

# TOGETHER

## MIDDLE SCHOOL SMALL GROUP GUIDE

### Session 5

Preparing the Way: Transforming Our Hearts Through Hope

- Sunday, December 3rd is the first day of Advent, which also means it's the first day of the new Liturgical Year! Happy New Year!
- Each liturgical year (or "church year") begins on the First Sunday of Advent during the preceding calendar year. For example, the First Sunday of Advent in 2022 began the 2023 liturgical year.
- The liturgical year is divided into six seasons:
  - Advent - The four weeks of preparation before the celebration of Jesus' birth
  - Christmas - The season in which we celebrate Jesus' birth
  - Lent - A six-week period of penance before Easter when we practice prayer, fasting, and almsgiving
  - Sacred Paschal Triduum - The holiest "Three Days" of the Church's year, when Christians remember the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus
  - Easter - The 50 days of joyful celebration of the Lord's resurrection from the dead and his sending forth of the Holy Spirit
  - Ordinary Time - It's divided into two sections (one span of 4-8 weeks after Christmas Time and another lasting about six months after Easter Time) and is when Catholics learn more about Jesus' teachings and works

- So let's talk a little bit more about Advent. With the lights glowing and the Christmas carols flowing, it's easy to get swept up in the holiday spirit. But what actually drives the season of Advent? Is it the hope that all the presents we want are under the tree on Christmas morning, or is it something more?
- Advent is a time of preparation for the feast of Christmas, in which we celebrate when Jesus was born of the Blessed Virgin Mary. We are also called to think about when Christ will come again at the end of time. We live in between these two events (the birth of Jesus and the end of time). How are we called to live knowing that we are not going to live forever?
- Our Advent preparations can be focused on celebrating the first event, but we should also keep in mind the second event. One way to keep this in mind is to turn away from our sins and toward the Lord, who promises more than this world could ever offer us.
- In this week's session, we're going to focus on hope. The virtue of hope "responds to the aspiration to happiness that God has placed in the heart of every person." In this Sunday's Gospel (Dec 3rd), Jesus tells us to "be watchful" and "be alert," for the time is coming when the prophecy will be fulfilled. It's when we put our hope in God's promises that we are protected from selfishness and led to happiness that flows from charity.
- During Advent, we use an Advent wreath to prepare our hearts for Christmas. Each Sunday of Advent, we light another candle, and each candle has a special meaning. The first candle represents hope. The other candles symbolize peace, joy, and love.
- This week's candle is purple, which is a color that symbolizes royalty. Sometimes called the "Prophecy Candle," the first candle

takes us back to the prophet Isaiah's foretelling of the birth of Christ and all of the promises God gave us in the Old Testament that would be fulfilled by the birth of Jesus.

- If you have a wreath at home, light the first candle and say this prayer: “Lord, make us turn to you; let us see your face, and we shall be saved.” (Psalm 80:20) Lord, we ask for the virtue of hope that we may see your bright light in this messy world and know that your promises never go unfulfilled. Strengthen us with your Spirit so that we may be ready and watchful for your return. Amen.
- We're going to watch a video about what it means to "hope in the Lord." There are two kinds of hope. Often we say things like "I hope my team wins this game!" or "I hope I can get tickets to The Eras Tour!" But that type of hope is like wishing something will happen. It might happen... it might not.
- Hoping in the Lord is different. When we hope in the Lord, we aren't *wondering if* He will follow through, we are simply *waiting for* Him to follow through. Because we know that God is faithful and unchanging, we can hope in Him. We know we can count on Him.

Watch this video about hope: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=4WYNBjJSYvE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4WYNBjJSYvE)

Reflect and Discuss:

1. How do you define "hope"?
  2. When have you seen someone "hope" in God?
- We are taking a break from our current series about the Attributes of God to talk about Advent and Christmas. We'll continue our other series in January. Our Advent series is called "Preparing the Way."

Reflect and Discuss:

1. Why do you think our series is called "Preparing the Way?"

(Example: We're preparing the way for Jesus to come into our hearts at Christmas and also preparing for His second coming.)

- During this time of year, we put a lot of pressure on ourselves to feel excited and happy, especially when it comes to holiday festivities and what we might find under the tree on Christmas morning. Of course, getting into the holiday spirit is awesome, but sometimes we can forget what the season of Advent is all about.
- This is a season where we get to take a step back and prepare our hearts and minds for the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ. We also remember that Jesus is going to come again at the end of time. So, Advent is a time to reflect on why He came the first time and what we can do to embrace this incredible gift from God in preparation for His second coming.

Reflect and Discuss:

1. What are you hoping to get out of this Advent season?

2. What are you hoping is different about your Christmas this year?

- This week we're going to take a look at the Gospel reading for the First Sunday of Advent. If you were at church last weekend, this was the Gospel reading you heard. As we listen to the Gospel, don't just think about the words or the verses but imagine yourself in the scene.

**Read Mark 13:33-37**

Reflect and Discuss:

1. What stood out to you from the reading?

2. What message do you think Jesus is trying to share with the disciples?
3. How do you think the message to "watch" is related to hope?
  - Some people might take this reading as a warning, “May he not come and find you suddenly sleeping,” and all of a sudden, feel paranoid that Jesus is watching you like Santa examining his naughty or nice list. Instead, what Jesus is telling us is to be ready for the greatest thing ever. It’s like getting ready for the season finale of your favorite show or the last two minutes of an exciting basketball or football game. You don’t want to miss it because it’s more epic than anything the world has ever known.
  - The reason it might be hard for us to find hope in Jesus’ message is because we have been let down before. Maybe we were disappointed by an event or even by a person; either way, it might be hard to believe that something is true when we’ve been misled before.

#### Reflect and Discuss:

1. Has someone ever made you a promise and then not kept it? Have you ever made someone a promise and not kept it?
2. Do you think God would ever break His promises?
  - During Advent, we prepare not only to remember Jesus’ coming into the world 2,000 years ago, but we prepare ourselves as well for his second coming at the end of time. When it comes to the second coming of Jesus Christ, there is a lot we don’t know; in fact, Jesus tells us that we don’t know when or how this will happen. That can be discouraging; however, our hope is in a loving God who never fails and always keeps His promises. Here are just a handful of the things he promises:

- “And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.”  
-Matthew 28:20
- “And I tell you, ask and you will receive; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.” -Luke 11:9
- “Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest.” -Matthew 11:28
- “Behold, God’s dwelling is with the human race. He will dwell with them and they will be his people and God himself will always be with them [as their God]. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain, [for] the old order has passed away.” The one who sat on the throne said, “Behold, I make all things new.” -Revelation 21:3-5

#### Reflect and Discuss:

1. What stood out to you from one or several of these passages?
  - It’s important that we are ready to meet Christ whenever he comes! One of the ways we get ready is by building up our hope. When we have hope, it changes the way we live. Just think about how people act in movies and books when there is hope that the day will be saved or they will overcome some obstacle. They’re positive, brave, and courageous. They empower and encourage those around them. They’re not only a better person to be around, but through them, change can come into a broken world.
  - We can have hope in God because He will never fail us. Having hope in God is a sure thing, we don’t need to doubt or be afraid because God will always keep his promises.
  - Yes, this world can be dark and life can be discouraging. But the good news is that we can live with hope because we know Jesus came to the world to save us and that God wins in the end. We have

to wait for Jesus' second coming when He will make all things new and beautiful, but we don't have to wait to experience the joy and peace Jesus offers us. We can live in God's Kingdom now by following Jesus and serving others. We can rely on the Holy Spirit to guide us daily so that we can joyfully live life to the fullest. And we're called to share this eternal, living hope with everyone we encounter.

### Session Challenges

- We all know the Christmas season can get chaotic and loud. To prepare our hearts for Jesus' coming, we're going to spend some quiet time with Him this Advent.

Read through the "How to have a daily quiet time" handout. After reading it, try it for yourself!

For Listening to God (Scripture Reading), you can choose any part of the Bible, but Matthew 6 is a great chapter for this activity. You can choose to focus on one part of Matthew 6 or read the whole thing. Look for words and phrases that stick out to you and then write those down. Ask yourself what those parts mean and why they stuck out to you. You can also read the footnotes about those verses too.

For Talking to God (Prayer), you can say your prayer out loud, in your head, or write it down. Don't worry about making your prayer sound fancy, flow perfectly, or sound formal. Just pour your thoughts and feelings out to God like you're debriefing your day in a text to a friend. You could also try to write something for each part of ACTS.

**Your challenge for this week is to spend some quiet time with God with this 7-minute activity again! :)**

Our theme verse for this week is **1 Peter 1:3**: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who in his great mercy gave us a new

birth to a living **HOPE** through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead."

Reflect and Discuss: What does this verse mean? What do you think this verse means by "living hope"?