

Preparing for Advent

Setting the Stage For Our Advent Journey, Even Before It Begins



1. Getting in Touch with Myself

One of the best ways to prepare for the very special season of Advent is to "get in touch with ourselves." It may sound odd, but one symptom of our contemporary lives is that we can often be quite "out of touch" with what is going on in our very own hearts. We are about to begin our Advent, right at the time our Western culture begins Christmas preparations. It is a busy time, and our heads are filled with details to remember. And, it is a time of emotional complexity that is part of this holiday season - with all of the expectations and challenges of family and relationships: who we want to be with and who we struggle to be with. So, our hearts are a bit tender, if not completely defended from experiencing anything deeply.

We are about to hear some very powerful and stirring readings from Isaiah, the Prophet. We will re-enter the ancient tradition of a people longing for the coming of a Savior. We may remember the days of our childhood when we longed for Christmas to come, because it was a magical time of receiving gifts. As adults, we have to ask ourselves: "What is it I long for now?" The answer won't come easily. The more we walk around with that question, and let it penetrate through the layers of distraction and self-protection, the more powerfully we will experience Advent.

Salvation From

We are about to read and pray about the expectant hope of Israel, as expressed through Isaiah. The images we will be using are about darkness and gloom - about thick clouds covering the people - and about hunger and thirst. They are images that attempt to capture a sense of what we feel when we are distant from our God. There are many images about war and conflict. They express the powerlessness and anxiety we experience when we feel vulnerable and defense-less. Most of all, there are images of a future day - a day that can only be called the Lord's - when all the tears will be wiped away, when there will be plenty to eat and drink, and when there will be no more conflict and no more war. God's salvation will be made known. God's victory will be complete.

These are very precious days for us to come into intimate contact with our own need for salvation. It is a time to make friends with our tears, our darkness, our hunger and thirst. What is missing? What eludes my grasp? What name can I give to the "restlessness" in my heart? What is the emptiness I keep trying to "feed" with food, with fantasy, with excitement, with busyness? What is the conflict that is "eating at me"? What is the sinful, unloving, self-centered pattern for which I haven't asked for forgiveness and healing? Where do I need a peace that the world cannot give?

Coming to know where I need a Savior is how I can prepare for Advent. I am preparing to listen to the promises, listen to these rich texts announcing the liberation I can truly long for. When my heart is open, when my hands are open, when my mouth is open and ready to ask for freedom, healing and peace, then I am ready to begin Advent.

Come, Lord, Jesus. Come and Visit Your People. We Await Your Coming; Come, O, Lord.

Isaiah 35

The desert and the parched land will exult; the steppe will rejoice and bloom.

They will bloom with abundant flowers, and rejoice with joyful song. The glory of Lebanon will be given to them, the splendor of Carmel and Sharon; They will see the glory of the LORD, the splendor of our God.

Strengthen the hands that are feeble, make firm the knees that are weak,

Say to those whose hearts are frightened: Be strong, fear not! Here is your God, he comes with vindication; With divine recompense he comes to save you.

Then will the eyes of the blind be opened, the ears of the deaf be cleared; then will the lame leap like a stag, then the tongue of the dumb will sing. Streams will burst forth in the desert, and rivers in the steppe. The burning sands will become pools, and the thirsty ground, springs of water; the abode where jackals lurk will be a marsh for the reed and papyrus. A highway will be there, called the holy way; No one unclean may pass over it, nor fools go astray on it. No lion will be there, nor beast of prey go up to be met upon it. It is for those with a journey to make, and on it the redeemed will walk.

Those whom the LORD has ransomed will return and enter Zion singing, crowned with everlasting joy; They will meet with joy and gladness, sorrow and mourning will flee.

The Two Parts of Advent

1. Part 1: up until December 16

While most liturgical seasons have the gospel as their main focus, during the first weeks of Advent, the Church gives us daily readings from the prophet Isaiah. With the eyes of faith, these foretell the coming of the Messiah. Rather than a continuous gospel narrative familiar to us for most of the year, this part of Advent offers a wide variety of gospel readings that support the first reading of the day.



After almost two weeks of Isaiah readings, we hear the foretelling of a Messiah from other prophets from the Hebrew scriptures - in Sirach, Numbers, Zephaniah and returning to Isaiah. With each passing week, the prophets speak more clearly of the coming of a Savior.

So, in reading the first reading, for the first part of Advent, we listen to the anticipation, expectation, hope and promise. In listening to the second reading, we listen for the fulfillment or connection with the gospel.

Part 2: December 17 - 24

In these last eight days before Christmas, the relationship between the readings changes. Now the gospel brings us to our celebration of Christmas. The gospels are taken from the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke.

Each of these days, the first reading is taken from the Hebrew scriptures, and chosen to match the gospel. In many cases we can imagine Matthew or Luke having the first reading open on their desks while they wrote the gospel.

So, we can read the gospel first and then read the first reading. The sense of anticipation and fulfillment builds as we read the story of the preparation for Jesus' first coming into this world for us.



The Three Comings of Jesus

While Considering One, We Prepare for Another

One way of really enriching our Advent journey is to keep in mind the three comings of Jesus, and how they relate to one another.

Jesus was born into our history - at a fixed point in time in the past. Jesus comes to us now, in a whole variety of ways. Jesus promised that he will come again in glory, at the end of time.

The Incarnation: Jesus has come.

This is not the coming we await. The first coming of Jesus has already happened. Our preparation to celebrate his birth is the occasion for our deeper reflection. On the first level, it is so important that we really let ourselves experience the power of the Incarnation: God is with us. That God became one of us means that "human" is one of the ways God can be. The deeper we contemplate this mystery the more we enter into the grace of "God with us." The more we let ourselves be touched by this mystery, the more we see the connection between Christmas and Easter: all of this is "for me" - for my salvation - to free me from the power of sin and death.

My Life Now: Jesus comes to me.

When we open our hearts and our mouths and plead, "Come, O Lord," we are most directly experiencing our desire for the Lord to come to us and touch us with the grace of salvation - that we might live it with greater freedom and peace. Jesus is present whenever we need him to be present: actually, whenever we turn to him - even with empty hands. Jesus is alive and active in us when we read God's Word and let it into our hearts. Jesus promised to be present with us whenever two or three are gathered together in his name. And, we know Jesus comes to us whenever our sacrifices and our sufferings unite us with his own mission. Advent is a special time to experience our longing for the presence of Jesus with us now - in all the places we need him most.

Our Future: Jesus comes again, in glory.

One of the most transforming graces of Advent is given us as our longing deepens. The more grateful we become for how God saved us in Jesus, the more deeply we enter into the mystery of how Jesus is with us now. The closer we come to experiencing joy at how our Lord, Jesus Christ came into our world, faithful to God and faithful to our life journey in the flesh, the closer we come to experiencing the mystery of salvation in our everyday lives. And, as our longing is filled with the utter fullness of God's gift to us, we begin to long with the ultimate freedom: we long to be with him in God. We live more at home in this world because our God made a home in this world. But the whole story draws us to a complete picture of who we are and where we belong. Then our prayer begins to change, in our hearts and on our lips. We still are singing, "Come, Lord, Jesus!" but our song is transformed into the free and complete song of the lover: "Come, and take me with you."

Now we watch for the day, hoping that the salvation promised us will be ours when Christ will come again in his glory.



As we begin Advent, we light one candle in the midst of all the darkness in our lives and in the world. It symbolizes our longing, our desire, our hope. Three "advents" or "comings" shape our desire. We want to be renewed in a sense that Jesus came to save us from our sin and death. We want to experience his coming to us now, in our everyday lives, to help us live our lives with meaning and purpose. And we want to prepare for his coming to meet us at the end of our lives on this earth.

So, we begin with our longing, our desire and our hope.

When we wake up, each day this week, we could light that candle, just by taking a few moments to focus. We could pause for 1 minute at the side of our bed, or while putting on our slippers or our robe, and light an inner candle. Who among us doesn't have time to pause for a moment? We could each find our own way to pray something like this:

"Lord, the light I choose to let into my life today is based on my trust in you. It is a weak flame, but I so much desire that it dispel a bit more darkness today. Today, I just want to taste the longing I have for you as I go to the meeting this morning, carry out the responsibilities of my work, face the frustration of some difficult relationships. Let this candle be my reminder today of my hope in your coming."

Each morning this week, that momentary prayer might get more specific, as it prepares us for the day we will face. And as we head to work, walk to a meeting, rush through lunch, take care of errands, meet with people, pick up the phone to return some calls, answer e-mail, return home to prepare a meal, listen to the ups and downs of our loved ones' day, we can take brief moments to relate our desire for the three comings of the Lord to our life.



If our family has an Advent wreath, or even if it doesn't, we could pray together before our evening meal. As we light the first candle on the wreath, or as we simply pause to pray together our normal grace. Then, as we begin to eat, we can invite each other, including the children, to say something about what it means today to light this first candle. Perhaps we could ask a different question each night, or ask about examples from the day. How am I getting in touch with the longing within me? How did I prepare today? What does it mean to prepare to celebrate his coming 2,000 years ago? How can we prepare to experience his coming into our lives this year? What does it mean for us now, with our country involved in so much conflict around the world? How are we being invited to trust more deeply? How much more do we long for his coming to us, in the midst of the darkness in our world? In what ways can we renew our lives so we might be prepared to greet him when he comes again? Our evening meal could be transformed this week, if we could shape some kind of conversation together that lights a candle of anticipation in our lives. Don't worry if everyone isn't "good at" this kind of conversation at first. We can model it, based on our momentary pauses throughout each day, in which we are discovering deeper and deeper desires, in the midst of our everyday lives.

And every night this week, we can pause briefly, perhaps as we undress or sit for a minute at the edge of the bed. We can be aware of how that one, small candle's worth of desire brought light into this day. And we can give thanks. Going to bed each night this week with some gratitude is part of the preparation for growing anticipation and desire.

*Come, Lord Jesus! Come and visit your people.
We await your coming. Come, O Lord.*



