

Christmas at Christ Fellowship

Week 1 of Advent| The Prophets

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O' Come Divine Messiah

*O come, divine Messiah!
The world in silence waits the day
When hope shall sing its triumph
And sadness flee away*

*Dear Savior, haste
Come, come to earth
Dispel the night and show your face
And bid us hail the dawn of grace*

*O come, divine Messiah!
The world in silence waits the day
When hope shall sing its triumph
And sadness flee away*

*O Christ, whom nations sigh for
Whom priest and prophet long foretold
Come break the captive fetters
Redeem the long-lost fold*

*Dear Savior, haste
Come, come to earth
Dispel the night and show your face
And bid us hail the dawn of grace*

*O come, divine Messiah!
The world in silence waits the day
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- By L'abbé Simon-Joseph Pellegrin, 1708, translated into English by Sister Mary of St.

Phillip, 1877

Before they fully realized just how much they would need him, he was already promised.

In the beginning, God created a wonderful world where he would live with his special creation, but the first people rebelled against his presence and reign. As Adam and Eve stood before God and learned of the consequences of their sin, the Creator also offered hope. Before they experienced how hard life would be away from God's presence, he'd already reassured them with his word. One day, one of their own descendants would come and set everything right (Genesis 3:15).

Over the millennia, as scripture was recorded, the outline of this Savior gained definition. In the words of the prophets, the poetry of the Psalmists, and the stories from Israel's past, the thin lines of the sketch we see in Genesis becomes a fuller portrait. The divine Messiah would come — the King of kings, the Lord of lords, the Prince of peace. And so Israel waited for his arrival.

As we move into the Christmas season, we're entering the weeks that churches around the world have traditionally observed as Advent. Derived from the Latin word *adventus*, which means "coming" or "arrival," Advent begins the fourth Sunday before Christmas Day. It's a season of expectancy and preparation, culminating in the celebration of Jesus, the Messiah who was, and is, and is to come. It's a time to shout "Hallelujah!" as we rejoice over the birth of our Savior, and "Maranatha!" (Come, Lord!) as we anticipate his return.

This year Advent begins on this Sunday, November 29. So, let's join together as the people of Christ Fellowship and celebrate Advent together. In the Engage God Daily, we'll walk through traditional Advent passages and ponder the moments that led to Jesus' birth. We're also including a traditional Advent guide that you can use with family or friends on the four Sundays of Advent, and Christmas Eve. You'll find this at the end of Day 5.

May the stories we'll hear during this season, and the Savior we'll worship bring us peace, joy, and hope at Christmas.

Day 1 | Waiting

I don't know about you, but I am more ready for Christmas this year than I have been in a long time. After everything we've been through in 2020, I am ready for some shiny tinsel and twinkling lights to brighten the gloomy winter nights. But beyond needing some Christmas cheer, this year, my soul is resonating more than ever with the mood of Advent.

We are used to the expectation and anticipation that's supposed to come with Christmas. In the Hallmark movie version, it means watching the oven timer while the cookies bake, looking out the front windows every fifteen minutes for loved ones to arrive, and staring at the presents under the tree and wondering what's inside. It's a joyful anticipation where the waiting is tinged with excitement.

Yet, for a lot of us, Christmas 2020 has us feeling a different kind of anticipation. We're anticipating the end of a pandemic and praying that our loved ones stay safe in the meantime. As we eagerly await vaccines, better treatments, and an end to mass outbreaks, we're looking forward to the day we can gather with a large group of people without anxiety — or a mask. For

many of us this year, our anticipation is tinged with a deep sense of weariness.

We're in good company. This Christmas, our sense of waiting is much more like the prophets of old than something depicted in a greeting card. Oppressed by foreign nations and broken by divisions within their own people, Israel waited for the King to come and rescue them. He's the one we're anticipating as well.

So let's allow the tension of waiting to remind us of the one we're truly waiting for. Because as wonderful as it will be when we are on the other side of this pandemic, sin and death will still be realities in our world until Jesus returns. For ancient Israel, their longing for the coming of the Messiah was an ache, not a tingle. The more they understood the hopelessness of their situation without him, the greater their desire for their long-expected Savior and King. As we remember his first coming, it's that kind of longing and desire that should have us anticipating his return.

Today, let's meditate on a single verse from Isaiah that captures a sense of longing that gives way to a joyful anticipation of Advent.

Isaiah 9:2

*The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness
a light has dawned.*

One of the reasons we decorate with sparkles and lights at Christmas is because it's the darkest time of the year. Even in the modern world, with the benefit of electricity, we like a little extra light during the long nights.

Imagine being an ancient Israelite and trying to traverse a rocky terrain in the deep darkness of a desert night. When the dawn finally breaks, and the world goes from black to full color, there would be a sense of joy and relief. At last! The darkness has been chased away and the way forward is clear!

It's the arrival of a great light that we celebrate at Christmas and what we anticipate when Jesus returns. His coming will make everything right. Let's believe it, trust it, and celebrate it this Christmas. May Advent give us strength in our fatigue, hope in our weariness, and joy in the long, dark night.

Take some time to pray and thank God for being true to his word and sending Jesus. Ask him to reveal himself to you in a fresh way during this Advent season. Ask him to grant your joy and peace.

Day 2 | The Already, but Not Yet

In the Old Testament, we see the nation of Israel struggle with faithfulness and obedience to God. God would warn them and they might repent for a time, but eventually they would turn again to idolatry and sin. Then they would have to endure the consequences of their disobedience when God allowed other nations to conquer them.

Israel needed a leader and a rescuer. A savior and a king. And they trusted that God would provide one.

The prophet Isaiah did not get to deliver happy, feel-good news to the Israelites. Many of his messages called the people to repent and to turn back to God, He warned them of God's coming judgment for their sins. But Isaiah did not leave the people without hope.

We read Isaiah 9:2 yesterday. Today, let's look at the whole passage.

Isaiah 9:2–7

*² The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness
a light has dawned.*

*³ You have enlarged the nation
and increased their joy;
they rejoice before you
as people rejoice at the harvest,
as warriors rejoice
when dividing the plunder.*

*⁴ For as in the day of Midian's defeat,
you have shattered
the yoke that burdens them,
the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor.*

*⁵ Every warrior's boot used in battle
and every garment rolled in blood
will be destined for burning,
will be fuel for the fire.*

*⁶ 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.*

*⁷ 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 proclaimed that the Messiah was coming and he would bring bright light and great joy.

And now we know his name — Jesus.

At last, Emmanuel, God-with-us, has come and we celebrate his birth at Christmas. With him, his kingdom has arrived and we now know that he is not just the Savior of the Jewish people, but of the whole world. All of us who have denied God and rebelled against his will can be saved! Anyone who places their faith in him will know the true joy of a relationship with God. That relationship begins now and will last into eternity.

Jesus Messiah has come and through his life on earth, he has shown us what his kingdom is like. Justice, righteousness, love, and acceptance will reign and disease, death, disaster and heartache will be banished. Although God's given us a glimpse of what the kingdom will be like through his Word and in our experience with the Holy Spirit, we are not yet experiencing it in its fullness. So like Isaiah's listeners, we are waiting, and it can feel like God is taking a long time.

Whatever your circumstances today, remember that you live in the "already" but "not yet." So much has already been gifted to us, but we're not yet experiencing the fullness of God's redemption. If you have trusted in Christ as your Savior, you know the joy of having your sins forgiven and your eternal destiny secured. You know the presence of Emmanuel through his Spirit. That doesn't mean life won't sometimes be hard, but in those moments, remember the future your Messiah has waiting for you — an eternal place in his kingdom. It can turn the pain of waiting into the joy of expectancy as we fix our eyes on Jesus and eagerly await his return.

Today, praise God that you have already experienced his love and mercy through Christ, and look forward to the joy and peace that is to come in his eternal kingdom. Praise him for the peace and hope you can have today.

Day 3 | Simeon

What's it like when something that you've hoped for finally happens? When that moment of expectation and anticipation is finally realized?

The long awaited Messiah didn't enter this world with a cataclysmic bang, but with the sound of a baby's cry. Only those whom God chose to alert even knew of his coming. But for them, their hope in God was realized.

At the time of Jesus' birth, some of God's faithful ones had been eagerly awaiting his arrival. Though hundreds of years had passed since the authoritative word of God had been spoken, they were still keeping watch and trusting that God would be true to his promise to send a Messiah to rescue and reign.

In his Gospel, Luke tells us about two of these people, Simeon and Anna. Today, let's meet Simeon and see his reaction when he holds the object of his hope.

Luke 2:25–35

²⁵ Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. ²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. ²⁷ Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, ²⁸ Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

²⁹ "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you may now dismiss your servant in peace.
³⁰ For my eyes have seen your salvation,
³¹ which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:
³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and the glory of your people Israel."

³³ The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. ³⁴ Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, ³⁵ so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

Simeon was waiting and longing for the Messiah, the "consolation of Israel". Luke shows us Simeon in the temple at the very time Mary and Joseph brought in Jesus to perform the custom of the law, presenting him to God. This custom was observed 40 days after the birth.

In Simeon's brief appearance, we are told, "It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he should not see death before he had seen the Messiah of the Lord." I wonder, how many times did Simeon go to the temple hoping for a glimpse of the Messiah? How much time did he spend waiting and wondering, asking the Holy Spirit "is that him"? At last, he not only sees Jesus, but holds him in his arms.

In recalling the promise of God, Simeon looks forward to what this incredibly special child will do. He is God's salvation, not just for the Jewish people, but for all people. God was doing something truly remarkable. The King of kings and Lord of lords had come at last to bring light to the Gentiles and glory to Israel.

Mary and Joseph marvel. Simeon's final words alert them that this great salvation will come at a cost. Jesus will not be welcomed with open arms. People's true motives will be revealed. Mary would one day see her Son crucified to save the world. But she would also see him raised to new life and ascend to the right hand of the Father to reign. God's promises are always fulfilled. He is faithful.

Perhaps during this Advent season you need to be reminded that God is faithful to his promises. No matter how long we have to watch and wait, we will experience the goodness of God. Let the fulfillment of Simeon's promise encourage you today.

What promises of God have you seen fulfilled in your own life? Take some time today to remember, and express gratitude for the faithfulness of God.

Day 4 | Anna

Whenever it's possible, I love a big family gathering for the holidays. The more the merrier. Yet, during those celebrations, there are moments when the joy of being together is interrupted by the memory of those who aren't there. Like many of you, I've lost people that I love — grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles, family friends, and a parent. At the holidays, the sting of grief can be a little sharper. Which is why I am so grateful to have the assurance that death doesn't get the final word, because Jesus, our Messiah, has defeated it.

This week we've been preparing for the first Sunday of Advent, and we've focused on the hope-filled anticipation that we can experience, even during wearying seasons of waiting. Today we're reading about Anna, who along with Simeon is shown waiting and watching for the Messiah to arrive and experiences firsthand the faithfulness of God to his people.

Luke 2:36–38

³⁶ There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, ³⁷ and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. ³⁸ Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

Anna makes a brief but significant appearance in the Christmas story. She was a woman who knew heartache and loss, yet her focus was always on God. At the loss of her husband after so short a time, she didn't stay locked in her grief. Anna had not wasted her life in bitterness, fear, or resentment. She waited in faith to see the Lord's promises fulfilled. And she didn't just wait, she prepared. For decades she had worshipped, fasted, and prayed. At 84, she had gained wisdom and an intimate knowledge of the Lord, and by his grace, saw the face of God incarnate.

Luke introduces her as a prophet, which meant her word carried weight. What is her reaction when she sees Jesus? She knows he is the key to Israel's redemption. God had not forgotten his promises to Israel.

God is faithful and he has not forgotten his promises to us. God is the great Redeemer. He redeems the losses and the heartaches. He turns what is intended for evil into good. From a sinful rebellion in the Garden of Eden to a sinless Savior being nailed to a cross, God redeems.

For some people, particularly those going through a hard time, Christmas can feel like too much. Too much glitter and lights, red and green, jingle bells and presents under the tree. Too much food and drink and holiday music. Too many forced smiles. Are we just fooling ourselves? Trying to lose ourselves in distractions? Not if we peel back the wrapping paper to the heart of Christmas.

Christmas is not about papering over the tragedies in the world, or pretending for a few days that everything is just fine. It's about faith in the God who loved us so much that he came in the flesh to redeem the lost and enslaved. It's about hope that he will see his plan all the way through to its final consummation, the restoration of his people and his creation. It's about

showing love for others and bearing one another's burdens when life seems like too much.

This is why for generations, the church has observed Advent. The Lord has come, he is here, and he is coming. He is our hope. Let's anticipate and prepare for his arrival.

If you are going through a difficult season, how can Anna inspire you? Pray that the Lord will fill you with hope. If you are doing O.K. this Christmas, how can you encourage someone who is struggling? Who can you reach out to and check on?

Day 5 | Reflect, Connect, Respond

Today, reflect on the passages we have looked at so far, and spend some extended time in prayer.

Reflect

Review our central passages for the week. What are your biggest takeaways?

[Isaiah 9:2-7](#)

[Luke 2:25-38](#)

Connect

There is a word for the place of waiting we sometimes find ourselves in — liminality. Liminal space is the place in between. It's a threshold, where you're not in the room, but you're not out of it either. It's those uncomfortable times in life when you seem stuck on pause. You know a season is ending, but you're not quite sure what the future holds.

Liminality is Abraham being promised a son, but having to wait decades for the birth of Isaac. It's the Israelites wandering in the desert for 40 years, freed from slavery, but not yet in the promised land. It's David having been anointed as king, but then living for years on the run from Saul. It's the years of silence between the last prophets and the birth of Jesus. God works in liminal space.

A lot of us feel like we've been holding our breath for months, waiting for the end of the pandemic, waiting for the results of the election, waiting for the economy to recover. We long for a return to "normal," but wonder if that's even possible. We're standing at a threshold, not knowing what's on the other side. So, we're waiting. God works in the waiting.

During this Advent season, let's invite the Holy Spirit to teach us how to wait in faith. Let's allow him to fill us with the joy of anticipation. The incarnation that we celebrate at Christmas reminds us that our God is here and he is with us. He is working to fulfill his every promise, including transforming us into the image of his Son. Don't waste the waiting. Lean in to Jesus, trust his ways, and celebrate his arrival. Let's spread the good news that in Christ there is light and life, hope and joy, even in the liminal space.

Respond

What is your next step?

As you consider what this Advent season might mean to you, think about how you can use this time to grow spiritually. How can you cultivate a deeper relationship with God this Christmas?

People may be more open to talking about Jesus during Christmas. How can you use this season to have meaningful conversations with friends, family, neighbors, or co-workers?

Advent Guide

Merry Christmas! Advent is a tradition that Christians around the world observe and can help you and your family focus on Jesus during the whole Christmas season. This is just one of many plans that are out there. You can use it as written or alter it to add your own traditions. Whether you are raising young children, living in an “empty nest,” or sharing a place with roommates, consider how you can come together with family or friends to celebrate the coming of the Messiah!

What is Advent?

The word “advent” comes from the Latin word that means “coming.” Advent is a time of expectant waiting as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus and look forward to his return.

Traditionally, advent is celebrated on the four Sundays before Christmas and on Christmas Eve. Some Christians use an Advent wreath or “crown” that sits on a table. Four candles are placed around the wreath, and one is added in the center. A different candle is lit each week, and the center candle is lit on Christmas Eve. During this special time, Scriptures are read and hymns are sung in celebration of Jesus’ arrival!

2020 Advent Calendar

To follow this Advent calendar, you’ll need: a wreath or “crown” of some kind where you can safely place the candles, five candles (a gold, white, green, purple and red), and a Bible. You’ll also want to find versions of the hymns listed below so you can sing along.

Adapt this so that it fits your family. Use a children’s Bible with pictures if you have little ones. If you don’t have an official Advent wreath or the right color candles, just use what you do have. Be creative! The point is to gather around the table with others and remember what’s truly special about this time of year — the arrival of Jesus, our Savior and Lord.

Week 1 (11/26) The Prophets

- Gold Candle: for prophets who announced Christ’s coming
- Scripture Readings: Isaiah 9:2–7, Isaiah 53:1–5, Micah 5:2, Luke 2:25–38 (Simeon and Anna)
- Hymn: *O Come O Come Emmanuel*

Week 2 (12/3) The Angels

- White Candle: for the angels who announced Jesus' coming
- Scripture Readings: Luke 1:11–45 (to Zechariah and Mary), Matthew 1:18–25 (to Joseph)
- Hymn: *Hark the Herald*

Week 3 (12/10) The Shepherds

- Green Candle: for the shepherds who came to worship Jesus
- Scripture Reading: Luke 2:8–20
- Hymn: *Joy to the World*

Week 4 (12/17) The Wise Men

- Purple Candle: for the wise men who came to worship Jesus
- Scripture Reading: Matthew 2:1–18
- Hymn: *We Three Kings*

Christmas Eve (12/24) Jesus!

- Red Candle: for the coming of Jesus
- Scripture Reading: Luke 2:1–7; 40, John 3:16
- Hymns: *Away in a Manger, What Child is This?, Amazing Grace*