



THE WAY OF LOVE
Practices for Jesus-Centered Life

**Journeying the Way of Love:
Advent Curriculum**

by Jenifer Gamber and Becky Zartman
www.episcopalchurch.org/wayoflove

JOURNEYING THE WAY OF LOVE:

ADVENT CURRICULUM

For the season of Advent, Journeying the Way of Love offers four sessions to be explored as we await the coming of Christ by moving through the first two chapters of the Gospel of Luke (alternate years of the lectionary tend to cover the same themes with parallel texts). Luke's gospel provides a pattern for understanding how we can live the Way of Love as individuals, as families and friends, as a community, and out in the world. The sessions are especially designed for use during the Christian formation hour before or after worship. Facilitation instructions accommodate small or large groups.

Contents

- **Advent One:** The Annunciation: Saying “Yes” to the Journey
- **Advent Two:** Mary and Elizabeth: Journeying with Family and Friends
- **Advent Three:** The Birth of John the Baptist: Journeying with Community
- **Advent Four:** The Birth of Jesus: Journeying with the World
- **Curriculum Resources:** Journeying the Way of Love Advent Calendar, Discussion Questions about Spiritual Practices, Starting a Rule of Life, Scripture Passages

Participants are encouraged to read and reflect on these passages in Luke throughout the season of Advent and “try on” the spiritual practices of the Way of Love. To accompany this curriculum, participants should also print a copy of the Journeying the Way of Love Advent Calendar, which offers daily suggestions for engaging in the seven practices that encompass the Way of Love. When the group gathers each week, participants will reflect with one another on how they experienced taking up the practices in the calendar.

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Learn more about The Way of Love and The Episcopal Church at www.episcopalchurch.org/wayoflove.

Share reflections and queries by writing to wayoflove@episcopalchurch.org or on social media using #wayoflove.

Scriptural citations from the New Revised Standard Version.

ADVENT ONE

THE ANNUNCIATION: SAYING “YES” TO THE JOURNEY

Overview

This week orients participants to the Way of Love and invites them to see the Way of Love as a journey that begins by saying “yes” to God’s call to birth new life into the world. The call is gentle, yet powerful. A call, fully embraced, will grow beyond our imagination, spilling out of ourselves to our family, friends, community, and into the world. The first half of the session introduces the Way of Love, while the second-half invites participants to join Mary in her encounter with the angel who announces that she will conceive and bear a son. This session is intended to launch participants into not just studying but birthing and then living the Way of Love.

Learning Objectives

- Participants will be oriented to this four-week curriculum.
- Participants will be introduced to the concept of a rule of life and the Way of Love.
- Participants will explore the story of the Annunciation and apply Mary’s experience to their own lives.
- Participants will prepare to walk the Way of Love with one another.

Materials Needed

- Copies of Journeying the Way of Love Advent Calendar for each participant
- Bibles for each participant or copies of the first two chapters of Luke, preferably New Revised Standard Version
- Newsprint with the seven Way of Love practices written at the top of each sheet or halfsheet
- Seven sticky notes per participant

Timeline

0:00-05	Opening Prayer
0:05-10	Orientation to Journeying the Way of Love
0:10-30	What Is a Rule of Life? What Is the Way of Love?
0:30-50	Scripture Study: Luke 1:26-38
0:50-55	Closing Reminders/Closing Prayer

Opening Prayer

Pray this or another prayer:

Great Spirit, God, Creator of all, we receive you into our hearts, our minds, our Souls: Grant us Mary’s wisdom to heed the inner voice that we know is you. Guide us to accept your invitation to serve and to do so with strength and courage. Amen.

[*Daily Prayer for All Seasons*, (New York: Church Publishing, 2014), p. 27].

Orientation to Journeying the Way of Love: Advent

Orient participants to the structure of this curriculum. Over the next four sessions, you'll be moving through the first two chapters of the Gospel of Luke. Luke's gospel provides a pattern for understanding how we can live the Way of Love as individuals, as families and friends, as a community, and out in the world.

- The Annunciation: Saying "Yes" to the Journey as an Individual (Luke 1:26-38)
- Mary and Elizabeth: Journeying with Family and Friends (Luke 1:39-56)
- Birth of John the Baptist: Journeying with Community (Luke 1:57-80)
- Birth of Jesus: Journeying in the World (Luke 2:1-20)

Participants are encouraged to read and reflect on these passages in Luke throughout the season of Advent.

Orient participants to the expectations of this curriculum. Hand out a copy of the Journeying the Way of Love Advent Calendar to every participant. Explain that participants are encouraged to actually do the practices listed each day during that day. Participants may wish to look ahead, as some days may require some preparation. Participants may wish to journal or reflect in another way on the practices as they move throughout the week. When the group gathers together again, participants will reflect with other participants on the experience of the practices.

WHAT IS A RULE OF LIFE? WHAT IS THE WAY OF LOVE?

Introducing a Rule of Life

Introduce your participants to the concept of a Rule of Life:

- The idea of a rule of life comes from the Latin word *regula* and suggests a way to regulate or regularize our lives to stay on an intentional path. A rule of life is not just a set of rules to live by; rather, it is a gentle framework to guide and support us on our way.
- A rule of life allows us to live with intention and purpose in the present moment. It helps us clarify our most important values, relationships, dreams, and work.
- A rule of life is meant to be simple, realistic, flexible, and achievable.

While the phrase "Rule of Life" may be new to many people, we likely already follow one - we just don't often recognize it as such. Think of a rule of life as a pattern of your day or commitments to regular practices. An example is a commitment to exercise, or do yoga three times a week, or a commitment to eat dinner with your family every night. These are elements of a rule of life. Invite participants to name secular elements of a rules of life, or secular communities that maintain a rule of life. (Some answers might include: CrossFit/Gym memberships, life in the armed forces, expectations around school participation, etc.)

Invite participants to respond to the following questions:

- Considering the rhythm of your day or week as a rule of life, what signs of a rule of life do you notice?
- Why do individuals or groups adopt rules of life?
- How might a Jesus-centered rule of life be different than a secular rule of life?

Introducing the Way of Love

The Way of Love is one type of spiritual rule of life. This is not the only such spiritual rule. There are other ancient spiritual rules of life, such as the Rule of St. Benedict or more contemporary ones like the Rule of the Society of St. John the Evangelist, the Rule of the Society of the Companions of the Holy Cross, or the Restoration Project's rule for the modern disciple. A spiritual rule of life is a purposeful tool to help us grow into a more meaningful life with God. As such, following the practices in the Way of Love can change one's relationship with God, ourselves, and others with whom we share the earth.

The Way of Love invites us to a rule of life that leads to incarnating Divine Love in the world, so it is appropriate to initiate a journey on the Way of Love during Advent, the season we slow down to get ready to welcome Jesus, God incarnate, anew. The Way of Love focuses on seven different spiritual practices. On your Journeying the Way of Love Advent Calendar you'll notice each week follows a pattern. Review each type of practice with the participants:

Sunday: Worship

Gather in community weekly to thank, praise, and dwell with God

When we worship, we gather with others before God. We hear the Good News of Jesus Christ, give thanks, confess, and offer the brokenness of the world to God. As we break bread, our eyes are opened to the presence of Christ. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we are made one body, the body of Christ sent forth to live the Way of Love.

Monday: Go

Cross boundaries, listen deeply and live like Jesus

As Jesus went to the highways and byways, he sends us beyond our circles and comfort, to witness to the love, justice, and truth of God with our lips and with our lives. We go to listen with humility and to join God in healing a hurting world. We go to become Beloved Community, a people reconciled in love with God and one another.

Tuesday: Learn

Reflect on Scripture each day, especially on Jesus' life and teachings.

By reading and reflecting on Scripture, especially the life and teachings of Jesus, we draw near to God and God's word dwells in us. When we open our minds and hearts to Scripture, we learn to see God's story and God's activity in everyday life.

Wednesday: Pray

Dwell intentionally with God daily

Jesus teaches us to come before God with humble hearts, boldly offering our thanksgivings and concerns to God or simply listening for God's voice in our lives and in the world. Whether in thought, word or deed, individually or corporately, when we pray we invite and dwell in God's loving presence.

Thursday: Bless

Share faith and unselfishly give and serve

Jesus called his disciples to give, forgive, teach, and heal in his name. We are

empowered by the Spirit to bless everyone we meet, practicing generosity and compassion and proclaiming the Good News of God in Christ with hopeful words and selfless actions. We can share our stories of blessing and invite others to the Way of Love.

Friday: Turn

Pause, listen and choose to follow Jesus

Like the disciples, we are called by Jesus to follow the Way of Love. With God's help, we can turn from the powers of sin, hatred, fear, injustice, and oppression toward the way of truth, love, hope, justice, and freedom. In turning, we reorient our lives to Jesus Christ, falling in love again, again, and again.

Saturday: Rest

Receive the gift of God's grace, peace, and restoration

From the beginning of creation, God has established the sacred pattern of going and returning, labor and rest. Especially today, God invites us to dedicate time for restoration and wholeness - within our bodies, minds, and souls, and within our communities and institutions. By resting we place our trust in God, the primary actor who brings all things to their fullness.

Group Activity: Practices for the Way of Love

Hang up the newsprint with the seven Way of Love practices written on whole sheets or half sheets, depending on your number of participants. Invite participants to write one specific spiritual action that correlates with each Way of Love practice on sticky notes. For instance, a participant could write "silent meditation" for Pray or "reading scripture each day" for Learn. Participants should place the sticky notes on the newsprint. Review the answers as a group, looking for a diversity of answers as there are many different ways for individuals to practice the Way of Love. If answers aren't diverse, brainstorm more possibilities as a large group.

SCRIPTURE STUDY: SAYING "YES" TO THE JOURNEY (LUKE 1:26-38)

If there are more than twelve participants in this session, have participants break up into groups of seven or less.

Have a participant read Luke 1:26-38 to the whole group:

²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." ²⁹ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴ Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" ³⁵ The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he

will be called Son of God.³⁶ And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren.³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God.”³⁸ Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

Questions for Reflection

Invite your groups to discuss the following questions for the next fifteen minutes.

Mary’s “yes” to her encounter with the angel is a model for our own yes to the Way of Love. We, too, are called to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Saying “yes” to the Way of Love, to Jesus, is one of the most countercultural things we can do today. It is just as countercultural as Mary’s “yes” more than two thousand years ago to birth the infant Jesus. Saying “yes” to our own call to the Way of Love is scary. It may be just as frightening as Mary’s. We may not know the implications of saying yes just as surely as Mary did not know. We can never be fully prepared for the magnificent journey with Jesus. It is sure to transform our lives. Like Mary, we are called to say “yes” to this impossibility made possible.

- Where have we heard the invitation to say yes to birthing good news in the world?
- When has such an invitation perplexed or frightened us?
- How can each of the practices be seen as an invitation to say “yes” to the journey?

If there is more than one group, the facilitator of this session should go from group to group, ensuring that everyone who would like to speak is given a turn to speak, and keeping track of the time.

At the end of the time, gather the group back together for closing reminders and closing prayer.

Closing Reminders

- Remind participants to use their Journeying the Way of Love Advent Calendars each day of this week, and to bring them back next week. Invite participants to spend a few minutes today reading the practices for the week. Participants are encouraged to actually do the practices listed each day during that day. Participants may wish to look ahead, as some days may require some preparation. Participants may wish to journal or reflect in another way on the practices as they move throughout the week.
- Next week we’ll continue with the story of Mary and Elizabeth, and explore how we can support each other on the Way of Love.

Closing Prayer

Pray this or another prayer:

Holy One, who makes the impossible possible, open our ears to hear you calling us to birth new life into the world. Grant us, through the power of the Spirit, the courage of Mary to respond with “yes” so that your Word may dwell in our hearts; through your son Jesus Christ, to whom with you and the same Spirit be honor and glory, now and forever. Amen.

ADVENT TWO

MARY AND ELIZABETH: JOURNEYING WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS

Overview

This week invites participants to see the Way of Love as a journey that can expand to include family and friends. Mary said “yes” to the call to birth Jesus, God’s Word, into the world and immediately went in haste to share her good news with her cousin, Elizabeth, who lived in the Judean hills, a four-day journey. Isn’t that what happens when we hear good news? We are driven to go and tell others. The Way of Love is good news that demands to be shared.

Learning Objectives

- Participants will discuss their experience of taking up the spiritual practices.
- Participants will learn how to extemporaneously pray for their family and friends.
- Participants will enter the story of Mary and Elizabeth and apply it to their own lives.

Materials Needed

- Copies of Journeying the Way of Love Advent Calendar for each participant
- Bibles for each participant, or copies of the first two chapters of Luke, preferably New Revised Standard Version
- Discussion Questions for Spiritual Practices handout, found at the end of the curriculum, or the discussion questions written on newsprint or a whiteboard
- Whiteboard or newsprint and markers

Timeline

0:00-05	Opening Prayer
0:05-20	Group Discussion about the Way of Love Practices
0:20-40	Scripture Study: Luke 1:39-56
0:40-50	Way of Love Practice: How do we pray for one another?
0:50-55	Closing Reminders/Closing Prayer

Opening Prayer

Pray this or another prayer:

God made known in the friendship of women, the word of greeting and unseen life enwombed: give us the courage of the teenage mother who brings into the world a song of joyful revolt and a God who needs her love; through Jesus Christ, the one who is to come. Amen.

[Steven Shakespeare, *Prayers for an Inclusive Church* (New York: Church Publishing, 2009), p. 80].

Practicing the Way of Love: Group Discussion

If there are more than twelve participants in this session, have participants break up into smaller groups of fewer than seven, so that everyone gets a chance to share their experiences. Facilitators may wish to make copies of the “Discussion Questions for Spiritual Practices” handout for each group or each individual. If not, facilitators should post discussion questions clearly where participants can see them. Invite participants to reflect on their experience of doing Way of Love practices during the first week of Advent, especially in relation to their Advent Calendar. Depending on how the questions capture the group’s attention, groups may move through all of the questions, or just a few. These questions are not meant to be exhaustive, but rather to stir conversation among participants. Facilitators may consider writing some additional questions for their own group.

- Which of the seven practices captured your imagination this week?
- Which of the practices challenged you?
- Which of the practices brought you the most joy?
- What did you learn this past week about the Way of Love?
- Where did you find blessing?
- Where did you cross borders?
- Which practice has been life-giving?
- Where have you seen love birthed into the world this past week?

Bring the group back together. If there were multiple small groups, the facilitator may wish to take a few minutes to process the conversation, asking individuals to reflect or report on the conversation.

Scripture Study: Journeying with Family and Friends (Luke 1:39-56)

If necessary, break the larger group into smaller groups once again, this time with different groups.

Have a participant read Luke 1:39-56 to the whole group:

³⁹ *In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country,* ⁴⁰ *where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.* ⁴¹ *When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit* ⁴² *and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.* ⁴³ *And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?* ⁴⁴ *For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.* ⁴⁵ *And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”*

⁴⁶ *And Mary said,*

“My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.

⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;

⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,

⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

⁵⁶ And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

Questions for Reflection

Invite your groups to discuss the following questions for the next fifteen minutes.

After Mary’s encounter with the angel she “set out and went in haste” to her cousin Elizabeth. The life - the Word - that began to grow within her could not be contained. She just had to share her good news with her cousin Elizabeth and set out to the hill country of Judea, a long journey.

By going, Mary found out that Elizabeth, too, was on a journey of love.

- Imagine each part of the encounter between Mary and Elizabeth (read slowly):

- Mary sets out in haste
- Mary greets Elizabeth
- The child leaps in her womb
- Elizabeth proclaims, “Blessed are you”
- Elizabeth proclaims “Blessed are they who believed there would be fulfillment”
- Mary proclaims a new reality.

Which moment reflects your life today? Why?

- Mary notices that Elizabeth is on the journey of love. Whom can you invite on this journey on the Way of Love? Or, whom can you join on the Way of Love?
- Mary runs to share her good news with Elizabeth. What good news do you have to share with one another?
- In religious art, Mary and Elizabeth are often portrayed in a supportive embrace. How might you support one another?
- Elizabeth says those who believe are blessed. How have you experienced your faith or trust in God as a blessing?

Way of Love Practice: How Do We Pray for One Another?

Improvisational prayer is difficult for many, mostly because we have not had the chance to learn how to do it. In this exercise, participants learn to pray extemporaneously, just like Mary and Elizabeth.

Explain that there is an easy way to pray for anything, and no one is expecting us to compose a new Hail Mary or Magnificat. Rather, we can learn to pray by praying Mad Libs-style. On a board/newsprint, write:

Dear God of _____ (noun),

You _____ (describe God).

We pray/give you thanks for _____.

So that _____.

Amen.

Have participants stand in two lines, facing one another, about an arm's length apart. Designate the one side to pray for the other. The praying side (the "prayer-ers") should ask the other person's name, and for what they would like prayer (for themselves, for another, for a situation, etc.). The person offering the prayer should then pray out loud for their partner, using the formula above. Participants may decide to touch one another, by holding hands or laying hands on the others' head. Either way, instruct participants to always ask permission first.

After about 60 seconds, the facilitator should call out "Amen." One side remains where they are, and the other side shifts over one person, and the last person shifts to the front of the line. Repeat the prayer process with the new partners. Do this at least three times. Then flip roles for an equal number of times, so that those who offered prayer become the ones being prayed for.

At the end of the exercise, ask participants to volunteer thoughts and feelings about their experience.

- What was it like to pray for someone else?
- What was it like to be prayed for?
- How could praying for one another change our relationship with family and friends?

Closing Reminders

- Remind participants to use their Journeying the Way of Love Advent Calendars each day of this week, and to bring them back next week.
- Next week we'll continue with the story of the birth of John the Baptist, and explore how we can journey the Way of Love in the context of community.

Closing Prayer

Pray this or another prayer:

O God of Elizabeth and Mary, you visited your servants with news of the world's redemption in the coming of the Savior: Make our hearts leap with joy, and fill our mouths with songs of praise, that we may announce glad tidings of peace and welcome the Christ in our midst. Amen.

[Revised Common Lectionary Prayers, alt., proposed by the Consultation on Common Texts (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), p. 34].

ADVENT THREE

THE BIRTH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST: JOURNEYING WITH COMMUNITY

Overview

This week invites participants to see the Way of Love as a journey with community. The witness of Zechariah and Elizabeth who bring infant John to the Temple to be circumcised reminds us of the importance of our faith community to sustaining the Way of Love. Just as the community did for John's family, communities provide a place for discernment, sometimes challenging us and other times affirming us. Communities celebrate and mark important moments along the journey.

Learning Objectives

- Participants will discuss their experience of taking up the spiritual practices.
- Participants will explore the story of the birth of John the Baptist and apply the story to their own lives.
- Participants will identify, name and celebrate ways they have seen God working in their own communities.

Materials Needed

- Copies of Journeying the Way of Love Advent Calendar for each participant (participants are encouraged to bring their own calendar back each week)
- Bibles for each participant, or copies of the first two chapters of Luke, preferably New Revised Standard Version
- Discussion Questions for Spiritual Practices handout, found at the end of the curriculum, or the discussion questions written on newsprint or a whiteboard

Timeline

0:00-05	Opening Prayer
0:05-20	Group Discussion about the Way of Love Practices
0:20-40	Scripture Study: Luke 1:57-80
0:40-50	Way of Love: Stories to Ponder in Community Life
0:50-55	Closing Reminders/Closing Prayer

Opening Prayer

Pray this or another prayer:

*God of community, whose call is more insistent than ties of family or blood: May we so respect and love those whose lives are linked with ours that we fail not in loyalty to you but make choices according to your will. Amen. [Janet Morley, "Christmas 2," *All Desires Known*, (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1992), p. 6]*

Practicing the Way of Love: Group Discussion

If there are more than twelve participants in this session, have participants break up into smaller groups of fewer than seven people, so that everyone gets a chance to share their experiences. Facilitators may wish to make copies of the “Discussion Questions for Spiritual Practices” for each group or each individual. If not, facilitators should post discussion questions clearly where participants can see them.

Invite participants to reflect on their experience of doing Way of Love practices during the second week of Advent, especially in relation to the Advent Calendar. Depending on how the questions capture the group’s attention, groups may move through all of the questions, or just a few. These questions are not meant to be exhaustive, but rather to stir conversation between participants. Facilitators may wish to consider writing some additional questions for their own group.

- Which of the seven practices captured your imagination this week?
- Which of the practices challenged you?
- Which of the practices brought you the most joy?
- What did you learn this past week about the Way of Love?
- Where did you find blessing?
- Where did you cross borders?
- Which practice has been life-giving?
- Where have you seen love birthed into the world this past week?

Bring the group back together. If there were multiple small groups, the facilitator may wish to take a few minutes to process the conversation, asking individuals to reflect or report on the conversation.

Scripture Study: Journeying with Community (Luke 1:57-80)

If necessary, break the larger group into smaller groups once again, this time with different people.

Have a participant read Luke 1:57-80 to the whole group:

⁵⁷ Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. ⁵⁸ Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. ⁵⁹ On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. ⁶⁰ But his mother said, “No; he is to be called John.” ⁶¹ They said to her, “None of your relatives has this name.” ⁶² Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. ⁶³ He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, “His name is John.” And all of them were amazed. ⁶⁴ Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. ⁶⁵ Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. ⁶⁶ All who heard them pondered them and said, “What then will this child become?” For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

⁶⁷ Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:

⁶⁸ “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.

⁶⁹ He has raised up a mighty savior for us
in the house of his servant David,

⁷⁰ as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,

⁷¹ that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.

⁷² Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant,

⁷³ the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us ⁷⁴ that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness
before him all our days.

⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,

⁷⁷ to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.

⁷⁸ By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,

⁷⁹ to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

⁸⁰ The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

Questions for Reflection

Invite your groups to discuss the following questions for the next fifteen minutes.

The story of John the Baptist’s birth suggests that this journey of the Way of Love is best done and sustained in the context of our faith community. Zechariah’s song joins Mary’s voice in proclaiming the coming of a savior. The final verse in this passage “he grew and became strong” is echoed later in Luke about Jesus. Both reflect the reality that we grow in faith through the support of community.

- Recall the following from the reading:

- Elizabeth’s neighbors rejoiced with her
- On the eighth day, they circumcised him
- They asked the father what he wanted to name the child
- They pondered Zechariah’s words

Which moment most resonates with your own experience?

What role was community playing in your life?

- What was the role of the members of the community in this story, especially in the lives of Elizabeth, Zechariah, and John?

- How does your community celebrate joy together? How does your community support others in their joy?
- New phases of life may come unexpectedly. How does your community support those entering into a new phase of life, like parenthood, graduation, retirement, or a call to a new ministry?
- Who in your faith community has a prophetic voice?
- How are you as a faith community proclaiming the arrival of the Kingdom of God?

Group Exercise: Stories of God in Community

Zechariah was in for a surprise when he was struck dumb by an angel, and the community was in for a surprise when Zechariah was able to speak again. Surely this story was repeated over and over again, as Luke tells us the community “pondered” what sort of person this John would become.

While the stories your community ponders are probably not as drama-filled as the Gospel story, what are the stories this community tells about how God is working in their midst? How do these stories shape how this community understands itself?

Break participants into groups of two or three and instruct them to tell stories to one another for the next ten minutes about where God has shown up within this community. Feel free to ask groups to ponder questions like these:

- Where have you heard God speaking in our church or ministry?
- When have you felt yourself growing closer to God in this church community?
- When have you experienced God’s love for you here? When have you felt yourself loving God in the context of this community?

At the end, ask if anyone would like to share their own story.

Closing Reminders

- Remind participants to use their Journeying the Way of Love Advent Calendars each day of this week, and to bring them back next week.
- Next week we’ll conclude with the story of the birth of Jesus, and explore how we can journey the Way of Love for the sake of the world.

Closing Prayer

Pray this or another prayer:

Merciful God of peace, your word, spoken by the prophets, restores your people’s life and hope: Fill our hearts with the joy of your saving grace, that we may hold fast to your great goodness and proclaim your justice in all the world. [Revised Common Lectionary Prayers, alt., proposed by the Consultation on Common Texts (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), p. 33].

ADVENT FOUR

THE BIRTH OF JESUS: JOURNEYING IN THE WORLD

Learning Objectives

- Participants will discuss their experience of practicing spiritual practices.
- Participants will explore the story of the birth of Jesus and apply it to their own lives.

Participants will choose practices they will commit to practicing in the new year.

Materials Needed:

- Copies of Journeying the Way of Love Advent Calendar for each participant
- Bibles for each participant, or copies of the first two chapters of Luke, preferably New Revised Standard Version
- Discussion Questions for Spiritual Practices handout, found at the end of the curriculum, or the discussion questions written on newsprint or a whiteboard

Timeline

0:00-05	Opening Prayer
0:05-20	Group Discussion about the Way of Love Practices
0:20-40	Scripture Study: Luke 2:1-20
0:40-50	Starting a Rule of Life: What do we take with us?
0:50-55	Closing Prayer

Opening Prayer

Pray this or another prayer:

Shepherd of Israel, may Jesus, who is Emmanuel and son of Mary, be more than just a dream in our hearts. With the apostles, prophets, and saints, save us, restore us, and lead us in the way of grace and peace, that we may bear your promise into the world. Amen. [Revised Common Lectionary Prayers, alt., proposed by the Consultation on Common Texts (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), page 34].

Practicing the Way of Love: Group Discussion

If there are more than twelve participants in this session, have participants break up into smaller groups of fewer than seven, so that everyone gets a chance to share their experiences. Facilitators may wish to make copies of the Discussion Questions for Spiritual Practices handout for each group or each individual. If not, facilitators should post discussion questions clearly where participants can see them.

Invite participants to reflect on their experience of doing Way of Love practices during the third week of Advent. Depending on how the questions capture the group's attention, groups may move through all of the questions, or just a few. These questions are not meant to be exhaustive, but rather stir conversation between participants. Facilitators may wish to consider writing some additional questions for their own group.

- Which of the seven practices captured your imagination this week?
- Which of the practices challenged you?
- Which of the practices brought you the most joy?
- What did you learn this past week about the Way of Love?
- Where did you find blessing?
- Where did you cross borders?
- Which practice has been life-giving?
- Where have you seen love birthed into the world this past week?

Bring the group back together. If there were multiple small groups, the facilitator may wish to take a few minutes to process the conversation, asking individuals to reflect or report on the conversation.

Scripture Study: Journeying into the World (Luke 2:1-20)

If necessary, break the larger group into smaller groups once again, this time with different people.

Have a participant read Luke 2:1-20 to the whole group:

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ² This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴ Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵ He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

⁸ In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹ to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

*¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”*

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Questions for Reflection

Invite your groups to discuss the following questions for the next fifteen minutes.

The angels appear again, this time, not to a single person in private, but before the shepherds, proclaiming the good news of Jesus' birth. The shepherds went in haste to see the infant Jesus and then told others what they had seen and heard. The Way of Love cannot be contained. The way of love bursts out into the world, crossing boundaries and offering blessings to many. It demands to be told.

- Recall the following moments from the reading:

- The angels praise God and proclaim the birth of Jesus
- The shepherds run in haste to see the savior
- The shepherds tell what they have seen and heard
- Mary ponders all these things in her heart

Which moment most reflects where you are today? Why?

- What do you see as the gifts Jesus' birth brings into the world?
- Where, with whom, and how are you called to share about the good news of Jesus' life and love?
- What amazes you about God? About God's love?

Starting a Rule of Life

Distribute the Starting a Rule of Life handout, found in the resources section of this curriculum. Invite participants to take five minutes and fill out one spiritual practice in each facet of the Way of Love that they will commit to practice weekly through the seasons of Christmas and Epiphany. Encourage participants to write realistic practices, and to think carefully about the questions at the bottom of the handout.

When participants are finished, invite them turn to the person next to them and share their practices with each other.

Facilitators may consider gathering and blessing of these rules and the people who will commit to the Way of Love during the worship service. See one form for a Commitment Ritual in the Print Materials section of www.episcopalchurch.org/wayoflove.

Closing Prayer

Pray this or another prayer:

God who makes the impossible possible, quicken our hearts to follow the shepherds who went with haste to see Jesus and told the world what they had heard and seen. Enliven our imagination to the many ways to walk the Way of Love with Jesus. Strengthen our resolve to remain on the journey with Jesus as individuals, with family and friends, and in community to proclaim your word in the world; through Jesus Christ, your Son, and with the power of the Holy Spirit, one God, whose way is love. Amen.

ADVENT CALENDAR

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
1 Worship Advent 1 What word or words from worship today have found a home in your heart? Share these words with a friend or family member.	2 Go Take time to listen closely to someone you may not ordinarily take seriously, or who has a different perspective than you. Pray to hear them as God hears them.	3 Learn Read Luke 1:30. What are you afraid of that keeps you from saying “yes” to God?	4 Pray Set a timer for three minutes. Silently repeat this prayer: “Here I am, God.”	5 Bless The angel blessed Mary with the gift of presence. To whom can you give the gift of presence this week?	6 Turn In giving generously, St. Nicholas turned from a sense of scarcity to a posture of abundance. What do you need to turn from in order to be generous of heart?	7 Rest From what could you rest in order to receive renewed life? Take as long as you are able to find that rest today.
8 Worship Advent 2 What part of gathering for worship fills your heart with hope?	9 Go Read or watch your local news. Where is reconciliation needed? Pray for healing.	10 Learn Read Luke 1:45. Consider how your faith is a blessing. Share your faith story with a friend.	11 Pray Offer a prayer of thanks for each person you encounter – both stranger and friend – silently or aloud.	12 Bless Call or write a family member with whom you desire a closer relationship. Share with them how they are a blessing.	13 Turn Reflect: Where have I fallen short this week? How can I make amends? Give thanks for the gift of fresh starts that we have through God’s grace.	14 Rest Set aside 30 minutes to rest, pause, and breathe deeply with a friend or family member. Give thanks for the restorative power of love in relationship.
15 Worship Advent 3 Pray for each person as they receive communion. Imagine who you would like to see at church next week. Invite them to join you.	16 Go Choose to take a different route to work, to school, or to play today. Who or what did you encounter differently?	17 Learn Read Luke 1:64. When Zechariah could finally speak, he began by praising God. For what can you praise God? Share on social media or with a friend.	18 Pray Keep a lookout for anyone who might seem lonely, stressed, or sad. Offer this simple invitation: “May I pray for you?” Then offer prayers – silently or aloud – on their behalf as you move through your day.	19 Bless Identify a blessing you have that you could give away. Share this blessing with your church, a local ministry, or your community.	20 Turn Turn away from the busyness of the week and turn toward someone who gives you life or to whom you give life. Give thanks.	21 Rest In Genesis 1-2, God calls the creation “good” and rests. What can you proclaim to be “good” instead of “not enough” as a witness to God’s love for the world today?
22 Worship Advent 4 Linger before leaving worship today. Ask God to prepare and send you on a journey into the world to witness to God’s love	23 Go Go out into your neighborhood today. Where do you see God at work? What attributes of God’s love are visible? Ask God to show you how you can celebrate and join that love.	24 Learn Read Luke 2:8-10. When has God surprised you? Share with a friend.	25 Pray Christmas Day Read Luke 1-2. Give thanks for the birth of the Christ-child. Pray that you may follow Christ Jesus on his Way of Love with your whole heart, mind, body, and spirit.			

CURRICULUM RESOURCES: JOURNEYING THE WAY OF LOVE

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS ABOUT SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

- Which of the seven practices captured your imagination this week?
- Which of the practices challenged you?
- Which of the practices brought you the most joy?
- What did you learn this past week about the Way of Love?
- Where did you find blessing?
- Where did you cross borders?
- Which practice has been life-giving?
- Where have you seen love birthed into the world this past week?

CURRICULUM RESOURCES: JOURNEYING THE WAY OF LOVE STARTING A RULE OF LIFE

What spiritual practices can you commit to practice once a week through the seasons of Christmas and Epiphany? Remember: the best rule of life is the one you actually practice.

Turn

Learn

Pray

Worship

Bless

Go

Rest

What resources do I need to live my rule of life?

Who can help hold me accountable to my rule of life?

CURRICULUM RESOURCES: JOURNEYING THE WAY OF LOVE

SCRIPTURE PASSAGES

Advent One (Luke 1:26-38)

²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." ²⁹ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

³⁴ Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" ³⁵ The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶ And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸ Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

CURRICULUM RESOURCES: JOURNEYING THE WAY OF LOVE

SCRIPTURE PASSAGES

Advent Two (Luke 1:39-56)

³⁹ In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰ where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴² and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³ And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴ For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

⁴⁶ And Mary said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.

⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;

⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,

⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

⁵⁶ And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

CURRICULUM RESOURCES: JOURNEYING THE WAY OF LOVE

SCRIPTURE PASSAGES

Advent Three (Luke 1:57-80)

⁵⁷ Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. ⁵⁸ Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. ⁵⁹ On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. ⁶⁰ But his mother said, “No; he is to be called John.” ⁶¹ They said to her, “None of your relatives has this name.” ⁶²

Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. ⁶³ He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, “His name is John.” And all of them were amazed. ⁶⁴ Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. ⁶⁵ Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. ⁶⁶ All who heard them pondered them and said, “What then will this child become?” For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

⁶⁷ Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:

⁶⁸ “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.

⁶⁹ He has raised up a mighty savior for us
in the house of his servant David,

⁷⁰ as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,

⁷¹ that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.

⁷² Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant,

⁷³ the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us ⁷⁴ that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness
before him all our days.

⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,

⁷⁷ to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.

⁷⁸ By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,

⁷⁹ to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

⁸⁰ The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

SCRIPTURE PASSAGES**Advent Four (Luke 2:1-20)**

¹In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

¹⁴“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

JOURNEYING THE WAY OF LOVE

ADVENT CALENDAR

FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT: SAYING “YES” TO THE JOURNEY

1	Sun	Worship	Advent I What word or words from worship today have found a home in your heart? Share these words with a friend or family member.
2	Mon	Go	Take time to listen closely to someone you may not ordinarily take seriously, or who has a different perspective than you. Pray to hear them as God hears them.
3	Tue	Learn	Read Luke 1:30. What are you afraid of that keeps you from saying “yes” to God?
4	Wed	Pray	Set a timer for three minutes. Silently repeat this prayer: “Here I am, God.”
5	Thur	Bless	The angel blessed Mary with the gift of presence. To whom can you give the gift of presence this week?
6	Fri	Turn	In giving generously, St. Nicholas turned from a sense of scarcity to a posture of abundance. What do you need to turn from in order to be generous of heart?
7	Sat	Rest	From what could you rest in order to receive renewed life? Take as long as you are able to find that rest today.

SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT: JOURNEYING WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS

8	Sun	Worship	Advent 2 What part of gathering for worship fills your heart with hope?
9	Mon	Go	Read or watch your local news. Where is reconciliation needed? Pray for healing.
10	Tue	Learn	Read Luke 1:45. Consider how your faith is a blessing. Share your faith story with a friend.
11	Wed	Pray	Offer a prayer of thanks for each person you encounter – both stranger and friend – silently or aloud.
12	Thur	Bless	Call or write a family member with whom you desire a closer relationship. Share with them how they are a blessing.
13	Fri	Turn	Reflect: Where have I fallen short this week? How can I make amends? Give thanks for the gift of fresh starts that we have through God's grace.
14	Sat	Rest	Set aside 30 minutes to rest, pause, and breathe deeply with a friend or family member. Give thanks for the restorative power of love in relationship.

THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT: JOURNEYING WITH COMMUNITY

15	Sun	Worship	Advent 3 Pray for each person as they receive communion. Imagine who you would like to see at church next week. Invite them to join you.
16	Mon	Go	Choose to take a different route to work, to school, or to play today. Who or what did you encounter differently?
17	Tue	Learn	Read Luke 1:64. When Zechariah could finally speak, he began by praising God. For what can you praise God? Share on social media or with a friend.
18	Wed	Pray	Keep a lookout for anyone who might seem lonely, stressed, or sad. Offer this simple invitation: “May I pray for you?” Then offer prayers – silently or aloud – on their behalf as you move through your day.
19	Thur	Bless	Identify a blessing you have that you could give away. Share this blessing with your church, a local ministry, or your community.
20	Fri	Turn	Turn away from the busyness of the week and turn toward someone who gives you life or to whom you give life. Give thanks
21	Sat	Rest	In Genesis 1-2, God calls the creation “good” and rests. What can you proclaim to be “good” instead of “not enough” as a witness to God’s love for the world today?

FOURTH WEEK OF ADVENT: JOURNEYING IN THE WORLD

22	Sun	Worship	Advent 4 Linger before leaving worship today. Ask God to prepare and send you on a journey into the world to witness to God's love.
23	Mon	Go	Go out into your neighborhood today. Where do you see God at work? What attributes of God's love are visible? Ask God to show you how you can celebrate and join that love.
24	Tue	Learn	Read Luke 2:8-10. When has God surprised you? Share with a friend.
25	Wed	Pray	Christmas Day Read Luke 1-2. Give thanks for the birth of the Christ-child. Pray that you may follow Christ Jesus on his Way of Love with your whole heart, mind, body, and spirit.