

Leader & Participants Study Guide

THE Midwife's Story



Meditations for Advent Times

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Ground Rules for Study Groups

Before the group begins its discussion, establish clear ground rules together. Write these on a flip chart. Keep the list and post it for each meeting as a reminder. The following are some typical ground rules:

- Everyone is encouraged to participate at his or her own comfort level – no one should be forced to speak.
- Everyone is to be heard – no one person should dominate the discussion.
- All views will be respected – everyone's input is valuable.
- Disagreements will not be personalized – put-downs, name-calling, labeling, or personal attacks will not be tolerated.
- Confidentiality will be maintained – this can be extremely important if people are to be comfortable revealing personal stories.

FEEDBACK

You will want to know how the participants feel about the study group and if they have suggestions for improvements.

Tip: Don't leave feedback until the last night when everyone is anxious to leave. Ask for feedback regularly along the way.

SESSION OUTLINE

This study guide provides a series of scripture passages and possible discussion questions related to the theme which has been identified for each of the eight segments of the poem *The Midwife's Story*.

We recommend that each session include the following four parts:

- 1) A time to gather and become at ease with one another.
- 2) A time when the poem segment is read and reflected upon along with the accompanying illustration. (In your first session, you will probably want to read the entire poem at least once, before you begin to focus on just the first segment.) You will also want to read the paragraph that briefly outlines the theme for the session.
- 3) A time for discussion. Use the questions and scripture passages provided as a focal point for the discussion. At the end of this time, draw the participants' attention to the suggestions for journaling and mediation for the days until the next session.
- 4) Closing summary and prayer.

What Is Advent

Many cultures and religions have a time of preparing body, mind, and spirit for an important event, particularly for a holy date. Advent, the four weeks before December 25, is the time Christians prepare for the celebration of God's incarnation as Jesus the Christ. The word "Advent" is taken from the Greek through the Latin and means "to come."

"But the only preparations I have time for are the gifts, the decorating, the festive meal!" Yes, it is so easy for Christ to get lost in this busy season. Traditionally, each of the four weeks of Advent has a message or theme. In order, they are hope, peace, joy, and love. By intentionally giving some time each week to readying ourselves spiritually for the birth of Emmanuel – "God With Us" – we give our faith an opportunity to become deeper and richer. We let the Christmas story touch us more fully, so that its message can live in us.

AN ADVENT INVITATION

I invite you to journey through this Advent season preparing yourself to become a more intentional revealer of God's will. The overarching question for this trip is, "What healing and/or growth does God want to bring to birth in me?"

WEEK 1A SUNDAY

GRATITUDE



*Later,
when the tale was told by others,
I was not mentioned –
like many women and men,
in essential jobs, taken for granted.
But the Eternal One knows.
For our God gave me the gift
to ease the birth.*

Any long or challenging journey goes more smoothly if we have packed things that help us on our way. In this journey through Advent, an attitude of gratitude will help us pack wisely. God gives us qualities that need to be honored and nurtured so that they can be used for our healing and growth. God gives us friends, teachers, counselors, and strangers who comfort, challenge, and speak words of truth to us. It is so easy to take our qualities for granted, saying, for example, “Oh, creativity just comes naturally to me, it’s not a big deal.” It is also easy to take the people in our lives for granted. By doing this, we cripple ourselves, making the journey more arduous.

Questions to clarify theme

- What qualities – such as perseverance, creativity, compassion – do you take for granted?
- How does this quality contribute to your healing and growth?
- What person have you been taking for granted? What gift do they bring you?

Journal or meditate

Over the next few days, express gratitude for these qualities or people. An attitude of gratitude helps us to be more receptive to how our loving God is present in our lives and it allows the transformative process to work more smoothly.

Scripture

A voice cries out:
“In the wilderness prepare
the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert
a highway for our God.”

Isaiah 40:3



Offer to God a sacrifice of
thanksgiving,
and pay your vows to the Most High.

Psalms 50:14

WEEK 1B MIDWEEK

STEPPING INTO THE UNKNOWN WITH TRUST



*He was like so many others;
you could tell it was his first.
Anxious to get back to her.
Love shining in his eyes.
That wasn't the only thing shining
that night.
You didn't need a light;
the whole sky was aglow with one star.*

Any journey contains unfamiliar elements. Sometimes it seems we are stepping into the unknown, which is totally beyond our control. Joseph had already been stretched past the familiar when he discovered that Mary was pregnant. Then he faced more strangeness when an angel came to him in a dream and asked him to accept Mary as his wife and the unborn child as his own. I imagine he felt he had all the newness he could handle. But then he heard he was to take his very pregnant wife on a long trip! The birth would likely come while they were far from home and from those who would normally provide support and guidance. How could he properly care for and keep safe his new wife and this son of God's? It would have taken a great deal of trust in Providence to step into this unknown, to do what he could do, and to do it with love.

Questions to clarify theme

- What is currently changing in your life? What is your attitude toward this change?
- Look over the past year. How did you get here from there?
- Where is the newness, the unknown, in your life?
- How do you let God help you with the unknown?
- What beliefs do you have about trusting yourself, others, God?

Journal or meditate

Over the next few days, be aware of the times you are invited to trust yourself or another. Blind trust tends to be rigid and narrow; trust that clarifies and questions allows us to be more aware of life-affirming people and situations. It is best to cultivate this latter kind of trust.

Scripture

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.”

Matthew 1:19–20



[Joseph] went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.

Luke 2:5

WEEK 2A SUNDAY

OBSTACLES ON THE WAY



*I knew they were packing them in.
But to make a woman, ripe to bursting,
sleep in a stable!*

Oh, well.

*At least no one would grumble at
the noise and the smell.*

Birth so resembles death sometimes.

When we agree to a change in our lives, to willingly accept the journey, we want the way to be smooth. Yet even if we've made reservations, sometimes there is no room for us at the inn. How do we handle these roadblocks on our way? Give up the journey? Use force to get ourselves the room we feel or think we deserve? Blocks are a part of life and because we have been given free will, God will not control our path. Our loving Creator will be with us, giving us strength and guidance to deal with life's challenges.

Questions to clarify theme

- What is currently blocking or challenging you? Ask the block what it needs, to be transformed.

- What is your usual pattern of attitudes and behavior when you encounter obstacles in your way? How do you feel about this pattern?
- Remember an obstacle in your past. How was God supporting and guiding you? If this is hard to see, look for God's traces by asking yourself, "Who or what showed me love, compassion, understanding during that time? Who or what gave me physical assistance or direction?"

Journal or meditate

Over the next few days, cultivate the qualities of receptivity (being open to God's presence in ways and places you are not used to) and patience.

Scripture

Do not be conformed to this world,
but be transformed by
the renewing of your minds,
so that you may discern
what is the will of God –
what is good and acceptable and
perfect.

Romans 12:2



Come to me, all you that are weary
and are carrying heavy burdens,
and I will give you rest.
Take my yoke upon you,
and learn from me;
for I am gentle and humble in heart,
and you will find rest for your souls.
For my yoke is easy, and
my burden is light.

Matthew 11:28–30

WEEK 2B MIDWEEK

FAMILY



*It was obvious she'd been
prepared well –
far from mother, grandmother, cousin,
yet taught by them and
remembering the teaching.
She knew that pain is part of
every birth,
living with the hope and the joy.
He was a help too,*

*the strength and gentleness
in his touch and look.
The love between them
rivalled that star.*

Birth does more than bring a child into the world; it creates a family. The experiences we have with our birth families, the families we marry into, and the people we come to view as family, such as a religious community or close friends, impact on us greatly. Also, every act of ours has a “ripple effect,” influencing family, friends, acquaintances, and strangers.

Questions to clarify theme

- Who is involved with your journey at this time? How do you feel helped or hindered by them?

- What person in your family has had the strongest positive influence on you? How can you use this influence to assist your current process?

Journal or meditate

Over the next few days, reach out to members of your family. Let them know how they have influenced your life in positive ways; express gratitude. Let them know your current needs. Take time and care to clarify how you would like to approach those you feel are hindering your journey.

Scripture

For where two or three
are gathered in my name,
I am there among them.

Matthew 18:20



For this reason I bow my knees
before [our God],
from whom every family in heaven
and on earth takes its name.
I pray that, according to the riches of
[God's] glory,
[Our Creator] may grant that you may
be strengthened in your inner being
with power through [the] Spirit,
and that Christ may dwell in your
hearts through faith, as you are
being rooted and grounded in love.

Ephesians 3:14–17

WEEK 3A SUNDAY

PREPARING THE WAY IS WORK



*Then, the sweating and the pushing.
Hard work, harvesting the seed
planted months before and
nurtured in darkness.
It's a willing sacrifice we make,
offering our bodies to be broken open
– water bursting forth, sweat and pain –
to birth a miracle.*

Birth of ideas, attitudes, behaviors, and babies takes effort and is painful at times. Our society tends to view pain as bad – an experience to medicate away as quickly as possible. “Sacrifice” is also seen in a negative light, raising images of restriction, diminishment, suffering. The original meaning of “sacrifice” is “to make sacred.” Therefore, anything we do to follow God’s will is sacred and is a sacrifice. There is helpful and unhelpful pain, pain that is part of healing and growth and pain that harms or destroys for no creative purpose. By clarifying the type of pain we are experiencing, we will be more likely to respond to it appropriately.

Questions to clarify theme

- What is painful in your life right now? Is it helpful or unhelpful pain?
- How is your current journey sacred?

Journal or meditate

Over the next few days, make a commitment to allow transformation of unnecessary or unhelpful pain. Ask God's help. See your daily actions, and those of the people around you, as sacred.

Scripture

May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.
Those who go out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves.

Psalm 126:5–6



I appeal to you therefore,
brothers and sisters,
by the mercies of God,
to present your bodies as a living
sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God,
which is your spiritual worship.

Romans 12:1

WEEK 3B MIDWEEK

LAMB IN A STABLE – LAMB ON A CROSS



*They knew he was a boy child
before I told them.*

*The final push was easy.
Sliding out of his warm nest,
he came*

*to be with us.
Little lambkin,
blood on his head.*

*Large eyes drinking in the world.
A person could fall into those eyes.*

Good Friday and Christmas Day are important days in the Christian calendar. The cross of Good Friday and the manger of Christmas are both potent symbols of faith. Christ's birth and death are inseparable: the little "lambkin" in the manger is the Lamb of God.

Questions to clarify theme

- What images of Christ are helpful to you on your journey?
- With every new beginning, something dies or is changed. How is this occurring in your life right now?

Journal or meditate

Over the next few days, when you think of God at this time, what image(s) speak most loudly (e.g., Shepherd, Father,

Mother, Holy Midwife)? What image fits you as seeker at this time? Explore how the images of your spirituality inform and guide your way.

Scripture

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.

Luke 2:7



The next day John [the Baptist] again
was standing with two of his disciples,
and as he watched Jesus walk by,
he exclaimed, “Look, here is
the Lamb of God.”

John 1:35–36



[Jesus] said to them,
“This is my blood of the covenant,
which is poured out for many.”

Mark 14:24



But when they came to Jesus and saw
that he was already dead,
they did not break his legs.
Instead, one of the soldiers pierced
his side with a spear,
and at once blood and
water came out.

John 19:33–34

WEEK 4A SUNDAY

SAVORING THE BIRTH



*I held glory for a second,
then gave him to her – to them.
I was forgotten for a time, as is right.*

*Their baby-filled eyes
had no room for anything else.
They had a few minutes, the three
united in communion, before the
magnetism of birth drew others.
This time, men as well as women.*

Once a task has been completed, do you spend a bit of time savoring what you have accomplished, or do you rush off to the next job? Taking time to acknowledge, rejoice in, and give thanks for an insight, awareness, or completed task has psychological as well as spiritual benefits. Remembering your process will make it easier to do it again when needed. Feelings of satisfaction can benefit self-image and self-esteem. Identifying the abilities we used in the process of developing the idea or task can deepen our relationship with our Creator. For we have been made in God's image, with love. Resting after completion also enables us to gracefully disengage from the idea or task and allows it to go where it needs to, such as into the care of another person.

Questions to clarify theme

- What is your pattern of thought and behavior after birthing an idea or task? How do you feel about this pattern?
- Remember a recently completed idea or task. Rejoice in it, give thanks for it, and rest with it for a few minutes. What is that experience like?

Journal or meditate

Over the next few days, be aware of completed ideas and tasks. Spend a few minutes savoring and resting.

Scripture

God saw everything
that [God] had made,
and indeed, it was very good...
And on the seventh day God finished
the work that [God] had done,
and [Our Creator] rested on
the seventh day...

Genesis 1:31 and 2:2



By [God's] great mercy [we have been given] a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading.

1 Peter 1:3–4

WEEK 4B MIDWEEK

GIFTS HELP PREPARE THE WAY



*I'm not good with crowds and
I felt full, satisfied –
my gift always ready,
prepared to make the way smoother.
I know I was inspired that night.
I left them to others and went home.
Grateful for my part
in bringing God to birth.*

Christmas is nearly upon us. Children and adults speculate about the gifts they will receive. Our greatest gifts, those qualities and talents that make each of us unique, were given to us by God prior to our birth. It is our job to discover, unwrap, and use them to help ourselves and others, and to bring God's kingdom to earth. This discovery is a lifelong process because, as we mature, our gifts will be expressed in different ways for different tasks. May this Christmas and the coming year bring your dreams to birth and may the gift you are to the world continue to grow.

Questions to clarify theme

- Choose one of your gifts, such as loyalty or efficiency. How has it changed and evolved over the years?

- What insights and “awarenesses” have you gained during this Advent season?
- What is coming to birth in you?

Journal or meditate

Over the next few days, realize that all around you is evidence of God's gift of love. Rejoice and sing with earth and heaven.

Scripture

You are the light of the world.
A city built on a hill cannot be hid.
No one after lighting a lamp
puts it under the bushel basket,
but on the lampstand, and
it gives light to all in the house.

In the same way,
let your light shine before others, so
that they may see your good works
and give glory to [God] in heaven.

Matthew 5:14–17

But each has a particular gift from God,
one having one kind and
another a different kind.

1 Corinthians 7:7



Like good stewards of
the manifold grace of God,
serve one another with
whatever gift each of you has received.

1 Peter 4:10



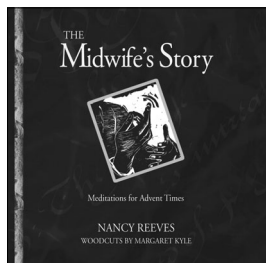
For it was you
who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together
in my mother's womb.
I praise you for I am fearfully and
wonderfully made.

Psalms 139:13–14

NANCY REEVES, PH.D. is a clinical psychologist whose practice focuses on trauma, grief, and loss. She is a spiritual director and psychotherapist for the Island Loss Clinic, teaches a graduate course at the University of Victoria, and conducts many lectures and workshops internationally. She is a feature writer for *Living Our Losses* and has published numerous articles in professional journals and general interest magazines. She has also written three books including *I'd Say Yes, God, If I Knew What You Wanted*; *A Path Through Loss*; and *Found Through Loss* (Northstone). Reeves is also a recipient of a 2002 YM-YWCA Victoria Women of Distinction award. You can visit Nancy at www.nancyreeves.com.

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