



TAKE THE TIME





Acknowledgmentsiv

Presenting RENEW International v

Introductionvi

Faith Sharing in a Small Community vii

Faith-Sharing Principles and Guidelines x

The Structure and Flow of a Session xii

SESSIONS

Stay Awake: First Week of Advent 1

Prepare the Way: Second Week of Advent 7

Great Expectations: Third Week of Advent. 12

God’s Surprises: Fourth Week of Advent 18

APPENDICES

Family Devotion: Blessing the Advent Wreath 24

Family Devotion: Blessing the Crèche 26

Family Devotion: Blessing the Christmas Tree 29

A Personal Reflection for Christmas Eve: ‘And on Earth Peace’ 32

Family Devotion: Epiphany House Blessing. 35

Song Lyrics 38

Music Resources 44

Faith-Sharing Resources from RENEW International 46

INTRODUCTION



Advent Awakenings is a resource for small Christian communities to use in their group meetings and with their families in order to enrich the experience of anticipating the coming of Jesus—an experience that is often muddled by holiday preparations that have little or nothing to do with the origin and meaning of the season. *Advent Awakenings* is based on the three-year cycle of the Lectionary. Each book contains four sessions corresponding to the four Sundays of Advent and presents themes drawn from the Sunday gospel readings.

Year A—Trust the Lord: Urges participants to have confidence that God’s challenging call, as proclaimed by John the Baptist, is the true way to prepare for union with Christ.

Year B—Take the Time: Encourages participants to prepare for Jesus’ coming by setting aside everyday busyness and becoming more deeply aware of God’s call.

Year C—Say Yes to God: Prompts participants to accept the invitation of Jesus to prepare for his coming by reflecting more deeply each week on how they can open themselves to his presence in their lives.

These reflections are intended to help Christian communities to move beyond the rhetorical call each year to “keep Christ in Christmas”—a call that has more to do with the hectic weeks leading up to Christmas than with the holy day itself. These faith-sharing sessions aim to focus reflection and prayer on the original dynamic of this season—the anticipation of the coming of the Savior Christ, in his human nativity, in his real presence in our everyday lives, and in his glorious appearance at the end of time. In addition to the group sessions, *Advent Awakenings* includes an appendix with devotional activities that families can use at home so that each adult and child can fully play a part in connecting the symbols of the season—the Advent candles, the crèche, the tree—with the everyday world.

As we wait for Jesus, we renew our commitment to him to both hear his word and practice it our lives—in love and in justice.



STAY AWAKE! FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

Suggested Environment

A Bible and an Advent wreath with four candles are placed on a small table. The Bible is open to the Scripture reading for this session. You might also wish to display a potted plant or a picture of a natural wonder as a sign of God's creative presence in the world. You might wish to decorate the table with violet, which is the liturgical color for the season of Advent.

Advent Awakenings 1

The leader invites one member to light the first candle of the Advent wreath while another member reads aloud the aim of the session:

May our prayer and sharing help us to make the most of our time during this Advent season and throughout our lives, keeping our attention on God's gifts and God's call despite the responsibilities, real and imagined, that tend to distract us.

Invitation to Pray

Leader: Let's take a few quiet moments to become conscious of the presence of God.

The group spends time in silence as each member pays attention to his or her breathing and quietly prays for stillness.

Leader: Let us pray.

All: Eternal God, thank you for the gift of time.

Help us to spend our time wisely.

Teach us how to invest time generously

in the things no money can buy.

Show us how to use time freely on the people who need us.

Remind us to save at least a few minutes every day for you alone.

In this hour we offer ourselves to you completely.

Be with us throughout each day, even when we forget you. Amen.



Song suggestions: “People Look East,” words by Eleanor Farjeon, or “Come Lord” by Douglas Q. Hutchings and Matthew Lee.

Gospel Reading for the First Sunday of Advent

The leader invites a member of the group to proclaim the Gospel:

Mark 13:33-37

The group reflects on the reading for a few moments.

Invitation to Share

- What word, phrase, or image from this Scripture reading touches your heart or speaks to your life?
- Place yourself in the Scripture passage as an on-looker or as a prominent figure. What are your feelings as you imagine yourself in the scene?
- How can you connect this Scripture passage with an experience you have had?

It pays to pay attention

An American journalist was visiting a small city in Sweden as part of a reporting assignment. When he had a free day, he took a train to Stockholm, thinking he should see the historic place while he had the chance. His free day was cold and rainy, and at one point he pressed his back against an old building to get out of a downpour. As he waited for a break in the rain, he found himself studying the stones and mortar of the building that was protecting him, and he noticed that he could see the trowel marks in the mortar. He realized that those marks preserved the movement of the hand of the craftsman who had done this work hundreds of years before. It occurred to him that he never would have observed this remarkable thing if he hadn't paused there to get out of the rain.

Invitation to Share

Share an experience in which you became conscious of God's hand at work because you took the time to experience his creation.

Reflection

This week marks the opening of a new Church year, as well as the beginning of the season of Advent. As this season begins, family and social demands



intensify. The secular world bombards us with talk of Christmas and tells us that time is running out. Now, as if that were not stress enough, Advent inspires preachers to add a little guilt to our schedules. Are we taking time to prepare for the coming of the Lord? Will we make sure to fit in a little more time for prayer? How many hours do we plan to devote to works of charity?

No matter how hard we try, we cannot add another hour to the day, and it can be challenging and may seem impossible to subtract a single hour from our commitments and responsibilities. Fortunately, however, we can do something to enhance the time we have. While we cannot increase the quantity of days in Advent we can dramatically change the quality of each day God gives us. We can transform the quality of our presence in it. When we're honest with ourselves, we have to admit that frequently we're physically present but mentally absent. With eyes wide open, we're asleep to some realities around us. And that is the real meaning of the commands that chime like alarm bells throughout today's Gospel: "Stay awake!" "Keep alert!" "Be aware!" Let's translate these Gospel imperatives to "Pay attention!" Pay attention to what?

- to the movement of light in a quiet room
- to new beauty on a road I travel every day
- to fresh meanings in an ordinary word
- to the signal for help in the eyes of someone I prefer to avoid
- to new possibilities in a "hopeless" situation.

How does all this relate to my relationship with God? Mystics in every age have defined prayer as simply an act of pure attention. We can prepare for the coming of Jesus Christ into the world by paying attention to the mystery of God's presence in the world around us, to the mystery of the holiness of all humanity—even our own humanity. Every act of attention to that mystery sanctifies time and becomes an act of prayer. Such a use of time is the highest expression of human consciousness and human freedom.

"We always have little time; especially for the Lord, we do not know how or, sometimes, we do not want to find it. Well, God has time for us! This is the first thing that the beginning of a liturgical year makes us rediscover with ever new amazement. Yes, God gives us his time, because he entered history with his Word and his works of salvation to open it to eternity. . . ."

**Pope Benedict XVI, Angelus,
November 30, 2008**

The story Jesus uses to clarify his message about time, however, would seem to contradict the idea of freedom. The parable features three characters related to slavery: the master, the slaves, and the gatekeeper. Obviously, the master stands for God. He seems to value that trusting relationship more than he treasures his money—just as God has given us all of creation to use and to safeguard.

Even the gatekeeper does not restrict the servants' freedom; he protects it. Is freedom, like time, a gift that demands attention? Apparently, Jesus thinks so. Our wise and generous use of both our time and our freedom is something for us to think about as we begin preparing to welcome the God who comes to set us free.

Invitation to Share

- An unexpected visit can be a pleasant surprise. How have you recognized God in your everyday life? When? Why?
- Are you fully present as you go about your everyday life? How can you be more present to the gift of every moment? How can you be more present in your relationships?
- This time of your life will never come again. How do you use your time and your freedom? What opportunities do you have to do good deeds?

Invitation to Act

Jesus emphasized the connection between faith and action, between what we believe and what we do. In that spirit, decide on an individual or group action that flows from what

Keeping a prayer journal

Christians at prayer often find it helpful to engage more fully with their reading and their thoughts by keeping a personal journal. Prayer involves both listening to and responding to God's word; response can take many forms, including fragments of Scripture or other spiritual reading that you want to recall as well as your notes, poetry, or sketches. What is most important is feeling free to use whatever form allows you to best express what is happening in your heart—anguish, joy, thanksgiving. We don't keep a journal to tell God what he already knows but to learn more and more about ourselves and our relationship with him. A prayer journal can be simply a blank notebook that is compact enough to easily carry with you but expansive enough to let you express yourself. It can also be a book specifically designed for this purpose, such as **GLEANINGS: A Personal Prayer Journal**, available from RENEW International. (See page 46.)



you have shared in this session. If you decide to act on your own, share your decision with the group. If you decide on a group action, determine among you whether individual members will take responsibility for various aspects of the action.

You are likely to benefit most from taking an action that arises from your own response to the session. However, if you don't sense God asking something specific of you, you can consider one of the following suggestions or use these ideas to help develop one of your own:

- Putting aside every other activity, listen to an entire piece of music or spend time in nature—not as background, but as an event in itself. Before you go on to your next task, thank God for the experience.
- Listen as attentively as possible to the next person who comes to talk to you. Before you respond, thank God for something good you just heard and for the person who has shared it with you. Try to make this exercise a regular part of your life.
- Commit to paying attention to God in a special way this season. Add a daily prayer experience to your life. You could attend daily Mass, spend twenty minutes in silence a day, or practice *lectio divina*—dedicating time to a holy reading and contemplation of Scripture—using the daily scriptural readings for the season of Advent.

Invitation to pray

The group leader invites the participants to offer spontaneous prayers for the spiritual or material needs of others or of themselves during this Advent season:

Leader: Let us pray.

**All: Jesus, our brother,
thank you for this time together to share our lives.
Help us to keep our hearts focused on you at all times.
Guide us to use the time and freedom you have given us
with humility and wisdom
as we strive to bring your love to others.
In your name we pray. Amen.**

Looking Ahead

Prepare for your next gathering by prayerfully reviewing the Scripture passage and the reflection for the next session.

***Lectio divina*: praying with Scripture**

An ancient form of meditative prayer, practiced privately and in community, is ***lectio divina***. This practice reflects our faith that while God speaks to all generations he also speaks to each of us. This method begins with an unhurried reading—a “prayer reading”—of a Scripture passage in which the Word can become a place to experience communion with God. We read with awareness that God is present in his Word, and we open what St. Benedict called “the ears of our hearts” to what God’s voice may be saying to us beneath and beyond the literal meaning of the verses.

Lectio divina is an occasion to be still in order to hear God’s voice as Elijah heard it in the silence that followed wind, earthquake and fire (1 Kgs 19:13). The first movement

of this process is ***lectio***, reading and listening: we read reverently and attentively as we listen for that word, verse, or passage that resonates with us personally. The next movement is ***meditatio***: we reflect on that fragment of Scripture. We carefully re-read it, repeat it to ourselves, asking ourselves what God is saying, to what prayer, intention or action he is calling us.

Next we engage in ***oratio***: as God’s word emerges from the text, we engage in prayerful dialog with him, accepting the effect of this more intimate understanding of his will on how we live our lives. Then, having listened to God and answered his word, we engage in contemplation, spending time in silence, contemplating his presence, his message, and his call.