

ADVENT

A Journey Of Waiting, Watching And
Preparing For The Light

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ADVENT: A Journey Of Waiting,
Watching And Preparing For The Light

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To my pastor, John Hollis, who retired in 2013 after 37 years of ministry at my home church, Freeport Church of the Nazarene in Freeport, Illinois. You and your family have taught me to prepare and participate in the Kingdom of heaven, and I am eternally grateful.

And to Andrea, I couldn't do it without you.

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Welcome to a Journey of Discovery

Advent is the time of year that prepares us for Christmas, the birth of our savior Jesus Christ. It's a period when we learn to wait, watch, hope and prepare for His coming. In fact, Advent is the first date on the church calendar, beginning the year for Christ followers. I haven't always worshiped in a tradition that embraced the church calendar, but recently I learned to embrace this method of keeping time.

In the same way our culture uses a calendar to track important dates — celebrating and remembering things that have happened in the past — the church calendar moves us through the year and encourages us to focus on important moments, dates and seasons in the life of God's people.

Both calendars share events like Christmas and Easter to an extent, but the church is called to embrace these events and holidays differently than we celebrate them in the culture at large. One of the biggest differences is where we begin. Our culture starts the year off on January 1, but Christians take a different route. Christmas, the birth of Christ, the incarnation of God—which is the story of God taking on skin and moving into our neighborhood—is the central idea for Christians. We could just kick off our calendar year here with a big Christmas party but because we are more concerned with spiritual formation than convenience (or even common sense), we need to be ready for this party and start our year on the with Advent.

With that said, let me be the first to wish you a “Happy New Year!”

I also want to welcome you to a counter-cultural way of celebrating Christ's birth, a way of subversion (or overthrowing the norm by living a new version of the story) and insurrection (or rebellion from the inside out). After all, Jesus' means of changing the world is to place himself on the inside and work out his plan from there. This is what Advent and Christmastide are all about.

The way we'll learn to celebrate these stories might be different from how you've done it in the past. That's because our culture does celebrate a variation of Advent and almost everyone celebrates Christmas. The celebrations we are familiar with centers mainly around purchasing and consuming. Gift giving and card writing are the significance of the season. It's such a stressful and debt-ridden time of year that people wind up depressed and stressed to the max.

Christians do things a bit differently. We don't encourage you to be counter-cultural or subversive on your own. This is not a trendy fad with a T-shirt and clever slogan. It's the opposite, actually. This journey might seclude you a bit. It might wind up making you look like a wanderer in a foreign land. Advent literally means, "coming," so Christians spend a few weeks waiting and preparing for that which comes, namely God Himself. Joan Chittister in her book *The Liturgical Year*, tells us "Advent is about learning to wait." That's because waiting is a key part of our spiritual formation. She says, "It is waiting that attunes us to the invisible in a highly material world."

Our church calendar and Christ both invite us to this different way of living, to a different way of celebrating and ultimately to a different way of keeping time.

For us, patience and prayer mark Advent. Waiting is the hallmark of our Advent season. We learn to be people who wait for what we know God will do. But hasn't Jesus already arrived? Why do we wait and prepare for him again? Think of it like flashbacks in a movie. They pull you into a part of the story that you already know the ending to, but you wind up so engrossed in the narrative that you relive the moments as if the end hasn't even happened. We get so caught up in retelling and reliving the story of God's people through characters like Mary and Joseph, Elizabeth, John, the wise men, the shepherds and other people that we almost forget that Christ has already been born.

Advent also encourages us to be formed by the ideas of waiting, preparing and hoping as the characters in our Advent story teach us what it looks like to live these things as we wait for Christ's second coming. With this in mind, we realize that all of life is an Advent. We are always waiting. That's why this time of year is so very important and formative. Most of us aren't very good at waiting. Advent gives us practice and, with the help of the Holy Spirit, teaches us to wait upon the Lord in all the moments of our lives.

That brings us to Christmastide. This is a fancy way to talk about not only Christmas Day and the culmination of our waiting and preparing, but also the twelve days when we celebrate Christ's birth and incarnation. That's right, we get twelve days of Christmas — not just one! As we get into the Christmastide devotions, you will hopefully begin to realize the depth and texture, the beauty that these twelve days lead us through.

The idea for this guide to Advent and Christmastide is that you will enter

into this journey with your church, youth group, small group or family. The journey of learning to wait, prepare and hope shouldn't be done alone. Ultimately, it should stir in you the desire to help the poor and give to those in need. It should encourage you to walk and not run and pray instead of purchase. Having people with you on the journey will help you to do all these things well.

I hope this book you hold in your hands helps you and your community along the way as you wait patiently on the Lord this Advent season.

How to Use This Book...

With Advent and Christmastide together, we are embarking on a journey that will last about 40 days. Here's how it works.

This book is comprised of scripture readings, reflections and questions for every day of the journey. Each day, you'll engage the different readings whether you're participating with your family, in a group or if you prefer reading them in your own time. Our journey will begin on the fourth Sunday before Christmas Day, which is always the first Sunday of Advent. It will end twelve days after Christmas as we are launched into the season of Epiphany.

Each week is grouped into Advent and Christmastide themes like *Wait*, *Prepare*, *Hope* and *Awake*. Each week will give you biblical characters and stories to frame your week and set an example for you to study and explore the given theme, drawing you deeper into the journey.

Christmastide gets a bit tricky. You have to stay awake for its arrival. Every year Christmas comes on a different day of the week. As you are reading through Week Four of this book, Christmas Day happens. When it does, skip a few pages and turn to the Christmastide section of the book. If there are extra days you didn't read, make note and come back to them on days when you need a little extra encouragement, or a reminder that God is always on His way.

Every day of the week will start off with a Bible reading. This scripture has been intentionally left out of this book so that you can engage with the passage in your own Bible. Highlight the passage, take notes, doodle...use the physical pages in your Bible as part of the journey. It may be easy to skip over this part and head straight into the devotion. I encourage you to take the extra minute or two, sit down with your Bible and read the Scripture for the day. If you only do one thing, do this.

After the Scripture, you'll find a brief devotional thought and also a meditation from a writer, scholar, thinker or interesting person. All of these things will help you think more deeply about that week's theme. They can be challenging—including some big theological words and maybe ideas you haven't thought about before—but don't be discouraged. If you don't understand something, ask someone in your community or a parent, and you can even email me (my information is included in the back of the book). I would love to listen to your questions and help you find answers.

On Sundays, you will find four Scripture readings from the Lectionary, a list of scripture readings churches all over the world use for their worship services. Reading the same Scriptures as thousands of other Christians around

the world helps us remember that we are a part of something amazing and big. We are not alone on this journey.

There are also a few traditional practices I would encourage you to participate in with your community and your family during Advent.

The Advent Calendar

Often Advent calendars are full of little chocolate gifts that count down to the big gifts we will receive on Christmas Day. Many of them start on December 1, but we will start our calendar whenever the first Sunday of Advent falls. You may want to make your own calendar that will produce anticipation and expectation in your life and help you and your family and community engage in this period of waiting and preparing. Check out the Advent Web Guide for some inspiration, or head over to Pinterest for countless Advent calendar ideas.

Keep in mind that we want to find creative ways to flip the script on the Advent calendar idea, making it about something more than getting chocolate gifts before one big gift on Christmas. We want to make our daily advent challenges about giving a note to a friend, a donation to a non-profit, or a small anonymous gift or encouragement. If you're extra motivated, make one of these challenges for every day in advance. We'll also have some creative challenges and ideas posted for you on the Web Guide. Stay tuned, and stay connected.

The Advent Wreath

A predominant image for Advent and Christmastide is that of light—a great light coming into the world. One way that Christian communities embrace this imagery is to make traditional Advent wreaths.

Advent wreaths consist of five candles in a green wreath. Some people choose four red candles and one white candle, traditional Christmas colors, but a lot of Christian traditions use three purple candles, one rose-colored candle and one white candle. After constructing their wreath, families and communities gather around it to light one candle each week of the Advent journey, with the final white candle being lit on Christmas morning.

Visit the Advent Web Guide for more details on the Advent wreath tradition including what the significance of the colors is.

The Advent Web Guide is a supplement to this book. There, you will find images and icons, videos, more great meditative quotes and Bible reading, as well as an opportunity to leave comments, ask questions and share a bit of your journey through this time of Advent.

www.AdventWebGuide.com

As you're reading, look for these icons.



SNAP!

There's a picture, image or Christian icon for you to check out!

You're only a click away.
We've posted a link to a website, blog or something cool for you to look at!



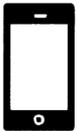
We've got a great video, YouTube, Vimeo or other goodie for you to watch.

Listen up!
We've posted an audio clip, sermon or message for you to listen to!



We like the Bible around here!
When you see this, we've got more Scripture for you!

Get ready to be inspired!
We've posted a quote or meditation that you won't want to miss.



There's an app for that.
We've provided a link to an app for your smart phone that might help you on this journey.

It's time to experiment!
Get ready to experiment with living out what you're learning!



WAIT

**ADVENT SUNDAY #1
WAIT — DAY 1**

**Isaiah 64:1-9
Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18
1 Corinthians 1:3-9
Mark 13:24-37**

Our Sunday readings are from the Revised Common Lectionary, year B. If your community follows the lectionary, make sure you check which lectionary year is being followed. The resource on the Advent Web Guide can help you with this. My hope is that you read these verses, meditate on them and engage them on Sunday morning with your church community. If your church doesn't follow the Lectionary, it's still powerful to know that thousands of Christians around the world are reading and thinking about these same verses. You're a part of something big: You're not on this journey alone!

I use a few key resources to help me connect to the Lectionary, Bible reading and the church calendar during this season. Check out the Lent Web Guide to get your hands on these resources.



WAIT // DAY 2
READING :: Luke 1:5-25

The story that frames our first week of Advent reflects many of the stories we find in the scriptures—a godly couple waiting, longing, and pleading for a child. The wife is barren, the husband is old, and waiting has turned into doubt, despair and disgrace.

Why are these stories so prevalent in the scriptures? Why does the theme of a holy longing and a perpetual waiting occur so frequently? It's human nature. We all want it—whatever "it" happens to be—*now*. Nobody wants to wait. If the Bible does anything, it tells a real story of a real people. And if you've ever deeply engaged the scriptures, you quickly realized that their story is our story. We have all found ourselves waiting. You can probably remember a time in the last week when you were in a waiting room or waiting in line. Waiting is a part of life and we do it a lot.

I wonder how many of us wait like Sarah and Zechariah in today's reading. Over the years, Zechariah fell in such despair and doubt because of the wait that God gave him that he questioned the angel that appeared to him. Let me repeat that: The *angel* that *appeared* to him.

We all have given up hope on some level, haven't we? We've moved on and written off God's promise. Even Elizabeth says in Luke 1:25 that she had translated her wait into disgrace instead of grace. When God finally answered her prayers for a child, she realized her status as favored in His sight. It's not that she wasn't favored when she was waiting; she was always favored but let doubt destroy her confidence.

Like Zechariah and Elizabeth, we often let waiting produce doubt when God intends for waiting to produce faith, hope and love.

Our challenge in Advent is to embrace the wait as a gift and not as a curse, to see in all our moments of waiting that God is preparing us for the good He has in store. Our wait is a grace, not a disgrace—if we have eyes to see all God wants to do in and through our time of waiting.

Can you think of a time when you let your waiting become doubt or disgrace?



WAIT // DAY 3
READING :: 1 Kings 19:9-13

Meditation ::

”Personal prayer is the meeting place between the Eternal One and me; the Blessed Sacrament is the visible sign of my covenant with him.

That is why I believe in personal prayer, and why every day I wait to meet him in the Eucharist. To pray means to wait for the God who comes.

Every prayer-filled day sees a meeting with the God who comes; every night that we faithfully put at his disposal is full of his presence.

And his coming and his presence are not only the result of our waiting or a prize for our efforts: they are his decision, based on his love freely poured out.

His coming is bound to his promise, not to our works or virtue. We have not earned the meeting with God because we have served him faithfully in our brethren, or because we have heaped up such a pile of virtue as to shine before Heaven.

God is thrust onward by his love, not attracted by our beauty. He comes even in moments when we have done everything wrong, when we have done nothing... when we have sinned.”

The God Who Comes by Carlo Carretto

In college, I had a theology professor who was famous for his prayers. Before I ever attended his class, I heard lore of his one- or two-line prayers that went something like this: “Crucify us. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.” When I finally sat in his classroom and had the opportunity to pray with him, all the rumors were true, but the thing that struck me most about his unsettling prayers was the space he left after “Let us pray” and before the first words of the prayer. In reality, it was only 30 seconds or maybe a minute. But those 30 seconds of silent waiting felt so long and awkward that I wanted to open my eyes and see if something was wrong. My ears naturally tuned in to the sounds and the breathing around me and strained to hear if anything was happening. I thought I was waiting to hear a prayer—waiting to pray.

In reality, the space my professor was creating with this silence and waiting was itself prayer. And my natural response to tune into the silence and listen for all that was happening is exactly what Advent is all about.

Have you ever thought about waiting and silence as prayer?

