



1 Watchful Expectancy

Background from the Author

The shouting of the merchants that begins sometimes as early as the day after Halloween and certainly by Thanksgiving drowns out everything about Christmas except eating, decorating, and gift-giving! Local newscasters on Thanksgiving night announce the “official” start of the “Christmas season.” Trees and decorations go up earlier and earlier each year, often to be discarded a day or two after Christmas Day. People today are not sure when Christmas begins or ends.

Unfortunately, many people seem as confused about the meaning of Christmas as they are about the timing. “Christmas was meant for children” bawls some singer on the radio, who has not the vaguest idea what he is talking about. Some folks have a fuzzy notion that wishing or “praying” for peace is the religious part of Christmas. They understand peace as a lovely fantasy, which we should nevertheless try to get closer to. In the view of many, all that Christmas has to do with Jesus is that it is his birthday party.

The recovery of the Advent season in and by the Church may be all that saves Christmas. What is all the celebration about? Why did Christmas develop in the Church in the first place? What is the theology; what is the message of God that we focus on at Christmas? How does peace come—if it comes at all? Why did Jesus come? What, if anything, did his coming accomplish? The people of our churches need to take a step back, remain calm,

put away the Christmas carols, and listen to the biblical texts which the Church has picked to guide us toward the deep meanings of Christmas.

Advent begins four Sundays before Christmas Day. Christmas runs from December 25 through January 5—the traditional Twelve Days of Christmas. Epiphany begins on January 6 and runs until Ash Wednesday. The Advent season is to Christmas what Lent is to Easter: a season of thoughtful preparation to make the faith community ready to celebrate one of its most important events.

What will come as a surprise to many participants in this study is the emphasis on the Final Coming of Christ that is the focus of the first Sunday of Advent. It will seem disjointed and out of place to some. But the Final Coming does not focus so much on the end of the world as it does on the fulfillment of the kingdom of God. Life is not ending; it is beginning. Jesus' coming is the announcement and the inauguration of the fulfillment of all the promises of God. God is bringing the fulfillment of history and it has a particular shape.

The Gospel texts contain scenes of doom and disaster, but be careful not to misinterpret these texts. For the faithful in Christ this is a time not of ending, but of beginning: "Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near!" (Luke 21:28). ". . . the night is far gone, the day is near." (Romans 13:12a). Help the participants in the study to focus more on what is coming than on what is ending. At all costs avoid discussions of signs in the present day, political, environmental, or whatever. The Final Coming is the fulfillment of all the promises of God; that is the focus.

The epistle texts keep us planted firmly in the present: since the shape of the future is sure, the present must conform to it in acts of love, mercy, penitence, forgiveness, compassion, and hope. If people will focus their concern on living this life trusting Christ, the future will take care of itself.

Do not ignore the theme of the judgment of God in this session. Help the people to understand God's judgment as part of God's mercy. How can God allow those who hurt and destroy others (whether with weapons or cruel words) to bring death and pain into the kingdom of God? If God rules, then those who cling to the power of hate and death cannot rule. If they will not repent, they exclude themselves from God's final realities. Beware of the sophistry, the mushy thinking that says that God is too nice to judge the people! God who does not judge evil is in no way "nice." The group need not make decisions

about universal versus particular salvation. But it is imperative that the concept of God's mercy in judgment be lifted up.

You will need to explain to the participants that the Church has divided Scripture readings in the Church into three years, A, B, and C. This listing of verses for each week is called a lectionary. There are differences from denomination to denomination. I have followed the Common Lectionary. The texts for all three years are included in these sessions. If you are the preacher as well as the teacher, you may want to preach on the lectionary readings for the appropriate year. That way the participants can see the dynamics of Advent worship at work. If you are not the preacher, you may want to alert the preacher to what is going on in this study, so that he/she might make these passages a part of the community's worship. We will be looking at many Advent hymns in these sessions. If the group can sing some of them, or if there is a soloist who can sing one or two a session, that is all to the good. The hymns of Advent are rich and beautiful; they deserve to be heard and used in worship.

SESSION PLANS

Learning Objectives

It is intended that this session will enable the participants to:

1. Become acquainted with the others in the study group and begin to feel comfortable sharing ideas and feelings with the group.
2. Recognize the ways in which the Advent season enriches our understanding and celebration of Christmas.
3. Think in positive ways about the Final Advent and the fulfillment of the kingdom of God.

Resources You May Need

Name Tags

Chalkboard and chalk or markers and newsprint

Bibles

Copies for overhead projector of the suggested hymns or hymnals for each person

Copies of the Common Lectionary or another lectionary

CD or tape of Handel's "But Who May Abide the Day of His Coming?" and CD or tape player

Copies of work sheets

A soloist and/or pianist

Leadership Strategy

SETTING THE STAGE

1. Welcome the group and open with a prayer. Do any "housekeeping" chores, such as identifying location of rest rooms, indicating coffee break time, "munchie" sign-ups, sign-in sheets and the like. You may want to distribute copies of the Common Lectionary or another lectionary and explain briefly how a three-year lectionary works. In this course we will look at texts from all three years.
2. Since this is a short study, it will be important to help the members of the group feel comfortable with each other rather quickly. Name tags are important if people do not know everyone since we are more likely to speak to a person if we know his/her name. In groups of five or six, have persons introduce themselves and answer the question: What do you hope to get out of this course? People should only spend one or two minutes (at the most) answering these questions.
3. Ask the small groups to make a quick list of things that they have had to wait for in their lives. Call time and ask someone from each group to call out the answers on the list. Make a list on the chalkboard or on newsprint for everyone to see. Ask what other important events might be listed. Items such as the birth of a baby, a wedding day, a spouse coming home from war, saving enough to buy a house, going on vacation, and many other items should be on the list. Have the groups

choose one of the most important events or tell them to use the birth of a baby as the event. Ask each group to answer the following questions about the chosen event:

- a. Why was the event worth waiting for?
- b. What did you do while waiting for the event?
- c. Why was it important for you to do these things?
- d. How did you prepare yourself emotionally and mentally for the event?
- e. In what ways would it have been more difficult if you had not had this waiting time?

Then, in the total group, discuss the positive points of waiting in any given situation. What does the waiting accomplish? Ask about the positive points of using the Advent season to wait for Christmas. Make sure the concepts of mental, physical, and emotional preparation are explored.

EXPLORING THE SCRIPTURE

1. Play for the group the aria from Handel's Messiah, "But Who May Abide the Day of His Coming?" This is the Malachi text.

Ask the group:

- a. What emotions are stirred by the opening section of the piece? What about when the soloist begins to sing about the refiner's fire?
- b. In what ways do you feel that this is a fitting text to begin the Advent season?
- c. In the context of the Church's Advent observances, what do individuals need to do to prepare for the "day of his coming"?
- d. Refer the group to C.S. Lewis' comment in the Resource Book (see page 5). What does God's judgment do?

and/or

Hand out Work Sheet 1. First have participants fill in the sheet individually. Then in groups of five or six have them compare answers and come to a consensus where possible. Discuss the answers in the whole group.

and/or

Give a brief mini-lecture on the Davidic Covenant, including discussion of the promises of God as mentioned in Jeremiah 33:14-16. Consult a Bible dictionary for additional help.

2. Introduce the Gospel texts by saying that these are some of the very rare instances where Jesus uses apocalyptic language, language that talks about a cataclysmic end of the present age. This language is designed not so much to foretell specific events as to emphasize with mighty language the universal and final import of the end of the present age and the inauguration of the age to come. Note also that these three texts are parallels; that is, the words at some points are nearly identical in all three texts. The parable of the fig tree in Matthew is repeated in Luke 21:29-33, which is not part of the Lukan text for Advent. The signs in the sun and moon used in Luke are also in Matthew (24:29-31) but are not used in his Advent text. Hand out Worksheet 2. Have the group work on it in small groups. Then bring the whole group back together and discuss briefly. Be sure to point out that anxiety and worry weigh down people every bit as much as “dissipation and drunkenness” (Luke 21:34).

and/or

Hand out hymnals containing the hymns “Lord Christ, When First Thou Cam’st” and “The King Shall Come.” Or project the words of each hymn one at a time with an overhead projector. If possible, have a soloist (or the whole group, if they are able) sing the first and third verse of the first hymn and all four verses of the second hymn. These are both hymns for the first Sunday in Advent. If they cannot be sung, have a pianist play through each. Note the different mood of both the music and the words. The first hymn is heavier in tone. It reminds us of the death of

Jesus brought about by sin and it focuses our attention on the dark possibilities of the Final Coming if changes are not made. The second hymn is a much lighter tune. It focuses on the glory of Christ and on the joy of that Final Advent. Ask the group to list the ways both moods are appropriate for the First Sunday in Advent.

or

Distribute hymnals and have the group open them to “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” (All seven verses and the Antiphons are available in **The United Methodist Hymnal**, page 211). If possible, have someone sing verses 1 and 7. At least play the music while the words are read. Note that the words go back to the 9th century. Look together at all seven verses of the text (with an overhead projector if individual copies are not available). Let the group scan the text and call out answers to the question: “What do the people want Emmanuel to do?” On newsprint or a chalkboard record their answers as they call them out. If you have the Antiphons as well, let them also scan those. Look at the compiled list together. What will that Final Coming of Christ accomplish? That is, what is the final outcome of history when God’s Will is fulfilled? If this is where history is headed, where does the Church need to be headed? How? Have someone read aloud Romans 13:11-14 and 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13 for examples. Note to the group that these texts speak about how the Christian community is to model behaviors that are in line with the Final Coming.

CLOSING

1. Let each person take a few minutes to write a responsive call to worship appropriate for the first Sunday in Advent.

or

Use Psalm 80 as a responsive reading.

2. Close with prayer.

IF YOU HAVE ADDITIONAL TIME

1. Let groups of five or six make banner sketches. Give each group a large sheet of newsprint, a pencil or two and a box of colored markers. Have them choose a theme that fits with the first Sunday of Advent. They may want to choose a verse of Scripture or a line from one of the hymns. On one side of the newsprint they can do a pencil sketch of the banner. Everyone should participate in the ideas; one person should do the drawing. When they have agreed on a design they can turn the paper over and sketch out their design in color. Share the banners with the group.
2. Have someone prepared to sing “Wake, Awake, for Night is Flying.” Afterward, let people meditate for a few minutes on the joy of the coming of the kingdom in all its fulness.

Worksheet 1

Isaiah's Plea

Read Isaiah 64:1-9 and answer the questions below.

1. Isaiah gives two reasons in verses 1 and 2 why God should “tear open the heavens and come down.” What are those reasons? What reasons might we cite today as evidence of our need for God’s presence?
2. In verses 4-5a Isaiah lists three groups of people who please God. Who are they? What are some examples of the kinds of deeds which please God?
3. Verses 5b-9 are a confession of sin for all humanity and a plea for God’s mercy. Why is this an appropriate text for Advent; that is, why might a realistic look at our own sin be important in preparing for both the celebration of the first Advent and preparation for the second Advent?

Wake Up!

- 1.** Read Matthew 24:36-44 and Mark 13:32-37. What point is Jesus making with the reference to the Noah story in Matthew? What point is he making with the parable of the Sleeping Householder and the Man on a Journey?
- 2.** What are specific ways in which those who listen to Jesus' warnings must "stay awake" in today's world?
- 3.** Read Luke 21:34-36. What, according to Jesus, are some of the things that distract us; that catch us "off guard"? Give some examples from modern life.
- 4.** In what ways is the image of Christ in these passages disturbing? In what ways is it comforting?