Ready my Heart:

An advent retreat
to prepare our hearts
for the birth of Immanuel

compiled by
Karen Block
2009 - Revised 2011
Ready my heart for the birth of Immanuel
Ready my soul for the Prince of Peace
Heap the straw of my life
For His body to lie on
Light the candle of hope
Let the child come in

Alleluia, alleluia
Alleluia, Christ the Saviour is born

Mine is the home that is poor and is barren
Mine is the stable of cold and stone
Break the light to each corner
Of doubt and of darkness
Now the Word is made flesh
For the birth of me

Music and Lyric by Lois Shuford
Sung by Steve Bell

Note: Play the song several times. Suggested: as people come in and are getting settled and then after the “announcements” regarding the facilities and the materials as a way to quiet yourselves before the Lord, and a final time just before they go out to spend time alone with God.
An Advent office

The Lord be with you.
And also with you.

We praise you with joy, loving God,
for your grace is better than life itself.
You have sustained us through the darkness,
and you have blessed us with life in this new day.

Veni Creator
Come Lord
Come down
Come in
Come among us
Come as the wind
to move us
Come as the light
to prove us
Come as the night
to rest us
Come as the storm
to test us
Come as the sun
to warm us
Come as the stillness
to calm us
Come Lord
Come down
Come in
Come among us.

The song of Zechariah:
Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel;
he has come to his people and set them free.
He has raised up for us a mighty saviour,
born of the house of his servant David.
You, my child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High,
for you will go before the Lord to prepare the way,
to give his people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins.
In the tender compassion of our God,
the dawn from on high shall break upon us,
to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death,
and to guide our feet into the way of peace.
Lectio Divina: Is. 9: 2, 6 & 7  (See p 4 for one Lectio Divina method)

The people who walk in darkness will see a great light - a light that will shine on all who live in the land where death casts its shadow.
For a child is born to us, a son is given to us. And the government will rest on his shoulders. These will be his royal titles: Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His ever expanding peaceful government will never end. He will rule forever with fairness and justice from the throne of his ancestor David. The passionate commitment of the Lord Almighty will guarantee this!

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit: as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen. Amen.

God of all hope and joy, open our hearts in welcome, that your Son Jesus Christ at his coming may find in us a dwelling prepared for himself; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

Come Lord
Come down
Come in
Come among us.
Amen.
Lectio Divina¹
Pray for God to speak to you and to protect you.

1. Listen to or read the whole passage. Just let it flow over you.
   - Sit in silence; don’t analyze;
   - Let your mind take you back over it - what do you remember?

2. What word or phrase captures your attention?
   - As it is read, allow a word of phrase to hold your attention.
   - Sit in silence and just let that word or phrase resonate with in you; don’t analyze; just let it sink in; write it down
   * If in a group setting share just the word or phrase (no need to explain).

3. How does it relate to your life right now? What is Jesus saying to you?
   - Sit in silence and just let that word or phrase resonate with in you; don’t analyze; just let it sink in; converse with Jesus about it; write it down briefly to help you remember.
   * If in a group setting share briefly.

4. Is Jesus issuing an invitation to respond to him? What is he asking you to do or be?
   - Sit in silence and just let that invitation come to you; don’t analyze, but you can converse with God about it; just let it sink in; write it down.

5. Rest in the presence of God²... Let go of everything and just rest in His presence... let go of it. Don’t worry about how to fulfill the invitation... Don’t fret. Just rest.

6. Resolve... As you leave resolve to hold on to this word and this invitation and to live it out in the coming days and weeks.

   * If in a group setting share this in as much detail as you want to. Pray for each other’s invitation to be fulfilled in their lives.

NOTE: I have found that reading and listening work very differently. I use a small tape recorder to record the passage I want to meditate on and listen to it over and over again.

² These last two steps come from Barton (2006) p. 61
Isaiah 9:2, 6 & 7

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The Word/phrase:

My situation/connection:

God’s invitation to me:
Time of Solitude with God,
being still, listening,
responding to what you hear...

Spend (at least 15 minutes) just stilling your heart - use any of these ideas that may help you:

a. Take a walk - letting go of all, stop for a rest and wait for the beginnings of what God has for you, as you continue your walk - receive that gift!

b. Notice your breathing... in and out... slow down... rest...

c. Sit still in a chapels or in a garden or wherever you are - just BE PRESENT to God

d. A full jar doesn’t have room for more.... what are you too full of? ‘too full of trying oh-so-hard’? too full of resentment? pain? busyness? doing? make a list of all that is swirling around inside then set it aside - so that there is room today for God

e. Do whatever enables you to become still and makes some space in your heart and mind for God to speak and fill you...

When you are quiet and calm - look over the materials and ask God to lead you to what he would have you focus on this morning. Please do not feel like you have to do everything in this booklet now... you can come back to it later on through the season of Advent. Don’t busy yourself for the whole of the time you have this morning.
Revisit the word from the Lectio Divina we did earlier - Continue your conversation with God. Ask him what he means by the word he gave you. Listen to his reply... Write down the gist of your conversation here or in your journal afterwards. Draw a picture of what you experienced, saw, felt...
Spend some time re-reading the lyrics of the song - Is God speaking to you through any of those words or phrases? Does this song touch your life in any significant way?

Ready my heart for the birth of Immanuel
Ready my soul for the Prince of Peace
Heap the straw of my life
For His body to lie on
Light the candle of hope
Let the child come in

Alleluia, alleluia
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Use Lectio Divina - (see p. 4) - or meditate in any way that you are comfortable with, on another passage about getting and being ready:


In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to the Galilean village of Nazareth to a virgin engaged to be married to a man descended from David. His name was Joseph, and the virgin’s name, Mary. Upon entering, Gabriel greeted her:

"Good morning!
You’re beautiful with God’s beauty,
Beautiful inside and out!
God be with you."

She was thoroughly shaken, wondering what was behind a greeting like that. But the angel assured her, "Mary, you have nothing to fear. God has a surprise for you: You will become pregnant and give birth to a son and call his name Jesus.

He will be great,  
be called ‘Son of the Highest.’
The Lord God will give him  
the throne of his father David;  
He will rule Jacob’s house forever—  
no end, ever, to his kingdom."

Mary said to the angel, "But how? I’ve never slept with a man."

The angel answered,  
"The Holy Spirit will come upon you,  
the power of the Highest hover over you;  
Therefore, the child you bring to birth  
will be called Holy, Son of God."

And did you know that your cousin Elizabeth conceived a son, old as she is? Everyone called her barren, and here she is six months pregnant! Nothing, you see, is impossible with God."

And Mary said,  
"Yes, I see it all now:  
I’m the Lord’s maid, ready to serve.  
Let it be with me  
just as you say."

Then the angel left her.

During the exercise...

f. Ask him to give you a word  
g. Ask him what he means by the word he gave you  
h. Listen to his reply...  
i. Enter into a conversation with God

Afterward - write down the gist of your conversation:
Advent

irrational season
preparing, anticipating, listening
ready my heart for
Immanuel
Poetry... Try your hand at writing a simple poem - a \textit{cinquain} is a five line poem with a set of rules for writing them:

Line 1: one word - the title (a noun usually)

Line 2: two words (two adjectives or a two word phrase) that describe line 1

Line 3: three words (action verbs - participles (-ing)) that relate to line 1

Line 4: four words (feelings or a complete sentence) that relates to line 1

Line 5: one word (a synonym of line 1 or a noun that sums up what the poem is about)

Here are two I have written:

\begin{verbatim}
Advent
irrational, grace-filled
preparing, anticipating, listening
ready my heart for
Immanuel

Door
open wide
inviting, welcoming, receiving
way to the heart
Jesus
\end{verbatim}

Try writing your own:
The Annunciation

She bows her head
Submissive, yet
her downcast glance
Asks the angel, “Why,
For this romance,
Do I qualify?”

Samuel Menashe
This is the irrational season
when love blooms bright and wild
Had Mary been filled with reason
thered have been no room for the child

Madeleine L'Engle
A Call:

To self-examination and to fear!3

LUKE 1:28-30:

And Gabriel came to Mary and addressed her thus:

“Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you.”

Now, she was greatly troubled at what he said and wondered what such a
greeting might mean.

But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found
favor with God.”

THIS, TOO, MUST absolutely be a part of our Christmas anticipations: that in the
presence of divinity we are “greatly troubled.”

When he saw the seraphim flying and heard their cries, the prophet Isaiah
wailed, “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips!” (Isaiah 6:1-5). Even the
reflected glory of the Lord, flaming in the face of a living man, caused such mortal
dread that the people of Israel “were afraid to come near” Moses after he had talked
with the Lord (Ex. 34:30).

Nevertheless, fear has been much forgotten—both by the world and by
Christians in general. We rush toward angels unafraid. We approach the blazing
furnaces of the seraphim with no more apprehension than children who reach
laughingly for fire.

This fearlessness is not a sign of the character of God, as if God has changed
through the centuries that divide us from Moses and Isaiah, from Zechariah and Mary
and the shepherds. Rather, it is a sign of the character of this present age, of
arrogance or ignorance, whether or not one admits to a living God.

Mindlessly do the bells of secular celebrations jingle for Christmas. Meaninglessly do
carols repeat their tinny joys in the malls of America. No richer than soda pop is ever
sentimentalized Christmas special on TV. Fearless is the world at play with godly
things, because Godless is its heart.

If God is a laughing Santy, why should we be afraid?

Secular arrogance says there is no God. Arrogance, in fact, assumes that
humanity itself—its dreams, its talents, its visions and accomplishments—is the
nearest thing to God the world will ever know. Therefore, the “true meaning of
Christmas” is assumed to be the occasional human kindness which, yes, may very well
be symbolized by a nice old gentleman.

Or secular ignorance takes creation for its Creator; it worships the earth, the
universe, the great cosmos both material and immaterial. It believes that goodness
itself is God. So it finds divinity in good little children. And its Christmas celebrates
not the birth of God among us, but birth itself: that humans do renew themselves,
starting fresh in infant faces, returning to innocence. Of course the secular angel is a
chubby babe with vestigial wings.

3 Wangerin, Walter Jr. 1999. Preparing for Jesus: Meditations on the coming of Christ, advent, Christmas, and
How can there be fear in such a Christmas? No God. No blinding righteousness approaching the earth. No gulf between us the immortal Invisible--and so, no need to bridge the gulf.

Surely we Christians should know better. Yet look around: are we more fearful at the prospect of angels than the world is? Aren’t we blithe this Christmas too? Heedless? Jaunty, even, to the point of self-satisfaction?

Of course it is right to rejoice in tidings of great joy: that the mercy of God now crosses the gulf which our sinning opened between ourselves and our Creator. Yes, it is right to fall down in perfect trust, fearlessly before the Christ child and to worship him. Yes, it is right to delight in the song of the angels, the peace that God brings to earth. Yes, yes, and therefore do we cry in confidence “Fear not! Fear not! For God hath banished fear!”

Ah, friend, but arrogance assumes that we deserve this blessed state. There is neither grace nor gifts for those who deserve what they get--and no true joy at the receiving.

And ingnorance forgets the sin without which mercy means nothing, without which the baby Jesus is just a baby after all.

Listen: the light of Christmas shines into the darkness! We should be the walking dead. What we deserve, in fact, is the absence of God--a cold and cosmic isolation--for this is our sin, that we chose to be gods in the place of God. In the day we disobeyed we began to die. We should, therefore, be dwelling in a land of deep darkness, mistrust, hatred, hopelessness, finality and death.

But here in a child comes God, the light! And light in darkness is a frightening thing. (“People loved the darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.” John 3:19). O my friend, a sel-examination both humble and true must cause us to tremble before the living God. Yes! --we will be “greatly troubled”at the appearing of angels.

But even as we feared, so do we rejoice when we hear the light say, “Don’t be afraid, I have not come to punish you but to give you life. I am no judge. I am the Savior born for you.”

Life instead of death? That is a wonder! And the wonder is all the more intense because death had been expected--because death had been right!

The mercy of God? Is not this a dazzling wonder?

And isn’t Christmas wonderful after all?

O Jesus Christ,
rule in my heart in truth and grace, and make my gladness prove the glories of your righteousness and wonders of your love, and wonders of your love.

Amen.
Everlasting Father

For a child is born to us, a son is given to us. ... And he will be called: ...Everlasting Father... Isaiah 9:6

Everlasting

- Lasting or enduring forever; existing or continuing without end; immortal; eternal. 4
- Continuing indefinitely, or during a long period; perpetual.

Father

- One who has begotten a child; a male parent.
- One who performs the offices of a parent by maintenance, affectionate care, counsel, or protection.
- One who gives origin; an originator...
- The Supreme Being and Creator; God; in theology, the first person in the Trinity.

A Son who is the Everlasting Father. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. One commentary5 states “The idea in these Hebrew words is that Jesus is the source or author of all eternity, that He is the Creator Himself. This then points to the definition above where the term ‘father’ may refer to one who gives origin - the Creator. This is where the Trinity gets hard for us to grasp - which is which? They are three. They are one.

I don’t know about you - but all this study gets my mind going in circles... all I want is a deep, personal relationship with this mysterious and hard to understand God. I do know this, he is one who gives affectionate care, counsel, and protection. He gives this forever in the past and forever into the future. This is my Saviour! This is my Father! This is my Counselor! I can sink into the arms of my Everlasting Father knowing it is the safest place to be.

It is my prayer that each of us can find the stillness, silence and solitude needed to allow these truths that are beyond us to sink deep into our hearts and to change us into his likeness.

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4 Definitions from Brainy quote http://www.brainyquote.com/words/ev/everlasting162118.html

5 http://www.enduringword.com/commentaries/2309.html
Bibliography:


Source: Unknown - from the Internet last year “THURSDAY 20 DECEMBER”

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After a time of sharing in small groups - a closing prayer:
That the coming of Christ may disperse all darkness,
   Lord, have mercy.
\textit{Lord, have mercy.}

That the birth of Christ may hallow all life,
   Lord, have mercy.
\textit{Lord, have mercy.}

That the love of Christ may be in every heart,
   Lord, have mercy.
\textit{Lord, have mercy.}

That the peace of Christ may fill the world,
   Christ, have mercy.
\textit{Christ, have mercy.}

That the descent of Christ may uplift all peoples,
   Christ, have mercy.
\textit{Christ, have mercy.}

That the humility of Christ may teach us gentleness,
   Christ, have mercy.
\textit{Christ, have mercy.}

That the presence of Christ may be within us,
   Lord, have mercy.
\textit{Lord, have mercy.}

That the power of Christ may be upon us,
   Lord, have mercy.
\textit{Lord, have mercy.}

That the Spirit of Christ may fill us,
   Lord, have mercy.
\textit{Lord, have mercy.}

\textit{David Adam “The rhythm of life”}

Keep us in the spirit of joy, simplicity, readiness and mercy.
Bless us and those you have entrusted to us,
in & through Jesus Christ our Saviour. Amen.