

*Traveling with*  
**OUR ANCESTORS**  
An Advent Devotional



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## A note from the author and a little plea for seven weeks of Advent

I'm a member of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), but one of my favorite churches in this country is University Lutheran Chapel in Berkeley, California. They do justice right, and they do liturgy right. And I say that as someone who believes there are a million ways to do both justice and liturgy.

One of the reasons I fell in love with them is that as they deepened their relationship with refugees in their neighborhood, including undocumented refugees, they decided that to be more Christ-like, they'd need to turn one of the offices in their building into a mini-apartment of last refuge as ICE raids became more brutal and more prevalent. They worked out a plan with their local police, who were sympathetic to their mission. And throughout the process they studied scripture and prayed and worshiped as they sought guidance for their path forward.

I know, that story has nothing to do with Advent...other than the fact that the holy family were refugees, and some of our spiritual ancestors in Egypt kept them safe until they could return home.

University Lutheran Chapel and their dynamic pastor, Rev. Jeff Johnson, also helped me fall in love with the ancient practice of seven weeks of Advent instead of four.

See, you've felt the same strain I have, I know it. The sense that secular Christmas and commercialism have crowded out the experience of Advent we long for: meditative, preparatory, mindful, and hopefully a little slowed down.

Back in the old days, Pastor Jeff explained to me, Advent was seven weeks long, just like Lent. The seasons mirrored each other, and they were both times of fasting, penitence, self-reflection, and preparation—for birth or for resurrection.

This is why there are seven verses in the often-sung "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," Pastor Jeff explained—one for the theme of each week of Advent.

According to my mother, that's why Advent includes Gaudete Sunday (also known as Rose Sunday or Joy Sunday) in the middle of Advent; for the practical reason that people were passing out from all the fasting and needed a snack to make it through the last two

weeks of Advent. I mean, *anyone* can fast for four weeks, right? But seven weeks is too much. (That was a little joke. I do not encourage you to fast for four straight weeks, much less seven.)

For the liturgically-rich explanation, you can visit [www.theadventproject.org](http://www.theadventproject.org), but University Lutheran Church's learnings are enough for me:

- Instead of being limited to the story of a baby arriving, seven weeks allowed them to prepare for the Incarnation of Christ in a bigger way—God already made manifest, God on God's way, and the eschatological Second Coming that is actually in the lectionary during the last three weeks of Ordinary Time (the weeks before Advent).
- They added some apocalyptic texts into worship that they usually ignore, which allowed them to connect with the Cosmic Christ who we see manifest in the baby Jesus.
- I'm going to quote Pastor Jeff directly here because it's so good: "We found it incredibly helpful because of late-stage capitalism. Seven weeks gives us a chance to get out in front of that." In other words, toy commercials can't drown out the spirit quite as easily.
- Congregants got to engage in the spiritual practice of waiting and anticipating, which is what we want Advent to be but rarely get to experience.

I told you why I fell in love with University Lutheran: the deep intersection between liturgy and justice. As Pastor Jeff says, "Liturgical practice without activism can be deadly, or nostalgic. We see liturgical practice as a way into contextual engagement—falling in love with your neighborhood, with the street. The combination of comfort and challenge is essential."

As an example of this, in 2020 the church did a digital pilgrimage using the teachings of the African American mystic Howard Thurman as part of their practice. Congregants followed a virtual route in their neighborhood to walk from Howard Thurman's house to the Land's End lookout point in San Francisco. Journeying with a spiritual ancestor such as Thurman, even virtually, helped them feel less alone during the COVID mandate to shelter in place.

This year we may need a little more spiritual support to get us ready for Jesus' birth. We have been through some really hard times.

The experience of fear, isolation, uncertainty, loss, and grief—it’s all still pumping through our veins. And my friends at University Lutheran understand that our ancestors have some tools we could use. They knew we deserved seven weeks of Advent as well as Lent—hitting the reset button twice a year, in community, with prayers and songs to accompany us on the journey.

This Advent devotional is designed to introduce or reconnect you with some spiritual ancestors who will give you a hug of encouragement or a nudge out of complacency. They know something about how to get ready for new life. I hope they can help you on the way.

Maybe a seven-week Advent devotional is in our future, but for now this devotional only has devotions for the new tradition of four weeks of Advent...plus the twelve days of Christmas.

So here are the ancestors we’ll get to hang out with during Advent and the twelve days of Christmas.

- On Sundays in Advent, we’ll connect with a spiritual ancestor from the time when Jesus was getting ready to be born.
- On Mondays, we’ll meet a more contemporary spiritual ancestor from somewhere else on the globe.
- On Tuesdays, we’ll receive guidance from the monastics who lived in the deserts of northern Africa, the Middle East, and southern Europe, known as the Desert Mothers and Fathers.
- On Wednesdays, a spiritual ancestor from before the time of Jesus will offer some wisdom.
- On Thursdays, we’ll encounter a more recent spiritual ancestor from the United States.
- On Fridays, we’ll encounter our spiritual ancestors who helped start the church almost 2,000 years ago.
- On Saturdays we’ll meet a spiritual companion who’s not yet an ancestor...because we’re also figuring out how to be better spiritual ancestors for our children’s children, and they might help us on our way.
- Then, during the twelve days of Christmas, we’ll spend time connecting with spiritual ancestors who helped create greater inclusion and justice within my denomination, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Even if you’re not a

Disciple, these folks are your ancestors, too, because they worked for the sake of Jesus' gospel message here in the United States.

In a year when we need a Prince of Peace more than ever, I hope our spiritual ancestors will help us prepare and ground ourselves.

Now go look up those seven antiphons of "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" so our ancestors can start their work on our souls!

Here are some thoughts on how you could practice the three weeks of Advent before November 28.

- Week of November 7: Mark 12:38-44 - How is the story of the widow's mite a story of Incarnation? As we wait for Christ to arrive in our midst, how might we recognize Christ is already in our midst, in actions of selflessness and generosity. Family practices of **generosity** might be acts of preparation this week of Advent.
- Week of November 14: Mark 13:1-8 - Jesus warns of all the things that can and will collapse. A part of preparation for new things, like Christ's coming and overturning so much that we are used to, is **non-attachment** or the acceptance of impermanence. What might we give away or what grudges might we let go of, or what physical things or places might we not put so much stock in so we actually create space for the coming of the Christ this week of Advent?
- Week of November 21: John 18:33-37 (aka Christ the King Sunday). Strange to have a Good Friday reading during Advent, huh? But Advent is a preparation for the Reign of Christ, not just to greet a baby. This passage reminds us to prepare for leadership that looks nothing like we've been trained to expect. Spending this week reflecting on the qualities of Jesus and the qualities we normally expect from elected officials might help us do the work of **adjusting expectations** as we prepare to greet an entirely different kind of king this season.

# HOPE

About half of Christmas movies hinge on people needing to believe (e.g., *A Miracle on 34th Street*, *Elf*, and *Jingle Jangle*, to name a few). The first week of Advent focuses on hope. God brings new life into our world because we have hope that a better world is possible. Hope can be hard to come by. Maybe our ancestors can teach us how to open our hearts to hope so we can prepare for the birth of the baby Jesus.

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 28

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*A Spiritual Ancestor from the Time of Jesus*

The angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth.” —*Luke 1:13–14*

Behold, a man without hope. Zechariah’s response to the angel bearing the news of John the Baptist’s birth suggests he was so worn down that, even though he performed the rote rituals of his job as a priest in the temple, his sense of God’s infinite possibility had been diminished. This can happen when living in the shadow of an empire (Rome) whose goal is to remind you that you are not valuable, to strip you of your hope. A hopeless person could not truly support the creation of God’s miracle. Zechariah, a person of influence within the religious hierarchy of his community, went silent. And the voices of praise could finally be heard in response—voices such as his wife Elizabeth, who had been spoken over and silenced too much and whose voice guided the birth of hope into a world that needed it so much.

Today, reflect on where you have influence, and whether you are creating space for hope for those who need it. If you need to be heard, pray for strength. If you need to be silent so hope can be heard, pray for patience.



MONDAY, NOVEMBER 29

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*A Spiritual Ancestor from the Global Scene*

Therefore prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed. —*1 Peter 1:13*

“I beg you all, dear brothers and sisters, let us look at these matters at this moment in our history with this hope, with this spirit of giving, of sacrifice, and let us do what we can...The holy woman we remember today could not do many things directly perhaps, but she could encourage those who can work, could sympathize with their struggle, and above all could pray.<sup>1</sup>” —Oscar Romero, the day he was martyred.

It took a lot of hope on the part of Archbishop Oscar Romero to keep preaching the gospel and to stand up against an oppressive government in El Salvador in the 1970s. Even on the day he was martyred by that same government, during Mass, he preached a message of hope that things could be better. With Jesus on the way, the community would know safety and love and justice.

Where on this journey do you have hope that, with Jesus on the way, your community might know safety and love and justice for all? Are there any risks you’re willing to take to live out your hope today?

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1 *America: The Jesuit Review*, “This is the Homily Óscar Romero was Delivering When He Was Killed.”

MONDAY, DECEMBER 6

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*A Spiritual Ancestor from the Global Scene*

Let them turn away from evil and do good;  
let them seek peace and pursue it. —1 Peter 3:11

Ahn Byung-Mu (1922–1996) gave birth to “Minjung Theology” (theology of the oppressed) in Korea in the 1970s. Because of his teachings that God loves those on the margins, he lost his job as a theology professor twice and was imprisoned for standing against the authoritarian regime in South Korea in the 1970s and speaking up for poor people. He saw injustice robbing his country of peace. “I view Jesus as a minjung event and a collective event,” he said in an interview in 1985. “This event [Jesus event] was never completed in a single occurrence two thousand years ago but has been recurring both within the church and in history in general...It is just like the volcanic lava that repeatedly erupts, while streaming below the surface of the earth. That is, Jesus is the great volcanic lava of the minjung event!”<sup>6</sup>

Sometimes creating peace requires us to stand against injustice and evil. Today, reflect on how you can prepare for the birth of the Christ child by actively pursuing the minjung event of peace.

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6 Byung-Mu, *Stories of Minjung Theology: The Theological Journey of Ahn Byung-Mu in His Own Words*, 19.