Epiphany
The Story Begins

Small Group Discussion Guide
Epiphany
THE STORY BEGINS

Jesus is God’s language. When God wants to communicate, He does so through His Son.

Leonard Sweet
Jesus: A Theography
Epiphany is the opening scene to the Jesus story. It’s a story that will end with the resurrection, which turns out to be a new beginning, a whole new kind of creation, one that announces renewal, reversal, one that says, "Tomorrow doesn't have to be a repeat of today." And that’s good news, news the writers of the bible desperately want us to believe. The Apostle John said it this way:

Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

John 20:30-31

During this series your group look at six opening scenes from early in the life and ministry of Jesus. The goal of the this discussion series is to lead your group into a deeper conversation about who Jesus was (and is), and to encourage next steps in each others’ faith journey with Him.

I’ll be in prayer for you and your group as you move through this series together. Thank you for all you do, and I look forward to hearing some great things that come out of your group!

Derek Sweatman
Epiphany 2013
1. This discussion is loosely connected to the Sunday morning sermon series that runs from January 6 through February 3, 2013. We recommend taking good notes during each sermon to help you with discussion later in the week. If you miss one or more of the sermons due to being out of town (or sleeping in), go to www.christianchurchbuckhead.com/media and catch up.

2. If you have iPad or a smartphone, no need to print anything out! Just open this doc as a PDF in whatever viewer you choose, and lead on.

3. Each session includes the following:

   [1] SHORT COMMENTARY - We have provided a brief, one-paragraph set-up of the passage for the evening. These are designed to help familiarize you with the message of each passage.

   [2] SESSION GOALS - To keep your group on point, we have provided a nice one-liner goal for you to lead from.

   [3] DISCUSSION QUESTIONS - It almost goes without saying, but we’ve provided some questions for you and your group use! **Note:** We have purposely designed these sessions to be more discussion and dialogue than question and answer. There are not a ton of questions per session - maybe 6 to 10 at the most - and they are framed more as talking points than the old Q&A that prompts the standard responses: God, Jesus, Bible, Prayer, Serve, Give, Bring-a-Friend.
### Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scene One:</th>
<th>Palace</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Passage:</td>
<td>Matthew 2:1-11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scene Two:</th>
<th>Jordan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Passage:</td>
<td>Luke 3:15-22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scene Three:</th>
<th>Wedding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Passage:</td>
<td>John 2:1-11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scene Four:</th>
<th>Synagogue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Passage:</td>
<td>Luke 4:14-21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scene Five:</th>
<th>Cliff</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Matthew 2:1-11

The Story: Our first scene unfolds in Herod’s mind. Upon hearing the news of Herod receives news that someone has been born “king of the Jews,” a title that he himself already held. The next verse says it all: “When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled.” (v3) This set in motion a series of events that would lead to the loss of life in the small town of Bethlehem, all at the whim of a nervous and anxious leader. Herod was troubled over the thought of losing his power, something all of us want struggle to hold onto. Herod’s barrier to faith was himself, his fears of submission and loss of power.

Session Goal: Help your group explore their personal barriers to trusting and following Jesus.

Leader Help: This session has no closure to it. It is in fact an open door to the rest of the series. You’re not looking to solve anything or fix anything. A win would be that people shared their barriers to faith.
Discussion Guide

No doubt about it: as a class, churches have been far better at giving answers than they have been at receiving questions. Catechism classes and Sunday School sessions, well-taught as they may have been, have been churning out routine answers to routine questions at regular age levels for eons. Unfortunately, the very age at which most people outgrow catechism class is exactly when they begin to grow into spiritual confusions that are the essence of adulthood. The old answers begin to thin a bit.

Joan Chittister, Uncommon Gratitude [p.13]

Opening Discussion
Read the quote (above) and ask your group to share their thoughts. Some guiding questions might be: What part really hit home for you? How has this been true for you in your faith?

Read Matthew 2:1-11
1. In the story, there are two very different responses to the news of Jesus’ birth: [1] Herod’s response was one of fear and skepticism; [2] the response of the wise men was fitting to their profile: they were interested, they wanted to find answers to their questions, they were seekers of truth. When have you experienced both of those responses in your faith journey? Which category would you say you’re in right now?
2. Share an experience from your past when faith in God was hard for you, one that you were able to overcome and push through.
3. What are the barriers to faith and following Jesus that you have to contend with in your life right now? [doubt, negative church experiences, etc.] What are some the current faith struggles that you are dealing with?

Moving Forward
Read, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” [Hebrews 11:1] Close in prayer, praying for the various spiritual needs that were mentioned during your discussion.
The Story: The baptism of Jesus is a strange story. For starters, baptism in those days was done as a cleansing ritual, for sin or impurity. And in the case of John the Baptist, his was a baptism of repentance, making Jesus’ baptism by him all the more puzzling. In the Matthew account John refuses to do so, but then concedes. Did Jesus need to repent of something? Is there something the writers of the gospel story aren’t telling us? Why did Jesus need to be baptized? There are number of reasons why Jesus went into the Jordan that day, two of them being: (1) He was publicly committing himself to his father’s mission, and (2) He was intimately connecting himself to Israel’s story. When Jesus was baptized in the Jordan that day, he was announcing his connection and commitment to us.

Session Goals: [1] Lead your group in a discussion around the evolution of their perceptions of Jesus through the years, and [2] explore the group’s perceptions of the closeness of Jesus to their lives currently.

Leader Note: Like the first session, this one has little to no closure. It’s an open door to dialogue. Our perceptions of Jesus evolve through time, from the cartoon in Sunday School class to the redeemer of our days. Not everyone in your group will be in the same place!
I first got acquainted with Jesus when I was a child, singing "Jesus Loves Me" in Sunday school, addressing bedtime prayers to "Dear Lord Jesus," watching Bible Club teachers move cutout figures across a flannel graph board. I associated Jesus with Kool-Aid and sugar cookies and gold stars for good attendance.

*Philip Yancey, The Jesus I Never Knew*

**Opening Discussion**

Read the Yancey quote above, and then ask the group to share the evolution of their own personal perceptions of Jesus through the years. What was he like when you were a child? How has he changed? What caused the changes? Were there moments of crisis in your faith and belief of Jesus? What were those?

**Have someone read Luke 3:15-22**

In Derek’s message on this passage we learned how Jesus’ baptism was, among other things, a picture of solidarity with the brokenness of the world he came to redeem. It was also a sign of his full commitment to participate in the human story. (Baptism was a humiliating experience) When did Jesus start to feel **real** to you? When did he move from Sunday School hero to someone who is deeply involved in your life?

**Read Psalm 103:10-14**

What do you hear in that passage? What is the writer saying about God’s understanding of us? What’s encouraging for you in this passage?

**Moving Forward**

Read, “We do not have a high priest is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are. [Hebrews 4:15] Close in prayer, praying for the various spiritual needs that were mentioned during your discussion.
John 2:1-11

January 20, 2013

**The Story:** This scene unfolds at a wedding in the town of Cana. The wine had run out, an embarrassment for the host family. Mary’s statement to Jesus, “they have no wine,” implies her knowledge that he can and should fix the problem. After a brief exchange, Jesus performs his first miracle, or **sign**, by turning the water into wine. It’s the first example John gives of the how the word “became flesh,” how heaven has come to earth. He does this using the six stone cisterns or jars located near the house. These were used for ritual cleanings: dishes, hands, or even baptisms, showing how God was doing a new thing within the old system of Jewish practice and belief.

**Leader Notes:** This is a story about renewal and restoration, about how Jesus brings life into what is otherwise empty, and also in unexpected ways. You goal tonight is begin seeing Jesus as the bringer of renewal into His world, the catalyst of reversal. NOTE: Miracles are sometimes the main thing people struggle with when it comes to Jesus. Be sensitive to those who struggle to believe these parts of the Jesus story.
Some see miracles as the implausible suspension of the laws of the physical universe. As signs, though, they serve just the opposite function. Death, decay, entropy, and destruction are the true suspensions of God’s laws. Miracles are the early glimpses of restoration.

Philip Yancey

Opening Discussion
Let’s talk about miracles! Here are a few questions to work through here at the beginning: (1) Are the miracles of Jesus hard for you to believe? If so, which ones specifically? (2) Which miracles of Jesus do you really hope are true? (3) Why do you think he did them anyway? Read the Yancey quote above and have your group share their thoughts on his observations. Discuss his statement Miracles are early glimpses of restoration.

Have someone read John 2:1-11
Discussion questions: (1) How does this story go from fullness, to emptiness, to overflowing abundance? (2) Jesus could have simply provided more wine, but instead, he provided better wine as well. Thoughts? (2) How is this scene one of renewal and restoration? (Remember, John calls this a sign and not a miracle. A sign points to something in the future, something that is coming!)

Read Psalm 36:5-10
What do you hear in that passage? How does it relate to our story tonight? What parts of your faith are dry right now? How has your faith “run out of wine?”

Moving Forward
Read, And let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith. [Hebrews 12:1-2] Close in prayer, praying for the various spiritual needs that were mentioned during your discussion.
The Story: This passage takes place in Jesus’ hometown of Nazareth. Though this event actually took place later in Jesus’ life, Luke couldn’t wait that long. He put up front in chapter four. It’s that important to him. It’s the story of Jesus at the Synagogue one Sabbath and they asked him to read and speak. So he did. He read Isaiah 60:1-2. He rolled up the scroll. Handed it back to the attendant. Sat down and said nine words: “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” (v.21) A nine-word sermon isn’t bad, by the way.

So what had been fulfilled? The passage Jesus read was this: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news (gospel) to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Originally a promise to the Israelites who were living in captivity, by the days of Jesus this passage had become messianic in tone. This was about what God was going to do in His world. And it turns out the church is called to be about these tasks too, to be a place where the broken and forgotten find community and healing.
At 11:00 on Sunday morning when we stand and sing and Christ has no east or west, we stand at the most segregated hour in this nation.

Martin Luther King, Jr. [1963]

Opening Discussion
Read the above quote and have your group share their initial thoughts and reactions. If it helps, read the full quotation [provided]. Some questions to help with discussion: How do you feel about his words? Why do you think we still struggle with this today? Outside of race, how else does the church continue to struggle with segregation?

Have someone read Luke 4:14-21
Discussion questions: [1] Who are the people mentioned in the passage Jesus read? [2] This text is a call for the church to partner with God in the lives of these people. Is this overwhelming to you? Is it uncomfortable? Exciting? [3] Of the people groups mentioned - the poor, the blind [limited physically], the prisoner, and the oppressed - which one pulls at your heart the most? [4] When you think about those are broken, which people come to mind?

Read 1 Corinthians 12:21-26
What do you hear in that passage? What is God saying to us? How does it relate to tonight’s story?

Moving Forward
Read, Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight. [Psalm 19:14] Close in prayer.
I must admit that I have gone through those moments when I was greatly disappointed with the church and what it has done in this period of social change. We must face the fact that in America, the church is still the most segregated major institution in America. At 11:00 on Sunday morning when we stand and sing and Christ has no east or west, we stand at the most segregated hour in this nation. This is tragic. Nobody of honesty can overlook this. Now, I'm sure that if the church had taken a stronger stand all along, we wouldn't have many of the problems that we have. The first way that the church can repent, the first way that it can move out into the arena of social reform is to remove the yoke of segregation from its own body. Now, I'm not saying that society must sit down and wait on a spiritual and moribund church as we've so often seen. I think it should have started in the church, but since it didn't start in the church, our society needed to move on. The church, itself, will stand under the judgement of God. Now that the mistake of the past has been made, I think that the opportunity of the future is to really go out and to transform American society, and where else is there a better place than in the institution that should serve as the moral guardian of the community. The institution that should preach brotherhood and make it a reality within its own body.

**Martin Luther King, Jr.**

Taken from an interview at Michigan State University in 1963
Scene 5

Cliff


The Story: This scene is a continuation of last week’s when Jesus announced in the Synagogue that he was the fulfillment of Isaiah 61:1-2, that he was the promised Messiah. Both hope and skepticism filled the gathering. In a series of complicated and, for us, easy to miss statements, Jesus announced God’s intentions to bring salvation to the nations, not just the Jews. Hear: Gentiles. [See notes on the background of this passage] This led the congregation to run Jesus to the edge of a cliff, but, “passing through their midst, he went away.” [v. 30]

Leader Notes: Our vision as a church is to see people, neighborhoods, and the city renewed through the power of the gospel. At the foundation of that vision is a belief that all people matter to God, that no one is outside of his reach, and that anyone who is in Christ is a new creation. This discussion guide is tied that vision, which was reiterated in this past Sunday’s sermon.
Love is not just our duty, it is our destiny. It is the language they speak in God’s new creation, and we get to learn the irregular verbs now.

N.T. Wright

Opening Discussion
Read the quote above and have group members share their thoughts. Flesh it out. Let it build into a discussion of what it means to be a loving person and a loving church.

Luke 4:22-30
Jesus reminded those in the synagogue that day of God’s love for the nations, people other than Israelites. This was the purpose in referencing the two accounts from the days of the prophets Elijah & Elisha. (See Background Notes) This turned out to be too much for them, and they tried to run Jesus off the cliff. How does a church get to a place like that, where they can’t see God’s love going beyond themselves to other people? Have you ever found yourself in that kind of place, where you starting to see people as unreachable? Have you ever felt like the person on the other end?

Read 1 Corinthians 13
What do you hear in that passage? What is God saying to us? How does it relate to tonight’s story?

Moving Forward
Read, By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. [John 13:35] Close in prayer.
This story does not give much hope to the seminary student, or even pastor, who returns to her home congregation to preach. It’s hard enough to live up to anticipated expectations. It’s harder still, of course, to meet up with unexpected rejection. There is a very human dimension to this whole story. When the hometown boy makes good, there are usually more than a few who resent the success.

Our text for today is the rest of the story, so to speak, and it doesn’t end well. But before we get to the “cliff-hanger,” there are a few details about Jesus’ words that are important to note, particularly for overall themes in Luke’s Gospel. Working our way backwards, that Jesus references the widow at Zarephath and the leper Naaman, the Syrian, reveals for whom Jesus has come – the widows, the lepers, the outsiders. Jesus’ whole ministry will be for the least of these, over and over again. Moreover, Jesus is for everyone. Both Elijah and Elisha take God into places where God was not thought to be and had no business being. It is these words of inclusion, Jesus’ own interpretation of his ministry, the real reason for God in a manger, that elicit a very quick transition from awe to rage for the hearers of Jesus’ words. Why is that?

The description of Jesus as prophet, along with Jesus’ reference to past prophets in Israel’s history, is a primary category through which Luke presents Jesus. Jesus is a righteous and innocent prophet as will be made clear by Luke’s account of the centurion’s words at the death of Jesus – “surely, this man was innocent” (Luke 23:47). Remembering the role of the Old Testament prophets is important for this passage. Prophecy is not about predicting the future, unless it means saying that the future is secure in God.

Rather, prophets tell the truth about the present and give hope to God’s presence. Jesus’ sermon in Nazareth is a prophetic message. Jesus tells the truth about the realities of our world, where the lowly are looked down upon, where the poor sleep in cardboard boxes under freeways, where the captives remain in their prisons, where the rich live exceedingly full lives. But reading – or hearing – between the lines, Jesus’ announces that God’s favor is upon us, upon all, imperceptibly here and now. Yet, that Jesus knows no prophet is accepted in his or her hometown does indeed predict the very near future. That’s the culminating promise of Epiphany – that our God is near, is here. That our God is indeed revealing God’s very self even when it appears that everything God is for cannot always be perceived.