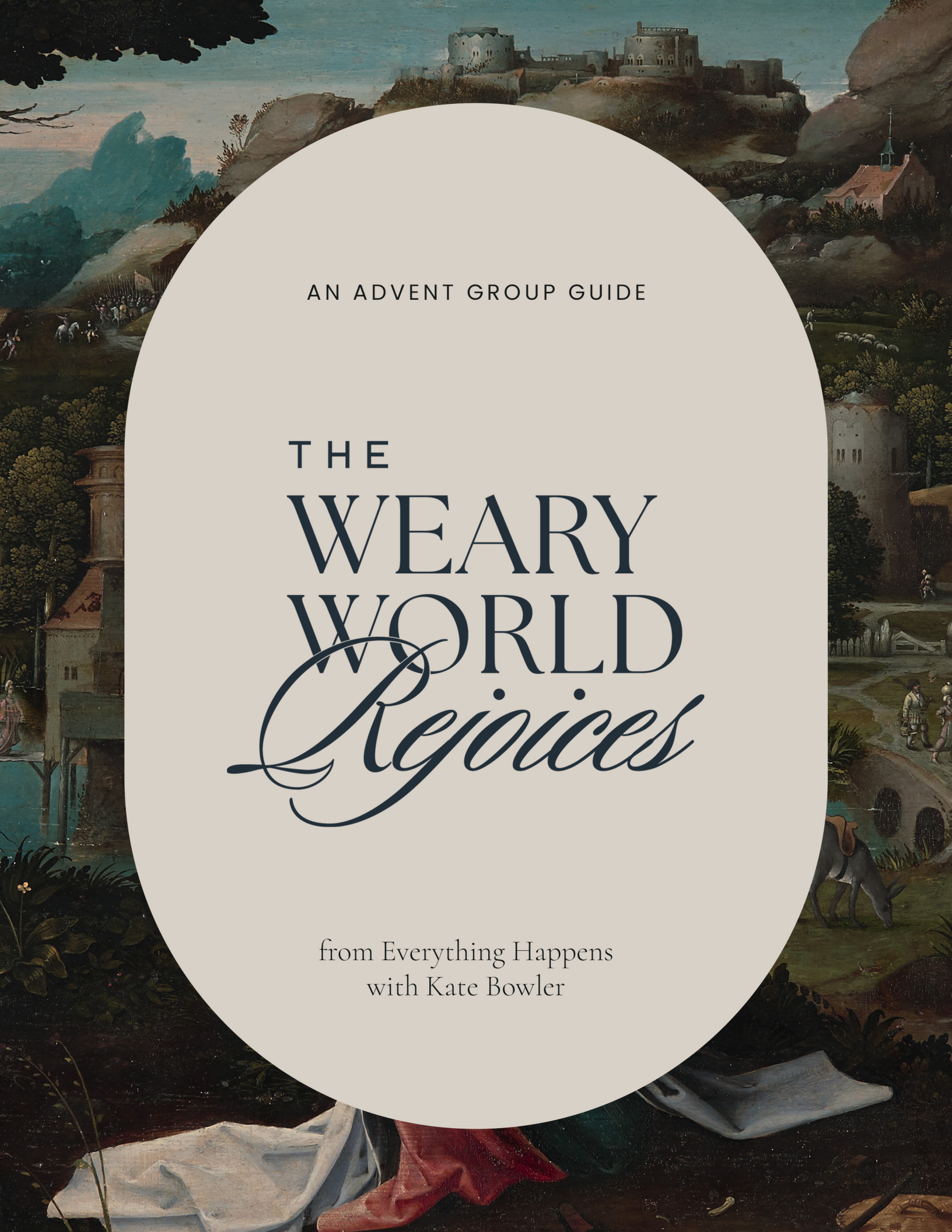




AN ADVENT GROUP GUIDE

THE
WEARY
WORLD
Rejoices

from Everything Happens
with Kate Bowler

An Introduction to *Advent*

Have you been looking at the jaw-dropping new images that are coming in from the James Webb Space Telescope? These photos of deep space are wild and surreal. Pillars of gas and dust. Clouds of yellows, oranges and blues that capture the mystery and dazzling beauty of the universe. You are immediately struck by the sense that there is so much out there, but it's not here. *Not yet anyway.*

The days leading up to Christmas (we call this season Advent) is kind of like that. It's a promise that is coming, as surely and steadily as light traveling from a distant star. It is the promise of a return—a restoration of all things to their true being, a goodness which was conceived from the beginning of time, a realized hope we've been longing for.

For the “days are coming,” say the prophets of old. “The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I

will fulfill the good promise.” The promise of truth, compassion, restoration, and justice.

These four promises are how we will orient this group discussion guide. They will serve as our guiding themes—pulling us toward a future that we can only glimpse. But it is a future that will turn everything upside-down (or maybe right-side up). Everything wrong will be made right; everything bad will be made good; everything empty and devoid of love will be filled.

This discussion guide is designed to be used by small groups, Sunday schools, book clubs, or informally among friends, neighbors, and family. Each week includes scripture to read, suggested discussion questions, and a prayer to close your time together. Consider this your invitation to join others in the community to look for God's promises already be-

ing fulfilled, and waiting for the day when the whole world will be made right. That is, after all, what we practice during the season of Advent.

Advent marks the beginning of the Christian calendar. It's about 22 to 28 days (depending on the year). And one of my favorite things about this time of preparation for Christmas is the tone. We don't cruise into Christmas with triumph and a rah-rah certainty that all is well. We begin by waiting—tired waiting. *A feeling I know you know too well.* Waiting for the test results. Waiting for the phone call. Waiting for your kid to come back or the job offer to come through. Waiting for your parents to get better or finally apol-

ogize. Waiting for the family you longed for or that financial relief you desperately need. Waiting for prayers to be answered or community to be found. We are *very* familiar with waiting.

But, this Advent, we don't wait in vain. Christmas brings us right to the moment of the birth of Jesus—our joy realized, first in a tiny baby born and laid down in a hay stall in a backwater town. A Savior who will someday make all things right. This Advent, may we squint at the light that is afar and say, “Come, Lord Jesus! We're tired of waiting.”

HOW TO USE THIS GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE:

—We've designed each entry in this group discussion guide to take around 45 minutes. Pick the parts that fit whatever day you and your group are having. Sometimes that might mean spending more time in prayer or maybe a single question takes up all the time because of the richness of discussion. That is totally okay. There are no rules to follow here—other than we recommend starting and finishing on the timeframe you and your group have agreed to. Consider this your official permission slip to adapt this content to your setting.

—If you want to go deeper, consider using our daily devotional guide for your individual study this Advent. It's totally free. You can access it, [here](#).

—We also have a corresponding sermon guide for churches and pastors that follows the Lectionary Text (Year C). It includes theme ideas for sermons, additional areas to research, and corporate blessings to use during worship. Access it all for free, [here](#).

TIPS FOR LEADING A DISCUSSION GROUP:

Whether this is your first time leading a group or your 34th time, welcome! We're so grateful for you—for the ways you long for connection and community and the ways you're practicing it now.

What makes a great conversation?

A great conversation happens when everyone learns something new. Often, that learning comes from engaging with the least popular opinion in the room (I know! Easier said than done. But let's practice respectful listening and open-hearted curiosity, shall we?). It also happens by asking really great questions instead of "typical" answers. Respond with curiosity and compassion to what people have to say. Remember these three vital words: "tell me more." And don't forget to laugh—people remember more when they are having fun.

How much should the leader talk?

Be concise and don't speak for more than 2 minutes at any time. Be nonobvious. If you think more than 30% of the room has heard what you are going to say, skip over it and get to the good stuff.

How do we keep someone in the group from talking too much?

Remember that your role is to act like air traffic control (but you are not the pilot). Your goal is to help participants learn something new from a thought-provoking exchange. Guiding a conversation towards what is interesting or insightful is part of leading this group—even if it goes in a direction you didn't expect or strays from the discussion questions laid out. That is totally okay! Sometimes the richest moments and shared experiences will happen in those moments of discovery together.

Acknowledgments:

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WEEK 01

the promise of *truth*

Advent is like glimpsing a promise that is being fulfilled but one still in progress. It is the promise of a return—a restoration of all things, a goodness conceived from the beginning of time, a realized hope we’ve been longing for. For the “days are coming,” say the prophets of old. “The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will fulfill the

good promise.” The promise of truth, compassion, restoration, and justice are found in the person of Jesus. Today, we will take a closer look at what it means to hope for a future we can only glimpse, what it feels like to live in the already-but-not-yet, and how lament might be our best response.

OPENING QUESTIONS

- 1. What are your favorite Christmas traditions? How do they help you reflect on the significance of what Christmas means to you or your family?**
- 2. Hope is tricky. Too much hope and we can feel disappointed. Too little and we feel despair. Sometimes it helps us remain open to hope if we think of a time we’ve been surprised before. What is one moment of beauty or joy that surprised you in the last year?**

READ

“‘The days are coming,’ declares the Lord, ‘when I will fulfill the good promise I made to the people of Israel and Judah. ‘In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David’s line; he will do what is just and right in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. This is the name by which it will be called: The Lord Our Righteous Savior.’”

—JEREMIAH 33:14-16 (NIV)

DISCUSS

1. What word or phrase stood out to you from this passage?

Biblical prophets are my favorite because they never shy away from hard truths. They speak plainly about the problems in the world. They weep and mourn for the brokenness, the pain, and the suffering that they witness—especially a man named Jeremiah (he wasn’t called the weeping prophet for nothing). Jeremiah noticed the ways that the world was *not as it would be*, not as it should be. He saw the world through tears. Yet he also saw something sacred shining through. He spoke to the people of Jerusalem, who were living in the aftermath of Babylon’s destruction of Jerusalem around the year 587 BCE. Jeremiah predicted the coming of the Lord, and he told everyone: “The days are coming... they are coming” when someone will come whose very name means truth and justice and love and compassion and peace and safety and righteousness to make all things right (a paraphrase).

2. The people of Jerusalem lived in the aftermath of war and fire. Imagine listening to Jeremiah as you stand in the ashes and rubble of all you hold dear. How would you react to his words of hope and promise?

3. We live in the already-but-not-yet. This means we have hope for a future of peace, safety, joy, and restoration, but may not experience it currently. Does this feel true in your own life? How so?

Fast forward over 500 years, and enter a baby born to usher in a new creation, a new hope, a new truth—a truth that the world would one day be restored. This is the very promise of God that began in creation and is now being fulfilled in the person of Jesus. This is what the season of Advent invites us to bear witness to. But that doesn't mean we can't tell the whole truth about what we are experiencing in the here and now. It takes courage to wrap our minds around the inconvenient truths, the difficult truths, the complicated and seemingly contradictory truths. God has made us for truth-telling, to have eyes that glimpse through tears at the already-and-not-yet that we live in. And at the same time, these same eyes are trained on Jesus, who embodies the compassion, restoration, and justice we long for.

4. Living between the already-but-not-yet means we need to make space to lament. Lament is a biblical practice that invites you to express your sorrow, pain, or confusion. It is the act of grieving with God. What is there to lament in your life, your community, or your world today?

5. How can you make space to lament this week?

6. If you were to pick one big hope for the world, what would it be? For your community? For your family?



A Blessing for Beginning Again in Advent

God, could this be the year when we see it?
The goodness that is coming,
like starlight from a distant time?

Could this be the Advent when we sense it?
That the springtime of the soul
will one day last forever?

Could this be the Advent when we notice
the inbreaking of your coming promises?
Promises full of blessing:
of truth so clear, so bright
that every shadowy lie must flee away.
Of compassion so deep, so strong
that everyone is encircled in its embrace.

Of restoration so complete, so beautiful
that there is gladness everywhere.
And of justice so satisfying and so right,
that all will be well.

May this Advent be the new beginning,
as we learn to live by the light
of your coming promises.
Glimpsing the world through tears,
while also seeing something
sacred shining through too.
Our Truth. Our Light.
Our Promise incarnate.
Amen.

WEEK 02

the promise of *compassion*

As we prepare for the birth of Jesus, we sing about the “Emmanuel,” but what is the significance of God truly being with us? In becoming human, Jesus “became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood” (John 1:14, MSG). Jesus is God-with-us so he could be God’s compassion *for us*, in word and deed. Compassion, in Latin, means to suffer (*passus*) with (*com*). When Jesus saw someone suffering, he wept with them (John 11:33) and came to their aid (Mark 10:51). He talked

with the excluded and marginalized (John 4:7) and ate with the outcasts (Matthew 9:10). There was no one whose illness or status rendered them unapproachable or untouchable (Matthew 8:3). This is the kind of radical compassion that says, I am not just helping you, *I am with you*. This week, we are going to dig into what it means to see the long arc of God’s work in the world, how we might recognize God’s compassion in our lives, and how we might participate in God’s work in the world.

OPENING QUESTIONS

1. **Share a time when someone showed you compassion or you witnessed radical compassion toward someone else. What made it stick in your memory?**
2. **Pain or grief can make us feel like we live on another planet. How have you experienced compassion bridge that distance?**

3. It is often said that in order to understand someone, you need to walk a mile in their shoes. Jesus came to walk in our shoes, feeling the same feelings and living with the same beauty, suffering, and loss as us. How does thinking about Jesus as God-with-us resonate with you today?

READ

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his child David, as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness in his presence all our days. And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways to give his people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins. Because of the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to shine upon those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

—LUKE 1:68-79 (NRSVUE)

DISCUSS

1. What word or phrase stood out to you in this scripture? What surprised you about this passage?

Zechariah's song in Luke 1 reflects on the birth of his long-awaited son. He and his wife Elizabeth thought they were well past the age of childbearing, and then the angel Gabriel announces they will have a baby. Not to mention, Elizabeth's unmarried cousin Mary is unexpectedly pregnant too. What a scandal! What a miracle! Imagine Elizabeth and Mary's shared joy as they place their hands on each other's growing bellies, delighting in the surprise and wonder of what God was up to. These were not the plans they had anticipated for their lives. But here God comes to fulfill a promise not just for them, but for the whole world.

2. In Luke 1:68-79, Zechariah speaks of all the great things God will do and has done. He recognizes the full story of God's work in the world. On a scale of 1-10, how easy or difficult is it for you to keep the full story of God in mind? (1—"I have a hard time seeing God's work in the world." 10—"I fully trust God is working to make all things right.")

3. What reason does Zechariah give that God will fulfill God's promises (hint: re-read verse 78)?

4. How have you experienced or witnessed the tenderness of God in your life (it could be big or small)?

5. How can you join in the work of God by sharing tenderness or compassion with someone else this week?



A Blessing for Open Arms

Blessed are you with open arms
to welcome God this Advent,
willing to invite its promises
into the center of your longing.

Blessed are you,
even now in the waiting.
Open to receiving what is beautiful
though clothed in such precarity.

Blessed are you,
agreeing to stand still long enough
to let your eyes adjust to the darkness
until the starlight begins to appear,
the dawning of God's promises.

In that gentle light,
find a corner of your heart
where hope can stay protected.
A place from which
we can nurture a little gratitude,
a little compassion,
enough to go around.
Some for God and some for yourself.
And some for the
next unsuspecting soul
that wanders into your light.

WEEK 03

the promise of *restoration*

The Christmas story speaks of “peace on earth and goodwill for all people” (Luke 2:14). This is a world where fear and death will be no more. Judgment and shame will be eclipsed by delight. There will be no loneliness, no illness, and no shame. Sounds wonderful, doesn’t it? But this is not

just a story we tell at Christmas. It is a declaration of the restoration that has already happened, is happening, and will one day be complete. This week, we are exploring what it means to be restored and how we might participate in God’s work in the world.

OPENING QUESTIONS

1. What does restoration mean to you?
2. Share your hope for restoration in your life or in your family. How about your community or the world? (World peace is a great answer—it’s okay to dream big here!)

READ

“Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more. On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival. I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth.”

—ZEPHANIAH 3:14-20 (NRSV)

DISCUSS

1. What word or phrase stood out to you in this passage? What brings you hope? What is hard to believe?

Zephaniah is a prophet called by God to speak to the people of Judah during the reign of King Josiah (640-609 BCE). Zephaniah expected the Lord to appear as judge and executioner, but instead, God reveals a savior who rescues, protects, loves, and rejoices (3:17-20). Through him, the oppressed will be protected, the exiled will be brought back into belonging, and those who feel shame will now rejoice. It is a day when those who are restored will rejoice that God is such a loving savior, and one in which God will rejoice over those who have been redeemed.

2. What stands out to you about God's character and intention from Zephaniah's words? Does this feel true in your own experience? Why or why not?

3. What gets in the way of God's restoration of the world? What about the restoration God offers for your own life?

4. The scripture says, "he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival. I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it" (Zeph 3:17b). How do you imagine it will feel when God restores you and throws a party with rejoicing and singing? How will it feel to be renewed in God's love?

5. God's promised restoration has begun, is happening, and will one day be complete. But perhaps this isn't an entirely passive project. We can participate with the work God is doing in the world, bringing God's kingdom to earth. This week, how can you join God in the work of restoration in your life? In your community? In the world?



A Blessing for Our Part in the Bigger Story

Blessed are we,
gathered already into the plot,
part of the epic story you have been writing
from long before we were ever born.

Thank you that we are not separated
into lives of loneliness
but joined together as those
who were loved into being.
We are made for meaning and a purpose
that only our days can breathe into action.

Pull us closer to the
bigger story that reminds us
that our ordinary lives
are the stuff of eternity.
You fitted each of our days
for small efforts and endless attempts
to pick ourselves up again.
In our triumphs and embarrassments
we need to be told again (sigh)
that we are not just everyday problems.
We are a story of extraordinary love.

WEEK 04

the promise of *justice*

Jesus is coming to bring justice to the world, but not a justice we would immediately recognize as such. God chooses the margins of society, where God will be born in dire circumstances, to an unwed mother in unsanitary conditions without a proper roof over her head. To an embarrassed new dad, forced to scoop up his family and flee the country from a powerful and vengeful king. This is the world that

God chose to enter at Christmas. Our world. So God could be the difference we didn't know it needed, flipping our understanding of justice upside-down (or maybe right-side up). This week, we are exploring what it means to be surprised by the ways God works in the world, what justice means through Jesus' eyes, and how we might join this gentle revolution.

OPENING QUESTIONS

1. Do you like surprises? When was the last time you were surprised by something?
2. Many people were surprised that Jesus chose to enter the world as a baby—especially through these surprising circumstances. If Jesus were to be born today, where do you think he might appear?

READ

“And Mary said, ‘My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowly state 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; indeed, 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 imagination 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 come to the aid of his child Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.’”

—LUKE 1:46-55 (NRSVUE)

DISCUSS

1. What surprises you or brings you hope from this text?

The Hebrew term for justice, *tzedakah*, is often translated as “righteousness” or “charity.” It means more than punishment or retribution for wrongdoing—it is mostly concerned with restoration and mercy. Jesus brings forth the Kingdom of God, and in this Kingdom, there will be justice. This Kingdom will be ruled not by retribution, but by grace and mercy. Justice, therefore, doesn’t add up the way we expect it to—God is horrible at math. Because instead of counting who is right and who is wrong, God’s Kingdom desires for everyone to find a place of belonging through mercy and grace.

2. The word “justice” can mean different things to different people. How would you define justice? What is your understanding of Jesus’ definition of justice?

3. How does Jesus show strength and power to the world? How does this compare to how today’s leaders show strength and power? Which do you prefer and why?

4. Mary sings of justice and mercy in the present tense. Where do you see glimpses of God’s justice (the one rooted in mercy and grace) already happening in the world?

5. This is a gentle revolution. Perhaps it means paying closer attention to those at the margins, as Jesus did. How can you join in this week?



A Blessing for the Coming of Justice

Blessed are we, starting to see the
height and depth and breadth
of God's love that includes all of us,
even the not-so-perfect.

Blessed are you, Mary, for saying yes
to the big risk
of being God's dwelling place.

Blessed are we, like Mary,
starting to sing our own songs of joy

at the thought that maybe this Advent
we too can start to trust it,
to risk it, to live it out,
the love that decides to love first,
before it is earned or deserved,
the love that your incarnation
embodies
to the full.

Blessed are we, breathing
in the truth that we belong,
and so does everybody else.

THE
WEARY
WORLD
Rejoices