



Heaven and Nature Sing

AN ADVENT DEVOTIONAL

A psalm.

“Sing to the Lord a new song,
for he has done marvelous things;
his right hand and his holy arm
have worked salvation for him.

The Lord has made his salvation known
and revealed his righteousness to the nations.

He has remembered his love
and his faithfulness to Israel;
all the ends of the earth have seen
the salvation of our God.

Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth,
burst into jubilant song with music;
make music to the Lord with the harp,
with the harp and the sound of singing,
with trumpets and the blast of the ram’s horn—
shout for joy before the Lord, the King.

Let the sea resound, and everything in it,
the world, and all who live in it.

Let the rivers clap their hands,
let the mountains sing together for joy;
let them sing before the Lord,
for he comes to judge the earth.

He will judge the world in righteousness
and the peoples with equity.”

Psalm 98

MERRY CHRISTMAS

The lyrics of the familiar Christmas carol “Joy to the World” speak of the joy experienced by all of the Cosmos (heaven and nature) because the Lord, the King, is coming. It’s not just a proclamation but an instruction, or rather an invitation: Let every heart prepare Him room.

In the church world, the Christmas season is often referred to as Advent. Advent is a time of longing, waiting, preparing, and the expectation of the most important arrival: the birth of Christ, the Messiah, Jesus.

During the next few weeks, no doubt, life will be filled with a lot of activities: shopping, wrapping, baking, gatherings, and travel. It is a very busy time of year for all of us, and in the midst of the busyness, it is easy to get preoccupied and distracted from the most important aspect of our Christmas celebration.

This year we want to invite you to join us in being intentional about carving out some time to remember and focus on “The Arrival”. Our desire is that our entire church family will participate in this as a unified body. To assist you in this we have created an Advent reading plan for you, your family and friends. Together, we will be reading through the prophecies that point to the Arrival, the psalms that speak of the Arrival and the nativity narrative that recount the Arrival. To make this as user friendly as possible we have made available both a printed and digital version of these devotional readings.

Each reading corresponds with the weeks of Advent:

First Sunday- Hope

Second Sunday- Peace

Third Sunday- Joy

Fourth Sunday- Love

Can we “prepare Him room” in our hearts, our schedules, our lives this Advent season? We trust that in so doing our response will be a beautiful participation as Heaven and Nature sing.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bob Marnel". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

‘Let the whole earth
shout to the Lord;
be jubilant,
shout for joy, and sing.’

Psalm 98:4



WHAT IS ADVENT?

Advent is a Latin word that means “coming” or “arrival.” On the church calendar, the season of Advent begins four Sundays before Christmas Day and culminates on Christmas Eve. It is a season filled with hope, expectation, and longing as we await the Messiah’s arrival.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Our Advent reading plan is guided by the lyrics of “Joy To The World.” The phrase “heaven and nature sing,” taken from a line in this classic Christmas hymn, serves as a reminder that the Lord is coming. “Let earth receive her King; let every heart prepare Him room.” This beautiful Christmas carol, penned by Isaac Watts in 1719, was inspired by Psalm 98 and emphasizes the reasons for our celebration. We rejoice in the birth of our King, who governs with righteousness, sets us free from sin and death, and will reign forever with grace and truth.

In this reading plan, we provide a devotional and reflection that starts each Sunday, aligning with the Advent calendar. We will read through prophecies, psalms and some of the Christmas narrative all in anticipation of celebrating the arrival of Jesus and His triumphant future return.

In this book you will also find family-friendly devotionals and activities that can be done throughout the week with kids.

CANDLELIGHTING

Many light Advent candles to mark the progression toward the anticipated birth of Christ. Feel free to practice this tradition each Sunday or simply acknowledge the candle and representation each week.

Each Sunday during Advent a new candle is lit until all the candles burn on Christmas or Christmas Eve. Three of the candles lit during Advent are traditionally purple, the Third Sunday candle is pink or rose-colored and the final candle is lit either on Christmas or Christmas Eve and is known as the Christ candle; this candle is traditionally white.

A black and white decorative border featuring various botanical elements. It includes sprigs of berries (possibly holly or rosehips), flowering branches with small blossoms, and a central vertical stem with oval-shaped leaves. The border is symmetrical and frames the central text.

Hope

THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

“The days are coming,” declares the LORD,
“when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch,
a King who will reign wisely
and do what is just and right in the land.
In his days Judah will be saved
and Israel will live in safety.
This is the name by which he will be called:
The LORD Our Righteous Savior.”

Jeremiah 23:5-6, NIV

A PSALM

“He has remembered his love
and his faithfulness to Israel;
all the ends of the earth have seen
the salvation of our God.”

Psalms 98:3



Did you ever have that feeling that something was coming to you? Most likely you couldn't put your finger on what it is, but your intuition tells you: Something is on its way. You wait, more watchful, ready to act when whatever it is reveals itself. You pray, asking God to open your eyes to what it is. And then you wait.

Zechariah, Elizabeth and Mary knew Jeremiah's words “the days are coming” and the promises of wisdom, safety and justice. Those would arrive via the LORD, called Our Righteous Savior. Then, just as now, they needed each piece: Our – it's for all, righteous – incorruptible, Savior – a rescuer. Each component was coming their way; yet they didn't know when, so they joined myriad others before them and waited expectantly.

JOY TO THE WORLD! THE LORD IS COME

text ISAAC WATTS, 1719, from Psalm 98

tune LOWELL MASON, 1848

1 Joy to the world! the Lord is come: let earth re - ceive her
 2 Joy to the earth! the Sav - ior reigns; let all their songs em -
 3 No more let sin and sor - row grow nor thorns in - fest the
 4 He rules the world with truth and grace, and makes the na - tions

King. Let ev - ery heart pre - pare him
 ploy, while fields and floods, rocks, hills, and
 ground; he comes to make his bless - ings
 prove the glo - ries of his right - eous -

room, and heaven and na - ture sing, and heaven and na - ture
 plains re - peat the sound - ing joy, re - peat the sound ing
 flow far as the curse is found, far as the curse is
 ness and won - ders of his love, and won - ders of his
 and heaven and na - ture sing,

sing, and heaven, and heaven and na - ture sing.
 joy, re - peat, re - peat the sound - ing joy.
 found, as, far as the curse is found.
 love, and won - ders, won - ders of his love.
 heaven and na - ture sing,

THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

In order to wait expectantly, they needed to believe that He would indeed remember them, that he truly loved them and would be faithful to them. For those of us who have waited a long time for something, we know how easy it is to lose hope, to begin to doubt that those promises are real. Either Mary or Elizabeth could have expressed doubt, but they did not. They rejoiced and believed. Someone good was coming. Months would need to pass first; this, after waiting for years. In the meantime, they'd wait together and while they waited, they'd hope.

Jewish writer Simone Weil said, "Waiting patiently in expectation is the foundation of the spiritual life." We spend our lives waiting. Mary waited with Elizabeth, seeking that community to keep alive the flame of hope and because they were together, that flame could grow stronger. These women show us the importance of waiting together.

We do that in this Advent season where we wait together in community. Then, as now, we wait in hope for Our Righteous Savior, our incorruptible rescuer. Though surrounded by darkness, war, and immorality, we light the Hope candle when we're together. Not only literally, but figuratively, holding on watchfully, expectantly.

Not to say any waiting is easy; hope holds hands with waiting and waiting often tries our souls. Yet, we wait for something that has already begun in us, that seed of hope. Christ has already given us something and he tells us there's more. Hope is trusting that something will be fulfilled, but fulfilled according to promises, not just wishes. Doubtless, those living before them wished he'd come in their time. He did not, but it did not make their waiting a foolish endeavor. On the contrary, it kept their souls in the proper posture for that season. May all of us do the same.



THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Advent is a season of inward preparation when our outward preparations become very distracting. It's a yearly opportunity to consider the promised coming of God's kingdom on earth. It's momentous because of the hope of His overcoming sin once and for all.

May we ready ourselves for action, and be watchful. The Joy we hope for is for the world – and the world needs Him so badly! Let us not fail to receive Him, our Lord and King.

Joy to the world, the Lord is come
Let Earth receive her King

PROPHECY

“In his days, Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. This is the name he will be called: The LORD is our righteousness.”

Jeremiah 23:6 NIV

HOW DO WE STAY FOCUSED ON JESUS THROUGHOUT THE SEASON?

As often as you are able, keep a candle burning, reminding yourself that the first candle on the Advent wreath represents Hope. The first Sunday of Advent not only leads us to anticipate the birth of Christ but celebrate the beginning of a new liturgical season as well. Sometimes called the “Prophecy Candle,” the first candle harkens us back to Isaiah’s foretelling of the birth of Christ and all the promises God gave us in the Old Testament that would be fulfilled by the birth of Jesus.



THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

A Prayer for the First Sunday of Advent

Father in heaven, we praise you because “You are my hope and my help, my glory and the lifter-up of my head.” Psalm 3:3 Thank you for giving us the hope of your return while not abandoning us, for you have left your Spirit as our Comforter and Guide. We praise you for the hope you have planted in our hearts; that we will soon experience firsthand. Through your grace, we feel your supporting arms leading us towards you. We await your salvation with a fervent desire and a calm surrender, thanks to your unchanging promise. Amen



Recipe



Candy Cane Cocoa

Warm drinks are a staple for this time of year! Try this festive twist on traditional hot cocoa by using melted chocolate and adding a dash of crushed peppermint.

INGREDIENTS

4 c. milk
3 sq semi sweet chocolate,
chopped
4 candy canes, crushed
1 c. whipping cream

DIRECTIONS

Heat milk till bubbly, but don't boil. Whisk in chocolate and candy. Garnish with whipped cream.

THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Family Advent Reading

The Family Advent Reading is designed to be read in a group setting with kids in mind. Don't have children? Keep reading and enjoy. This section focuses on the Nativity narrative and includes discussion questions and a family activity.



Begin this Advent season with a reminder of the
Hope that is coming.

“For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the greatness of his government and peace
there will be no end.
He will reign on David’s throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.
The zeal of the LORD Almighty
will accomplish this.”

Isaiah 9: 6 & 7

THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

FAMILY DEVOTIONAL

Long ago, God made a promise that someone - a child - was coming who would provide hope to all the people. He promised to send a Savior that would fulfill that promise and rescue creation. When He sent Jesus, that was one of His kept promises. That was really good news! But after many years, Jesus returned to heaven. God tells us that Jesus will come back for His people - us! We can have hope because God keeps His promises.

DISCUSSION

Have you ever had someone break a promise to you?

How does it make you feel that God will never break His promises?



FAMILY ACTIVITY

Light a candle of hope (purple, if you have it) at the dinner table tonight. May it remind you that Jesus came and is coming back.

Warm drinks are the BEST! Try the Candy Cane Cocoa recipe and think about other sweet treats you want to bake together this season.



THE SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

“May we be in this world a ray of that light which shone forth
from Bethlehem, bringing joy and peace
to the hearts of all men and women.”

– Pope Francis

A PSALM

“Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices;
my body also will rest secure,
because You will not abandon me to the realm of
the dead,
nor will You let Your faithful one see decay.
You make known to me the path of life;
You will fill me with joy in Your presence,
with eternal pleasures at Your right hand.”

Psalms 16: 9-11



We lined up against the church's inside walls, the pews full of those who came to hear our concert. After performing on stage, we moved to surround the audience for our final song. They waited, unsure of what we were doing, some feeling awkward at our closeness. Our director allowed the silence to sit among us all and then, one note hung in the air. He took a breath, raised his arms and we sang “Peace, peace, peace on Earth and good will to all. This is a time for love. This is a time for joy. Now let us all sing together of peace, peace, peace on Earth.” It never failed to inspire awe and reverence. Harmonized voices singing acapella and the acoustics of the sanctuary all combined to make us feel safe and calm, while turning our hearts and thoughts heavenward.

THE SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Oh, if only that feeling of peace could endure. Outside those walls, harsh realities wait for us - for some of us more than others, to be sure, as we battle with sickness, trauma and pain. Perhaps we are in a season of personal joy but recall seasons when things were different or we fear for the future when things may turn for the worse.

Shining through all that is Christ's peace, and because of that, we can face our lives with "the unshakable sureness that the Lord will come, to set our life in God's order." (Alfred Delp) The world today needs people who, though shaken by the world's hardships, have emerged with the surety and confidence that the Lord preserved them. Any one of us can look back at times of trial and see how His hand gripped them.

Recalling his faithfulness gives us peace and it expands when we share that peace with others. One man recently told me how he saw God's protections in his darkest days. I recalled a similar story. Together we affirmed the Lord's presence and peace as we live with those stories, having them within us to remind us of his promises.

"Rejoice for the Lord is near." That was not only for those days before Christ's birth; it is for all time. It is for us today. He is near us. Blessed are we when we feel it palpably, but even when we don't, He is. He is skin deep, he rides on every pump of our blood. His presence brings us peace - it did in our past, it does in our present, it will in our future.

Joy to the Earth, the Savior reigns
Let all their songs employ



THE SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Our Savior does indeed reign! Because of that, we each have a song we can employ – a song of his faithfulness, a song of a peace that's settled deep within us as he's made himself known to us in our darkest hours. He says, "I am here. I am with you always." That enables us to be a single ray of the light he brought to Bethlehem that still shines today. In this Advent season, may we shine that light, signifying his peaceful reign – in our hearts now and in his kingdom on Earth soon.

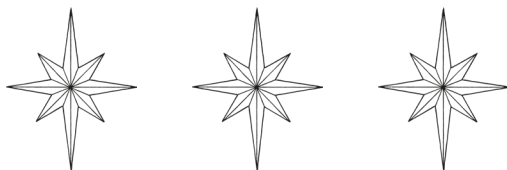


The second candle on the Advent wreath represents Peace. Like the first candle, it is also purple. Often called the "Bethlehem Candle," the second Advent candle reminds us of building on the meaning of the Prophecy Candle. This second candle recalls that after all of the division, destruction, and dispersion of the kingdom in the Old Testament, there might finally be peace on Earth – Jesus is coming, and so is his Kingdom of Peace. As we read in the quote from Pope Francis, this light of peace shone forth from Bethlehem for all the world.

PROPHECY

"I see him, but not now;
I behold him, but not near.
A star will come out of Jacob;
a scepter will rise out of Israel."

Numbers 24:17



THE SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

“The Lord watches over you—
the Lord is your shade at your right hand;
the sun will not harm you by day,
nor the moon by night.
The Lord will keep you from all harm—
He will watch over your life;
the Lord will watch over your coming and going
both now and forevermore.

Psalms 121



HOW DO WE STAY FOCUSED ON JESUS THIS SEASON?

Counter to our culture’s message, retain your focus on Christ by simplifying. Loretta Ross-Gotta, an American author and chaplain, suggests that with all the intensity and strain that many of us bring to Christmas, it may suggest to onlookers that we have not gotten the point of it. Perhaps she’s right. Instead of doing something, be something this Christmas. Be a quiet center of peace, a dwelling for God.

A Prayer for the Second Sunday of Advent

Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

From The Book of Common Prayer

THE SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Family Advent Reading

“So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.”

Luke 2: 4-7

FAMILY DEVOTIONAL

Mary and Joseph journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem before Mary gave birth to Jesus. It was probably not a very peaceful time since Mary was about to have a baby and most likely very uncomfortable. She didn't have a nice car to ride in, but was instead on a bumpy animal back. Also, when they arrived, they couldn't find a place to stay so she had no soft bed to rest on. Joseph must have wanted to comfort her very much. This scene represents the peace that everyone needs when they're uncomfortable in life and need a place to rest. Jesus is that resting place. He brings peace and comfort into our hearts. All we need to do is ask him!

DISCUSSION

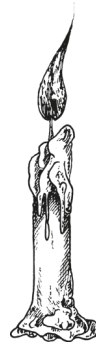
Is there something in your life right now that is causing stress or discomfort?

How does it make you feel to know that Jesus is our Prince of Peace and we can always go to Him for comfort?

THE SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

FAMILY ACTIVITY

Light a candle of peace (purple, if you have it) at the dinner table tonight. One of the prophecies about Jesus calls him “the Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6-7). When the angels appeared to the shepherds, they ended their message by saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests” (Luke 2:14)



Take your smile wherever you go this week!

Look for people that you might not normally notice and give them a big smile.

Think about the janitor at your school, your bus driver, someone at the store or church who you do not know yet.



THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

“But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see — I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.’”

Luke 2:10-12

A PSALM

Sing to the LORD a new song,
for he has done marvelous things;
his right hand and his holy arm
have worked salvation for him.
The LORD has made his salvation known
and revealed his righteousness to the nations.
He has remembered his love
and his faithfulness to Israel;
all the ends of the earth have seen
the salvation of our God.
Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth,
burst into jubilant song with music;
make music to the LORD with the harp,
with the harp and the sound of singing,
with trumpets and the blast of the ram's horn—
shout for joy before the LORD, the King.
Let the sea resound, and everything in it,
the world, and all who live in it.
Let the rivers clap their hands,
let the mountains sing together for joy;
let them sing before the LORD,
for he comes to judge the earth.

Psalms 98



THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

“Once in our world, a stable had something in it that
was bigger than our whole world.”

– C.S. Lewis



My mother-in-law passed down her nativity set to us. Made with durable materials, those figures have been touched by 3 generations of hands. Moms set it up the first time, perhaps, but inevitably, the kids move the pieces around, setting the scene for how they see in their minds' eyes the people and animals encircling Jesus. The stable is made from pieces of wood, none of them smooth; and polished, but more reminiscent of a utilitarian space, constructed to get the job done.

In such a place, as C.S. Lewis notes, there resides someone bigger than the entire world – not just the Jewish world, or the Middle Eastern world, or our globe, but the entirety of the galaxies beyond which man has no understanding. He surpasses all of that and yet, as the children kneel by that creche, eyes aglow, picturing what it must have been like on that most blessed of nights, they see a baby. No nursery bedecked in blue, no comfortable rocking chair for a nursing mother; instead, animals and their accompanying smells, shepherds and their respectful awe.

This is how the Lord has done marvelous things; this is how he has made his salvation known. It is only fitting that in addition to the awe we feel for this most humble of acts – to come to us not as a mighty warrior, but as a helpless child – that we make music and burst into song.

In some traditions, churches hold “hymnal” nights dedicated to singing only the songs from an old psalter hymnal. Though we had sung them during worship sets in our traditional morning service, the evenings were set apart for those joyous songs sung with more vigor. I remember most “Joy to the World’s” lyrics.

THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

“He rules the world with truth and grace
And makes the nations prove
The glories of His righteousness
And wonders of His love”
-Joy to the World

Voices energetically bounced along the repeated lines of “wonders of his love, and wonders of his love.” Those more stoic worshipers allowed themselves a bit of vivacity during those lines, revealing that even the most reserved had joy to leak.

In that final verse, we’re taken out of the manger and into the now where He rules the world with truth and grace. Oh, how we need truth and grace! Then and now and all times in between, nations need all that Jesus has to offer. Amen

PROPHECY

“He will judge the world in righteousness
and the peoples with equity.”
Psalm 98: 9b

HOW DO WE STAY FOCUSED ON JESUS THROUGHOUT THE SEASON?

If you have one, make the nativity scene a prominent one in your home. If you don’t own one, you don’t need to buy an elaborate set, you can make a small manger with items around the house - which more closely mimics Jesus’ first crib anyway. A patch of cloth, a small box, anything you already have to set the scene. Or, paint the nativity figures on rocks. Start with Jesus and his parents and add other figures in future years.

THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

A Prayer for the Third Sunday of Advent

If you're struggling to find the words for prayer, this Advent prayer from Henri J.M. Nouwen encapsulates what many of us feel and hope for during the Advent season:

Lord Jesus, Master of both light and
darkness, send your Holy Spirit upon our
preparation for Christmas.

We who have so much to do seek quiet
spaces to hear Your voice each day.

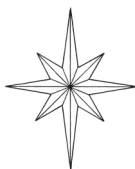
We who are anxious over many things
look forward to your coming among us.

We who are blessed in so many ways long
for the complete joy of Your Kingdom.

We whose hearts are heavy seek the joy
of Your presence.

We are Your people, walking in darkness
yet seeking the light. To You, we say,
"Come, Lord Jesus!"

The third candle of Advent symbolizes Joy. As we continue to approach Christmas Day, our joy grows more and more. The third candle takes us back to the joyful anticipation of the shepherds who journeyed to see Jesus in Bethlehem, even before the wise men. On this third Sunday of Advent, which the Church calls "Gaudete Sunday," meaning rejoice or praise, we light the third candle and rejoice like the shepherds.



THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Set some time aside with friends and family to watch a favorite Christmas movie. Don't forget to make the popcorn! We've included a tasty recipe by singer/songwriter, Natalie Grant and Raechel Myers.



Recipe



Caramel Popcorn

INGREDIENTS

- 2 bags buttered microwave popcorn
- 1 cup butter
- 1 cup white sugar
- 1/3 cup water

DIRECTIONS

Combine butter, sugar, and water in saucepan. Cook on high, stirring constantly. Allow to reach a boil (15-20 minutes of stirring). Pro tip: stir 5 seconds longer than you think you need.

Prepare popcorn as directed. Pour caramel over popcorn!

Let stand 5 minutes and enjoy.

Family Advent Reading

“God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.”

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.”

Luke 1: 26-33

THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

FAMILY DEVOTIONAL

When Mary found out she was going to be a mother, she was surprised, but she was also overwhelmed with joy. She shared her joy with a relative who was equally happy. Both of the women were going to have baby boys! Those boys would grow up to faithfully serve God, bringing much joy to many more people. Today, we have joy because we know Jesus and He will return again one day.

DISCUSSION

Can you think about something that brings you joy?

Let's take a minute to thank God for the things that bring you joy!

FAMILY ACTIVITY

Use stuffed animals to re-enact the scene from today's reading. One animal can be the angel, one can be Mary and the other can be her cousin, Elizabeth. How would the characters react to such great news? Sing "Joy to the World" together, too!



Light a candle of joy (pink, if you have it) at the dinner table tonight. At Christmas, we joyfully celebrate that God's greatest promise was fulfilled: God's kingdom has come.



THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

“And in the end, everything else will turn out to be unimportant and inessential, except for this: Father, Child, and Love.”

– St. (Pope) John Paul II



A PSALM

“Have mercy on me, God, according to your faithful love!

Wipe away my wrongdoings according to your great compassion!

Wash me completely clean of my guilt;
purify me from my sin!

Purify me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me,
and I will be whiter than snow.”

Psalm 51:1-2, 7 CEB

“No one can celebrate
A genuine Christmas
Without being truly poor.
The self-sufficient, the proud,
Those who, because they have
Everything, look down on others,
Those who have no need
Even of God – for them there
Will be no Christmas.
Only the poor, the hungry,
Those who need someone
To come on their behalf,
Will have that someone.
That someone is God.
Emmanuel. God-with-us.
Without poverty of spirit
There can be no abundance of God.”
–Oscar Romero

THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

“Everything else will turn out to be unimportant and inessential.” We who pour a lot into “everything else” like gifts and careers and retirement plans don’t want to hear that they will be unimportant and inessential. We’re strivers, some of us. Even if we’re not, we’re not keen to lean into the category of being truly poor. We may even be described as Oscar Romero does: self-sufficient and proud. He makes a point. When we have all we need, we’re more inclined to not need God. Though no one wants to be poor or hungry, those are the people who are most aware that they need a Savior.

These two writers suggest that having much may impede us from what is most true about this season – that too much gets in the way of creating a space for Christ. They suggest that when we consider our Christmas clothes, think of putting on the love of Christ. When we ponder our next acquisition, think of the love of Christ being our sole master. For “the human heart is made for Jesus Christ and cannot really be content with less.”

-Brennan Manning

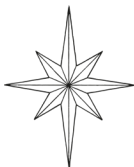
A beautiful story is recounted each Christmas in the forest of Provence in southern France. It’s about four shepherds who came to Bethlehem to see the child. One brought eggs, another bread and cheese, the third brought wine and the fourth brought nothing at all. People called him L’Enchante. The first three shepherds chatted with Mary and Joseph, how cozy was the cave and how handsomely Joseph had appointed it, what a beautiful starlit night it was. They congratulated the proud parents, presented their gifts and assured them that if they needed anything else, they had only to ask. Someone asked, “Where is L’Enchante?” They searched high and low. Finally, someone peeked through the blanket hung against the draft, into the creche. There, kneeling at the crib, was L’Enchante – the Enchanted One. Like a flame taking the direction of the wind, he had taken the direction of love. Throughout the entire night, he stayed in adoration, whispering, “Jesu, Jesu, Jesu – Jesus, Jesus, Jesus.”

THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

At Christmas, like L'Enchante, we should have one pure passion: to love the Christ child. Even when surrounded by the trappings of Christmas, those of us who would be the first three shepherds, we are to give our best to Jesus. If we are more like L'Enchante – in circumstances or in spirit – we still can give Him our best. All are asked to be content with nothing less. It begins with taking our eyes off ourselves and focusing them on the child in the manger. For holiness is less about our right behaviors and more about an emptying of ourselves to make room for Christ. May He crowd our hearts with his love! May his mercy, kindness and compassion fill us. And may we find ourselves kneeling at the manger, whispering 'Jesus, Jesus, Jesus' to our King.



The fourth candle of Advent represents Love, the ultimate love of God that He might send His only Son for us. Called the “Angel’s Candle,” the fourth candle of Advent is lit the Sunday before Christmas, and it is the color purple, leading us to eagerly await the new Kingdom of God on earth.



THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

PROPHECY

“This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet:

“The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son.

And he gave him the name Jesus.”

Matthew 1:18-25

HOW DO WE STAY FOCUSED ON JESUS THROUGHOUT THE SEASON?

What would the Most Holy One want with a heart like mine? He wants to inhabit it. This season, pay attention to how you make room for him within your heart. It may be in the evening while you listen to Christmas music and gaze upon the lighted tree. It may be in your elevated heartbeat after exercise. Or, it could be in expanded compassion for someone who possesses little. Be aware of his knock on the door, his entering in to fill you. Repeat this breath prayer from Colossians 3:11

“There is only Christ: he is everything.”

THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

A Prayer for the Fourth Sunday of Advent

Lord Jesus, thank you for coming to earth as a child. We are made for you and nothing else will satisfy us. You knew we needed you to come on our behalf. Forgive us when we're content with a teacup when you give us the ocean. Flood our hearts with your love. May you be pre-eminent in our thoughts and hearts this season and always. Supreme lover of our souls, take up residence in our hearts and may we be quick to share the love you've given us. Amen



Family Advent Reading

“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign:
The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son,
and will call him Immanuel.”

Isaiah 7:14

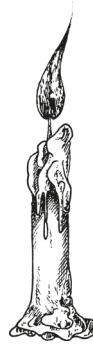
FAMILY DEVOTIONAL

Can you imagine what it was like to look at baby Jesus in the manger? He was probably sleeping and had to be so cute! Mary and Joseph, the animals, and later, the shepherds all came to get a peek. As he'd grow up, He'd give His love away freely, but for now, in his first nights as a human, others would look on him with love. They probably didn't want to hurry away – although they later would tell as many people as possible. For now, they all just stared at his sweet face, his little hands, knowing that this baby was more special than any other baby they'd ever see again.

THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

FAMILY ACTIVITY

Candle four is purple, known as “the Angel’s Candle,” and stands for Love. If you have a candle, light it at the dinner table tonight. The night Jesus was born, angels appeared to shepherds outside Bethlehem, announcing the Messiah’s birth and telling them where to find him (Luke 2:8-20)



Often Christmas means we look forward to getting gifts from those that love us. Make an effort this Christmas to be a giver. Who can you give a gift to? It doesn’t have to be a physical gift wrapped in paper. It could be a gift of help or compliments. Think first of giving before you think of receiving.

A Special Thank You

Sue Likkel is our Host Teams Coordinator at our Bellingham Campus and also an author. Sue, your dedication to crafting this beautiful devotional has not only graced these pages but has also touched the hearts of those who will turn them. A sincere thank you, from us to you.



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