

# Preparing the Way

Christian  
Practices  
for Advent

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# Introduction

Wouldn't it be nice if stores had “Advent is coming” sales? They could have an endcap with wreaths and candles, some devotional books and journals and perhaps even purple or deep blue accessories. They could pipe in Advent music and dim the lights, inviting people to contemplate the holy in the weeks leading to Christmas.

Alas, Advent does not get much hype in stores—or in the secular world in general. Christmas decorations appear just as pools are closing for the summer. Hallmark and other TV and streaming channels start airing Christmas shows before Charlie Brown searches for the Great Pumpkin, and Mommy's kissing Santa Claus on the radio before the leaves hit the ground. It's hard to give Advent its due.

But the weeks leading up to Christmas should—and can—be sacred time. As we watch and wait for the birth of Christ, we have wonderful traditions such as the Advent wreath that can help us mark the time. Committing to worship each Sunday (and during the week, if possible) takes us on the journey with Zechariah, Sarah, and John the Baptist, then with Mary and Joseph (and Jesus!) as they make their way to Bethlehem. Many churches offer special services and activities that create space for reflection about what it means to welcome the Christ child.

At the same time, embracing Advent doesn't require us to wear earplugs and blinders, lest we accidentally engage in Christmas preparations. If we are intentional, we can infuse the holy into some secular traditions, from picking and decorating a tree to sending Christmas cards and celebrating the feast of Saint Nicholas. Most of us are not called to a monastic or hermetic life, set off from society. But Christianity has always been countercultural, from the moment the King of kings was born in a manger. We have the opportunity—and obligation—to let our faith play a role in all we do. These daily reflections written by the staff of Forward Movement offer insights, suggestions, and stories about ways to prepare our hearts and minds during the seasons of Advent and the 12 Days of Christmas.

During this time of year and always, let us bring glad tidings of great joy into our homes and communities, transforming our traditions with prayer, intention, and devotion.

Richelle Thompson  
Editor, *Preparing the Way*

**A note:** We included a full four weeks of meditations for Advent. But the number of days in the season of Advent depends on the calendar. Feel free to skip ahead to Christmas Eve and Christmas Day (and, if you'd like, read the days you missed during the fourth week of Advent, too!).



Sunday  
The First Week of Advent

# Getting ready

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away  
the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light,  
now in the time of this mortal life in which  
your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility;  
that in the last day, when he shall come again in his  
glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead,  
we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives  
and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

—*The Book of Common Prayer*

The collect for the First Sunday of Advent sets the direction for the whole season of Advent. Many Anglican prayer books over the centuries have appointed this prayer to be said every day of the season. This prayer lays out a couple of key themes to help us savor these weeks leading up to Christmas.

As we pray, we are reminded that Jesus Christ will come again in glory, and we'd better be ready! That's an invitation to redirect our lives so that we are following Jesus in the fullest way we can. Whether we meet Jesus at his second

coming or on the day we die, we will surely meet Jesus! And even if we focus on our earthly pilgrimage rather than its inevitable end, there's no downside to shaping our lives around our call as Christians. Advent is a wonderful season to think about meeting Jesus, whether we see him at Christmas or at another time.

The second theme of the collect has to do with light. The light of Christ is our armor. And, of course, the light of Christ is also a beacon that draws people to follow him. At this time of year, as the nights grow longer, light becomes a more powerful symbol. There's nothing like seeing the light from a single candle flame illuminate an entire dark room as a metaphor for the power of Christ's light to change our lives and our world. And if we use the light from one candle to light another, the light only magnifies. The first candle's light is not diminished when we light the second candle.

Of all the customs of this season, the Advent wreath is surely the most widely known. In an Advent wreath, there are four candles for each of the four weeks of Advent. At the start of Advent, one candle is lighted. On the second Sunday of Advent, the first and second candles are lighted. By the end of Advent, four candles burn brightly.

Over the course of Advent, as days become shorter and nights are longer, the Advent wreath burns more brightly. It's just like that with Jesus. When we need him most, there he is, offering the light of his grace and mercy.

## **Going Deeper**

If you don't have an Advent wreath at home, it's not too late. Maybe your church has the supplies to help you make your own wreath—or you can buy Advent wreath kits. But all you really need is four candles. At mealtime or when it's convenient, say a prayer and light the candles every day of Advent. As you light those candles and see how the light increases through the season, invite Christ to be your light.

Monday  
The First Week of Advent

## Counting the days

Our hearts are restless, until they can find rest in you.

—Saint Augustine of Hippo

Last year, my four-year-old daughter brought home an Advent calendar from her Philadelphia parochial school. I groaned as I unpacked it from her backpack; this would mark the fourth, yes the fourth, Advent calendar in our home. And it didn't even have chocolate! Perhaps sensing my disappointment and its future in the recycling bin, my daughter looked up at me and said, "When you open the door, there's the Bible!" I looked back at her and paused. I couldn't trash the Bible. So, we hung up our fourth Advent calendar and hoped the next one included candy.

As Advent unfolded, my daughter's words proved to be prophetic. Her calendar took us from the Annunciation all the way to Christ's birth and allowed us, as a family, to read pieces of scripture and journey together each morning. I now concede that her initial summary was correct—the whole arc of the narrative leads us to Christ. When you look in the manger on Christmas morning, there's the Bible.



From the initial joy of God's creation to the ways humanity continues to fall into sin and ruin, only to be redeemed by an ever forgiving and merciful God, scripture prepares us for the long and often frustrating wait for our savior. We identify with Israelites wandering through the deserts of our lives filled with confusion and doubt, we share the disbelief of Abraham and Sarah when God surprises and astounds us, we mourn with Martha and Mary when death comes for those we love, and we are drawn again and again to God's presence.

Advent calendars can be fun holiday decorations, filled with sweet treats and a physical countdown to Christmas morning. And also, with the turn of each small door, we can be reminded of the Biblical narratives and their characters who still ring true two millennia later. We wait and watch and pray and long for God's presence in our lives and our world. We look around us and, with every door that does not open to a manger scene, wonder, "How long, O Lord?"

Fourth-century saint, Augustine of Hippo, wrote in his *Confessions*, "You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless, until they can find rest in you." We are eager to get through this season of waiting for the Messiah. Turning each small door with Eve, Miriam, Elijah, Esther, Amos, Mary, Paul, Phoebe, and a great cloud of witnesses, we know that our redemption is at hand. We are restless to kneel before the manger.

Lindsay Barrett-Adler

## **Going Deeper**

Try including a sentence or two of scripture in this year's Advent calendar. Each day that you turn a door, read a passage and discuss it with friends or family.

SAMPLE



Tuesday  
The First Week of Advent

## Service to others

In the biblical Advent story, we find inspiration to serve. In Luke's account of the nativity, the Virgin Mary chooses to call herself God's servant. "Here am I, the servant of the Lord", Mary replies when the angel Gabriel tells her that she will conceive and bear a son. "Let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). Later in the same chapter, Mary utters one of the most cherished poems of Christianity, the *Magnificat*, and again calls herself God's servant (Luke 1:48). In both instances, Luke uses the Greek word *doulē*, which can also be translated as "handmaiden" or even "slave."

Christmas and the weeks leading up to it are often touted as the season of giving—and rightly so. As Giving Tuesday approaches, many of us will receive dozens of requests from charities, nonprofits, and volunteer organizations (including our churches!) asking for a donation or a pledge. Seeing the ads on TV and social media platforms can be an overwhelming and even painful experience because we can feel that we are forced to make choices that dramatically affect people's lives.

During Advent, in addition to our church pledge, my husband and I typically donate to one or two organizations whose causes are close to our hearts. In the past, we have donated to Doctors Without Borders, to Episcopal Relief & Development, and to MOAS, an organization that has rescued thousands of migrants trying to cross the Mediterranean in improvised vessels. We pray our modest contributions join an ample pool of benefactors, which is how most nonprofits and volunteer organizations balance their books.

Yet there are other types of service that make this season meaningful: simple and unplanned acts of kindness that we can practice at the grocery store, in a parking lot, or at the airport. In one sense, these unplanned acts of service echo Mary's spontaneous response, "Let it be with me according to your word." They also recall the shepherds' speedy response found in Luke 2:15-16 to their angelic visitation: "When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger."

Hugo Olaiz

## **Going Deeper**

How can Mary and the shepherds inspire you to make this Advent a season of service?

SAMPLE

Wednesday  
The First Week of Advent



## Holy in the holly jolly

I want to be honest with you from the start: not all of our family traditions during this time of the year are focused on the divine. Elf on the Shelf? Yup. We did it. And it was fun for our two young ones and increasingly annoying for us as parents. On Christmas Eve, we threw out handfuls of oats and glitter for reindeer food, and one year, as our oldest started asking questions about Santa Claus, I made boot prints in the dust by the fireplace. She was mildly impressed but still skeptical.

It's easy to get sucked into the secular activities. Flashy gimmicks and a bevy of Pinterest pages spout the latest fads on how to bring the jingle-jangle into the season. That's why we try to balance the secular with the holy, practicing traditions that root us in the why of Advent and Christmas. For our family, celebrating the feast of Saint Nicholas has been one of the ways we call ourselves away from the holly jolly and into the holy.

On December 5, the evening before the feast of Saint Nicholas, our children set a pair of shoes on the fireplace hearth; in the morning, they received simple gifts: an

orange, a bag of nuts, an ornament for the tree, and sometimes a pair of pajamas. They also received gold (chocolate) coins as a symbol of Nicholas's generosity. According to legend, Nicholas gave coins to a poor father to use for doweries for his daughters so they wouldn't be enslaved.

We talked about Saint Nicholas and the many legends surrounding his life. In addition to the stories about his secret gifts to help the poor and others, Nicholas is patron saint of sailors, reputedly calming stormy sea waters and saving travelers from death. These conversations rooted Santa Claus in the generosity of Saint Nicholas. When their young peers questioned the veracity of Santa, our kids would answer with stories about Nicholas. And interestingly, they seemed as excited to receive the simple gifts on the feast of Saint Nicholas as they were to open the latest tech gadgets on Christmas morning.

Our children are grown now, and our oldest is expecting her first. But they still set out their shoes and wake up to a handful of chocolate coins on the feast of Saint Nicholas. They—and we—are never too old to recall and honor the generosity of Nicholas the Wonderworker.

Richelle Thompson

## **Going Deeper**

Think about ways you can recover the historical Saint Nicholas. You might start the tradition of celebrating the feast day in your own home (whether or not you have children!). You could also follow in Nicholas's example and be generous in your gifts to children, especially the poor in your community.





Thursday  
The First Week of Advent

## O Christmas tree

The tree tradition can be simultaneously full of fun and fraught. When do you buy a tree or get it out of storage? Do you prefer one color of light or multi-colored strands? Big lights or fairy lights? When do you decorate?

One thing I know about trees is that those who practice this tradition have a way. Our family has differing opinions, and our tree practices have evolved through our years together.

As a child, I don't remember having much say in how things happened. We had a formerly alive tree that we decorated with ornaments lovingly wrapped in tissue paper each year by my mom, who wrote notes on ornaments gifted to us. My parents kept everything, so we had an abundance of ornaments. We purchased our tree close to Christmas as my dad, an Episcopal priest, was a bit of a purist about Advent, and the tree was not a part of it. He was a fun dad, though, and gave in to my mom's desire to get the tree a little earlier.

I carried my childhood experiences into my family. For several years, my husband and I alternated spending

the holidays with our parents. Then came a Christmas when we tried to go to Connecticut during a blizzard and had to turn around and come home, so we had our first Christmas by ourselves. We had an artificial tree back then because of our daughters' asthma. Then, one year, the girls clamored for a live tree. The next thing I knew, we had a new tradition of getting the tree on Thanksgiving weekend. "Hold on," I protested. "I don't want a tree this soon!"

"Mom," they said to me, exasperated, "the trees are scraggly when we wait until closer to Christmas." And did I mention these girls like trees that take over the living room? Meanwhile, I'm happy with a Charlie Brown tree that needs a little love. If it were up to me, I'd rent a tree in a pot and return it to rent again next year.

I have friends who planted an evergreen in their yard, and they decorate it every year as their offering to anyone who passes by. One of my dearest friends had a Christmas cactus that he kept up year-round decorated with fairy lights. My beloved neighbor, Joy, kept an artificial tree up all year, decorated with birds in nests with white ornaments.

Thinking of these loved ones and their tree practices as well as those of my family remind me that while the particulars seem essential and highly relevant at the moment, what matters most is your intention. Whatever you do with your tree—and when—matters as long as you're happy with it. For us, it's been lesson after lesson about compromise and

making decisions together, which seems an appropriate way to move through the season of Advent.

Miriam McKenney

### **Going Deeper**

How can you be more intentional about decorating your tree—or house? In what ways can you make this a holy way to prepare for Christ?