

UNDERSTANDING ADVENT



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*Besides this, you know what time it is,
how it is now the moment
for you to wake from sleep.
For salvation is nearer to us now
than when we became believers.*
—Romans 13:11

THE ADVENT SEASON



For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.—Ecclesiastes 3:1

Advent, the first season of the Church's liturgical year, ritualizes the human experience of waiting for God and the wondrous, mysterious timetable by which love incarnate arrives. Advent reveals how differently Christians tell time. A believer's clock resets itself at Advent, for with Christ's arrival, time begins anew. This accounts for the ancient practice of dividing history into two epochs—BC and AD—and starting to number the years over with "Anno Domini," the year of our Lord.

The Church's anticipation of Christmas also resets her calendar, making New Year's Day come "early" with the first Sunday of Advent. Ancient peoples marked the winter solstice—the shortest day of the year—

as a turning point that would mark the sun's return. In a similar way, Christians celebrate Advent as the anticipation of a new creation when the Son of God, the light of the world, will come to illuminate the world.

Since Christians live in the unique "time zone" of faith, they sometimes find themselves "out of sync" with the cultural celebration of the holidays. In society, the Christmas season ends on December 25th, but for people of faith it is just beginning. Like a faithful pregnant mother, the Church knows to delay the full celebration until her child is born. Thus, Christians begin singing carols in church just about the time they cease playing on the radio. They also may keep lights up longer than the shopping malls to reflect the only true gift of Christmas.

Like all of God's time, the season of Advent is cyclical, celebrating the same sequence of faith events year after year. Yet, a cyclical calendar is different than "going around in circles." If we follow God's time faithfully, we arrive at the same place, but with a stronger faith, a truer hope, and a deeper love. Christmas is different each year because we are different. We have grown and changed. The season of Advent reminds us that God is always with us, but also always coming.

THE HISTORY OF ADVENT

The word “advent” is taken from the Latin word, *adventus*, which means “arrival” or “coming.” Early Christians lived relatively close to the time of Christ’s birth, but New Testament writings also convey a belief that Christ’s second coming is imminent: “Strengthen you hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near.” Advent celebrates both events—the Lord’s initial coming in humble humanity and his final coming in glory. Yet, it also embraces the many ways the Lord is present to us in-between, particularly in the gift of the Eucharist.

The precise origin of Advent is difficult to determine. Early homilies contain references to fasting and preparation for Christmas, but no specific mention of an Advent season. As bishop of Tours from 460 to 490, St. Perpetuus established the framework for Advent by initiating days of fast in the weeks before Christmas.



In 567, the Council of Tours made the first official references to a season of Advent as a penitential period of preparation for the feast of the Nativity.

The mood of Advent has evolved over the years. There are indications that a festive tone marked Advent

in the early centuries of the Church. Gradually the season took on more of a penitential mood as the second coming of Christ became more of a focus. In modern times, this penitential tone has given way to an atmosphere of hope and expectation that distinguishes Advent from Lent. Today Advent is more focused on anticipation and welcome than on sin and redemption.

The season of Advent begins on the Sunday closest to November 30th, the feast of St. Andrew the Apostle. It always includes four Sundays, but depending on its calendar position, may have as many as twenty-eight or as few as twenty-two days. Changes to the liturgy set apart this time of preparation. The liturgical colors change to purple and the *Gloria* is omitted from the Mass so that this angelic hymn celebrating the Nativity may be properly highlighted by its reintroduction on Christmas Day.

ADVENT TRADITIONS

THE ADVENT WREATH

The Advent wreath is a central liturgical symbol of the Advent season. It integrates several elements that predate Christian faith. For ancient peoples, the wreath was a symbol of the life-giving rhythms of nature and evergreen was a hopeful sign of life in the midst of winter. The candles on the wreath are rooted in the

ancient observance of the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year, but also the turning point when the sun's life-giving light begins to increase. Lighting one additional candle each week thus signifies the movement of both the sun and the Son of God.

Because of these historical ties to presumed pagan practices, there were times in the Church's history when the use of evergreen decorations was condemned. In time, however, the Advent wreath became a focus of the liturgical season because it reflects key dimensions of Christian faith—the circular, eternal nature of God's love even in harsh times and the light of Christ that so permeates the night that “the darkness could not overcome it.” The purple candles signify longing, expectation, and hope, while the pink candle, lit during the third week, represents joy.



THE JESSE TREE

The Jesse Tree celebrates the history of God's loving action in our world leading up to the birth of Christ. This striking symbol is based on the prophecy of Isaiah: “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.” The Jesse tree



bears symbols of the most significant manifestations of God's saving power down through history. Dozens of the key events of Hebrew salvation history are represented, including Noah's ark, the burning bush, the Ten Commandments, Jacob's ladder, Joseph's coat, and the key of David.

THE "O" ANTIPHONS

The seven "O Antiphons," are part of the Liturgy of the Hours or Divine Office, the Church's official daily prayer. They have traditionally been sung in monasteries and in Christian communities during evening prayer on the seven days before Christmas Eve. Each antiphon begins with the letter "O" followed by one of the biblical names for Christ: "O Wisdom," "O Lord," "O Root of Jesse," "O Key of David," "O Orient," "O King of the Gentiles," and "O Emmanuel." These beautiful prayers provide the lyrics for the most famous of all Advent hymns: "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel."



PEOPLE IN THE ADVENT STORY

ISAIAH & JEREMIAH

All the prophets of salvation history are part of the Advent story, but none are more prominent than the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah. Their poetic words dominate the Hebrew Scriptures of the Advent season. With both unsettling challenge and comforting hope, they proclaim the message of peace and justice that heralds the coming of the Prince of Peace and the Son of Justice.



JOHN THE BAPTIST

We all know of people who are said to “need no introduction,” but Jesus is not one of those people. John the Baptist represents the central role of the forerunner in God’s plan of salvation. He is the antithesis of the narcissism and self-promotion that is so common in our day. He knows his place as “a voice crying in the wilderness” and embraces it humbly: “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals.”



ELIZABETH

Elizabeth is the cousin of Mary and the mother of John the Baptist. It is her pregnancy that Gabriel



reveals to Mary as a reassuring sign of God's miraculous power: "This is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Elizabeth responds to Mary's gracious visitation with the words that would eventually become a staple of

Christian prayer: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb."

THE ANGEL GABRIEL

The Angel Gabriel is a manifestation of the mystical experience of "calling." We don't hear the word



"vocation" so much anymore because we have lately given ascendancy to popular cultural wisdom of individualism and "following your own heart." Yet, angels suggest that there is no discrepancy between God's will

and human aspiration. Gabriel speaks the Advent truth that as we choose our paths, God guides those who listen: "The Lord is with you;" "Do not be afraid."

JOSEPH

Joseph is the quiet, “righteous man” of the Nativity story. References to him in the Infancy Narratives are few. Like a backstage crewmember of a Broadway musical, Joseph works behind the scenes to support the mysterious reality of Mary’s pregnancy, to get her to “center stage” in Bethlehem, and to protect the Holy Family from harm. Joseph becomes the foster father of Jesus and teaches him the carpenter’s trade.



MARY

The Blessed Mother, more than any other human, is the vehicle by which God enters the world. Mary stands in contrast to the “my way or the highway” attitude of modern times. Instead, she realizes that without her willingness to discern and follow God’s will, there may be no highway for God at all.” Mary is a model of the fruitful listening we call “contemplation.” She listened so intently to the word of God that it formed a living person within her, “the Word made flesh.”



ADVENT ATTITUDES

VIGILANCE

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.—Luke 2:8

The shepherds in the Christmas story are a model of holy vigilance. They keep watch for threats to their flocks, but they are also alert to the possibility of good news, angels heralding the birth of the Lamb of God.



Nothing has made people understand the virtue of vigilance like the rise of global terrorism. “If you see something, say something” is the slogan of responsible citizens. The same philosophy applies to people of faith who possess the Advent spirit of vigilance for the presence of God. Whenever they see it, they proclaim it to the world.

PATIENCE

The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient until it receives the rains.—James 5:7

Advent reminds us that “good things come to those who wait.” In our “instant access,” “instant coffee,” “instant gratification” society, that wisdom is not always an easy sell. The Advent scriptures use the related images of farming and pregnancy to celebrate a truth that nature

embraces, but culture sometimes resists. Whether it is sowing the seed of God's Word or bringing a child of God to term, God's creation works its miracles in its own good time. The blessing of Incarnation cannot be rushed, but must be patiently nurtured to fruition.

LONGING

*My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts
of the Lord.*—Psalm 84:2

During the holidays we may feel a melancholy that springs from an awareness that our lives and our world are not all we wish them to be. The purple colors of Advent reflect this emotional contrast between childlike faith and harsh reality, between light and darkness. Children long for Christmas morning to open gifts, but Advent heralds the Christ who is born in darkness, in the midnight hour of our yearning for more permanent gifts, the presents or presence of God. This is why the tradition of Midnight Mass was a centerpiece of Christmas liturgy for so many years.



JOY

*Rejoice in the Lord always;
again I will say, Rejoice.*—Philippians 4:4

The third Sunday of Advent was traditionally known

as “Gaudete Sunday.” *Gaudete* is the Latin word for “rejoice.” We light the pink candle on our Advent wreaths to highlight the joyful mood that is elicited by our growing awareness that the Lord is near. There may be good reasons for our artificial Christmas trees, but there is no excuse for artificial joy. Like Mary, we do not rejoice in ourselves or in our possessions, but “our spirits rejoice in God, our Savior,” the Son of God who alone can bring true “joy to the world!”

HOSPITALITY

She laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. —Luke 2:7

Interior design has become very popular in recent years. In the hope of creating more space in their dwellings, homeowners knock down walls or tear out counters



to create the popular “open concept.” Advent is also a time for interior design. Our hearts and our

lives are often cluttered with material things, leaving “no room in the inn.” We put up walls of division, partitions of status, or closed doors of judgment that shut out God and others. Through prayer, good works, and forgiveness, we open up Advent spaces for God to enter and dwell among us.

WAKEFULNESS

Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come.—Mark 13:35

No one likes the harsh sound of the morning alarm clock. That is why snooze buttons were invented. Advent is an alarm clock of faith to awaken us to the problems of the world. Just as Christmas sales are made available “for a limited time only,” God offers us finite opportunities to address urgent issues like nuclear arms and water scarcity before it is too late. We pray, “Lord, rouse your power and come to save us,” but we must rouse ourselves as well. When the call sounds to help the Lord save the world, we cannot snooze and be “late for work.”



PEACE

They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks.—Isaiah 2:4

The dream of peace beats through the Advent season like the sacred heart of the body of Christ. This dream shines forth brightly in the poetic words of the two predominant Advent prophets, Isaiah and Jeremiah. Their words foretell the coming of the Prince of Peace who will teach us a new standard for blessedness: “Blessed are the peacemakers.” We honor our soldiers

for good reason, but perhaps we have failed to give peacemakers their due, for there is nothing unpatriotic or unfaithful about Advent's deep, unflinching commitment to "peace on earth, good will to all!"

JUSTICE

With justice he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth. —Isaiah 11:4

During Advent, all creation seems to utter a cosmic prayer that justice will one day be born through divine and human cooperation: "Let justice descend, O heavens...like gentle rain let the skies drop it down. Let the earth open and let justice spring up!" God will rain down justice from above, but justice must also be cultivated from below. Politicians must pass just laws; parents must run just households; schools must make just policies; and corporations must pay just wages. Last but not least, God's justice must be embodied in the Church, the Body of Christ on earth.



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