

Welcome to The Unexpected Guest List! We're so glad you're joining us this Advent. This study is based on Rachel Billups' book An Unlikely Advent: Extraordinary People of the Christmas Story, and over four weeks we'll meet some of the folks in the Christmas story who don't usually make it onto the Christmas card: an older couple who'd given up on a dream, a fearful king, a group of curious travelers from the East, and some shepherds working the night shift.

You can watch on your own and use this guide for personal reflection, or watch with your small group and use it to guide your time together. However you use it, we hope you'll find yourself somewhere on God's guest list too, because God has a long history of showing up for the people we'd least expect.

Episode 1: What If I Missed It?
Elizabeth and Zechariah · Hope · Luke 1:5-25

Introduction
Zechariah and Elizabeth were good, faithful people. They kept the commandments, they showed up, and they prayed the same prayer for years. By the time we meet them in Luke's Gospel, they're older, and the dream of having a child has pretty much slipped away. Then one ordinary day, while Zechariah is serving in the Temple, God interrupts him with news he'd stopped expecting.

A lot of us carry a quiet worry that we missed our shot, whether that's a career, a relationship, or the life we pictured for ourselves. Advent is a season of waiting, and the waiting is active. It's a time for leaning in and expecting God to do something, even in the places where we've stopped hoping.

Three Questions for Reflection:
-Was there a time you were sure you'd missed your shot at something? What happened?

-Zechariah was faithful, but he still had a hard time believing God would show up for him. Why do you think it's easier to believe God will move in someone else's life than in our own?

-Beau and Lauren talked about the stories we tell ourselves about our lives, and how those stories can get comfortable even when they keep us stuck. What's a story you've been telling yourself that might need to change?

Two Key Insights:
Rachel Billups writes, "Ordinary delays and disappointments are fertile ground for God to do an unlikely work."

She also writes, “We miss future dreams by holding on to the broken bits, by losing our imaginations, and by refusing to have our minds changed.”

Lauren shared the Japanese art of Kintsugi, where broken pottery is repaired with gold so the cracks become part of its beauty. Is there a broken dream in your life that God might want to rearrange into something new?

One Practice
This week, call someone close to you, like your spouse, your best friend, your neighbor, or your small group leader, and talk about your dreams, including the ones you set aside or stopped believing were possible. Start dreaming forward together. Then think about who in your life is in a season of waiting, and how you might bring them a little hope.

Closing Reflection
Offer this prayer to God: “God, thank you for keeping your promises even when we’ve stopped expecting them. Give me the courage to hope again and to lean into what you might be doing. Amen.”

Episode 2: Playing the Villain
King Herod · Love · Matthew 2:1-8, 16-18

Introduction
Every good story needs a villain, and the Christmas story has one in King Herod. He was a gifted builder who created cities and fortresses like Masada and expanded the Temple in Jerusalem, and he was also a man consumed by insecurity and fear. When he heard about a newborn king in Bethlehem, it hit his deepest fear of losing control, and the results were devastating.

It's easy to keep Herod at arm's length, but Rachel Billups gently invites us to look a little closer. Most of us will never hold the kind of power Herod did, and still we find small, everyday ways to play the villain in someone else's story. The good news of Advent is that God's love is big enough to reach even the villains, including the little Herod in each of us.

Three Questions for Reflection
-Who's your favorite movie villain? Why do you think we love a good villain so much?

-Herod used fear to hold onto control. Where do you notice fear or insecurity shaping the way you respond to people?

-Rachel talks about "limitation prophecies," the things spoken over us growing up that shape who we become. What words were spoken over you, and how has God been rewriting them?

Two Key Insights:
Rachel Billups writes, "There is a little Herod in all of us."
She also writes, "Grace changes the way we live, the way we pray, who we love, and how we love ourselves."

Rachel mentions in the book that the word “save” carries a sense of healing and wholeness, the restoration of all creation.

Does it bother you that God’s love includes the Herods of the world? What would it look like to let that same grace meet you on your own Herod days?

One Practice
This week, text a friend who might need help seeing a path toward healing and hope, and remind them that God’s scandalous love chases and redeems all of us.

Closing Reflection
Offer this prayer to God: “God, forgive me for the times I’ve played the villain in someone else’s story. Thank you that your love reaches all the way into those places. Help me see others, and myself, with the grace you show me. Amen.”

Episode 3: A Curious People
The Magi · Joy · Matthew 2:1-2, 9-12

Introduction
The Magi were outsiders by every measure. They were foreigners from the East, they didn't share the faith of Israel, and they followed a star a very long way without knowing exactly where it would lead. God brought them right to the manger anyway, and they were some of the very first people to worship Jesus.

Rachel Billups mentions a simple wooden sign with four words that sum up this story: "Jesus eats with everyone." From the very beginning, God's plan was to widen the circle. The Magi remind us that where someone comes from doesn't get the final say on where God can take them, and that it was never our job to decide who belongs at the table.

Three Questions for Reflection
-Have you ever received a gift that somehow captured who you are, or who you want to be in the world? What was it?

-Have you ever had boundaries placed on you because of who you are or where you're from? Have you ever done that to someone else?

-Lauren shared what it felt like to always be the new kid. When have you been on the outside of a room looking in? Who helped you find your way to the table?

Two Key Insights
Rachel Billups writes, "Never put boundaries around the places God chooses, the people God uses, and what God chooses to do. Our boundaries keep people out, and on our worst days they discourage folks from coming close to the savior."

She also writes, “Jesus eats with everyone.”

The Magi came with joyful curiosity, asking questions and wanting to see what God was doing. Who are the people we tend to leave off God’s guest list, and what would it look like to get curious about their story?

One Practice
This week, think about where you could create a space this Christmas season where everyone is welcome and everyone is invited, whether that’s your dinner table, your small group, or a seat next to you on Christmas Eve. Then ask yourself who you can invite.

Closing Reflection
Offer this prayer to God: “God, thank you that where we come from doesn’t get the last word on where you can take us. Give me a curious heart like the Magi, and help me make room at my table for the people I might have overlooked. Amen.”

Episode 4: When God Shows Up
The Shepherds · Peace · Luke 2:8-20

Introduction
Every year we promise ourselves this Advent will be different. We'll slow down, light the candles, and keep a reasonable pace. Then December happens, and the season turns into a sprint. In the middle of all that, we often find ourselves asking God for a sign so we know we're headed the right way.

When God announced the birth of Jesus, the news didn't go to a palace. It went to a field full of shepherds working the night shift. They were ordinary, faithful workers near the bottom of the social ladder, and the sign the angel gave them was about as humble as it gets: a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. God is already good and already present in our everyday lives. Our part is to slow down long enough to notice.

Three Questions for Reflection
-What gets in the way of peace for you during the Christmas season?

-Rachel talks about modern-day shepherds like bus drivers, ER nurses, folks working third shift at Waffle House, and parents up at three in the morning with a crying baby. Who are the shepherds in your life? How has God shown up through them?

-Have you ever asked God for a sign? What showed up, or didn't?

Two Key Insights
Rachel Billups writes, "God is always present in our lives; it is just that we sometimes need to open ourselves and our schedules to God's presence."

She also asks, “Could it be that we have gotten the shepherds all wrong? Could it be that we are looking in the wrong places for signs?”

Where in your ordinary, everyday routine might God be trying to get your attention this Advent?

One Practice
This week, take the permission slip the shepherds were given. God gave them permission to leave the field and sit at the manger. You have permission to leave your desk, set the laundry aside, close your laptop, and sit at the manger with Jesus. Try taking three minutes each morning to sit quietly before checking your phone.

Closing Reflection
Offer this prayer to God: “Lord, teach me your unforced rhythms of grace. Help me slow down long enough to notice you in the ordinary places of my life, and send me out like the shepherds, eager to tell what I’ve seen. Amen.”

As you wrap up the study, take a moment to share with your group: What’s one thing from these four unexpected guests that you want to carry into the new year?

For additional discipleship opportunities, visit resurrection.church/discipleship

Rachel Billups, *An Unlikely Advent: Extraordinary People of the Christmas Story* (Abingdon Press, 2023).