

MATT RAWLE

EXPERIENCING CHRISTMAS

CHRIST
IN THE SIGHTS
AND SOUNDS
OF ADVENT

YOUTH
STUDY



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YOUTH STUDY
BY JOSH TINLEY

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Experiencing Christmas
Christ in the Sights and Sounds of Advent
Youth Study Download

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INTRODUCTION

God blessed us with a variety of ways to perceive the universe that God has created. We often describe these ways of perceiving as senses: sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell. During the Advent and Christmas seasons our senses allow us to enjoy the lights displayed on trees and houses, the wide variety of holiday-themed songs, the foods we eat at family celebrations, and the warmth of a fire on a cold day. Our senses also give us ways to better understand and appreciate how God is present and what God is doing.

This four-session study takes a sensory approach to the Advent season. Through sight, sound, taste, and touch, we'll experience the story of Jesus's birth and consider what truths it holds for us today. Participants will not only explore what God has done through Christ but also what it means to live in response to God's love and gifts.

The study includes the following sessions:

Session 1: Do You See What I See?

Many of the sights of the Advent season involve light. This is appropriate because, through Jesus, God breaks through the darkness in our world and gives us hope. As God's people, and as followers of Jesus, we should look different because of what God has done. People should see God at work in us.

Session 2: Do You Hear What I Hear?

Music has become an essential part of our Advent and Christmas celebrations, and music played a key role in the story of the first Christmas. While we often experience God through music and other sounds, God also meets us in silence.

Session 3: Do You Taste What I Taste?

Sharing food with people was an important part of Jesus's ministry. Food also gives us ways to better understand Jesus and how we encounter God.

Session 4: Do You Feel What I Feel?

Jesus was fully human and experienced real human feelings such as hunger and warmth. In Jesus, God erased the distance between God and humanity and lived as one of us. Still today, thousands of years after Jesus's earthly ministry, Christ is still present with us.

Using This Resource

This study can be used in Sunday school, during evening youth fellowship gatherings, or as part of a small group or midweek Bible study. All session plans include:

- A few learning objectives that leaders can focus on as they facilitate activities and discussion.
- A list of supplies that you will need for each session.

- An opening activity and prayer.
- A list of discussion questions, many with references to Scripture.
- A post-discussion activity that demonstrates how each line of the prayer is relevant to participants' lives.
- Closing discussion questions and a closing prayer.

SESSION 1

DO YOU SEE WHAT I SEE?

Lesson Objectives

- Consider the role of light in our Advent decorations and celebrations and examine the importance of light to the story of Christ.
- Discuss how we expect to encounter God during the Advent season.
- Explore how we, as God's people, look and act differently as a result of our relationship with Christ.

Supplies

- Bibles
- Sheets of paper
- Markers or colored pencils
- A whiteboard or large sheet of paper and markers

Opening Activity: Sights of Christmas

Supplies: You will need paper and markers or colored pencils.

As participants arrive, give each person a sheet of paper. Ask participants to reflect on the question: "What is something that you see every year that is a sign that Christmas is on its way?"

Each person should draw this pre-Christmas sight on his or her sheet of paper.

When most participants are present, invite each person to present his or her drawing. Then discuss:

- What thoughts or feelings do you experience when you see these things every year?
- Why does this particular sight make you think of Christmas or get you excited about Christmas?

Say something like:

One common sight as the weather gets colder and Christmas grows closer is Christmas lights. Strands of small lights—on houses, on trees, or on anything else that can support green wires and tiny light bulbs—are everywhere during the month of December. Light is an important symbol of the Advent and Christmas seasons. God's story in Scripture begins with, "Let there be light," but early on the darkness of sin and death creep in. God sends Jesus to be "the light for all people" that "shines in the darkness" (John 1:4-5). Each

year we remember the light that came into the world on the first Christmas and that still shines among us.

As time permits, discuss participants' experiences with Christmas lights: when and where do they hang lights; where have they gone to look at lights; whether they prefer multicolor or single-color lights; and what effect Christmas lights have on their mood or attitude.

Then open with the following prayer or one of your choosing:

God, thank you for bringing us together for this time to reflect on how we experience you through the sights and sounds of the Advent season. Open our hearts, minds, eyes, and ears to the message you have for us today; in Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Discussion:

- When does the sky start getting dark this time of year?
- In the northern hemisphere, we get fewer hours of daylight as we approach Christmas. How do the shorter days and longer nights affect your mood?
- We talked in the opening activity about the sights we see as Christmas approaches, and especially the lights. The Advent season also is a time of lighting candles. What, do you think, is the significance of surrounding ourselves with light at the darkest time of year? What does light represent during the Advent and Christmas seasons?
- Read aloud John 1:1-5. John's Gospel describes Jesus as the Word of God and explains that, through the Word, light shines in the darkness. When have you experienced light during a dark time of your life? (It is OK if some participants do not feel comfortable discussing specific examples.)
- Where do you look for hope during dark times? What gives you the strength to keep going when you are stressed or frustrated or run into obstacles?
- Read aloud Jeremiah 33:14-16. As needed, explain:
- The prophet Jeremiah lived during the late seventh and early sixth centuries BCE, which was a dark time for the kingdom of Judah. The Babylonian Empire was gaining power and would eventually conquer Judah and destroy the temple in Jerusalem. Meanwhile, Jeremiah saw his own people rejecting God and allowing injustice. But Jeremiah was a prophet of hope.
- What hope does Jeremiah offer the people of Judah in these verses?
- Jeremiah mentions a promise that God made to Israel and Judah and refers to David, Israel's greatest king. He refers to the past to give the people hope for the future. What are some things that God has done in the past—in Scripture, at other times in history, or in the lives of people you know—that give you hope for what God will do in the future?
- Read aloud Psalm 30:5. What does this verse have to say to us during dark and difficult times?

- What sorts of things do you look forward to each year during the Advent and Christmas seasons?
- When have you been surprised (in a good way or in a not-so-good way) by something at Christmas?
- Because of what God has done through Christ, we know that we have hope. This doesn't mean that we know exactly what the future has in store for us. What can we be certain of because of the hope we have through Christ? (We can be certain that God loves us, that God is always present with us, that God forgives our sins, that death doesn't have the final say, and so forth.)
- How does this hope give you comfort when the future is uncertain?
- This session is titled, "Do You See What I See?" We've already talked about some of the sights of the season and how our homes, churches, and schools look different than they do during other times of year. How do people look different during this season? What sorts of things do people do during the Advent and Christmas seasons that they might not do during other seasons?
- Loving and serving God's people requires us to open our eyes to people and situations that need to experience God's love. What people or situations tend to get overlooked or ignored?
- What are some little things that you can do, both during the Advent season and throughout the year, to show God's love to those who need it most?

Activity: Christmas Looks Different

Supplies: You will need Bibles, a whiteboard or large sheet of paper, and markers.

Say something like:

As Christmas approaches, we spring into action. Schools, churches, and other groups organize food drives and clothing drives. They sponsor children to ensure that those children have presents to open on Christmas morning. They serve meals and offer shelter to those who are without these necessities.

While serving others should not be limited to the Christmas season, the celebration of Jesus's birth is a great reminder that God calls us to love and serve all people. When Mary learned that she would give birth to God's Son, she sang a song about how the world looks different as a result of what God is doing.

Ask a volunteer to read aloud Luke 1:46-55. In these verses Mary praises God for the following:

- Showing mercy (verse 50; showing mercy may involve showing forgiveness and compassion)
- Lifting up the lowly (verse 52; the lowly would include anyone who lacks money or power or is overlooked or marginalized)
- Filling the hungry (verse 53)
- Coming to the aid of Israel (verse 54)

Divide a whiteboard or large sheet of paper into two columns. Title the first, “Are Doing.” Title the second, “Could Do.”

Take a couple of minutes to brainstorm ways that you—your group, your congregation, and other groups your participants are involved in—are showing mercy, lifting up the lowly, filling the hungry, and coming to the aid of others. List these in the first column.

Then take a couple of minutes to brainstorm additional things that you could do to show mercy, lift up the lowly, fill the hungry, and come to the aid of others. Focus on things that would be easy to do and would not require a lot of additional resources. (Examples might include organizing a clothing drive at school, being intentional about greeting and introducing oneself to people who appear to be lonely, or taking money that might have been spent on something unnecessary and donating it to an organization that provides food to those who need it.)

Say something like:

The world looks different because of what God is doing. And a lot of this transformation involves God working through human beings like us.

Closing

Discuss:

- What is one thing you learned during our time together that you didn't know before?
- What is one thing that you will do in the coming week as a result of what we learned or discussed?

Close with the following prayer or one of your choosing:

God, thank you for bringing us together for this time of study and discussion. Thank you for all the sights of the Advent and Christmas seasons. Open our eyes to all the ways you speak to us through the lights, the decorations, the people, and all the things we see this time of year; in Christ's name we pray. Amen.

SESSION 2

DO YOU HEAR WHAT I HEAR?

Lesson Objectives

- Consider the power of music and the role it played in the first Christmas.
- Explore how we experience God through silence.
- Celebrate how, at Christmas, “heaven and nature sing” together.

Supplies

- Bibles
- Paper
- Pens or pencils

Opening Activity: Sounds of the Season

- When have you wanted a “sign” to tell you that you were on the right track or to help you with a decision?
- When, if ever, have you gotten a sign that indicated to you that you were on the right track?

When most participants are present, ask them to think of sounds—not including music—that they associate with the Advent and Christmas seasons. (This could include the sounds of tearing wrapping paper, a crackling fire, the voices of characters in popular seasonal movies, knocks and doorbell rings signaling arriving guests, and so forth.)

Invite participants to mimic one of these seasonal sounds, one at a time, while others guess what they are mimicking.

Then say something like:

Advent and Christmas are seasons of sounds. In addition to all of the sounds we just made, there is music. No other time of year is the subject of so many songs: sacred songs, pop songs, children’s songs, and novelty songs in every genre imaginable. In this session we’ll focus on hearing and how we hear God’s Holy Spirit.

Open with this prayer or one of your choosing:

God, thank you for bringing us back together to reflect on how we experience you through the sights and sounds of the Advent season. Open our hearts, minds, eyes, and ears to the message you have for us today; in Christ’s name we pray. Amen.

Discussion

- What is a song that always makes you feel a certain way or remember a particular memory? How does this song make you feel, or what does it make you remember?
- Read aloud the Christmas story from Luke 2:1-20. If you were choosing songs for a soundtrack for a movie based on this Scripture, what songs would you select and why? (This may include seasonal songs, popular songs, classical pieces, or any other songs that participants think would be appropriate.)
- What role does music play in the story of the first Christmas?
- Why, do you think, has music become such an important part of our Advent and Christmas celebrations?
- Read aloud Isaiah 42:9-10. This Scripture is one that Christians often read during the Advent season. Why, do you think, do we associate these verses with the time of year when we prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ?
- What “new things” does God “declare” through the birth of Jesus?
- Sing the opening stanza of “Joy to the World.” (It is OK if some participants are not familiar with the words.) What, do you think, did Isaac Watts (who wrote “Joy to the World” just over three hundred years ago) mean by, “and heaven and nature sing”?
- What does heaven represent in this line? What does nature represent?
- How do “heaven” and “nature” relate to Jesus Christ? How do “heaven” and “nature” relate to the Nativity story? (You might mention that in the Christmas story, heaven and earth come together. They join in harmony. God, our Creator, comes to live among us, as a human being.)

Activity: Majoring in a Minor Key

Supplies: You will need Bibles.

Ask a participant to read aloud Luke 2:19. Discuss:

- How do you imagine this scene? What do you imagine that Mary is doing as she “committed these things to memory and considered them carefully”?

Say something like:

In the first chapter of Luke, after Mary learns that she will give birth to Jesus, she sings a song of praise. But here, after the visit from the shepherds, she is more restrained. This verse gives the impression that she is taking time for silent reflection.

Discuss:

- How do you feel about spending time in silence? Do you find it peaceful? Does it make you antsy?

Ask volunteers to read aloud Matthew 14:22-32. Discuss:

- This story takes place right after Jesus and his disciples feed thousands of people with just five loaves of bread and two fish. After all that excitement, what does Jesus decide to do?
- How do Jesus's disciples respond to the storm that breaks out while they are on a boat on the lake?
- How does Jesus respond to the storm?
- How does spending quiet time with God affect your attitude and how you approach difficult situations?

Challenge participants to spend two minutes in complete silence. Ask that they try to clear their minds and listen for any message that God has for them. Suggest that if they struggle to empty their minds, they can focus on the part of the story where Jesus says to his disciples, "Be encouraged! It's me. Don't be afraid" (Matthew 14:27).

Then discuss:

- How did you feel during that time of silence? What did you like about it? What did you dislike?
- How easy or difficult was it for you to focus during this quiet time?
- What distractions did you have to deal with?
- The purpose of this activity was to use time in silence to focus on God and hearing God's voice. How did you feel close to God during this quiet time?

Say something like:

We live in a busy world full of distractions and voices vying for our attention. While silence can be uncomfortable, setting aside time for silent prayer and reflection keeps us focused on God's will and prepares us for the challenges we'll face.

Closing

Discuss:

- What is one thing you learned during our time together that you didn't know before?
- What is one thing that you will do in the coming week as a result of what we learned or discussed?

Close with the following prayer or one of your choosing:

God, thank you for bringing us back together for this time of study and discussion. Thank you for all the sounds of the Advent season. Open our ears to the message you speak to us through the sounds and the music that surround us as we celebrate your presence on earth in Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.



SESSION 3

DO YOU TASTE WHAT I TASTE?

Lesson Objectives

- Consider what it means for Jesus to have been a baby with all the needs that an infant has.
- Explore the different “flavors” of Scripture and God’s revelations to us.
- Examine what it means for Jesus to be fully God but distinct from God the Father.
- Look at the role of food and meals in Jesus’s ministry and the significance of Holy Communion for us, his followers.

Supplies

- Bibles
- One small candy cane for each person

Opening Activity: Minty Fresh

Supplies: You will need at least one small candy cane for each person.

As participants arrive, hand each person a small candy cane, and invite them to partake. Discuss:

- What do you associate with the taste (and smell and look and feel) of a candy cane?
- What other peppermint-flavored, or scented, items do you encounter during this time of year?
- What other flavors remind you of Christmas (even when you taste them during different times of the year)?
- What are some of your favorite tastes of the season?

Open with this prayer or one of your choosing:

God, thank you for bringing us back together to reflect on how we experience you through the tastes of the Advent season. Open our hearts, minds, eyes, and ears to the message you have for us today; in Christ’s name we pray. Amen.

Discussion

- Why, do you think, did God decide to come and live among us as a baby who needed to be taken care of?
- Why might this have been risky or dangerous?

- What does it tell us about God that Jesus was fed and nurtured by a human mother?
- Think about potatoes. What are some of the different foods that, even though they may look and taste different, are really just potatoes? (Some examples might be french fries, baked potatoes, hash browns, and so forth.)
- Which of the types of potatoes are most different? In which cases is it hard to believe that the two items came from the same vegetable? Was there a time in your life when you were surprised to learn that a type of food (such as fries or chips) was actually potatoes?
- While it's not a perfect metaphor, potatoes can help us understand something about Jesus. While Jesus is fully God, he is distinct from God the Father, or Creator. What is different about how God, our Father and Creator, relates to us and how God relates to us through Jesus?
- Read aloud Philippians 2:5-11. What do these verses tell us about who Jesus is?
- What does it mean to you that Jesus was in the "form of" God?
- We believe in one God who takes multiple forms and relates to us in different ways. What does it say about God that God took the form of a human being?
- Let's shift gears a bit. What are some gatherings of people that typically involve a meal? Why, do you think, do so many of our celebrations and other big gatherings involve a meal?
- What are your favorite meals to share with a large group of people?

Read aloud each of the following Scriptures: Matthew 9:9-13; Mark 6:30-44; Luke 7:36-50; Mark 14:17-26. For each one, discuss:

- With whom is Jesus sharing a meal?
- What is the occasion?
- What lesson does Jesus teach his followers during this meal?
- How does food continue to connect us to Christ and to one another? (Be sure to discuss Holy Communion and how it connects us not only to Jesus but to Jesus's followers throughout history and around the world.)

Activity: Different Flavors

Supplies: You will need Bibles.

Say something like:

The New Testament includes four Gospels, each of which is an account of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection. Though all of the Gospels tell us essential truths about Jesus Christ, every Gospel writer has a unique perspective. The four Gospels are like four different flavors of Jesus's story.

Divide participants into two or four teams or pairs. Assign each team one or two of the four Gospels.

Teams should read the assigned verses from their Gospel(s), skim the first few chapters, and then answer the questions below.

Gospel passages:

- Matthew 1:18-25
- Mark 1:1-13
- Luke 1:5-17
- John 1:1-14

Questions:

- How does the Gospel writer choose to begin his account of Jesus's life?
- What events from Jesus's early life does the author not include?
- What important things about Jesus does the author tell us in his opening verses and chapters?

Allow a few minutes for teams to read and discuss. Then invite each team to summarize its answers to these questions.

Discuss:

- What differences did you notice about how the different Gospel writers begin their Gospels?
- What surprised you most about this activity?
- What is the value in having different accounts of Jesus's life, told from different perspectives?

Say something like:

In addition to the Gospels, the Bible contains many other flavors of literature. There are histories of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, writings of prophets, poetry and collections of wise sayings, and letters written to early Christians. These books provide us a variety of ways to understand our relationship with God, live as followers of Christ, and respond to challenging situations that arise.

While Scripture is our best source of information about God's people and about Jesus Christ, it is not the only way we can know God and discover what it means to be faithful disciples of Christ. There are other sources of wisdom and guidance, each with its own flavor.

Discuss:

- In addition to the Bible, what are some other ways you can learn about God and God's will?

Affirm their answers, but specifically make sure to talk about the following:

- **Tradition:** The Christian church has spent two thousand years thinking, talking, and writing about how to follow Christ's example and live as a community of faith. During this time, our forebears have wrestled with how to be faithful Christians in times, places, and cultures that were very different from those in Scripture. Christians throughout history have had to make decisions about how best to interpret and apply the Bible's teachings, how to hold one another accountable, how to proclaim the good news of Christ, and how to love their neighbors. All of these Christians were human. So they weren't perfect. But we can learn a great deal from their spiritual journeys.
- **Experience:** We affirm that God is always present with us in the person of the Holy Spirit. God did not stop speaking to people when the Bible's final books were written. Each person has personal experiences of God's grace. We feel God nudging us away from a bad decision; we hear God calling us to take on a new task; we know that God forgives us and gives us the strength to turn away from hurtful behavior. Our personal interactions with God are meaningful and should inform how we live as followers of Christ.
- **Reason:** God created us in God's image. Part of being made in God's image is our God-given ability to reason. Our minds are capable of applying timeless principles to new situations and to use the information available to us to make difficult decisions.

Discuss:

- How have these other "flavors"—and particularly tradition, experience, and reason—affected your decision-making and how you live as a follower of Christ?

Closing

Discuss:

- What is one thing you learned during our time together that you didn't know before?
- What is one thing that you will do in the coming week as a result of what we learned or discussed?

Close with the following prayer or one of your choosing:

God, thank you for bringing us back together for this time of study and discussion. Thank you for being a God of many flavors who relates to us in so many different ways. Thank you also for the gift of Holy Communion, through which we connect with you and all of your followers throughout history. We pray these things in Jesus's name. Amen.

SESSION 4

DO YOU FEEL WHAT I FEEL?

Lesson Objectives

- Consider the role that touch played in Jesus's ministry.
- Examine the importance of Jesus living as a human being and experiencing human feelings and sensations.
- Discuss how God, in the person of Jesus, erased the distance between God and humanity.
- Explore the ways in which God is present with us now.

Supplies

- Bibles
- A whiteboard or large sheet of paper and markers
- Slips of paper; pencils or pens; cardboard boxes, prepared according to instructions in "What's Inside?"

Opening Activity: What's Inside?

Supplies: You will need a few cardboard boxes, prepared according to the instructions below.

Beforehand, gather a few cardboard boxes. Cut a hole in the tops or sides of the boxes that is large enough for people to put their hand through. Place an object in each box. Participants will reach into each box and guess what is inside.

Objects you might put in the boxes include toys, shells, and items made from fabrics. Avoid foods and anything with sharp edges.

As participants arrive, give each person a slip of paper and a pencil or pen. Invite participants to put a hand into each box and guess what they feel inside. They should not say their guesses aloud but should instead write them on the slips of paper. When everyone has had a chance to reach into the boxes, find out who guessed correctly.

Say something like:

Thus far in this study we have explored the sights, sounds, and tastes of the Advent and Christmas seasons. This session will deal with our sense of touch.

Open with this prayer or one of your choosing:

God, thank you for bringing us back together to reflect on how we experience you through the sights, sounds, tastes, and feelings of the Advent season. Open our hearts, minds, eyes, and ears to the message you have for us today; in Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Discussion

- How do humans use touch to communicate?
- What do each of the following actions communicate?
 - ◇ A hug from a trusted friend
 - ◇ A tap on the shoulder
 - ◇ A firm handshake
 - ◇ A high five
 - ◇ A fist bump

Read the following passages from Luke's Gospel: Luke 7:11-17; 7:36-39, 44-50; 8:46-48.

- What role does touch play in these Scripture passages?
- What do these Scriptures tell us about the role of touch in Jesus's ministry?
- In Jesus, God became fully human and lived a fully human life. Jesus felt real human pain and hunger. And he literally healed and comforted people by touching them. We also affirm that Jesus is present with us now. What does it mean to you that Jesus is present with us today? In what ways is Jesus present?
- Read aloud John 16:5-11. What do these verses, from Jesus's last evening with his disciples, tell us about how Jesus is still present with us? (Note that the "Companion" [or "Advocate" or "Helper"] Jesus mentions is the Holy Spirit.)
- Read aloud Matthew 25:31-40. What do these verses tell us about how we encounter Jesus in our lives today?

Activity: A Sense-able God

Supplies: You will need a whiteboard or large sheet of paper and a marker.

Discuss:

- In previous sessions, we discussed the sights, sounds, and tastes of the seasons. What are some of the "feels" you experience this time of year? (Examples might include the chill of an early winter's day, the prickle of pine needles, the warmth of a fire from the fireplace, the slippery texture of wrapping paper, or the feel of the wax candles at the Christmas Eve service.)

Say something like:

We know that, in Jesus, God lived on earth as a human being. This means that God experienced a lot of the same sensations that we feel.

Ask participants to brainstorm things that Jesus would have felt during his time on earth. (This could include things like hunger, thirst, and pain. It could also include the feel of rocky ground on his bare feet, the cool water of the Jordan River, or the summer heat in Galilee.)

Discuss:

- What does this exercise tell us about God and how God relates to us?

Say something like:

In the first two sessions of this study, we explored the sights and sounds of the Advent season. Many of the things we see and hear during this season, and throughout the year, draw us closer to God, help us better understand God's will, and reveal to us how God is at work in the world. But God isn't limited to sight and sound—things we can perceive from a distance. Through Jesus, God got close to us—close enough to heal us and comfort us and close enough to understand what it means to be human.

Closing

Discuss:

- What is one thing you learned during our time together that you didn't know before?
- What is one thing that you will do in the coming week as a result of what we learned or discussed?

Close with the following prayer or one of your choosing:

God, thank you for bringing us back together for this time of study and discussion. Thank you for living among us and feeling the things that we feel, and thank you for all the ways that you are present with us here and now. We pray these things in Jesus's name. Amen.