



On your marks

The time of Advent gives us the opportunity to get ready for the celebration of Christmas. Not, however, the getting ready of buying presents, making the cake, sorting the travel, and so on, but of preparing ourselves to hear afresh the miracle of the incarnation. How do we highlight this aspect of Advent with our children's groups, who are under so much pressure to think only of the commercial side of the season and who are targeted to become 'consumers of Christmas' not pilgrims on the way to a mystery? The following idea suggests some possible approaches that could be used over the four weeks leading up to the Feast.

Get set

You will need four key objects: a blank map, a magnifying glass, a compass and a black postcard.

Each of these is developed in different ways as described below.

Go!

Advent has its origins in the Latin for 'coming towards' or 'the approach'. The idea of travelling towards something special is the true meaning of this season. Over the next four weeks invite your group to become travellers or pilgrims on an adventure, as they set out on their journey towards Christmas.

Begin by packing a suitcase together (or maybe packing individual rucksacks) with some unusual items, namely: a blank map, a magnifying glass, a large compass and a mysterious black postcard.

Each of these different items will help us on our way through Advent. Focus on one item for each week, along with the accompanying Bible story/stories, games, craft ideas and worship activities.

Week 1— A Map

Hand out a series of ordnance survey maps—perhaps of the area where you live—and discuss the sort of things that you find on these maps. It will include streets, rivers, woodland, mountains and hills, important buildings, railways and so on.

However, the map we need for our journey is rather strange.

Produce a piece of A1 paper that folded up to be like a map but that is blank.

Our Advent map does not have any streets, rivers, woodland and so on. Instead there are arrows. Draw on six large arrows, all pointing from the bottom of the map to the top, coming in from different directions.

These arrows have names on them.

Write on the names of Abraham, Judah, Moses, David, Isaiah, Daniel

They are all famous people from the Old Testament, who show us the way to go on our Advent



journey.

In the space to which all the arrows are pointing now draw or attach small pictures of the following, linked to each of the names:

with Abraham—a star

with Judah—a lion

with Moses—a hand pointing

with David—a crown

with Isaiah—a baby picture

with Daniel—a picture of a man in shining clothes, glowing bright

These are the strange directions we have.

Abraham told us that God's family would be as many as the stars in the sky and one day one star—his seed—would come from this family.

Judah was one of the sons of Jacob and one day from Judah someone would come like a lion to lead all the rest.

Moses told the people of God in the desert that one day a special prophet would come who would show them the way.

David was told that one day a king would come from his family—a king who would last forever.

Isaiah spoke of a special baby with the special name *God with us*.

Daniel had a vision of a special person who is called *the Son of Man*.

On our Advent journey, we're following arrows.

Play game where the children walk around your meeting area but when you call out 'freeze', they must stop still and then all turn towards the object you call out, becoming human arrows pointing the way.

For the Bible story, read about the strange map that we need to make to find our way through Advent as outlined in Isaiah 40:3-5

What would this map look like? A straight highway in the desert and all the valleys and hills flattened out; no uneven paths and beautifully smooth roads! This would make an unusual map. It is the route we need to travel to see God's glory revealed on earth, which is the mystery of Christmas.

Throughout these Advent sessions ask the children to draw around one of their feet onto card and create a group set of footprints. Today the footprints should be put together to create a massive arrow, which is the direction we've been set on our journey.

As a craft idea, why not make some small scrolls to represent the stories of Abraham, Judah, Moses, David, Isaiah and Daniel. These scrolls could be put together in the form of an arrow.

Week 2— The Magnifying Glass

Collect together a number of magnifying glasses for your group to use. Use them to investigate some small items that you have brought in, such as the small print at the end of a business contract or the writing on the side of a medicine packet; a human hair; a person's fingerprint; a small detail of a



large picture and so on. The magnifying glass helps to see what we might otherwise miss.

Most journeys need signposts to show us the way so we can get there safely. On our Advent Journey, there are signposts, but they are so small that they are often missed. These tiny signposts are like small clues, which we need to find by searching the Bible with a magnifying glass.

Using some Bibles and a magnifying glass, look at the following passages to see what clues we can find:

1 Samuel 16:1: Jesse comes from Bethlehem and one of his sons will be a king.

1 Samuel 16:11-13: David is a shepherd and he's the one who is chosen.

Isaiah 11:1-5: A special branch will grow from what is left of Jesse's family and this person will have God's Spirit on them to make a difference to the world.

Micah 5:2-4: A ruler will come from Bethlehem. He will be a shepherd, who will rule for God to the ends of the earth.

Malachi 4:5: Before we arrive at the mystery that we're travelling towards through Advent, God promises to send a special prophet. Someone else will be born just before the person we are waiting for (link John the Baptist).

Talk about these clues together, unravelling what they might mean. Many people had read these scriptures over the years but had missed these small clues.

Turn these stories into some pictures beneath a large magnifying glass shape, of a village, a shepherd, a branch and a second baby.

As a group, play a game that involves looking for clues around your meeting area. Hide a series of small objects linked to the stories in some out-of-the-way places and then give some cryptic clues to the group to see if they can find them. Make sure that finding these things involves looking carefully and in detail to match the theme of the session.

Use the footprints that you make this week to create two shapes: a shepherd's crook and a king's crown as two more clues on our unusual journey.

Week 3— A Magnetic Compass

Introduce a compass to the group and describe how it is used. Work out which direction is north in your meeting area and then the other points of the compass, including in which directions people's homes are.

A compass helps us travel in the right direction on our unusual journey. Which direction should we be going to discover the mystery of Christmas?

Play a game that involves marching the children around and calling out different points of the compass to which they must move. Keep this active and fun and include some unusual halfway directions such as north-east or south-west.

An alternative game would be to create a grid of squares, five by five, with ropes or gaffer tape in



the open area of your meeting space. Along the top, number the columns 1 to 5 and down the side of the grid use the letters A to E. Now decide secretly which square is the space where you reach your destination for your journey through Advent (for example D 4). Have ready a series of forfeits for the other squares, involving standing in strange group positions or running around the whole grid in different ways.

Now three or four from the group should stand in the top middle square, A3. They can travel only one square at a time. As a group they should decide whether to go east, west or south to find the end of their Advent Journey. As they arrive at their chosen square, they pay the forfeit each time until they find the secret destination. How many moves does each group need?

Which direction is our Advent Journey?

Read together Matthew 2:1-2. The star was in the east and this is the direction we need to go. Talk about why they think the wise men decided to follow this star, why they chose the gifts they did, and what sort of hazards they must have met on their way.

As a simple craft idea create a large star each, which points to the four points of the compass and then lay this on a background with symbols in between the points that remind us of the story of the journey of the wise men to find Jesus, including camels, the city of Jerusalem, the gifts which they packed and the scrolls which Herod's advisers searched (see Matthew 2:3-6 and link this to the work of week 1 of the unusual journey).

See also Isaiah 60:1-6 —another Advent clue!

Use the footprints that you make this week to create a huge star shape, which is the next clue on our unusual journey.

Week 4— A Mysterious Postcard

You sometimes see novelty postcards from resorts, which are all black with captions such as: Brighton at night or London by night! Introduce some glossy black paper the size of postcards and wonder what town this might be by night? (This could become a guessing game, allowing questions to elicit clues. Any town/city could of course be the answer!) Without a light to show us, we cannot know where somewhere is.

This black postcard could also be the world at night in the days before any streetlights. It must have been like this in Jesus' time. But then a light did come on. This is the light to which we are travelling through Advent on our unusual journey, a light that shines in the darkness.

Play a game that involves finding and putting together some nativity scenes (postcard-size) in teams. For this cut up some old Christmas cards into four or five jigsaw shapes.

Read together the story in Isaiah 9:2-3 and 6-7.

This light is unusual. Not a bulb, nor a street lamp, nor a neon light, but a baby! This is the light that lights up the darkness. This is what took the world by surprise and is what we discover at the end of



our unusual journey.

This baby is given various names in the passage from Isaiah. Let the children choose the name they like best to put underneath a picture of a baby shining bright on the dark background of their glossy black postcard.

Use the footprints that you make this week to create a candle outline that represents the light that came into the world in Jesus.