

Learning Cycles

BE ALERT, SHEPHERDS!

**Creative Activities for
Teaching Advent**

Written by Tracey E. Herzer



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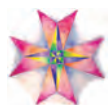
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About LearningCycles

What is LearningCycles?

LearningCycles is an innovative approach to faith formation. It takes seriously the spiritual development of children while providing creative and exciting activities that engage children in a whole new level of learning and retention. The rotation-style model means that children work on the same story or concept for several weeks, using different learning approaches in each workshop room they visit.

Ideas for possible workshops:

Art
Storytelling
Music
Group Activities
Cooking

Science Experiments
Games
Drama or Puppets
Movies
Geography or Map Excursions

Easy to Adapt

You can use the activities in this resource for shorter learning center events, normal classroom use, intergenerational gatherings, and more. Adapt what you find here to best suit your faith formation situation.



Recruiting LearningCycles Leaders

LearningCycles make it VERY easy to increase your number of volunteers, by dividing jobs into manageable parts. Here are some ways that parishioners of ALL ages can be involved:

CYCLE LEADERS sign up as part of a team of 2 or 3 adults who will teach one 4-6 week cycle. Teachers remain in the same workshop room each week of the cycle and teach the same lesson plan to different classes each week. Workshop rooms may use skills in areas as music, dance, cooking, quilting, gardening or painting, but you don't have to have a special skill in order to help. Teachers can sign up to help read stories, turn on computers, make popcorn, hand out art supplies, etc.

SHEPHERDS commit for the entire school year, but they never have to prepare or teach a lesson! Shepherds work in teams and travel with their class through each of the different workshops. Shepherds are the essential relationship part of this program, learning the children's names, providing continuity of leadership and being a friendly, safe presence in the classroom each week.

CYCLE COORDINATORS are needed for each different cycle. These people manage the details of a cycle, contacting all the volunteer teachers for that cycle, distributing the lesson plans, making sure supplies are purchased, etc.

Some churches have also used:

DECORATING TEAM A resourceful group of people is needed to create and plan new and evolving learning spaces. These folks might be interior designers, or they may be people who are just addicted to home improvement shows or have a knack for decorating inexpensively! Churches who share space or don't have the budget for large-scale renovations will need a group of creative thinkers to come up with props or posters that can be used on Sunday, but safely stored away during the week.

RESOURCE TEAM This "big picture" group can be comprised of all your cycle coordinators, as well as interested parents. Together the group handles trouble-shooting, long-range plans and communication to the entire church. For churches that already have a catechist or formation team, that committee can provide the functions of a Resource Team.



General Class Structure

- 1. OPENING ACTIVITY** (10-15 minutes, as children arrive)
Welcome students and make sure everyone has a nametag. Opening activities give early arrivers something to start on immediately and provide a warm, busy room for children to enter. The activity could be simply drawing or decorating your nametag. It could also be coloring sheets or simple games. Check the “Filler Activities” of your lesson plan for ideas or ask your Cycle Coordinator.
- 2. INTRODUCTIONS** (approximately 10 minutes)
 - a. Introduce yourself:** Tell students about you – your family, how long you have been at this church, what kind of work you do, what your hobbies are, why you signed up to help teach, etc.
 - b. Introduce the cycle story or theme:** Ask children what they’ve been studying or have done in other rooms on other weeks. Talk about the basic theme or season (see the Overview p. 6 for some ideas). Read the story to children.
 - c. Introduce your activity:** Tell the children which part of the story your room is focusing on, and perhaps ask them to re-tell you that part of the story in their own words.
- 3. WORKSHOP ACTIVITY AND REFLECTION** (approximately 25-30 minutes)
See attached lesson plans for specific instructions about the main activity. Supplies should be in your classroom, but if you need help, ask your cycle coordinator. If you run low on supplies, please tell your coordinator so they can plan accordingly.

If children finish early, you can use any of the “Filler Activities” provided in each lesson plan. In addition, you may use activity sheets (see “Suggested Resources for this Cycle”) as “quiet work” for the early finishers while they wait for everyone to complete the task.

Try to plan your time so that children finish the activity and still have a few minutes to process the class by journaling or drawing. Encourage them to take their work seriously, and try to foster a semi-quiet atmosphere that allows children to think about what they have heard, seen and experienced. Ask questions like “What did you learn today?” or “How did you feel while doing this activity?” Connect your activity back to the story. Studies show us that quiet reflection time is what helps move items from short-term memory into long-term memory so this piece is VERY important!

- 4. CLEAN UP** (approximately 5 minutes)
Have children help clean up and make sure everyone has their papers, jackets, etc. If parents come to the classroom to pick up their children, this is a good time to praise children in front of their parents. This is also a good time to discuss any concerns or questions quietly with parents. Tell the children goodbye. Thank them for coming.



Theological Overview of this Cycle

Each year we begin a new Church Year on the first Sunday of Advent. In some ways, Advent seems like an odd time to begin a new church year since we are at the very end of a calendar year, but in other ways it seems very appropriate.

Advent gives us a fresh start to come alive again to God's presence in the world around us. We once again have the chance to be like the shepherds on the hillside that dark night who were surprised and shaken awake from their everyday lives. They encountered the glorious reality of God's presence on earth and they immediately left the familiarity of their warm blankets to go and seek the Savior.

It's true that Advent is a quiet season of reflection and preparation before the excitement of Christmas, but it is also a call to wake up and pay attention. In Mark 13:37, Jesus tells his followers to "Keep awake" and this seems to be the message of Advent. We need to be alert, awake, aware... watching because at any moment Christ's presence can come breaking into our lives in very unexpected ways.

The classic words of Advent are "COME – WAIT – WATCH!" and this is what we hope to convey to the children who participate in this unit.

- COME join us on this journey.
- WAIT with us as we prepare our hearts and minds.
- WATCH to see what God will do and where God might show up.

We will talk about the Shepherds and how they were a surprising choice to be the first recipients of the Good News that God had come to man. We will talk about how hard it is to wait for Christmas and what it must have been like for the Israelites to wait for the coming of their Messiah. We will talk about how people have celebrated Advent and Christmas for centuries and what we can learn from that.

But most of all, we will talk about how WE can find ways to be more alert to God's presence in the world and in our hearts. We will talk about how the Good News is not just that Jesus was born as a baby in the manger, but that God is still here, still waiting, still wanting to be an active presence in our lives today.

It is our hope that by hearing "Be Alert, Shepherds!" we also remind ourselves to be alert to God's presence and we shake off the sleepy veil of everyday apathy and find ourselves once again awed by the miracle of Emmanuel, God with us.

God's Peace to you this Advent season,
Tracey E. Herzer



Letter to the Parents for this Cycle

(We suggest you mail this letter to all parents with a copy of the cycle story, plus the Theological Overview)

Dear Parents –

Getting ready for Christmas is a busy, fun time for most of us... filled with friends, families and holiday gatherings. In homes with young children, the quiet reflection of Advent often gets lost in the craziness of getting ready for Christmas. There are gifts to purchase and wrap, holiday parties to prepare for, special events at school and church, and a million other details that can distract us from what this season was really meant to be about... preparing our hearts and lives once again for God to come be with us.

As Christians, we know that God is with us always, but during the season of Advent we can recognize this truth in a new and special way. Advent is a fresh start. It is a time of new beginnings and the beginning of a new church year. Advent gives us the grace of starting over, of trying again. As we retell the ancient story of the Christ child, we also remind ourselves again to make room in our busy lives for the God who loves us so.

Advent is here and the Christ child is coming... coming to tell us again that we are loved and we are not alone. Some years, we find the time and emotional resources to prepare our most excellent space for the Christ child and it is a glorious celebration of the coming of our King. But even in those years that we have only a cluttered stable and a manger bed we kept meaning to clean out... the King still comes. God is still here with us, whether we celebrate that fact or ignore it. God is still here.

It is our hope this unit will help your children find ways to watch for God's presence in the world. In the busy days that precede your Christmas celebration, we hope you will find some time to talk with your children about where YOU experience God's presence.

Once in a great while, these conversations happen at the "perfect" time... when everyone is quiet and ready for bed, children are freshly bathed and parents are calm and happy. The lights from the Christmas tree sparkle as you share eloquent, heart-felt stories about God. But more likely the exchange happens as you buzz through holiday traffic and try desperately to remember what else is on your ever-growing To Do list. You distractedly attempt to answer your child's questions about why we do all this. But that is God's presence too... holy moments in the midst of holiday chaos.

Whenever it happens, however it happens, watch for God's presence in this season. Help your children watch too. Share stories of times when you were especially aware of God's presence... in a special church service or outside in creation. Whatever your experience, share it with your children... this is how we pass on the legacy of faith.

Advent blessings on one and all –
Tracey E. Herzer



Story: Be Alert, Shepherds!

To be read each week of the cycle

Shepherds are people who take care of sheep. In Bible times, shepherds mostly lived outside in the fields with their sheep. They stayed with their sheep all day and all night, watching over them carefully, helping them find grass to eat and water to drink. Shepherds were not rich or powerful or educated, but there was once a group of ordinary shepherds who were the very first people to hear some important and miraculous news.

One night, a brightly-shining angel appeared to a group of sleepy shepherds on a hillside and said, “Do not be afraid because I have come to share some wonderful news! This is happy news for all people: today in Bethlehem, God’s son was born! You can go see him – he is wrapped up safe and sound in a special manger bed.”

Suddenly, after the angel finished speaking, the sky was filled with many, many angels, who praised God saying, “Glory to God in the highest and Peace to God’s people on earth!” Can you imagine what THAT must have looked like?

When the angels left, the shepherds said to each other, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this baby the angels told us about.”

So they went to Bethlehem “with haste” (which means they HURRIED) and when they got there, they found a simple stable. The stable was usually used for keeping animals, but in this stable, they found a woman named Mary and a man named Joseph. Most importantly, they found a tiny baby lying in a manger and they knew what the angels had told them was true.

Advent is the time of year when we prepare ourselves to remember the story of Jesus being born and how God came to earth to be with us. But it is also when we remind ourselves that God is still with us today.

If we pay attention, we can feel God in lots of different ways... in the quiet of the church, when we are outside enjoying God’s creation, when we feel the love of our families or friends, when we reach out to other people. God’s presence is all around us, but we don’t usually have brightly-shining angels to tell us about it, like the shepherds did. We have to make a special effort to try and BE ALERT and PAY ATTENTION.

I wonder where YOU feel God’s presence....?

Story re-told by Tracey E. Herzer
(Luke 2:8-20)



Suggested Resources for this Cycle

ACTIVITY PAGES

Having activity pages as a backup time-filler is a good idea to ensure calm classrooms and teachers who do not become overwhelmed. There are many websites that will help you develop activity pages or have coloring pages that can be downloaded for free from the site.

One site we found was <http://www.discoveryeducation.com/free-puzzlemaker/> which is great because you can create your own crossword puzzle or find-a-word in less than 2 minutes. You type in a list of words associated with the lesson and the computer generates a puzzle you can save to your computer or print out. You can also create fill-in-the-blank or matching games.

In addition to the general sites listed above, we found a few sites with activities for this unit:

A word puzzle about the shepherds: <http://www.annieshomepage.com/shepherdsvisit.html>

A maze for shepherd to find sheep: https://www.sermons4kids.com/sheep_shepherd_maze.htm

Detailed coloring page for older kids: <http://www.christiananswers.net/kids clr-angel-shepherds.pdf>



Activities Overview for this Cycle

WORKSHOP	SUMMARY OF PLANS	FOCUS
ART	Children create Advent countdown calendar to use at home	Advent is a time to watch for God's presence
GROUP	Research about shepherds	Learn more about shepherds
DRAMA	Act out scenarios of waiting and watching	What does it mean to "Stay Alert!"
MOVIE	Watch movie about shepherds	How are we like shepherds? What do we watch for?
STORY	Read stories and play shepherding games	What are the responsibilities of a shepherd?
KITCHEN	Make shepherd staff cookies and talk about the Legend of the Candycane	What are the tools of a shepherd?
MUSIC	Sing Advent and Christmas hymns about waiting and watching	How do we celebrate Advent?



Be Alert: Drama Workshop

Bible Reference for the Cycle:

Luke 2:8-20

Main Verse for the Cycle:

So the shepherds went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger... (Luke 2:16) *(New Revised Standard Version of the Bible)*

Key Concepts and Life Application:

- The Shepherds were woken up by the angels and told to go find Baby Jesus
- Advent is a season where we are called to wake up and be alert to God's presence
- The Advent words are COME – WAIT – WATCH!

Summary of Class Plans:

In this workshop, children will talk about waiting and why it is so hard to wait for things. They will also enact scenarios of waiting.

Materials Needed:

- Stopwatch or timer
- Copies of "The Waiting Game" clues from page 22 – cut apart
- Two bowls or bags to hold clues from "The Waiting Game" – one for each team
- Small slips of paper
- Pens or pencils
- Simple props, if you have them
- Fabric pieces for costumes, if you have them

Materials Needed for Filler Activity

- Bibles with concordances
- Paper
- Crayons and/or markers

Workshop Lesson Plans:

- **BEFORE CLASS** – You will need to cut apart the clues for the waiting game and have them ready to use if necessary.
- You can refer to "A General Schedule for Class Structure" (included in the Introductory Materials) for ideas on how to introduce yourself and the story, as well as how to plan your class time appropriately.
- Welcome students as they enter. When it is time to start, read the cycle story about shepherds. After you finish, ask questions, such as:
 - What do you think the shepherds were doing before the angel came?
 - How would you have felt if you had been there?
 - Do you think the shepherds were waiting for something to happen?



- What are some things you wait for?
 - What is the hardest thing to wait for?
 - Why are some things harder to wait for than others?
- Talk to the students a little bit about how the people of Israel had waited for many, many years for a Messiah who would save them. The prophets had told them to watch for a Messiah and many people had ideas about what that Messiah would be like... many thought it would be someone powerful and strong who would fix everything that was wrong. When Jesus was born, he was a very different kind of Messiah. Ask your class some questions about that, such as:
 - If you were waiting for someone to save you, what would that person be like?
 - What kind of Messiah do you think the Jewish people expected?
 - Do you think they expected their Messiah to be born in a stable?
 - How does it feel to wait and wait for something, but when it comes, it turns out to be something totally different from what you expected?
 - Ask students to give you examples of all the things they wait for. After getting a few suggestions, divide the group into 2 teams. Have each team try to come up with 4 or 5 situations where you have to WAIT for something. Explain that they will be giving these clues to someone from the other team who will have to act it out for their team to guess. The actor will have 30 seconds to try and get the right response from their team.
 - Give both teams a few minutes to work on this activity and then ask them to dump their clues into their bowl or bag
 - **For younger classes** – they may not be able to think of many situations, so you may need to use all of the pre-printed clues from “The Waiting Game” page in order to help them.
 - **For older classes** – you can just keep the clues from “The Waiting Game” sheet to help extend the game or just as extras in case you need them.
 - Once you have clues in the bowls or bags, take turns having the teams choose one player to come draw out a clue from the other team’s stash. They will need to act out that scenario for their teammates. If they need help figuring out how to act it out, they can consult with the team who created it or with an adult.
 - **For younger classes (K-1)** – you probably won’t want to put too many restrictions on this age group since this activity may be a bit difficult for them. You also may want to have them work in pairs.
 - **For older classes** – to make the game more difficult, you can tell the class they may not say any of the words on their slip of paper. To make it even more difficult, make it a game of charades where the actor can’t say anything!



- After you have finished the game, gather the class back together and talk about the activity, using questions such as these:
 - Which scenarios were easiest to guess?
 - Which scenarios were the most difficult to guess?
 - How are waiting for these things similar to the way the Jews waited for the Messiah?
 - How are waiting for these things different from the way the Jews waited?
- Ask the students to clean up the room by putting anything away they have used during class, throwing away trash, and tidying the chairs.
- Use the last 10 minutes of class for quiet journal time and ask students to write about waiting for something, including some of what they have thought about today as we have talked about waiting.

Filler Activity:

- See if students can help think of other Bible stories where people waited. Older classes can use their Bible concordance to look up the word “wait”. Here are some Bible references we came up with:
 - Noah & the animals waiting for the flood to be over
 - Abraham & Sarah waiting for a son
 - Daniel waiting in the lion’s den
 - Esther waiting to go talk to King Ahasuerus
 - Job waiting for deliverance
 - Isaiah 40:31 – Those who wait on the Lord shall mount up with wings like eagles
 - Simeon & Anna at the temple, waiting on the Messiah
 - Mary & Martha waiting for Jesus to come heal Lazarus
 - Paul & Silas waiting in jail
- Hand out paper and crayons and have children create drawings or cartoons of people waiting. The pictures can come from your discussion of the Jews waiting for a Messiah, or from the skits the children did, or from the above Bible stories... or from any other waiting scenario they can imagine. ☺



THE WAITING GAME

Cut the following clues apart and allow children to draw from a bowl.

Waiting at a red stoplight in the car when you are in a hurry	Waiting at the doctor's office for your turn
Waiting for someone to come pick you up	Waiting for a cake or cookies to finish baking
Waiting for your birthday	Waiting for the weekend when you get to do something you really love
Waiting at the airport for someone to arrive	Waiting to see the grades on your report card.
Waiting for 3:00 or whatever time your school day is over	Waiting to arrive someplace when you're in the car on a long trip. ("Are we there yet?")
Waiting for your mom or dad to be finished shopping	Waiting for Christmas