

Lesson Plans that Work
Year A – First Sunday of Advent
Lesson Plans for Younger Children

Scripture: Matthew 24:36-44

Happy New Church Year! The Gospel according to Matthew will be our main guidebook through Year A. Matthew appears to have had a hunch that the Son of Man's expected return just might be taking a bit longer than expected. Matthew helps us figure out how to live — as we celebrate the birth and life of Jesus and await his coming again. One thing Matthew is very clear about: be ready!

The school year began months ago; New Year's Day is over a month away. Yet here we are, beginning our new Church year with the First Sunday of Advent. Advent invites us to risk pushing on through the world's weariness to expectant hope. Something's coming we proclaim! Immanuel: God With Us in the form of an infant. We celebrate what happened 2000 years ago while we look to the promise that Jesus will come again. We are also called, as we live in this parenthesis time, to look for messages God continues to send: what has happened, and will happen again, is also happening now: right here.

A Notation for This Week's Gospel

Keep awake, for you do not know when Jesus is coming back. This message is not intended to cause us to cower in fear. Fear provides a useful warning signal, but it can also have the potential to paralyze us. Instead, we are called to the opposite of fear; we are called to faith.

Theme: Be Ready for Messages

Before: Decide what you will do to make your classroom look a bit different for Advent. An Advent wreath is a possibility. Consider this safe construction option: bring greens, a pan to arrange them on, four drinking glasses filled about $\frac{3}{4}$ full of baking soda, a votive candle nestled in each baking soda-filled glass, and wooden matches. Fireplace matches are best so that the children can assist lighting the candles each week. We suggest blowing them out when you have finished your prayers and story. If lighting candles is not a possibility, you could use electric candles in your wreath. Another alternative would be to take a large piece of paper and draw a simple wreath with four tall candles. Each week the children can color an additional candle and top it with a bright yellow flame until you have all four candles colored. Most churches are using blue candles for Advent, with the third candle pink for Mary.

The theme for Advent is messages. Today the children are invited to make little cards to slip into the pockets of people who do extra work this season: harried grocery store check-out clerks, stocking clerks in toy stores, mail carriers, UPS delivery people, police, etc. Bring small plastic sandwich bags (the zip-type works best) and pieces of colored paper, cut to fit in the bags. You may want to print "Thank You" on each of the pieces of paper before you cut them up. You will also need crayons and whatever other art supplies you have on hand (glitter, stickers, stars, whatever) to decorate the cards.

Beginning: If you have brought the makings of an Advent Wreath, invite the children to help you get it arranged and light one candle. If you are offering the wreath drawing, explain it to the children and invite their help coloring one of the candles. When completed have the children stand around the wreath as you offer your prayer.

Opening Prayer: Thank you, God, for Advent, the time we wait for the birth of the baby Jesus. Thank you that Jesus was born and came to live with us. Thank you that Jesus is here with us today, even if we cannot see him. Amen.

The Story: What might happen if we took all our favorite toys out to a park, left them lying around there and then just went home without them? Do you think they would all be there when we came back? What if it rained, or snowed, or a fierce wind started to blow? What might happen to these toys we really like? What do we do to take care of toys we really like?

In our story today, Jesus is telling people to pay attention and take care of important things. Jesus says that if you do not take care of things, someone might take them away from you. Then Jesus tells the people that he will be back some day, and not one of us knows when that will be. Jesus says he will come back some time when no one is expecting him. And Jesus wants you to have taken care of and not forgotten the important things.

Activity: Ask the children if any of them have seen any different lights in people's houses and in the places where we go shopping? Did anything look different in our church today? (An Advent Wreath? Different colors on the altar?) What do they think is going to happen? Who is coming? (Accept all responses, including Santa Clause and lots of presents.) Ask them what their favorite thing about Christmas is.

Then tell the children that Advent can be a hard time for some people. People who work in stores may have to work even harder. People who deliver mail and packages have lots of extra work. Show the children the supplies you have brought and the plastic bags. Tell them that we are going to make a batch of cards to give to these people who do so much extra work. Invite the children to draw pictures of hearts or whatever they want as "messages." Suggest the children take their bags of messages with them when they go to grocery stores, toy stores, etc. so they can give their messages to clerks working in the stores, to delivery people coming to their house, and to whoever else they notice. After the cards are made put the cards in the plastic bags. When they have finished, help the children get all their cards into their plastic bags and close the bags.

Getting Closure: Ask the children to sit in a circle, holding their plastic bags. Help them consider who they can give the cards to this week. If you have time, they can share one of the cards that they made to the group.

Closing Prayer: Thank you, God, for all the people in our lives who work hard. Thank you that we can be messengers, too. Amen.

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Lesson Plans that Work
Year A – First Sunday of Advent
Lesson Plans for Older Children

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Theme: Be Ready for Messages

Before Class: Decide if you are going to do anything to change how the classroom looks for Advent. If you have an altar, change it to either blue or purple (depending on what color your church uses) or add an advent wreath.

For each of the four weeks in Advent a project is suggested that the children can display for all in the congregation to see. You may want to collaborate with the church leadership to find the most appropriate place for the display.

An optional activity is offered this week that invites the children to look at some of the "messages" and "messengers" recorded in the Bible. You will need a large piece of paper (poster board, for example) and either crayons or felt markers. If you will have time to do this activity, copy these citations on separate small sheets of paper so that each child receives at least one:

- Genesis 9:12-13 (the rainbow);
- Genesis 18:1-2 (the three "men" who came to tell Abraham his wife would have a baby);
- Genesis 22:11-13 (an angel calls to Abraham to tell him he need not sacrifice his son and sends, instead, a ram for the sacrifice)
- Genesis 32:24 (the "man" who wrestled with Jacob)
- Genesis 41:1-3 (fat cows and lean cows in the Pharaoh's dream);
- Exodus 3:2 (the angel of the LORD appearing in the burning bush);

- Exodus 16:4 (manna in the desert)
- Judges 6: 37-40 (Gideon's fleece that receives dew and then is dry when all else is wet);
- 1 Samuel 3:4 (God calling to young Samuel);
- Isaiah 6:6-7 (the seraph cleanses Isaiah's lips with a live coal);
- Luke 1: 11 (Angel appears to Zechariah);
- Luke 1:26-27 (Angel appears to Mary);
- Matthew 1:20 (Angel appears to Joseph).

You may well have a favorite not listed here, so use it, too. Note: all these citations come from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. If you are using another translation, check to see if any of the citations appear in a slightly different verse.

Beginning: Tell the children we are going to be noticing ways messages are sent and received. Ask them to think of ways we get messages to each other today (examples might include phone, cell phone, FAX, e-mail, web page, blogs, mail, packages sent by UPS or FedEx, iPods, radio, TV, movies, videos, CD's, DVDs. etc.)

What did people do to send messages 100 years ago? (Mail, telegram, teletype, morse code, packages sent only by mail – no UPS, a very few “Victrolas” [to play 78 speed records], a very few telephones, etc.)

Do they know of anything before that? (Pony Express, runners, smoke signals, etc.)

What does God use to send us messages? (People, events, angels, etc.)

If time permits, invite some speculation about what **might** be available in the next 50 to 100 years for messages (cell phones implanted in our ears, ability to receive TV signals on our bodies, etc.)

Opening Prayer: Thank you, God, for all the ways we have to send and receive messages. Help us to be alert to messages you are sending to us. Amen.

The Story: Matthew 24: 36-44 Invite as least two readers, one to read verses 36-41 and the other to read verses 42-44.

Questions:

- If Jesus is the messenger in this passage: what would we say is the message?
- I wonder if any parts were scary? (The possibility of Jesus coming back and only some people noticing. A house could be broken into by thieves, if no one was watching.)
- What do we understand Jesus to be saying about our being “ready?” (Pay attention to what is important and don't get bogged down with stuff that is not important.)
- What things are we doing that we think Jesus will think are important? (Taking care of our bodies, eating food that is healthy, doing our best at school, looking out for people who need our help, etc.)

Option: Looking at other messages we know about by reading the Bible. Give each child a sheet of paper with one of the passages listed above. Each child will also need a Bible. Ask them to find the “messenger” or the “message” and be prepared to describe it to the others.

Activity: A 21st Century Angel

Invite the children to come up with what they think an angel sent to us in the 21st Century would look like. The children could work in groups of two or three if you have several children, or all together if the group is small. Do they think God would send tall, male angels with huge wings? If not, what might they look like? Invite them to draw on a large piece of paper (so the angel is life size) what this angel might look like. If they want to, they could post the angel where all in the church could see their work.

Getting Closure: Ask the children to explain the choices they have made, perhaps to give the angel a name, and then decide if they want to post it where all in your church can see it.

Closing Prayer: Thank you, God, that angels usually come as a surprise. Thank you that you send angels to help us be who you call us to be. Amen.

Matthew 24:36-44

36 ‘But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³⁷For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, ³⁹and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴¹Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left.

⁴²Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

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Lesson Plans that Work
Year A – First Sunday of Advent
Gospel Lesson for Adults

Scripture: Matthew 24:36-44

Happy New Church Year! The Gospel according to Matthew will be our main guidebook through Year A. Matthew appears to have had a hunch that the Son of Man's expected return just might be taking a bit longer than expected. Matthew helps us figure out how to live — as we celebrate the birth and life of Jesus and await his coming again. One thing Matthew is very clear about: be ready!

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Theme: Be Ready for Messages

Before Class: You will need copies of the Bible or of the scripture for today, a sheet of newsprint or other large sheet of paper, and a felt marker. You will also need enough sheets of paper and pencils or pens for each person in the class to have one.

Beginning: Ask the class to brainstorm with you the things that show up on our "To Do List" when we hear "Advent" as the season that precedes Christmas. You can scribe what is said. (The list will probably include Christmas cards, presents purchased, wrapped, shipped or hidden in the house; decorating the tree and the house; children's pageants and office Christmas parties.)

Then, ask the group to take a deep breath, change the focus from "gotta do" to what God might be calling us to do. Some idea starters you could offer: Could God be calling us to be gentler on ourselves, find spaces however brief to just be with God? Could it be that we are being called to "waste some time" just hanging out with our families? Could we turn off the TV one night a week, pop some popcorn and together watch a quality movie or read a good book; or take a drive around and enjoy the lights? Could our family identify a need in the community and reach out to them with gifts or even with visits?

Opening Prayer: Dear God, you call us to be ready because the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour. Help us to choose our priorities, work through our fears and live our lives in expectant hope. Amen.

The Scripture: Matthew 24:36-44 Invite one person to read the entire passage while the rest of you listen and follow along. Keep a moment of silence at the conclusion of the reading.

Questions:

- I wonder what stood out for you in this passage.
- Name some of the “fears” in this passage that will have to be worked through. (Example: some will be taken and some will be left out, an unprotected house could well be ransacked, etc.)
- Since it is our understanding that the Gospel is Good News, let us find the messages of hope expressed in this passage. (Jesus is painstakingly describing how to “be ready;” some stayed awake so they were ready, etc.)

Option:

Invite each member of the group to take a sheet of paper and make three columns; entitle the three columns: **Data – Important – Expendable**. Ask them to list the items from our large list that apply as data to them (if they have no children, the children’s pageant will probably not surface) adding things they think of that were not on the list, if they want. Suggest they begin to think which of the two columns the data can be listed under – which things are really important (probably a Christmas tree, for example) and which are expendable (possibly baking, from scratch, several dozen cookies). Again priorities will be different in each family. Then, invite the class members to take these lists home and work on them with the other members of their families.

Option: (If any members of your class have young children and these optional lessons will be used in their class, alert the parents that the children will be making cards to give to harried grocery clerks, tired mail carriers, possibly even day care workers or shut-ins the family is aware of.) Discuss how “naming” the fear of this season gives us a jump on working through the fear.

Getting Closure: Since perhaps finding spaces of quiet, silence, emptiness may well be a part of “be ready” invite the group to spend a few moments in silence. Invite them to put aside “to do” lists, even intercessions, and “be.” Remind them that all kinds of thoughts will come to them. The idea is simply to notice the idea and let it go on by, returning to silence. A simple word, like “peace” or “Emmanuel” or “Jesus,” repeated silently can help hold the silence. After a time that seems appropriate to you, simply say “Amen,” to end the silence.

Closing Prayer: Gracious God, we thank you for your love for us, that you do not want us stuck in fear, and that you hold out to us the hope that accompanies our acceptance of your love. Amen.

Matthew 24:36-44

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