

Preparing the Way



Scripture Reading Guide
Advent – Christmas 2023

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Advent: Waiting, Watching, Preparing

*He came with love to Bethlehem;
He comes with grace into our souls;
He will come with justice at the end of the world.*

The word “Advent” simply means ‘to come’. This is a time of year that Christians set aside to anticipate the coming of Christ. It is a season of attentive waiting, watching and preparation.

But we are not simply waiting for Christmas or remembering the past. Advent is the time in which we prepare for Christ to return, to reflect on the upside-down nature of the Kingdom of God that is breaking in even now on our desperate history.

It is a time of reflection about the many excessive attachments and affections that we have given ourselves to – to those things that prevent us from fully attaching ourselves to Christ. Those things that numb us to his presence, blind us to our need and the needs of others, and lull us back to the sleep of complacency.

It is a season that compels us to go beyond simple cliches like “*Jesus is the reason for the season*” or “*Keep Christ in Christmas*” to something much deeper.

The emphasis of this season falls not on Jesus coming as a baby but rather on the coming of Jesus as the Judge of all things at the end of time. This is not bad news, for as a people we long for Jesus to come because there is much in the world that needs to be put right. We long for Jesus to come in power and glory. The reason of the season can be summarized in the cry of the church: ***Maranatha! Come Lord Jesus!***

Thus, of all the seasons of the Church year, Advent most closely mirrors the daily lives of Christians. We live as a people at the juncture of two ages, where the world’s resistance to God meets the irresistible force of the God who is coming.

Our example for what we do as we wait is the person of John the Baptist, he out of place with his time, we, the Advent people, out of place with our own.

John's message is our call to action: "***Prepare the way of the Lord make straight his path.***"

Author Fleming Rutledge writes: "*John reminds us that our faith is called to be oriented not to the past, but to the future, not to the repetition of religious exercise, but to Jesus, not to arrangements as they are, but to an utterly new authority and dominion.*"

John the Baptist still speaks to us today – summoning us to rethink and reorder our lives around a new perspective – God's. His mission – of bearing witness and pointing to the one who is coming – is ours as well.

As we enter this season, consider how God sees us, our actions. What will God judge us by? Our possessions? Our successes? Or shall God judge us by the fruit of our repentance? This will require more than us being sorry. Instead, God wants change, reorientation, receiving a new start all together. Admittedly, change is hard for humans – we cling to our earthly status and old dying ways more desperately than ever. Our hearts can be like stone.

But here is the good news that Advent proclaims: a power from outside is coming, a power that is able to make a new creation out of people like us, to take stones like us, people who have no capacity to save themselves and turn them into people of God.

Advent reminds us that this power is not our own, not the power of our deeds, or our inner strength, or our spiritual discipline, or our faith or repentance. ***It is God's power that gives these gifts, and we are able to change and bear fruit because he is coming.***

What shall this repentance mean? It will mean seeking after the good of all, not just the comfort of a few. The knowledge of the coming of the Lord means that there will be hope – that our efforts are not in vain – for God is coming to set things right.

We are a people ***propelled by desperation and drawn to hope*** to the only one who can save us, trusting in the promise that Christ will come.

You know what hour it is, how it is full time now for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed; the night is far gone, the day is at hand.

- Romans 13:11-12

Reflecting on Scripture

1. Where is God in the story? How is God at work? What does this passage teach you about God?
2. What is the truth about God and what God is doing that is revealed?
3. What stood out about this story? What verse or word? What do you see or picture? What is strange, difficult or uncomfortable about this reading?
4. What do you think this story meant to the people who first heard it? What do you think it means today?
5. How does this story move you toward Jesus? How does this story fit into the bigger story of God's salvation through Jesus?
6. After reading this scripture, what questions do you have? What parts don't you understand? What questions would you ask God? The People?
7. In reading this passage how might it shape your prayers? How might it shape your actions? What does it ask you to do or not to do?
8. What is the one thing from this scripture reading that your community needs to hear today?

The Bible is Israel's story. It is the church's story. It is God's story. If we read it carefully, we will see that it is our story. When we read with ears and hearts open to hear, God speaks, and the scriptures convey to us "wonderful words of life."

First Week of Advent

November 27 – December 3

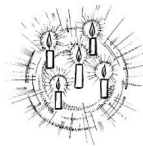
Monday	Isaiah 64:1-9
Tuesday	Micah 4
Wednesday	1 Corinthians 1:3-9
Thursday	Mark 13:24-37
Friday	Hosea 6:1-6
Psalm of the Week:	Psalm 80

Questions for Reflection

The weeks leading to Christmas are often filled with much activity. Along with work, school, and church responsibilities, there are special holiday festivities to which we will attend. Staying “awake,” as Mark 13: 24– 37 stresses, may not be the problem— in fact, we may feel there are not enough hours in the day!

Yet, this reading from Mark counsels us to be awake to, to pay attention to, what is most needful for our well-being and the well-being of the world: *God’s presence, God’s appearing among us.*

Here at the beginning of Advent, how will you “keep alert” for God in the midst of so many responsibilities and distractions?



Household Prayer: Morning

Thank you, God, for the gift of life today. I give thanks that your face shines upon me—for you are my salvation.

Lead me like a shepherd through this day.

Strengthen me for whatever lies ahead.

Grant me the spiritual gifts of peace, patience, kindness, and gentleness, for I want to show your love, in word and deed, to others.

In Christ's name. Amen.

Household Prayer: Evening

Keep watch, dear Lord, with those who work, or watch, or weep this night, and give your angels charge over those who sleep. Tend the sick, Lord Christ; give rest to the weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering, pity the afflicted, shield the joyous; and all for your love's sake. *Amen.*

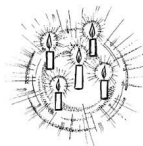
Second Week of Advent

December 4 – December 10

Monday	Isaiah 40:1-11
Tuesday	Isaiah 26:7-15
Wednesday	2 Peter 3:8-15a
Thursday	Mark 1:1-8
Friday	Malachi 2:10-3:1
Psalm of the Week	Psalm 85

Questions for Reflection

The prophet Isaiah announces good news: God comforts and strengthens a wearied and exiled people in preparation for their homeward journey. Mark's Gospel announces the good news of God in Jesus Christ: God comes to turn the world right side up and baptize us with the Holy Spirit. As we prepare to celebrate the birth of the Messiah, what is the beginning of God's good news in your life, and how will it change the way you approach this season of expectation and hope?



Household Prayer: Morning

Lord, how I love this season of new beginnings, the opportunity to turn toward you and start again. Empower me to be a messenger of good news, and a leveling influence along the way, as I seek to be one with you in smoothing out the rough places I encounter. Amen.

Household Prayer: Evening

O God, your unfailing providence sustains the world we live in and the life we live: Watch over those, both night and day, who work while others sleep, and grant that we may never forget that our common life depends upon each other's toil; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

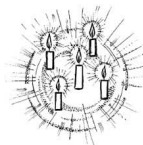
Third Week of Advent

December 11 – December 17

Monday	Isaiah 61:1-11
Tuesday	1 Thessalonians 5:16-24
Wednesday	Hebrews 1:1-4
Thursday	Hebrews 1:5-14
Friday	John 1:6-8, 19-28
Psalm of the Week	Psalm 126

Questions for Reflection

John 1: 6- 8, 19- 28 reminds us that we are not the light, but with John we are called to testify as witnesses to the light, who is Jesus Christ. The verb “to bear witness” occurs thirty-three times in the Fourth Gospel! How can you bear witness, in this season of lights, to the true Light who has come into the world?



Household Prayer: Morning

Light of the world,
you greet me this morning with new possibilities.
Shine brightly, I pray,
until I see into the dark places of this world,
and into the dark places of my own life.
I want to follow you in paths of justice,
speak up with you for liberty,
and bend with you toward the broken-hearted,
even the broken places within myself.
I trade in my faint spirit for your mantle of praise—
and with my whole being I will rejoice in you. Amen.

Household Prayer: Evening

Be present, O merciful God, and protect us through the hours
of this night, so that we who are wearied by the changes and
chances of this life may rest in your eternal changelessness;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

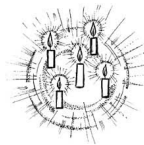
Fourth Week of Advent

December 18 – December 24

Monday	2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16
Tuesday	Romans 16:25-27
Wednesday	Luke 1:26-38
Thursday	Luke 1:46-55
Friday	1 Samuel 2:1-10
Psalm of the Week	Psalm 89

Questions for Reflection

Mary's song proclaims that God is lifting the lowly while scattering the proud and feeding the hungry while sending the rich away with empty hands. How does this change the way you think about God's coming reign of justice and favor? How does this change the way you live?



Household Prayer: Morning

Expectant God, Mary sings because she has new life in her, the promise of your salvation. Fill me with hope this day as I lift my life to you and seek to do your will. Look with favor on our world and all who are in need, that your love may be magnified as I follow humbly in your way. Amen.

Household Prayer: Evening

Visit this place, O Lord, and drive far from it all snares of the enemy; let your holy angels dwell with us to preserve us in peace; and let your blessing be upon us always; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

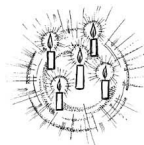
Week of Christmas

December 25 – December 31

Monday	Luke 2:1-14
Tuesday	Titus 2:11-14
Wednesday	John 1:1-14
Thursday	Isaiah 9:2-7
Friday	Hebrews 1:1-4
Psalm of the Week	Psalm 96

Questions for Reflection

Christmas Day brings the astonishing news that God is revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the imprint of God's being and the reflection of God's glory (Heb. 1: 3), and we, in turn, are God's offspring through Christ (John 1: 12). How does this news shape your self-awareness and change the way you live?



Household Prayer: Morning

Almighty God, who hast poured upon us the new light of thine incarnate Word: Grant that the same light, enkindled in our hearts, may shine forth in our lives; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Household Prayer: Evening

At the beginning of this day, O God, you are with me, like light scattering darkness. Be with me to the end— and to the beginning of the life that even death cannot destroy; through Jesus Christ the Lord. Amen.

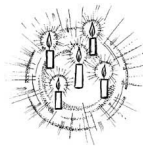
Week of Epiphany

January 1 - 7

Monday	Isaiah 60
Tuesday	Ephesians 3
Wednesday	Matthew 2:1-12
Thursday	Psalms 97
Friday	Daniel 1
Psalm of the Week	Psalm 72

Questions for Reflection

Warned in a dream of Herod's evil intentions, the magi "left for their own country by another road." What could it mean for you to take "another road" as the church concludes the celebrations of the Christmas season?



Household Prayer: Morning

O God, who by the leading of a star didst manifest thy only-begotten Son to the peoples of the earth: Lead us, who know thee now by faith, to thy presence, where we may behold thy glory face to face; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Household Prayer: Evening

Loving God, in the journey of life guide me by the star that leads to Jesus, that I may return to you transformed by his love. *Amen.*