

Celebrating Advent

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During elementary school, I did not understand what Advent celebrated until one of my teachers, a Benedictine woman religious, helped me not only to understand something about Advent, but also to appreciate the season itself. She went all out for Advent, much like some of my neighbors do for Christmas decorations. Our teacher decorated our homeroom with an Advent wreath made with fragrant cedar branches and beautiful pillar candles. Bluish purple fabric covered the bulletin boards and the table on which the Bible was displayed. Every morning during Advent, Sister had us gather around the Advent wreath to participate in a 10-minute prayer service. She would then give us a five-minute reflection on one aspect of Advent. Her reflection could be as simple, though profound, as discussing one of the symbols of the Jesse tree, or having us engage our senses to think about why cedar was used for the ring of the wreath. From that period, Advent became one of my favorite times of the liturgical year.

Advent has two purposes. The first, and most obvious, is that it helps us prepare for Christmas when Christ became human. The readings for the Fourth Sunday of Advent, in particular, relate to Mary's conception. Mary responded to God's invitation to bear Jesus. The time from her conception until Jesus's birth nine months later was one of expectancy and hope. Advent has this same aspect for us: a time of joyful expectation for Christ's coming into our lives. Christ is the Redeemer and Savior whom we, like Mary, bear in our very beings. In the waters of Baptism, we began to be called "Christian" but it was the Father's gift of the Spirit who was bestowed on us that we, too, might bear Christ. Like Mary, Christ lives within us. Christ is "Emmanuel"—"God-with-us." God continues to be with us, even after Baptism, especially through the Eucharist when Christ enters us to transform us more and more into his image.

From December 17 through the 24th, Advent begins to focus intensely on Christmas. These days are often referred to as the "O" Antiphons. Each day between these dates is geared toward one of the titles for Christ: "O Wisdom," "O Lord," "O Root of Jesse," "O Key of David," "O Dayspring," "O King of All Nations," "O Emmanuel." Thus, the chant "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" is particularly appropriate during these days of Advent. The Book of Isaiah, prophesied about the Messiah whom Israel expected to arrive to liberate them. The O Antiphons come from Isaiah's prophecies of the Messiah

and these are used prior to Christmas as a way to recall that Christ is the Messiah, the long-awaited one who is the bringer of hope.

Secondly, during Advent "minds and hearts are led to look forward to Christ's Second Coming at the end of time (*Universal Norms on the Liturgical Year and Calendar*, 39). This second focus is most noticeable in the first few weeks of Advent. For those of us in the northern hemisphere, winter days grow shorter and nights become longer as we progress through Advent. The natural rhythm of life evokes the mystery of Christ. One of the titles for Christ is the Morning Star. The morning star generally refers to the rising sun at dawn. This ancient title is an analogy. Christ as the Son (like the sun) of God rises to dispel the darkness of sin and death. While we look to Christ's final coming at the end times, we are not necessarily waiting for a day of doom; rather, we are awaiting a day of hope. This future is the future God intends for the world. We continue to journey toward that future, but we cannot do it on our own. It is in the present where both themes of Advent are connected: past (Christ's birth) and future (Christ's final coming).

In liturgy, Christ comes into the present through the power of the Spirit. In the proclaimed Scriptures, Christ speaks to us; and in the Eucharist, Christ enters us so that we might be transformed into his body. The power of Christ is that he is not confined to either the past or the future, but he comes into the present to nourish us in Word (Scriptures) and Eucharist so that we will continue to wait joyfully for the consummation of Christ's final coming.

Advent is a season when the Church prepares for Christ's coming (1) at Christmas, (2) in the final coming, and (3) through the sacraments. Past and future are mediated in the present. It is God's transforming invitation to accept his promises and to journey in hope toward Christ's final coming.

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