

# A Sermon Planning Guide FOR ADVENT - EPIPHANY



FROM  
GENERATION  
TO GENERATION...

*Featuring Biblical commentary by Dr. Christine J. Hong  
Guide developed by Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity*

## INTRODUCTION

### How to use this guide

We hope this guide is your starting point for shaping your sermons, worship services, and scripture study classes. For each Sunday in Advent through Epiphany, we have included theme connections, biblical commentary, guiding questions, and links to further reading and materials.<sup>1</sup> We hope these offer a few ways of approaching and thinking about the texts in light of our theme and weekly sub-themes. We encourage you to use this guide as a companion to the poetry, visual art, devotional, and materials in the bundle—allowing all of the words, images, and ideas to cross-pollinate. You can find full-length artist statements inspired by each of the focal texts listed in this guide in our Visual Art Collection. Consider mapping out your ideas in our accompanying Sermon Planning Grid. Additionally, you might use this guide to facilitate adult education sessions or small groups. You could absorb and discuss some of the articles and materials noted in the “Further Reading and Research” with a small group. You could also adapt or use the guiding questions as discussion prompts.

### How we developed this Advent series

For the past 6 years, *A Sanctified Art* has created Advent resources inspired by the Revised Common Lectionary. While much of our larger ecumenical audience follows these common scriptures each year and there is beauty in these unifying texts, we started to crave what the lectionary doesn't offer: a clear, chronological storyline of the events leading up to and following Christ's birth. For the sake of biblical literacy and narrative cohesion, we felt it could be deeply meaningful to offer an Advent series that hones in on all the humans involved in the story. And so, sourcing from all of the Gospel writers, we hand-selected scriptures in an attempt to tell the full scope of the Christmas story. We paired these narrative Gospel texts with the Isaiah scriptures from Year A in the Lectionary. In this way, our focal scriptures look at the Christmas story through a micro and macro lens, focusing on both the human interactions and events recorded in the Gospels, as well as the cosmic prophecies in Isaiah.

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<sup>1</sup> Under the “Further Reading and Research” sections, we direct you to the work of authors, scholars, thinkers, and writers who might inform or enhance your sermonic message. We do not own the rights to these works. We encourage you to patronize and support these authors and creators. You may find it helpful to browse through this section for the entire series ahead of time so that you can purchase and read any books that are referenced.

# INTRODUCTION (CONT.)

## About the theme

The stories, scriptures, and traditions of the Christmas season have been passed down to us throughout the generations. Many of us enter this season with a swell of memories and emotions as vast as the cultural and religious rituals this holiday holds. Like a tapestry woven throughout time, the Christmas story weaves us in—to remember how God has shown up in the past, to continue the work of collective liberation, to behold the presence of God in flesh and bone.

As we read through and studied the scriptures we selected, a line from Mary’s song of protest and praise gave us pause:

*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.*

*His mercy is for those who fear him  
**from generation to generation.***

(Luke 1: 48b-50)

Despite the challenges and vulnerability she faced, Mary could glimpse the scale and scope of the good news she was part of bringing forth. This good news transcends time and space—it was and is bigger than just her. Christ is coming for collective liberation: God’s redemption is at work for years to come. Therefore, the promise is meant to be lived out and passed on from generation to generation.

We encourage you to pay attention to each of the characters in these familiar narratives and ask: *What did each person pass on or contribute? How did they either participate in God’s liberation and love—or try to thwart God’s justice? What can we learn from them, and what is our role now? What will we pass on to the next generation?*

The root word of “generation” is “gen” meaning “origin” or “birth.” Our theme is also a call to action: what are we being called to generate or bring forth? What have your ancestors and those who have come before you passed on for you to continue? Who are the spiritual elders in your community who planted the seeds for the things that are now blooming? What seeds are you planting for the future?

*From Generation to Generation...* reminds us of the ways our lives, histories, actions, and stories are interconnected and woven together. The work of God is always unfolding—in and through us. This Advent, may you remember that you belong—to a story etched into the wrinkles of time, to generations that have come before and will come after, to a love that won’t let you go.

## INTRODUCTION (CONT.)

### Guiding questions for this series

Throughout this worship series, we invite you to take a closer look at how the Christmas story unfolds. We encourage you to pay attention to each of the characters in these familiar narratives and ask:

- What did each person pass on or contribute?
- How did they either participate in God’s liberation and love—or try to thwart God’s justice?
- What can we learn from them, and what is our role now? What will we pass on to the next generation?

### About the Biblical commentary for this series

In our collaboration with our guest writer, Dr. Christine Hong, we encouraged her to follow her inspiration when writing reflections on these familiar scripture stories. Considering the theme, Dr. Hong was led to share some of her own generational stories, weaving them in with the ancient stories of Christ’s birth. Therefore, what you will find in her commentary is like a tapestry of personal memoir and biblical reflection. If it feels appropriate, you are welcome to integrate some of her stories into your sermons.<sup>2</sup> We also hope that her reflections may inspire you to flex your own storytelling muscles, sharing about the stories you have heard or experienced and how they may mirror what you see in the scriptures.

### Theme reflections from the Sanctified Art creative team

One of my all-time favorite things is to visit my grandparents and listen to their stories. My grandmother is an avid, amateur genealogist who lights up at the chance to weave together a tapestry of family stories and connections. She brings out old photographs and delicately strings each story together with the care and reverence she feels each person’s story deserves. I hang out with my grandfather in his workshop, where layers of dust cover many gadgets, odds and ends. He marvels at the craftsmanship of old, worn tools and tells stories of the trades he made to acquire such treasures. He shows me step by step how he recycles old materials into intricately handcrafted knives, jewelry, and reimagined utensils. His life is a wonder, and I feel honored to be invited to hold his stories. The theme, *From Generation to Generation*, as it relates to Advent and Christ’s entry into the world, makes me want to visit this familiar narrative with the passion my grandmother approaches her family’s history, and the attentive playfulness with which my grandfather scrolls through memories like snippets of old black and white film. Who are the people who make Jesus who he is? What are the pathways of the stories that lead to the miraculous arrival of God into the world? What stories are neglected and forgotten? What stories have we twisted to suit our own worldview and perspectives? These stories are fragile and sacred. We need to approach them with reverence and care and protect them as we hand them to future generations to hold and pass along.”

—Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman, Director of Branding, Founding Creative Partner

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<sup>2</sup> If you are printing and distributing our *From Generation to Generation*...Advent devotional booklet, you will see that Dr. Hong’s commentary is included in the weekly reflections. Please don’t let that deter you from referencing the commentary in your sermons, as we believe that can actually help connect your worship to the materials your congregation members have at home. It can also strengthen memory recall—and remind folks to keep reading their devotionals!

## INTRODUCTION (CONT.)

### Theme reflections from the Sanctified Art creative team (CONT.)

“I love stories of the past. They bring about a nuanced understanding for me while opening my mind to connection and dislocation, to a mirror of this current time and place. I felt a profound comfort in the perpetual welcome that my grandparents and great grandmother extended us each summer. How I wish to gather with the abundant nostalgia of my grandfather’s pancake breakfasts on Christmas morning. I want to gather without the prevailing habit of leaving my politics at the door, stifled. I want to hear my loved ones speak truly with abundant love; why can we not speak? I want to engage in the complexity of the discussion. I see the pain of millions from the past when I look at my white skin in the mirror. I know that my ancestors owned slaves and had servants of color. I know that my ancestral theology was twisted to enable slavery, violent colonialism, and to promote those structures... And I look forward; I see the future generations. We have people of color in our future lineage. We work tirelessly to ensure a world that sees our children as humans, incredible, wonderful, whole people who can safely go for a run through a construction site or buy Skittles at the corner store.”

—Hannah Garrity, Founding Creative Partner

“I can vividly remember a conversation between my 13-year-old adolescent self and my mother on the way to church one wintry morning. I asked her, “Mom, what if I don’t want to be a Christian?” (a protest undoubtedly influenced by my teenage desire to sleep in). My mother didn’t take the bait. Instead, she told me how this story of God has changed her life. She told me how she couldn’t imagine her world without the church. She told me how she so deeply believed in a better day, and how she felt called to help be a part of that. From the back seat of the car, I could tell that she was serious. Her joy, her hope, her conviction—they were so pure and so authentic that they left a lasting impression on me. It was a generation to generation moment. The Christmas story, of a love that came here, that walked among us, that was born in a humble manger to uncertain parents with shepherds nearby, is a story that we pass from generation to generation, because without fail, it continues to change us. It reframes the way we hope. It centers the way we love. It shapes the way we live. So this Advent, may we tell this story that has spread like wildfire from generation to generation. Let us remember the generations from Abraham to Jacob who waited for that promised day. And let our generation be so influenced in joy and love that future generations can’t help but pay attention. This Advent, let us tell the story of good news—from generation to generation.”

—Rev. Sarah Speed, Founding Creative Partner

## INTRODUCTION (CONT.)

### Theme reflections from the Sanctified Art creative team (CONT.)

“While we were developing this theme, I learned about The Seventh Generation Principle, a philosophy of the Iroquois that emphasizes how seven generations after us will be affected by our current actions and decisions. This philosophy invites us to cultivate a sacred imagination for what will come, considering what will sustain and benefit the generations who come after us. To do this, we must see ourselves as belonging to a web of interconnection. Nothing is generated from complete isolation; our world is continually shaped and re-shaped by our collective actions. I’m meditating on this philosophy as I enter this Advent season, which will be my first Christmas as a mother. I’m remembering my mothers who have passed on—my maternal grandmother and my mother—and the parts of them that live on in me. I am thinking about the child currently kicking in my womb, and, like Mary, pondering, treasuring, and wrestling with the visions I have for her future. This Advent, may you remember that you belong—to a story etched into the wrinkles of time, to generations that have come before and will come after, to a love that won’t let you go.”

—Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity, Founder, Creative Director

“With this theme, we decided to simply tell the story, start to finish, without the usual jumping back and forth in the timeline. But what is so beautiful about the Christmas narrative is that it isn’t simple; it isn’t just one person’s story during a single year. It’s the story of Mary and Joseph, shepherds and magi, Elizabeth and John, but it’s also the story of Ruth and Jesse and David and Isaiah, all of these individual threads over centuries woven together into the story of God’s unconventional inbreaking. And the Christmas story is our story, too. The tapestry God is weaving did not stop in Bethlehem. Our own threads, from generation to generation, weave into the narrative of God’s incarnation in the world that proclaims the Advent promises of hope, peace, joy, and love.”

—Rev. Anna Strickland, Operations Support & Content Creator





There's room for every story

FOCAL SCRIPTURES Matthew 1:1-17 | Isaiah 2:1-5

## THEME CONNECTIONS

Our series begins with Matthew's genealogy. In that long list of names, we remember the trauma and triumph of those who came before; each name holds a story and their story gives way to Christ's story. God works through the unexpected people and stories of the past and present. When you zoom in, you may not be able to see how each character propels the story forward, but when you zoom out, you can see how each story is woven together into a larger tapestry. The Isaiah passage illustrates a convergence of opposing groups and identities coming together. Instead of the way of the past—of war—they learn a new way by transforming their weapons into gardening tools. What are the old paths that we've followed, and where must we diverge into a new way?

## COMMENTARY ON MATTHEW 1:1-17 | by Dr. Christine J. Hong

Just as Christ's genealogy reveals the relationships across time and space in his life, many of our names also tie us to the generations who come before us and those who will come after us. Matthew lists the names of Jesus' forebearers as a marker of hope finally realized. Even today, names are the seeded hope of one generation planted in another. They are the thread that connects our histories, stories, and futures. We are the hopes of those who've come before, and we live in hope for those who will come after us.

In the Korean tradition, male babies are named by the oldest patriarch on the father's side of a family. My paternal grandfather died before I was born, so it was my maternal grandfather who built my name. Even before I was born, he declared he would build a meaningful name for me (even though I was not a boy). I would receive a name with intention from the oldest living generation to the newest. He gave me the name *Jin*, which when paired with my surname, becomes *Hong Jin*, meaning "something precious in the wide expanse." When I was born, he was not sure when he would get to meet his granddaughter with the vast ocean separating South Korea from California. In those days, it was not so easy or affordable to fly internationally. The name represented the connection he felt to me and my parents, despite what felt like an insurmountable distance between us. What is the Spirit of God if not the hope against hope in our lives?

My grandfather knew about hope against hope; he died at 101 years old, a survivor of war and displacement, excruciating trauma and loss. Yet, I knew him as a loving human with a joyful disposition, a spiritual and humble man, my biggest fan, the person who left me the gift of my name—connecting me through that name to the hope he bore through so much tragedy. Three years ago, I passed the gift of the name *Jin* to my daughter, *Tae-Jin*, giving her the part of the name my grandfather built for me. Her name means "precious light." Through her name, she is connected to her great-grandfather, to his stories, his hopes, his spiritual presence. As she grows, she will become part of a larger story by weaving in her own stories as seeds of hope against hope for someone new.

## GUIDING Q'S

- In the brief podcast, "What's the Point of Giving a Genealogy from Joseph's Perspective?"<sup>3</sup> the hosts try to answer why Matthew's genealogy is traced through Joseph instead of through Mary's lineage. There are many guesses. In Jewish tradition, the legality of the royal throne passes through the paternal line. Tracing Christ's lineage through Joseph connects Jesus to David (fulfilling the prophecies in Isaiah). Some say that this shows that adoption is just as legitimate as bloodline in biblical records. Why does Matthew begin Christ's story with his ancestry? What is significant about how this ancestry is traced? How do you tell the beginning of your story? How do you tell the beginning of your church's story?

<sup>3</sup> "What's the Point of Giving a Genealogy from Joseph's Perspective?" Episode 924. *ReKnew*. Hosted by Greg Boyd. February 8, 2022. [reknew.org/2022/02/whats-the-point-of-giving-a-genealogy-from-josephs-perspective-podcast](https://www.reknew.org/2022/02/whats-the-point-of-giving-a-genealogy-from-josephs-perspective-podcast).

## There's room for every story

### GUIDING Q'S (CONT.)

- Luke's genealogy of Christ diverges from Matthew's. Some scholars propose that the Aramaic in verse 16 should introduce Joseph as Mary's father, not her husband, therefore tracing the genealogy through Mary. In some ways, the record of Jesus' family tree is like a tapestry of mismatched strings woven together. Theologically, how does the untidiness of Jesus' lineage emphasize how God grafts family in different and unexpected ways? How might this create room for stories of blended families, families through adoption, or families who don't know their ancestry? How does this create room for your story?
- Matthew's genealogy includes 42 names, organized in 3 sets of 14: there were 14 generations from Abraham to David, 14 generations from David to the Babylonian exile, and 14 generations from the exile to Jesus. The number 14 (twice of 7) could represent wholeness or completion, though it is important to note that many names (some evil kings and many of the matriarchs, in particular) are omitted from this list. As you read through the names, note the vastness of stories represented here—stories of trauma, triumph, hardship, and beauty. All of this complexity leads to Christ's story. In your sermon, you might briefly highlight some of the stories of the people mentioned in the genealogy. How does each person add to the tapestry of God's story?<sup>4</sup>
- Isaiah's prophecy paints a powerful illustration of regeneration—of weapons of war becoming plows that break up soil and shears that prune away dead branches. Within your life, church, or community, what needs to be unearthed or dug up? What needs to be pruned away? What steps are required for this work to take place? Where is God regenerating a new path forward?

### FURTHER READING & RESEARCH

**Read** “December 18: Advent Calendar, Tangled Roots” by Diana Butler Bass. *The Cottage*. December 18, 2021. [dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/december-18-advent-calendar](https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/december-18-advent-calendar).

*(Note: In this excerpt from her book, [Grounded: Finding God in the World, A Spiritual Revolution](#), historian Diana Butler Bass describes the role of biblical genealogies. She asserts that, when a particular ruler or leader comes to power, they legitimize their authority through ancestry. Matthew's gospel begins with the announcement that Jesus is king of the Jews. This claim, Butler Bass writes, “is big and bold, directed toward a Jewish audience seeking both political liberation and spiritual empowerment during a time of oppression.”)*

**Read** “Genealogies of the intangible: Christine Hong addresses Next Church” by Outlook Reporting. *The Presbyterian Outlook*. March 6, 2021.

[pres-outlook.org/2021/03/genealogies-of-the-intangible-christine-hong-addresses-next-church](https://pres-outlook.org/2021/03/genealogies-of-the-intangible-christine-hong-addresses-next-church)<sup>5</sup>

*(Note: This is a report summarizing Dr. Christine Hong's keynote address at the 2021 virtual NEXT Church gathering.<sup>6</sup> In the keynote, Dr. Hong describes what she calls “genealogies of the intangible”—not literal family trees, but lessons taught in community. She introduces two concepts: “the flavors of one's hand” and “us-ness as the framework for our lives.” Emphasizing that we share an ancestral journey of collective liberation, Hong declares, “You have inherited what cannot be stolen by empire... It can only be erased if you choose not to pass it on.... We are meant to inherit and co-create a just world for all.”)*

4 Read Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman's artist statement for “Genealogy of Christ” (included in the visual art collection). In her art, she highlights the stories of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary. These women's stories are nuanced and complicated, and yet, as Wright Pittman concludes, “Without their brilliance, passion, ingenuity, resourcefulness, creativity, and sacrifice, the lineage would have ended.”

5 We hope you can access a preview of this full article. If not, you can gain online access to the article and all of the Outlook's online archives for one month for \$4.25 here: [subscribe.pres-outlook.org/PBO/?f=paidd](https://subscribe.pres-outlook.org/PBO/?f=paidd).

6 For more information about the 2021 NEXT Church gathering, or to access the recordings, go here: [nextchurch.net/product/2021-next-church-national-gathering-subscription](https://nextchurch.net/product/2021-next-church-national-gathering-subscription).

## There's room for every story (CONT.)

### FURTHER READING & RESEARCH (CONT.)

**Watch** “A family tree for humanity” by Spencer Wells. *TED Talk*. August 18, 2008.  
[ted.com/talks/spencer\\_wells\\_a\\_family\\_tree\\_for\\_humanity](http://ted.com/talks/spencer_wells_a_family_tree_for_humanity).

*(Note: In this TED talk, geneticist Spencer Wells explicates how DNA serves as a historical document, leading geneticists to construct a family tree that includes every living person. In the talk, he declares: “...if we go far enough back, we share a common ancestry with every living thing on earth. DNA ties us all together, so we share ancestry with barracuda and bacteria and mushrooms, if you go far enough back—over a billion years.” Consider what this research might mean to us theologically, particularly for those of us with trauma or grief in our families—or for those who cannot access their genealogy due to oppression and historic erasure.)*



**Genealogy of Christ**  
by Lauren Wright Pittman  
Inspired by Matthew 1:1-47



**War No More**  
by Lisle Gwynn Garrity  
Inspired by Isaiah 2:1-5