

# LOW

## DISCUSSION/REFLECTION GUIDE



## **LOW Discussion/Reflection Guide**

### **Week 1 Sunday: A Messy Nativity**

Additional Scripture: Luke 2:1-21

1. One of the greatest pressures we face every day (but especially during this time of year), is to pretend that we're perfect and that everything is wonderful. Why do we feel compelled to hide the uncomfortable parts of our lives, even from people we're in community with?
2. When you look at the world, define the "mess" you see. What is at the root of the conflict and animosity in the world, and what is the remedy?
3. One of the "low" postures of life is when we grieve. What is a source of grief or loss you are carrying into this season and how is it changing your experience of it?

Prayer/Reflection/Meditation Word: Mess

### **Week 1 Monday: Faith in the Intersection**

Additional Scripture: John 9:1-25

1. Reflect or talk about one of the intersections in your story that has changed you for the better; a person who has crossed your path and helped you see things you hadn't seen.
2. Your intersection with religion has likely affected you, in both beautiful and painful ways. Reflect on or talk about how you have been shaped by organized religion or spiritual experiences. Is God easier or more difficult to believe in because of your interaction with religious people?
3. What would you like people to say they experienced as they crossed paths with you in this life? What do you want to give them in the intersection?

Prayer/Reflection/Meditation Word: Relationships

## **Week 1 Tuesday: *This is Not a Test***

Additional Scripture: Psalm 23

1. Have you ever over-analyzed the small events of your life, looking for the spiritual meaning/religious lessons you felt you were supposed to be learning? How or why is this either helpful or a hindrance? How do you process your faith in the small and close things?
2. Embracing the mysteries and the “greys” of the spiritual journey can be freeing, but it’s also difficult, especially when you’ve been that being sure is a virtue. Reflect on or talk about the need for absolutely certainty in spiritual matters, whether you see it in yourself or in others, and how embracing wonder may be a better path.
3. Imagine the character of whoever/whatever you believe to be the source of this world and all life—whether you name that God or not. How has your image/description changed over time? What/Who is “God” to you?

Prayer/Reflection/Meditation Word: Uncertainty

## **Week 1 Wednesday: *Too Good To Be True?***

Additional Scripture: Luke 4:14-21

1. Our specific privilege often buffers us from the adversity and the wounds that other people experience as their default setting. As much as you aware, name some ways organized Christianity has and still continues to damage vulnerable communities, and consider how your own experience of privilege may have prevented you from pushing back?
2. One of the greatest sources of injustice perpetuated by organized religion of any kind, is *fear*. Where do you see fearful religion being practiced? As a person of faith, how can you contribute to a less fearful world? Talk or reflect on the ways fear has shaped your image of the world, of other people, or of God.

3. Can Christianity ever be good news for *all* people? If so, what needs to change in churches and faith communities to make this a reality?

Prayer/Reflection/Meditation Word: Privilege

### **Week 1 Thursday: *Fleeing to Egypt***

Additional Scripture: 2 Corinthians 3:12-18

1. When it comes to the needs of people around you, do you tend to find it easier to focus on one group as opposed to another? Are you better at caring for people close to you, or does your activism and burden for the wounds of the world, come at the detriment of your close relationships?

2. Jesus tells us to love our enemies. Though we don't really get a good definition of what those enemies look like, we probably have a good idea about the people we view as our adversaries. How might we find/express compassion toward people we really don't like?

3. In what ways do you currently feel trapped or stuck? Where are you struggling as you enter this season? How can you offer some compassionate care to yourself?

Prayer/Reflection/Meditation Word: Freedom

### **Week 1 Friday: *Eyes on the Road***

Additional Scripture: Hebrews Chapter 11

1. The pressures and pains of this life don't take the holidays off, and in fact sometimes these days exacerbate them. Talk about or reflect upon the what the recent journey has been for you? Are you in a period of ease or tumult, of relational connection or fracture, of health or illness? How can you enter this season honestly?

2. The essence of hope and of faith, is the belief that what we do *now* impacts the journey ahead, that our work in what we can see, will bear fruit in what we can't yet see. What is one thing you'd like to invest more time and energy into right now?

3. Think about a time in the past when the road seemed unclear. What have you learned about yourself since then? What can that teach you about your current struggles?

Prayer/Reflection/Meditation Word: Future

### **Week 1 Saturday: *Carry and Deliver***

Additional Scripture: Matthew 5:13-15

1. What is your response to the idea that like Mary, that you too can “carry and deliver” love and goodness into the world? Does it feel too flowery? Too optimistic? Maybe too daunting? Talk or write about that idea, and about some small, tangible things you can do to make the world better.

2. When you think about the character of Jesus (whether you’re Christian or not) what quality would you like to emulate in the world? How might you specifically embody that character trait in order to live low?

3. If you could change the churches you are a part of or come into contact with, what is one transformation you’d like to see take place, and why?

Prayer/Reflection/Meditation Word: Incarnation

### **Week 2 Sunday: *Sorry and Sorrow***

Additional Scripture: Psalm 31

1. It’s difficult for most people to make space for grief during the Advent/Christmas season. Do you feel the pressure to set aside your sadness/mourning in order to meet the expectations of other people? How can you make space for the emptiness of grief right now?

2. We tend to want to make the spiritual journey only about the mountaintop moments, especially in faith communities on Sunday mornings. We often pretend where we should be most authentic. How can churches become better at dwelling on and sitting in the messiness of loss and doubt and sadness?

3. Reflect or think about one “empty chair” you’re facing this season? How can you acknowledge that person and include them in your Advent journey, and celebrate their memory even as you observe a holiday of “life”?

Prayer/Reflection/Meditation Word: Grief

### **Week 2 Monday: Church Clothes**

Additional Scripture: Matthew 11:28-29

1. Every church says that you can “come as you are,” though many times we’ve shown up and realized we couldn’t come as we were. Talk about or reflect upon the times and places where you’ve felt excluded, unwelcomed, or pushed away by organized religion—or by professed Christians.

2. Jesus modeled a table that truly welcomed all people, which often placed him in the middle of conflict. What are you learning about the balance between hospitality and justice, about the tensions between loving the least and your enemies? Can you do both?

3. Somehow comparison and competition have seeped into every area of our lives, even our faith communities. What can we do to create spaces where people can simply be, without feeling they need to be fixed or changed or renovated?

Prayer/Reflection/Meditation Word: Welcome

### **Week 2 Tuesday: The Curb**

Additional Scripture: Matthew 25:31-46

1. One of the ways we “live low,” is to slow down and see people and notice the need around us, and then to respond. Sometimes the obstacles to this are busyness or laziness or selfishness or fatigue? Which of these barriers to caring for others do you most identify in you?

2. Reflect upon or talk about a time when you were suffering, and someone noticed

and helped you—or encouraged you without even knowing. How did that change your story?

3. Name a way you can intentionally be more aware of the need around you as you approach this season, but more importantly, how can you cultivate a lifestyle of compassionate activism?

Prayer/Reflection/Meditation Word: Movement

### **Week 2 Wednesday: *Living Parables***

Additional Scripture: Matthew 13:15-17

1. Think about the way you experienced this season as a child, or even as a younger version of yourself. How have you changed and what do you miss about that version of you?

2. Often as we sense our faith shifting, we outgrow certain things we once believed, or we outgrow certainty itself. How have your religious beliefs/understanding of the world changed over time—and does that give you comfort or bring sadness today?

3. Think about a child you know who embraces or embodies wonder. Talk about them, and maybe spend some time with them to see the world the way they see it.

Prayer/Reflection/Meditation Word: Mystery

### **Week 2 Thursday: *The Song You're Singing***

Additional Scripture: Psalm 13

1. There are all types of “songs” in the book of Psalms; ones of thanksgiving or doubt or praise or anger. How would you describe the way you enter this season? What is your emotional “playlist?”

2. Have you ever felt out of step with the people around you during this season; that you couldn't be fully authentic about who you are, how you're feeling, what you believe or don't believe? What kept you in that place of hiding?

3. What is the greatest “peer pressure” you see in organized religion: to have unwavering faith, to be perfect, to believe the right doctrine? How would you like to see that change?

Prayer/Reflection/Meditation Word: Honesty

### **Week 2 Friday: *Surprise Party***

Additional Scripture: Luke 1:34-36

1. The life and ministry of Jesus were surprising, especially to many who were expecting him to arrive as a conquering political/military figure. His message then and now, is still countercultural and upside down: compassion, mercy, humility, forgiveness. What do you see as the most radical of his teachings today?

2. Describe or reflect upon a person who surprised you with unexpected goodness or kindness when you anticipated something else. How might you surprise someone else by treating them better than they might expect from you?

3. Most of us get into ruts: in our careers, relationships, routines, attitudes. Where and how might you flip the script so that you can enter this season with a different energy or outlook? If you’re part of a faith community, how can you do this together?

Prayer/Reflection/Meditation Word: Unexpected

### **Week 2 Saturday: *Do What You Can***

Additional Scripture: Matthew 6:25-34

1) Where and when have you noticed the comparison sickness John speaks of, showing up in you? How can you actively resist that?

2) The “crowds” can be a source of criticism in our lives, and so can the voice in our own heads. Talk about or reflect upon the challenge of the messages that tell you you’re not good enough—and where they often come from for you?

3) The holidays can often magnify our sense of lack or deficiency: what we don't have, what we haven't accomplished, the relationships we aren't connecting in. How can you make gratitude and a sense of abundance central to this season?

Prayer/Reflection/Meditation Word: Enough

### **Week 3 Sunday: *Turbulence is Coming***

Additional Scripture: Mark 4:35-41

1) Sometimes our circumstances can mislead us. In moments of trouble or adversity, what we see can make us forget what we know. Is there a thought, situation, or struggle overwhelming you right now? How can you right-size that threat?

2) As you travel through the world every day, where do you notice the "shaking" of people most? Who do you see experiencing profound turbulence right now, and how might you bring a small bit of peace to them—whether individuals you know or groups of people?

3) Knowing that everyone around you is enduring the shaking of being human, how can you (or your faith community) be intentional bringers of peace in this world.

Prayer/Reflection/Meditation Word: Shaking

### **Week 3 Monday: *The Lowest Places***

Additional Scripture: Matthew 5:1-11

1) Humility is one of the "low" postures. This often means examining our own biases, facing our own prejudices, and confronting our assumptions. Take an inventory of times and ways you may be sliding into arrogance, overconfidence, or intolerance. Write or talk about that.

2) How have your spiritual convictions or religious worldview evolved over time? What are the greatest changes in the past year or two?

3) Talk about or reflect upon some "new thing" that you are looking forward to (or

frightened) by) in the coming year? What about the unknown ahead, excites or terrifies you, and why?

Prayer/Reflection/Meditation Word: Arrogance

### **Week 3 Tuesday: *Twisted Bowels***

Additional Scripture: Matthew 15:29-39

1) Compassion isn't just an emotional or intellectual response—it actually affects us physically. Recall a time recently when someone else's suffering or hardship made you sick, and how that internally solidarity changed you?

2) There is a great difference between empathy (feeling badly about someone's pain) and compassion (moving to alleviate it). How can you as an individual or a faith community, get proximity to people in pain, and do something about the things that twist you in your bowels?

3) Jesus saw the crowds and had compassion on them, because he focused on their internal condition; what the world was doing to them. How can you be more mindful of that hidden pain in people, and more ready to respond to it?

Prayer/Reflection/Meditation Word: Sickness

### **Week 3 Wednesday: *Closing Doors***

Additional Scripture: 2 Cor 4:7-9

1) Given Jesus' hospitality to so many kinds of people, why do you think so many people still experience rejection and exclusion at the hands of professed Christians?

2) A closed door often comes with the death of something: a person, a plan you had, a dream you held, a future you envisioned. When and where have you faced a closed door and what have you learned about yourself and/or about God in the process?

3) Our desire to know and be known is so powerful. Talk or think about the strengths and the dangers of community: when it is healthy and how it becomes toxic. When has community been a source of healing, and when has it brought pain?

Prayer/Reflection/Meditation Word: Rejection

### **Week 3 Thursday: *Waiting Rooms***

Additional Scripture: Romans 12:12

1) Most of us grew up with heightened expectations around this time of year. Talk about or reflect on a time you remember looking forward to something, and when they waiting was actually the best part.

2) The time between the what is and the what's to come can be filled with excitement or fear. Describe a period of waiting or transition you are in, and whether that leaves you feeling hopeful or anxious.

3) Whether you're a Christian or not, what do you see happening in these days in organized religion? How are you and those around you experiencing community differently?

Prayer/Reflection/Meditation Word: Waiting

### **Week 3 Friday: *Underdog Revolution***

Additional Scripture: Matthew 21:30-32

1) Talk about or reflect on someone you admire or respect (either someone you know or only see from a distance) who's overcome adversity, tragedy, or difficulty to be where they are. What have you learned from their journey?

2) The story of Jesus' life and ministry isn't about political power, military might, or imposing one's will on someone. Why do you think so many Christians conflate religion and power, when Jesus never did? How and why do we get it wrong?

3) What do you see as your greatest personal flaw, disadvantage, or barrier to finding peace. How might you lean into that in order to grow or mature?

Prayer/Reflection/Meditation Word: Humble

### **Week 3 Saturday: *It is Not Well With My Soul***

Additional Scripture: Mark 5:1-5

1) Though the pressure to be happy is always present, the holidays seem to amplify this—and yet the Bible gives us so many examples of people who were faithful, yet struggled with all sorts of doubt, despair, depression, and “inner demons.” Why is happiness something we chase?

2) Why do you think faith communities often struggle to meet the needs of grieving, depressed, or mentally ill people? Is there a way space can be made for people who struggle with such things; ways churches can include the valley experiences of life along with the mountaintop?

3) How can you make space for your own valley places this season? How can you be okay with your not okayness, and simply come to Advent as you are, resting in the truth that this is a beautiful thing?

Prayer/Reflection/Meditation Word: Sadness

### **Week 4 Sunday: *The Sound Love Makes***

Additional Scripture: John 15:12-17

1) Jesus teaches that we are to love: God, ourselves, our neighbors, or enemies, and the least among us (those disregarded and marginalized). Though none of these tasks are simple or easy, where is the greatest challenge for you right now? Who do you find it most difficult to love right now, and how might you “get low” to remedy that?

2) Where do you see a disconnect between the faith Christians profess and the lives they live? As you look at organized religion, where is the greatest *love disparity*?

3) *Social justice* tends to be a polarizing term, but it's also an inherently Christian reality. As we mentioned, Jesus directed people toward many expressions of love—and one was to “love the least.” Reflect upon or talk about how love and justice are connected.

Prayer/Reflection/Meditation Word: Courage

### **Week 4 Monday: A Real Friend**

Additional Scripture: Psalm 65:8

1) The difference between joy and happiness can be subtle but powerful. What would you say most often impacts your happiness these days, and how might you find a joy that transcends it? How can you be free from needing favorable circumstances in order to be internally peaceful?

2) Recall a time when you last felt joy; the deeper feeling of *everything is alright-ness*. What makes that kind of feeling so fleeting for so many people, maybe for you too?

3) Reflect upon or talk about some practices you can engage in to cultivate joy internally and to perpetuate it in the world.

Prayer/Reflection/Meditation Word: Rejoice

### **Week 4 Tuesday: Getting Low**

Additional Scripture: Psalm 34:18

1) One of the ways that privilege shows up in our lives, is in our lack of urgency on issues; when we don't feel a pressing need to act immediately. That is often a luxury that others can't afford. Where do you see this in yourself? How can tiring of an issue or feeling compassion burnout, point to your places of privilege?

2) How can you intentionally hear stories that are not your own right now? How can you “get low” and listen better? Where are some practices churches can adopt to this end?

3) How has your activism, advocacy, or engagement on social issues changed you? What have you learned about yourself or the world or God?

Prayer/Reflection/Meditation Word: Urgency

#### **Week 4 Wednesday: *Beautiful Pain***

Additional Scripture: Matthew 5:9

1) Relational fracture is inherent in this life, but it seems the holidays magnify these tension points. Why do you think that is? How can you avoid putting extra pressure on yourself to have perfect relationships right now?

2) John has previously written that "our present suffering can be the 'manure' of which the flowers of our future selves grow." Can you think of a painful experience that transformed or taught you something? Reflect or talk about the way you were shaped by suffering.

3) As much as we might deny or wish it away, some of the pain in the world you and I are actually responsible for. Consider "getting low" this season by acknowledging some of the damage you may have done to people (even unintentionally) and do something to bring healing.

Prayer/Reflection/Meditation Word: Disconnection

#### **Week 4 Thursday: *The Main Idea***

Additional Scripture: Luke 10:38-42

1) The busyness of life tends to obscure the elemental, essential things. How can you clear some of the clutter from your mind and your calendar this season, in order to focus on what matters?

2) Why do you think Christians so easily drift from the core message of Jesus? Where do you notice mission drift in the Church: people missing the *main thing*?

3) When and where do you feel most grounded, most mindful of the best way to be

human? How do you reconnect with your source and with the purpose of this life? Share or think about how you can avoid unnecessary distractions?

Prayer/Reflection/Meditation Word: Distraction

### **Week 4 Friday: *Doubting and Deconstructing***

Additional Scripture: Matthew 14:30-32

1) What is the greatest source of doubt or place of tension in your belief system? What question nags at you that you can't seem to get a sufficient answer to?

2) Did you grow up believing that doubt was a sign of weakness, a moral failing, or worse—a rejection of God? How did this affect your ability or willingness to express doubt?

3) How can churches make space for questions, faith shifts, and existential crises? How can we create spiritual communities where everyone can be authentic?

Prayer/Reflection/Meditation Word: Doubt

### **Week 4 Saturday: *I'll Take The Low Road***

Additional Scripture: Romans 12:15-17

1) As you've journeyed through the past four weeks, what thoughts, ideas, and themes have shown up? What have you noticed about yourself or the world?

2) What is something you'd like to change in the coming year, and what do you need to alter in thought, practice, lifestyle in order to do that?

3). What does "living low" look like to you? Of all the "postures" we've explored: humility, compassion, grief, doubt, gratitude, reverence, rest—which are you most connected to right now?

Prayer/Reflection/Meditation Word: Arriving