

First Week in Advent

Isaiah 2:1-5 - Isaiah envisions the day when Zion (Jerusalem) will be the place where nations will come and be eager to learn – and walk – in the ways of God. Isaiah’s view of the future is filled with a promise of peace, where the Lord Himself will settle international disputes.

Romans 13:11-14 - Paul challenges us to remember that our “salvation” (the complete blessing we will have when Christ comes – including new bodies and a new home) is closer today than ever before. It’s easy to get lulled into darkness. Paul calls us to be awake and alert and to behave as those who walk in the light of the Gospel so we will not be found in sin when Christ returns.

Matthew 24:36-44 - This passage reminds us that Christ will return. It stresses that only God knows the hour, or the time, of this event. It indicates that the coming of Christ will be sudden, catching people unaware. These verses also remind us that when Jesus returns it will be a time of separation and judgment... a time when he will gather to himself those who are his own.

There’s No Place Like Hope

Hope. Just say the word and suddenly the world looks a little brighter and trouble feels a little lighter. It was this gift of hope Isaiah gave to God’s people. Through faith’s eyes, he saw the coming of the Messiah and the peace His arrival would bring. By faith, Paul also saw eternal life closer than ever – day-by-day, moment by moment.

It is hope that enables us to see the coming of Christ in our own lives and in the life to come. Sometimes the darkness of our circumstances overwhelms us. But the words of Jesus pierce the darkness of our suffering, causing us to look up. Like children awaking to Christmas morning, Christ comes suddenly, His joy surprising us, His embrace gathering us.

As we await His coming, it is hope that gives voice to faith as we affirm: *Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again!*

Prayer when lighting first candle of the Advent wreath

God of hope, Your light pierces the darkness of my heart and the world. Strengthen me to walk in Your light, casting off the works of darkness. Fill my home and heart with the light of Christ and help me reflect You to a weary world, longing for the thrill of hope. Blessed be God now and forever. Amen.

**Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A*

Second Week in Advent

Isaiah 11:1-10 - Isaiah envisions a king who will be scrupulously fair in the administration of justice, putting right the injustices of his predecessors. He sees a king that will be faithful, full of wisdom and understanding... one who righteously honors God. He sees the time when perfect peace will flood the earth. And Isaiah depicts that this King will be like a shoot from the stump of Jesse.

Romans 15:4-13 - Paul emphasizes the obligations of those within the Christian fellowship. How are we to live with one another? How are we to treat those who are weak? He stresses: 1) "Consideration" must always be foremost in our thoughts and actions. 2) To study Scripture and draw encouragement from it. 3) To be people of fortitude (able to stand against pressures) and encouragement so that we may live in harmony with one another. 4) To welcome one another, because Christ has welcomed us.

Paul quotes Isaiah reminding us that "the root of Jesse shall come" and He will reign – not only over Israel – but He will be the ruler of the Gentiles.

Matthew 3:1-12 - Despite the verbal respect shown for the Law, John recognizes that God's people had departed from total covenant commitment and needed a radical change of both attitude and behavior. He announces that God's kingdom is near, and echoes Isaiah's words admonishing us to "prepare the way of the Lord."

John stresses that while he baptizes in water, Christ will immerse believers in the Holy Spirit and unbelievers with fire.

Better Than Santa's List

We often tease children that they better be good since Santa knows who's been naughty or nice. For children, the knowledge of their actions resulting in good gifts is enough to cause a change in behavior.

In a sense, Advent offers us this same opportunity – a chance to examine our hearts and attitudes in preparation for Christ's coming. The desire is not about making "the good list," but about seeing the Holy Spirit produce in us good fruit that reflects the glory and grace of God.

When we examine our hearts and allow the Holy Spirit to work in us, we experience heavenly peace, making our hearts and homes calm and bright with the presence and peace of Christ.

Prayer when lighting the second candle of the Advent wreath

God of peace, Your word calls me to prepare the way of the Lord, forsaking sin and greeting with joy the coming of Christ. Through Your Son, give me the peace of reconciliation with You and make me an instrument of peace in my home and the world. Blessed be God now and forever. Amen.

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Third Week in Advent

Isaiah 35:1-10 - In poetic form, Isaiah portrays the time when conflict (of the pagan peoples; chapter 34) results in the restoration of Israel, when hopes break the darkness of despair. New life, color, joy, and singing will transform the wilderness into a place where God's glory will be revealed. The "recompense of God" (that is, his reward for those who remain steadfast in his love) is the hope that offers strength and courage to the weak and fearful.

James 5:7-10 - James exhorts followers of Christ to be patient in the midst of suffering. The sense of patience includes waiting and endurance until the Lord takes action on their behalf. James' counsel is not to encourage revolution by taking justice into one's own hand. Rather, it is a call to relinquish their rights to God who will judge oppression in his time.

Matthew 11:2-11 - John is in prison. His high view of Jesus is confronted with questions. Possibly John is wondering why there were no signs of the imminent judgment of the wicked that he had predicted (Matthew 3:10). Jesus' reply to John encourages him to observe the works that Jesus was doing. Jesus specifically itemizes them (vs. 4-5), in beatitude form. Jesus encourages John, and everyone else with similar doubts to remain faithful to him no matter what may come (vs. 6).

Look Who's Here

"Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God." In the midst of oppression and suffering – in the face of doubt and fear – feel the power and joy of those words. That which is longed for has come. That which is hidden is fully revealed.

In our own lives and the lives of those around us, we face seasons of doubt, suffering, and confusion. It is in these moments that faith echoes the voice of John the Baptist preparing the way of the Lord, revealing Jesus who already stands among us.

Who is around you? Is there one in need of healing? Does someone wait for forgiveness? Is there one who longs for acceptance and comfort? Does someone need food or shelter? Open your hands and heart to share. In serving others, Christ comes and we proclaim with joy to others, and ourselves, "Here is your God!"

Prayer when lighting the third candle of the Advent wreath

God of joy, deliver me from sin, strengthening me with your grace and mercy. Through Your Holy Spirit, empower me to proclaim joy to the world through Your coming. Blessed be God now and forever. Amen.

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Fourth Week in Advent

Isaiah 7:10-16 - Ahaz was commanded to ask for a sign: some clear supernatural event that would confirm Isaiah's promise. His disobedience was a demonstration of unbelief, not piety. So, the Lord turned from Ahaz and gave a sign to the entire house of David (vs. 13). This sign was fulfilled ultimately in the birth of Jesus Christ (Mt. 1:23).

The name "Immanuel" means "God with us" and reinforces the emphatic position of the words to show that "With Us is God!" "Immanuel" captures the awe and wonder of the incarnation – the unimaginable fact that the God of the universe entered the stream of time to become one with us.

Romans 1:1-7 - Paul defines his ministry as that of the Gospel, which he calls "the Gospel of God" (vs. 1), "the Gospel of His Son" (vs. 9), and "the Gospel of Christ" (vs. 16). This "Good News" is not something that Paul invented, but is what the Old Testament promised concerning Jesus' coming, death, and resurrection.

Paul reminds his readers that they (we) are also "called by Christ to be 'saints'" (living believers in Jesus Christ), and that only God can make saints out of sinners. And, he reminds them (and us) that they (we) are "beloved of God," just as Christ is loved by the Father.

Matthew 1:18-25 - Both the reality and the supernatural nature of Jesus' conception are highlighted in Matthew's account. The incarnation is the real "enfleshment" of the Son of God. Jesus took our human nature and entered into our world through the door of the virginal conception. The ministry of the Holy Spirit, which will be an important motif in Matthew's Gospel, is highlighted first in relation to the incarnation of Jesus.

"Immanuel" means "God with us," and finds its echo in Jesus' promise at the very end of the Gospel: "I am with you always" (28:20). Matthew also tells us that Joseph and Mary had no sexual relations until after the birth of Jesus.

Love Came Down

During times of darkness and suffering, there's something comforting about the presence of a loved one. A gentle touch, a quiet word makes all the difference in letting us know we are not alone. This is what God has done for us.

In the ultimate act of love, He entered our darkness and suffering, stretching out His hands to – and for – us. Emmanuel, God with us. Let every heart prepare Him room. Let earth receive her King.

Prayer when lighting the fourth candle of the Advent wreath

God of love, by Your Holy Spirit, prepare my heart as Your dwelling place. Be born anew in me, and through me, let Your love be known. Blessed be God now and forever. Amen.

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