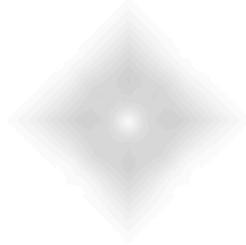


KEEP  
WATCH  
WITH ME



*An Advent Reader  
for Peacemakers*

DISCUSSION GUIDE

*Keep Watch With Me: An Advent Reader for Peacemakers* Discussion Guide

by Claire Brown

This simple, four session guide accompanies *Keep Watch With Me: An Advent Reader for Peacemakers*. It is designed with Christian education classes and weekly small groups in mind, as a tool for reflecting together each Sunday of Advent 2019. The guide offers sessions of approximately 30 minute, and can be expanded by inviting participants to share their stories, trying in other scripture readings, or including more of the weekly reflections in the session.

For more conversation and facilitation suggestions, check out, “Using *Keep Watch With Me* with Groups,” in the back of the book. This appendix includes suggestions for dialogue, using the daily spiritual practices with a group, spiritual formation with new-to-you voices and respecting difference, and connecting this reader to the worship rhythm and practices of your church.

Interested in connecting your local dialog community with other peacemakers? Join our Facebook discussion group, “Keeping Watch Together,” at this link <https://www.facebook.com/groups/KeepingWatchTogether/> and share stories, support, and prayer with other readers across the world.

This free guide is for use with *Keep Watch With Me: An Advent Reader for Peacemakers* by Claire Brown and Michael T. McRay, Abingdon Press, 2019.

## Sunday December 1st

*Encourage participants to read the Introduction and December 1st reflections before gathering. If reading ahead isn't possible, you may want to allow for folks to read these sections during your time together.*

*Open with the opening prayer, the collect for the week, or a brief period of quiet.*

**Ask:** What do you think of when you hear the word "Advent"?

*Allow a few minutes for response.*

**Ask:** What stood out for you as you read the introduction and today's reflection? Did you encounter any new ideas about what Advent might mean or be?

**Say:** The word "Advent" means "coming" or "approach." But the thing we look forward to is more than our Christmas celebration. Today's Old Testament reading for the first week of Advent is from the opening section of Isaiah. While we read the prophet's words as encouragement and wisdom for our lives, we recognize that this text was written with a particular context in mind, and real social and political implications for its original readers. This prophetic book proclaimed God's work and hope in the midst of years of political upheaval.

*Invite someone to read the following text aloud. Encourage folks to read along with Bibles or a copy of the reading. If time and attention permit, have two readings by two different readers. This offers a more complex voice for listening to scripture as well as an opportunity for a closer second hearing.*

### **Isaiah 2:1-5 (NRSV)**

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD!

### **Prayer**

*Jesus of the vigil,  
you told us to keep watch,  
to stay alert for what is coming.  
Bless us with the strength  
to watch,  
to wait, and  
to work  
this Advent season,  
so that your kingdom which is here  
and still to come  
may be realized in its fullness.  
Because if we do not keep watch,  
we may miss it.  
Amen.*

**Ask:** What images or phrases stand out to you?

*Allow a few minutes for response.*

**Say:** This passage describes God as judge and arbiter, getting intimately involved in settling human injustice. God's word of judgement on our world is that the ways of war and violence are not acceptable, not good enough for God's beloved creation. Isaiah condemns the inequalities and violence he sees in Judah, but this word of condemnation is accompanied by invitation to an alternative way of life.

**Ask:** What is it that we are being called into?

*Allow a few minutes for response. The text offers: the ways and paths of God, farming instead of warring, the light of the Lord.*

**Say:** In Advent, the liturgical season of waiting and anticipating the birth of Jesus, we read these prophecies with attention to both the spiritual and the physical implications of their call. Our hope in Christ is spiritual, as he brings us to God and eternal life. Our hope in Christ is physical, as his words, healing, and resistance to political power brings us into a vision of how we can be together.

**Ask:** How are you anticipating Jesus right now? What kind of spiritual anticipation or waiting are you experiencing? What kind of social/cultural/political anticipation or waiting are you experiencing?

*Allow a few minutes for response.*

**Say:** In today's reflection, Michael McRay tells the story of his friend Jeannie, and reminds us of the African proverb, "When you pray, move your feet," and encourages us to an active waiting, watching, and working.

**Ask:** What does it mean for you to be active in the anticipations and waitings you just mentioned?

*Allow a few minutes for response.*

**Ask:** How does our community pray? How do we move our feet? How might God be calling our community to practice active waiting in this Advent?

*Close with the opening prayer, the collect for the week, or a brief period of quiet.*

## Sunday December 8th

*Encourage participants to read the December 7th & 8th reflections before gathering. If reading ahead isn't possible, you may want to allow for folks to read these sections during your time together.*

*Open with the opening prayer, the collect for the week, or a brief period of quiet.*

**Say:** The gospel reading for the second Sunday of Advent introduces us to John the Baptist, a cousin of Jesus, who had a peculiar prophetic calling. Let's read his story and message together.

*Invite someone to read the following text aloud. Encourage folks to read along with Bibles or a copy of the reading. If time and attention permit, have two readings by two different readers. This offers a more complex voice for listening to scripture as well as an opportunity for a closer second hearing.*

### **Matthew 3:1-12 (NRSV)**

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

**Say:** John the Baptist had some harsh words for the Pharisees and Sadducees, leaders of the religious establishment.

**Ask:** What images or phrases from John stood out to you in the reading?

### **Prayer**

*God, forgive me when I seek control and "right-ness" and choose the path of fear that yields violence. Strengthen me to partake in your hope. Pry my hands loose from the grasping and striving, and teach me to sing your wonder.  
Amen.*

*Allow a few minutes for response.*

**Say:** John encouraged a humble attitude and a religious faith that is proven by its lived out meaning, its fruit, more than its certainty about who is included or excluded. He urged repentance and humility so that the people could be prepared to receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit, the dwelling of God's Spirit in and among them.

In yesterday's Advent reflection, Jarrod McKenna reminds us that religious practice and doctrine can sometimes lead us down a path of false control rather than the uncertainty of receiving grace. Today's reflection by Mark Charles describes an experience of listening to a friend's hard and violent stories with no words or solutions.

**Ask:** How do you see the preaching of John the Baptist at work in the reflections this week?

*Allow a few minutes for response.*

**Say:** These reflections, and John the Baptist's call to his audience and to us, all point toward a vulnerability and openness to be present to God. Jarrod's description of hard-fought-for hope is a delicate thing, and cannot be grasped or controlled. Mark's call to lament, to sit with difficulty and pain and violence without explanation or fixing, is an uncomfortably raw place to be.

**Ask:** When have you struggled to let go of the need for certainty or control in your life? In your faith? What hard or sad things in your life or in the world leave you without words to say?

*Allow a few minutes for response.*

**Ask:** Were there other reflections in the Advent reader that stood out to you this week?

*Allow a few minutes for response.*

**Ask:** Which spiritual practices or prayers were most meaningful to you this week? Most challenging?

*Close with the opening prayer, the collect for the week, or a brief period of quiet.*

Sunday December 15th

*Encourage participants to read the December 14th & 15th reflections before gathering. If reading ahead isn't possible, you may want to allow for folks to read these sections during your time together.*

*Provide copies of this week's gospel reading, Luke 1:46b–55, for the group.*

*Open with the opening prayer, the collect for the week, or a brief period of quiet.*

**Say:** The gospel reading for the third Sunday of Advent is the song of Mary, which she sang after becoming pregnant with Jesus. Mary, encouraged by the angel, went to see her cousin Elizabeth, who was also miraculously pregnant with John the Baptist. When the women saw each other, they both burst into joyful praise of God. This song is known in church tradition as the *Magnificat*, and is meant to be sung or said by the whole community in worship. Let's read it aloud together.

*Lead the group in reading this text aloud. If you are from a tradition or community that practices responsive readings, alternate reading each line half the group at a time. If this is a new practice for your community, give brief instruction about how to read together: slowly, with a pause after each line of the text.*

**Luke 1:46b-55 (NRSV)**

"My soul magnifies the Lord,  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.  
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;  
for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.  
His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.  
He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;  
he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.  
He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,  
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

**Prayer**

*God of the unfolding story, draw us into friendship with our Divine Discontent as a gift of your Spirit.  
Give us the strength to keep longing for your Kingdom Come, to keep returning to our communities and our peacemaking in gratitude for your guidance toward the world you imagine for your creation. Amen.*

**Ask:** What images or lines stood out to you from the Magnificat?

*Allow a few minutes for response.*

**Say:** Mary's worship focuses on the justice of God, particularly in politics and economics. She names the problems in the world, the imbalances of power, and declares that God is the one who rights these wrongs. This song is so revolutionary that it has been banned by governments in recent history. Under British empire's control of India, the Magnificat was banned from being sung in church in case it inspired resistance. In the 70's in Argentina, the oppressive military dictatorship would disappear civilians as a method of terror and social control. The mothers of disappeared children formed a grassroots community group, Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo, and used the Magnificat for their chants and posters until it was outlawed by the state

**Ask:** Do you associate worshipping God, or the power of God, with the economic and political situations of our world and society? Is this a comfortable or an uncomfortable idea?

*Allow a few minutes for response.*

**Say:** Charlie Stobbel calls the attitude of Advent, and the attitude of the Magnificat, "divine discontent." It is the gift of being dissatisfied with what is wrong in the world and striving for better in the name and power of God. Brittany Sky offered a story of acting from her sense of divine discontent by joining in a Black Lives Matter march.

**Ask:** Where do you experience divine discontent? Can you share about a time you were moved to declare a different vision of a just and loving world, like Mary? Can you share about a time you were moved to action, like Brittany?

*Allow a few minutes for response.*

**Ask:** Were there other reflections in the Advent reader that stood out to you this week?

*Allow a few minutes for response.*

**Ask:** Which spiritual practices or prayers were most meaningful to you this week? Most challenging?

*Close with the opening prayer, the collect for the week, or a brief period of quiet.*



Sunday December 22nd

*Encourage participants to read the December 21st & 22nd reflections before gathering. If reading ahead isn't possible, you may want to allow for folks to read these sections during your time together.*

*Open with the opening prayer, the collect for the week, or a brief period of quiet.*

Yesterday, Shane Claiborne shared a story of a friend's unusual Christmas service that incorporated a live donkey into the regular annual pageant. Some people were offended and even left, but "for those who stayed . . . it was something like they'd never seen before." This experience brought the over-familiar story of the nativity to life in a new way. Today as we reflect on the gospel lesson of Joseph's vision, let's pause and see what new images, words, or grace the text has for us today.

*Invite someone to read the following text aloud. Encourage folks to read along with Bibles or a copy of the reading. If time and attention permit, have two readings by two different readers. This offers a more complex voice for listening to scripture as well as an opportunity for a closer second hearing.*

### **Matthew 1:18-25 (NRSV)**

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

**Say:** To say that the birth of Christ was a surprise would be an understatement. His arrival was bewildering at best and scandalous at worst, as God came to God's people in a strange and unexpected

### **Prayer**

*Jesus, the impoverished refugee, you showed up in the mess and the crap and the stench. You told us to look for you in prison, on the streets, among the thirsty and hungry, naked and alone, those who are sick. And yet sometimes, we do all we can to avoid every one of those places and people.*

*Convict and compel us to stop trying to get you to show up where we want to go, and instead start showing up where you told us you would always be.*

*Amen.*

way. While the gospel of Luke gives us the story of Mary's annunciation, hearing this strange news from God, Matthew presents Joseph's side of the story. It is easy to imagine what might have been going through his mind as he tried to make sense of the situation, what his fiancé was telling him, and how to navigate a social scandal. But instead, he also encountered God in the middle of this strange and unsought circumstance. The story of Christmas continues on this arc of God showing up in unwelcome and unexpected places. The Christ child is born in a barn to a couple in scandal. He comes into a military occupation and is worshipped by poor folks and foreigners.

**Ask:** When have you encountered God in unexpected or undesired ways? Where have you found grace when you least expected it?

*Allow a few minutes for response.*

**Say:** Today's reflection by JJ Warren shares the story of his coming out experience, when a moment of fear and dread was transformed into a moment of celebration and support. While Mary's unplanned pregnancy undoubtedly caused trouble in her community, this story of uncertainty becomes the great joy to the world. Our experiences of this trouble transformed, of uncertain hope, of suffering made into grace, can help us to become givers of this acceptance and joy to others around us.

**Ask:** What places of struggle, fear, or uncertainty in your life has God made into paths for showing care to others? How might the Spirit be inviting you to make space for others' moments of uncertainty, to become a comforter?

*Allow a few minutes for response.*

**Ask:** Were there other reflections in the Advent reader that stood out to you this week?

*Allow a few minutes for response.*

**Ask:** Which spiritual practices or prayers were most meaningful to you this week? Most challenging?

*Close with the opening prayer, the collect for the week, or a brief period of quiet.*