



Advent Life Groups

Rejoice Together One and All!

Advent is the season dedicated to anticipating Jesus's arrival. This season is more than waiting to celebrate; it is a time of actively preparing ourselves to welcome Jesus.

This time as a group is designed to support us as we explore and reflect on what it means to rejoice in all that God has done and continues to do in, through and around us.

Together, we will use our senses and take time to see, hear and feel the things around us as we “Rejoice together one and all!”



Rejoice

In Christian circles, the word REJOICE is common. We hear it in Church, sing songs about it, and read it in the Bible (over 200 times). However, the word rejoice is rarely used or heard in community settings. When was the last time you heard someone use the word rejoice? What does it mean to rejoice? When do we rejoice?

Here are some definitions:

- To feel or show great joy or delight. (Oxford)
- To feel or show that you are very happy about something. (Brittanica)
- To feel joy; to experience gladness in a high degree; to have pleasurable satisfaction; to be delighted. (Webster's Dictionary)

Which definition do you like best? Why did you choose that one?

This Advent let's take in the sights, sounds, feelings and learnings, and find reasons to rejoice. We encourage you to share your experiences with others, and let's make the word 'rejoice' a mainstream word again.

If you would like to, in the space below, you could draw or write what you think it means to rejoice.

Week One: Rejoice and See

Opening Discussion:

Imagine your Christmas experiences were turned into a photo album. Describe a few of photos that would be sure to be included, what do you see in those images?

Introduction:

How often do you take the time to really look and see all that is around you?

This week, we encourage you to take a good look around and notice things you may never have noticed – a newly formed spider web, a plant flowering in your neighbourhood, a new Christmas ornament, someone's earrings, an excited person.

This Advent, what gives you a reason to rejoice? What makes you stop and reflect? Maybe you:

SEE the signs of hope.

SEE the burdens carried by strangers and friends.

SEE the uncontained joy of children.

SEE God at work through other people.

Read and Reflect:

It might work best to read each reading one at a time and then discuss it before moving on to the next reading.

- Jeremiah 33: 14-16
- Psalm 25: 1-10
- 1 Thessalonians 3: 9-13
- Luke 21: 25-36

Discussion Questions:

- As you read each of these readings, what images do you see?
- Imagine yourself in the readings and look around. What do you see on the surface?
- What is revealed to you if you look a little deeper?

It's Beginning To Look a Lot Like Christmas

Have you ever heard the Christmas carol "It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas"? If you've worked in any kind of shop during the Christmas period over the last 10 years, this might trigger some bad memories, but for the rest of us, the signs that we see around us at this time of the year are a reminder that Christmas is on the way.

The decorations that catch our eye with their sparkle and movement.

The lights and displays covering entire churches, houses, and even whole streets.

The ads everywhere are showing us what we need to make this Christmas more amazing than any we've had before!

Signs everywhere we look point us to what is to come, even counting down shopping days!

Signs to get excited and rejoice for what is to come!

But, sometimes, all these things we see can actually make it hard for us to rejoice as we remember things from the past, or see where things are now in comparison with them.

Maybe we struggle to rejoice because we can't see what is to come.

So, as we begin this Advent journey, we might find ourselves in a time of very mixed emotions for ourselves and for those around us.

Our Gospel reading this week from Luke 21:25-36, reflects some of this tension too, as it invites us to look around, not at the beginning of Jesus' story, but at the other end of his story - Jesus' return.

It speaks of the challenges and trials to come and the difficulties that will be seen.

But it also reminds us to straighten our backs, lift our heads, and look for God. It challenges us, despite how we might be feeling, to look with open eyes for God and what God is doing in the world.

It also serves as a reminder to continue living the way Jesus has asked his followers to. No matter what is happening around us, we are encouraged to continue living lives of self-sacrificing love, working in partnership with God, and restoring all things so that others may see God and find reason to rejoice.

This is something to see and rejoice about: moments when we can be part of God's transformation, particularly during this time of Advent.

Over the last few years, our family has found a charity group to join in helping pack and deliver Christmas hampers across our community. This is a small sign of God's ongoing work and brings joy in the midst of darkness.

As we've done this, our kids have invited their friends to join in, and we have been part of something tangible for others to see a glimpse of the coming of God's hope, love and joy. This interaction has allowed them, too, to see God's people undertaking small acts of joyful restoration in the world.

As you approach this Advent, despite how you might be feeling, or even because of how you are feeling, I wonder what opportunities you may see around you to rejoice in the goodness of God and share that rejoicing with others. How might you be able to embody a hope that can withstand whatever challenges it may come up against and, in doing so, allow others to see what it really means for it to "begin to look a lot like Christmas".

Wonder and Discuss:

- What things do you see around that show you that Christmas is on the way?
- Which of these bring you joy? Which don't?
- What opportunities do you have (or could you take) to rejoice in the goodness of God and share that with others?
- How can you embody hope to withstand challenges?
- How can you show others what it means to "begin to look a lot like Christmas"?

Prayer Opportunity:

Purchase a newspaper or look at online news. As you read the news, ask God to speak to you.

- What stories make you rejoice? Thank God for the situations and people in these stories.
- What stories make you sad or angry? Talk to God about these situations and stories.
- Are there any stories that make you reflect on your own life and/or behaviour? Talk to God about these things.
- You might like to make a prayer collage using different cut-outs of newspaper stories.

An Alternative:

- Take the time to sit still and watch a candle flicker. Take deep breaths. What thoughts come to mind? Talk to God about them.
- Take time to pray for the others in the group that they may be freed to rejoice.

Week Two: Rejoice and Hear

Opening Discussion:

Have everyone share a favourite Christmas carol — listen to them if you have time and the capacity. Talk about what the songs remind you of and why they are your favourites.

Introduction:

Preparing for Christmas can be full of noise. You might hear Shopping centres full of Christmas carols, the excitement of children hoping for a particular present, plans for Christmas lunch celebrations, holiday makers' travel ideas and advertising for the latest Christmas movie.

This Advent, what gives you a reason to rejoice? What makes you stop and reflect? Maybe you:

HEAR the voices of hope.

HEAR the cries of a hurting world.

HEAR the stories of how God is at work through other people.

HEAR the voices singing the good news of Emmanuel – God with us.

Read and Reflect:

It might work best to read each reading one at a time and then discuss it before moving on to the next reading.

- Malachi 3: 1-4
- Luke 1: 68-79
- Philippians 1:3-11
- Luke 3: 1-6

Discussion Questions:

- As you read each of these passages, what do you hear?
- What words and phrases jump or stand out to you?
- What are your inner thoughts saying?
- What messages do you hear in the words of John the Baptist and the prophet Malachi? How are they good news for you and your community?

Do You Want to Hear the Good News?

This week's readings from Malachi and Luke are full of good and bad news. The good news is that God had not forgotten them and had promised a Messiah to show them good ways. This is bad news for some because they would have to change, which is sometimes hard.

In the reading from Luke 3:1-6, John, who became known as John the Baptist, comes out of the wilderness to the region around the Jordan River to tell the people to get ready for the promised Messiah. He tells them to change their ways and repent. Repentance is translated from a Greek word that means "have a change of mind" or "go beyond the mind you have". John told the people it was time to change (hear the Messiah is coming) and make a change (ask for forgiveness and be baptised). This was good news for those who would hear.

John's message is for us to hear, too. As we prepare for Christmas, we hear the good news and are called to be people who put it into action. To be people who daily change our way to God's way, so that what we say and do. Smooths the way, enabling the good news of Jesus to be heard and known in our community and world.

We have family that work and live in remote Western Queensland. It can be very rewarding but, at times, very challenging. One time, James was coming back to the homestead on his motorbike after mustering all day. It was getting dark, and as he headed along the track, he saw what looked like a brown snake ahead. He swerved to miss the snake, hit a log, came off the bike and landed on a branch that pierced his upper thigh. He couldn't move because he was pinned to the branch, and his leg hurt a lot. What was he to do?

Fortunately, James' two-way radio was still secured in a pouch on his chest, so he pressed the transmit button and called the homestead for help. "Station 1, are you there?" no answer. He called again, "Station 1, are you there?" Then James' wife came on the radio. "Station 1 here. Where are you?"

James said he had never felt so much relief as when he heard his wife's voice. He knew help would be on its way. He had even more relief when he heard the RFDS plane overhead later that night. He knew that it would have been action stations at the homestead. Someone had gone out and lit up the runway, setting tins of oil down the sides to mark a straight path so the plane could land. He knew that even though his pain was extreme, and the branch was still in his leg, the expertise of the flying doctor team would help him. James said as he lay there praying and waiting

for the team to arrive, and the sounds of the night bush came over him; he knew he would be OK.

James was airlifted to the hospital and, after surgery and lots of therapy, was able to walk again. James and his family rejoiced as healing milestones were met along the way. Praise God!

Wonder and Discuss:

- Have you or someone you know been in a situation like James? How was that?
- How would you feel when you heard the plane, voice, and noises in the dark of night?
- What sounds do you hear this season to help you celebrate Jesus and rejoice?
- As you listen to Christmas carols what is the good news you hear that you can tell others?
- What opportunities do you have (or could you take) to rejoice in the hope of God and share that with others?
- How can you show others what it means to be a follower of Jesus?

Prayer Opportunity:

Foil Prayer¹: Use alfoil to pray for yourself and others:

- Get a piece of foil (6x6cm is big enough)
- Place the piece of foil shiny side up: think of the good things in your life.
- Lightly scrunch the foil into a loose ball: think of people who find life tough.
- Smooth out the foil again: think of people who help others (smooth things out) – parents, teachers, doctors etc.
- Make a letter out of the foil: think of something or someone who starts with that letter.

An Alternative:

- Bubble-Wrap Prayer: Talk to God about the things that are worrying you and pop bubble-wrap bubbles as you do.
- Sit in silence. As you focus on the sound of your breathing, what might God be saying to you? Silently pray for the other members of your group that they may hear God's voice.

¹ Adapted from <https://flamecreativekids.blogspot.com/2016/04/interactive-prayer-foil-intercessions.html>

Week Three: Rejoice and Act

Opening Discussion:

Often, we have traditions or practices connected to Christmas. What is something you do that helps it feel like Christmas? Why is that practice important to you?

Introduction:

How often do you stop to think about what you are doing during the week?

This week, we encourage you to take some time to think about what you want to be doing, or how you want to be acting, this Advent. What priorities do you need to action at the moment?

This Advent, what gives you a reason to rejoice? How does this rejoicing make you want to act? Maybe you want to:

- ACT with a sense of purpose.
- ACT to serve others.
- ACT to make a difference.
- ACT to share the good news.
- ACT to share God's love.

Read and Reflect:

It might work best to read each reading one at a time and then discuss it before moving on to the next reading.

- Zephaniah 3:14-20
- Isaiah 12:2-6
- Philippians 4:4-7
- Luke 3:7-18

Discussion Questions:

- As you read these passages, what actions (if any) did you notice?
- What in these readings calls you to action?
- What makes you want to act in a different way?

Don't Wait, Act Now

People generally don't want to be told how to act. But sometimes, we might ask others, seeking a response that either lets us off the hook or keeps us in our comfort zones.

In the Luke reading, the people ask John what they should do. If John is telling them to follow God, then what do they need to do? I wonder if you have ever asked the question, "What does God want us to do?"

What's your answer?

We would generally say things like reading the Bible, praying, and going to church. They are good things to do, no doubt. But they are not the things that John mentions. His ideas are focused on others. Give to those in need, don't take more than you need.

How does that play out in your life? Particularly at this time of year? We are busy getting ourselves ready. How often do we think about others? Sure, there is a lot of thinking about what to buy for others. And that can be special. It is one of my real joys of Christmas. To come up with something that the person really loves. That is bringing joy into their life and is part of the message of Christmas.

But then, how do we think about those outside of our family? Uniting World allows us to buy a gift for someone overseas and to give a card to a relative to say, "hey I was thinking of you, and I bought this for someone in need." For many years, my parents have said, "We have all we need; get us some of these." I probably spend more on them now than if I was giving them something physical. It is fun to think which gift of help makes them smile. The joy of this is that the gift which is given is something that the people who receive it really need, that will make a radical change in their life - what a great gift to give, so much better than socks (sorry to my son who loves giving me socks). This action also links with the Philippians' reading, where we can be thankful for what we have and be generous.

The other way we might act is to help those around us to understand more of what Christmas is about. Maybe you are involved in a carols service at your church, then invite your friends along. Maybe you have special decorations, share the meaning of those with others. Maybe when you are sitting at work over lunch and chatting about the busyness of Christmas, share a little thought about the joy it brings you and the way Jesus brings light to the world. It doesn't have to be an hour-long presentation, a sentence or two can have a huge impact.

Yes, I know you probably don't want to be told how to act right now. But think about how you might act in a new way.

Wonder and Discuss:

- What is still left on your Christmas to-do list? How is this compared to your regular to-do list?
- What do you think God wants you to do or how does God want you to act this week?
- How might you show others what it means to be a follower of Jesus in action this week?
- What opportunities could, or have you taken this week to act differently and share the good news of Jesus with others?

Prayer Opportunity:

Five Finger Prayer²: Use your fingers to pray for yourself and others.

- Thumb: Pray for people closest to you – your family and friends
- Pointer: Pray for teachers and healers – your Teachers, Leaders, Coaches, Doctors and Pastors
- Middle Finger: Pray for leaders – those in government, business, school and church
- Ring Finger: pray for the sick, lonely and poor
- Pinky: pray for yourself and your own needs last

An Alternative:

- Stretch and Pray:
 - Stretch your arms up high for 30 seconds: Focus on who God is.
 - Bend over and stretch down for 30 seconds: Thank God for all that God has done in your life.
 - Stretch your arms and body to the left side for 30 seconds: Pray for your family and friends.
 - Stretch your arms and body to the right side for 30 seconds: Pray for difficult situations around the world.
 - Give yourself a big bear hug for 30 seconds: Ask God to be with you during the day - guiding, helping and supporting.
- Take time to pray for each person in your group that they will be free to act according to God's call.

² <https://www.imom.com/printable/five-finger-prayer/>

FIVE FINGER PRAYER



Week Four: Rejoice and Feel

Opening Discussion:

As we get closer to Christmas Day, where are you in your advent journey?

... Distracted by the to-do list.... Ready to rejoice.... Anticipating but not there yet... Already rejoicing... Ready for something different....

How are you feeling about Christmas this year?

Introduction:

How often do you take the time to stop and feel? Feel the textures of things around you and feel the emotions within you?

This week, we encourage you to take the time to feel – it may be sand under your feet, a cool breeze, the bark of a tree, clean sheets, or the warmth of a hug.

This Advent, what gives you a feeling of rejoicing? What moves you beyond your logic and reasoning to stop and wonder? Maybe you:

- FEEL a sense of excitement.
- FEEL nervousness before trying something new.
- FEEL the warm embrace from a loved one.
- FEEL God's presence.

Read and Reflect:

It might work best to read each reading one at a time and then discuss it before moving on to the next reading.

- Micah 5: 2-5a
- Psalm 80: 1-7
- Hebrews 10: 5-10
- Luke 1:39-55

Discussion Questions:

- As you engage with the Bible readings, what do you feel?
- Put yourself in the readings and be aware of your feelings. How is your body reacting? What is revealed to you through those feelings?

How Do You Feel With Only A Few Days Till Christmas?

Work out how many sleeps are left till Christmas Day. I wonder how you feel when you hear that?

Maybe you are one of those people who have everything organised, menus planned for Christmas Day and presents not just bought but already wrapped and under the Christmas tree. Or maybe you are like so many others who had good intentions of being organised this year, but life got in the way, and now the school holidays have started, and you're rushing to get everything done.

Living in a place where many come to holiday, I can already feel the difference. The locals have started to express their frustration as they feel their piece of paradise is being overrun by 'the outsiders'.

You can feel the tension rise on the roads as the locals try to continue their lives, getting from point A to point B, trying to do their shopping, getting to the medical appointment, finding the roads blocked by people trying to find their hotel, or that meeting place someone suggested would be really easy to find.

Amidst the busyness of Christmas and holidays, normal life continues. As you go for a stroll along the esplanade, you can feel the difference! There's a big difference between those who are out exercising, maybe in between work, school, and family schedules, and those who are exercising at a much more relaxed pace, which you can just tell is a holiday maker with no schedule to keep.

And don't you dare suggest going to the shopping centre! Do you know how packed it is with people looking for that last-minute gift? Or if we are to listen to the media, full of husbands in panic mode trying to source the right gift. Maybe it is the attitude people take into the shopping centre, as some look like they are actually enjoying themselves, whereas you can tell others are feeling the strain and pressure of the clock ticking ever closer to Christmas Day.

Christmas Day can be a wonderful time for many people, a chance to reconnect with relatives and friends that you have not seen for a long time, and people feel the excitement of the day approaching, but for others, Christmas Day is not such a great experience. Personally, I had an uncle who was in the process of relocating to Australia and staying with us, die on Christmas morning; all the feelings of excitement drained away as we sought to find meaning in what was happening. It took many years before I or my family could look forward to Christmas day again!

Thinking back to the first Christmas, have you ever stopped to consider the stresses and anxieties those in the story might have been feeling?

If you have been fortunate enough to experience parenthood, or to journey with someone who has, you know the hope and joy that is associated with a newborn, but also the feelings of fear and uncertainty that are there too.

This Christmas, as we think about the journey to Bethlehem, I encourage you to think about your feelings, whatever they are, and know that the only thing you can do with a feeling is feel it.

Wonder and Discuss:

- How do you think Mary and Joseph felt as they journeyed to Bethlehem?
- How do you think the others in Bethlehem might have felt when they saw a pregnant lady with no place to stay?
- How do you think the shepherds felt about being included in the story?
- How do you think the wise men might have felt as they sought to follow a star, not knowing why?
- How do you think Herod felt as he was told about the newborn King?
- How do you feel as you journey to Christmas day?
- How could you help others feel a sense of joy and expectation about the wonder of Christmas?

Prayer Opportunity:

Set up a tactile 'feeling' prayer area to engage with. You might like to give every group member one item, and after a set amount of time, everyone passes their item on in the same direction. Some ideas are:

- Rock – pray for situations that are hard.
- Bowl of water – pray for people who live across the sea.
- Playdough/clay – out of the playdough, make an alphabet letter to represent someone you'd like to pray for.
- Rough – pray for people who are having a rough time.
- Smooth – thank God for people who smooth the way and make life easier for us.
- Cuddly – pray for people who need to feel God's loving embrace.
- Christmas ornament – pray for those people who may struggle this Christmas.

An Alternative:

- Walk around and take the time to touch different objects and surfaces. As you touch different things, talk to God about the things that come to mind.
- Take time to pray for the other members of your group. Asking God to help them feel free to experience and unpack their true feelings around Christmas this year.