

Instructions:

Group leaders, take some time before your gathering to look over these questions. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you as you pick 3-5 questions to discuss that pertain to your group's unique style and needs.

**Series: Good News of Great Joy**

The theme of joy comes up over and over again in the Christmas story. People experienced joy in times of darkness, uncertainty, and challenges back then, and we can too still today. Join us this Advent as we explore the moments of deep joy found throughout the story of Christmas in Luke and discover ways to cultivate that joy today. In this series, we don't just want to talk about joy, we actually want to practice experiencing joy in community together. Make plans to join us for one of the many ways we hope to experience the joy of Christmas this year!

Message description:

Experiencing joy doesn't mean ignoring all the bad, painful, or heartbreak things going on in the world; it is an intentional act of faith NOW to have hope NOW even before everything is set right. That is what Advent invites us into; the future hope we have in the second coming of Christ. **The greatest kind of joy comes from security in Christ.** To cultivate joy this Advent, consider the example of Zechariah and Elizabeth; EXPECT God to show up and move, LISTEN and look for the good news to see and believe it, and look for opportunities to SHARE what God has done for you! May we all have the awareness and joy to proclaim as Elizabeth, look what God has done for me!

Key Scriptures*Luke 1:5-25*

Questions Related to This Week's Message:

1. What makes it hard for you to find joy in this season?
 2. What is bringing you joy right now?
 3. What stuck out to you about the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth this time?
 4. At the end of the teaching, Rachel asked these questions for personal reflection. As we enter this Advent season, are you:
 - a. Going through the motions OR expecting to experience God?
 - b. Unwilling to listen and believe OR receiving God's gifts with joy?
 - c. Living life on mute OR sharing God's gifts with joy?
- Respond to any of the above.
5. How can this group help you expect to experience God, receive gifts with joy, and share the good news this Advent?

Going Deeper:

Have you ever heard the phrase, “the joy of the Lord is my strength?”

Or maybe you have heard a song like this one: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x3gLeCiMJql>

Have you ever considered where the phrase comes from? Or what it means?

Take a few moments and discuss what you think the joy of the lord is and how it can be a strength for God's people.

Read Nehemiah 8:1-12, the original reference for “the joy of the Lord is my strength.”

For background on Ezra-Nehemiah, watch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MkETkRv9tG8>

Nehemiah sets out to Jerusalem to re-build the temple wall. While there, he joins with Ezra, a priest and teacher of the law, to bring about spiritual renewal among the people of Israel who had not been keeping their covenantal promises with God in worship, work, and Sabbath-keeping. At the beginning of chapter 8, Ezra reads from the law to the people of Israel gathered there, but “all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law” (verse 9). Nehemiah and the other leaders called the people not to weep, but to celebrate, which leads them to celebrate the feast of tabernacles where the people of Israel remember the faithfulness of God. Later in chapters 9-12, they will participate in a confession of sin and a renewal of their covenant with God.

Nehemiah 8:10- “Nehemiah said, ‘Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.’”

- What role does repentance play in this chapter?
- Where do you see the grace of God at work here for the people of Israel?
- How can celebrating the faithfulness of God help us to find joy today?

CONSIDER CLOSING YOUR TIME TOGETHER IN PRAY AND BY READING THE BLESSING FOUND ON THE FOLLOWING PAGE.

A blessing for Advent by Jan Richardson:

It is almost Advent, again. I know how hopeful that is. And I know how hard it can be.

For so many, December is an intense swirl of sorrow and stress. The season has a way of opening our most vulnerable places of memory as we also navigate the expectations of cheerfulness this time of year holds. When folks tell me about wanting to hide under the covers until the new year, I understand.

I have also come to know in my bones the fierce hope that lives so deeply in Advent—a hope that draws us beyond complicated holiday cheer and into a season luminous with mystery and possibility. At the heart of Advent is the story of love that comes to us, that crosses a seemingly impossible distance to meet us, that enters into our life and every single thing it holds. No matter what.

As we enter this season of mystery, this is a blessing for you. Think of this as me coming alongside you and tucking its words into your hand, with such gratitude for your presence on the path and for the light you bear.

ON THAT NIGHT

A Blessing

On that night when
you are holding
your very last hope,
thinking to let it go
as too small to be saved
or sanctified;
on that night when
you turn away at last
from the far horizon
over which you had thought
your life would come
to find you;
on that night,
believe me,
this is where
the ache
will give way
to the mystery
and the blessing
that seemed so distant
will quietly
come to meet you,
holding your heart
in its two
luminous hands.

—Jan Richardson