

Cycle B

The Unsheltered **HEART**

a guide for
small-group discussions



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WELCOME

This guide has been developed for weekly small-group gatherings of individuals who are making the at-home Advent retreat found in *The Unsheltered Heart*. In many cases, groups will gather at the parish center for a simple meal, then break into smaller groups for conversation about how the at-home retreat is progressing. In other instances, small groups will gather in homes, schools, or offices to share reflect on how their Advent retreat is progressing.

The simple process outlined in this guide is intended to help small groups structure the time spent together each week for faith sharing and prayer. It assumes that each small-group participant is following the retreat and seeking to share whatever enrichment he or she finds there. Participants should bring their copies of *The Unsheltered Heart* retreat booklet with them each week to the small-group gathering.

Peace and all good in your Advent growth,
Ronald Patrick Raab, C.S.C.

Watch!

1. *The Silence*

Spend a few minutes in silence, letting go of whatever might distract participants from the conversation at hand. In these busy and often chaotic days of Advent, silence refreshes the spirit and opens the group to authentic sharing and reflection on the prophetic gospel reading.

2. *The Word*

Refresh everyone's memory of the Sunday gospel by slowly reading the sacred text aloud (Mark 13:33–37, page 5 of *The Unsheltered Heart*). Even though most of the group may be individually reflecting on the text daily, reading the gospel together grounds the reflections deeply within the group's prayer.

3. *Connecting to the Gospel*

Give each participant an opportunity to share what he or she hears from the gospel. Make sure the group is aware that no one will critique or challenge what the individual shares. Each person speaks with an open heart, and the group hears with an open heart. In your conversation together, the group might consider what they have gained this week from daily reflection on the question “**For what will you watch today?**” (See Step 2, Monday through Saturday).

4. Responding to the Call

Ask participants to share some of their reflections from the week, either from their journal entries, or from new insights about their own lives. Depending on the size of the group and the time spent, each person may have a certain length of time to share their insights. A possible question to offer the group is “What does it mean for you to keep ‘watch’ in life?”

5. Closing

In closing, participants may articulate one item of action or prayer that they will incorporate into their lives in the coming week. Then, the following or another prayer may be recited by the group facilitator, by several members, or by the entire group together.

O God of fresh beginnings,
Satisfy our longings for new life.

Stir our hearts to love
when we grow weary from tasks and demands.

Open us to gratitude when cynicism shreds our relationships.
Give us new vision when our eyes close in shame and doubt.

O God of loving wakefulness,
Keep our attention focused on the needs of other people.
Rouse our desire to serve when worry keeps us in isolation.
Keep us focused on new priorities when we slip into old patterns of neglect.

Forgive us when words of judgment and prejudice harm our neighbors.

O God of Advent desire,
Love us into waking up and believing in your presence.

Amen.

Seek Messengers of Hope

1. *The Silence*

Begin by welcoming people to rest in comfortable silence.

Ask the group to reflect on last week's session or articulate insights, prayers, or concerns from the previous week's private retreat time spent journaling or praying.

2. *The Word*

Read aloud the gospel for the second week of Advent (Mark 1:1–8, pages 23–24 of *The Unsheltered Heart*). Slowly and lovingly bring those words to the lives and wisdom of this group, on this occasion. Invite each participant to share insights they have gained this week from daily reflection on the question **“What emotional and spiritual pathways can you clear for Christ's coming this day?”** (See Step 2, Monday through Saturday).

3. *Connecting to the Gospel*

Invite participants to reflect on the gospel passage by asking reflection questions such as “How can John's insistence that we reorder our lives, come to grips with our past, and hope for the future change the way we approach life?” “How are you being called to unshelter your heart, opening it to new events, people, and situations and the sufferings of others?” and “What does it mean for you to prepare the way for the Lord?”

4. Responding to the Call

As the sharing of the group grows stronger and more trusting, invite the participants to explore the challenges of the gospel in our culture with its expectations of materialism and consumerism. Ask questions like “What is the grace of hearing this gospel today?” and “How can we repent and become messengers of hope?”

5. Closing

Briefly summarize what the group has discussed in responding to the gospel message. Highlight some of the ways in which participants talked about making straight a path for Christ. Then invite the group to bring those ideas and desires to prayer.

O God of loving patience,
Help us to live the mission of the gatekeeper,
allowing God to transform us into a people of
faith, integrity, and hope.

Open our eyes to miracles when apathy shuts us down.
Unshelter our hearts to discover the person of Christ.

Instill courage in us when we judge the marginalized and forgotten. Make us
hospitable to the strangers around us.

Give us kindness as we prepare our hearts for people in need.
Prepare our lives for a new understanding of love.

God of hope and forgiveness,
Trust us with your gifts of love.

Keep our eyes peeled for Christ,
and our hearts ready for his return.

O God of courage and fidelity,
Make straight our paths toward your hope and wisdom.
Amen.

Testify to the Light

1. *The Silence*

Settle the group into a peace-filled silence.

2. *The Word*

Read aloud the gospel reading for the Third Sunday of Advent (John 1:6–8, 19–28, pages 43–44 in *The Unsheltered Heart*) inviting them to listen, as if hearing the words of scripture for the first time.

3. *Connecting to the Gospel*

Invite the group to share their insights, struggles, and challenges of the week's reflections on the gospel. Each participant may share what insight they have gained this week from daily reflecting on the question: **"In what specific ways will you testify to the life of Christ's presence today?"** (See Step 2, Monday through Saturday). Allow for respectful silence after each person speaks so as not to judge or dismiss the insights offered.

4. Responding to the Call

Have the group reflect together on the message of the Gospel. Questions to pose include “How can you incorporate this week’s Advent message by uniting in a common refrain of gratitude for life?” and “What does John the Baptist’s example mean to you today?”

5. Closing

Wrap up the discussion by asking each participant to name one thing he or she will do during the coming week to focus on announcing hope. Then finish with a brief prayer.

God of Advent hope,
Reshape our deafness into compassionate listening.

When we trip over our narrow views of others, give us new eyes.
When we fear the intensity of others’ suffering,
instill in us your loving strength.
When selfishness grabs hold of our priorities, set us on a new path.

God of Incarnate love,
Create in us a new desire for genuine relationship.
When words of discouragement catch in our throats,
help us speak the truth.

When pride fashions our actions, give us humility in service.
When the voice of the distressed meets with our apathy,
draw out instead our warm solidarity.

God of Advent peace,
Settle into our lives and send us off to tell the Good News.

Amen.

Do Not Be Afraid

1. *The Silence*

Once again, begin the group session in prayerful silence. Invite participants to acknowledge and try to release whatever stresses they are feeling. Invite them to reflect on their retreat time over the past week.

2. *The Word*

Read the gospel reading for the Fourth Week of Advent (Luke 1: 26–38, pages 63–64 of *The Unsheltered Heart*). Ask participants to share their moments of insight, struggle, or concern from the week’s reflection on the gospel. Invite each person to share what insight they have gained this week from daily reflection on the question **“What fear will you face and begin to release today?”** (See Step 2, Monday through Saturday).

3. *Connecting to the Gospel*

Discuss this week’s well-known gospel passage using questions like “How can Mary’s ‘yes’ provide a model for our own openness to God’s will?” and “In what ways can you seek to listen more carefully to what God is calling you to do?” Also invite participants to reflect further on those questions that have remained with them throughout the retreat experience during these four weeks of Advent.

4. *Responding to the Call*

Allow the group to share what they consider to be a new commitment for themselves or a new desire to serve people in need. Ask participants to articulate how—if at all—their views of Advent have changed because of *The Unsheltered Heart*.

5. *Closing*

As you bring the conversation to a close, invite each participant to share a spiritual gift he or she hopes to receive this Christmas. Once everyone has had a chance to speak, close with one of the prayers written by participants during the retreat, or invite each person to share one. You may also use the following prayer, prayed aloud by one person, by several group members taking small parts, or in unison.

God of gentleness and peace,
Send us your grace in the close of Advent days.

Help us to envision a new path of love when we stumble out of fear.
Make our fear the window to new life and courage.
Give us new hope when we cling to the past and doubt the future.
Offer us new birth when we hold on to anger
and call us always into your healing presence.

God of Advent joy,
Send us the love of your Son, Christ the Lord.
Restore our innocence when violence and war prevail.

Give us silent nights when stress and anxiety quicken our hearts,
and allow your love to be born among us when we are deaf to your guiding voice.

God of ancient mercy,
We wait for Christ in joyful hope so that we may live forever in joy.

Amen.



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The Unsheltered Heart

An At-Home Advent Retreat (Cycle B)

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