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## **SUMMARY**

The Scriptures for the first Sunday of Advent look forward to the Final Coming (Advent) of Christ and the consummation of history. This fulfillment of history spells disaster for those who have ignored God and God's will. It is, however, deliverance for the community of people who live their lives alert to the daily demands of the will of God. The Old Testament texts chosen by the Church speak both of the fearsome justice of God and of the final fulfillment of all the promises of God. The Gospel texts center on the need to be watchful and alert; not allowing the tasks and events of everyday life to distract us from living our lives in the knowledge of God's supreme power. The epistle texts speak to the way people living the gospel message respond to others with love and compassion.

## **BASIC BIBLE REFERENCES**

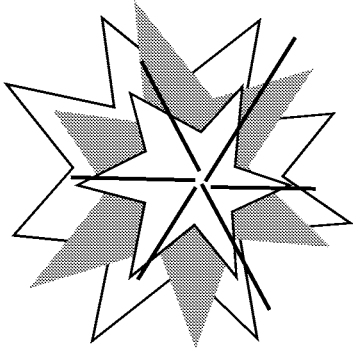
*Old Testament:*     Jeremiah 33:14-16  
                              Isaiah 64:1-9

*Gospel:*                 Matthew 24:36-44  
                              Luke 21:25-36

*Epistle:*                Romans 13:11-14  
                              1 Corinthians 1:3-9

## **WORD LIST**

Messiah  
Final Advent  
Apocalyptic



# 1 Watchful Expectancy

## *Where Is History Headed?*

The Church for most of its life has begun the Advent season by centering on the final fulfillment of God's purposes in human history. Why is Messiah coming? What is he announcing? What does he usher in? Beginning with the call of Abraham (Genesis 12:1), the Scriptures record the acts of God as God seeks to reunite rebellious humanity with himself. The promises of God center in the promise that God's will shall ultimately be done in all its fullness. God will be with God's people and the kingdom of God will be reality (see Revelation 21:3-4). Any persons or situations, including death, which attempt to destroy God's communion with God's people will be destroyed. Messiah's coming is both announcement and guarantee that the promises of God are being fulfilled. Our actions do not bring that fulfillment, which the New Testament calls the kingdom. It is coming because God is bringing it. We are called to get in line with what is already breaking in to human history and will come to fruition at the Final Advent.

**Read Jeremiah 33:14-16.** This text was probably not originally speaking of the Messiah, but more likely was a promise that during a particular time of unrest the nation of Israel, God's servant people, would not cease to exist. The promise of a ruler descended from the line of David, the greatest of Israel's kings, later became associated with the description of God's Messiah—the One who would lead God's people back to God. The Church sees in this text that this promise of God has been fulfilled in a much grander way than the orig-

inal writer could have known. The one described as “a righteous Branch” is seen in the coming of Christ.

In **Isaiah 64:1-9** the tone is much different. Here the prophet is begging for a mighty epiphany of God now. This section of Isaiah was probably written after Judah, the southern kingdom, had returned from exile in Babylon. The temple at Jerusalem had been destroyed. Israel’s God was mocked as not being strong enough to save his people. It is the mocking of God that puts the prophet in agony: “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down . . .to make your name known to your adversaries.” If God would only come down into human history, the world would see God’s majesty. Isaiah then pleads with the righteous God not to abandon God’s sinful people who have brought all their troubles on themselves (verses 5-6). The themes here are the greatness and righteousness of God, the sin of the people which has destroyed their relationship with God, a cry of repentance, and a plea for mercy—a plea for God to be with God’s people. It is God’s coming into our history that both judges and saves us. This is a central theme for the first Sunday in Advent: Jesus comes as both Judge and Savior. The plea for God to “tear open the heavens and come down” is echoed in the closing words of the Bible: “Come, Lord Jesus.” (Revelation 22:20b).

In Malachi the theme is one of joy and fear. Read Malachi 3:1-4. The people delight in God’s covenant of love and security. But have they been living their lives as a response to that covenant with God? When the messenger of the covenant comes, he will come with the power of a refiner’s fire to make them presentable before Almighty God. The Old Testament ends on the question, “But who can endure the day of his coming. . . ?” (verse 2). This is a question that will lead directly into the preaching of John the Baptizer in weeks two and three of Advent.

### ***Focus on the Final Advent***

None of what has been said so far sounds very “Christmassy.” It certainly is not designed to sell merchandise! Why does the Church focus on the Final Advent (sometimes called the Second Coming)? The answer comes as we answer the questions: What are we celebrating at Christmas? What does the coming of Christ mean? If in Jesus we see the promises of God coming to pass: promises to be with God’s people; promises of the fulfillment of all that life can be; promises of justice and life, then it is the sure hope of the

final consummation of history, the fulfilling of God's will, that we celebrate at Christmas. We are not ready to celebrate Christmas until we understand that the God who comes is the God of both justice and mercy. Without looking to where God is leading us, the celebration of God's coming is meaningless. In the words of theologian Fred Gealy:

By omitting observance of the Final Advent we trivialize the first. A valid observance would confront us with the God who comes both to judge and to redeem. Only when the Final Advent forms the backdrop for the First do both Advents get their full Christian meaning.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Watch and Wait***

Thomas Jefferson once said, "I tremble for my country when I consider that God is just." That is at least part of the message of the gospel readings for the first Sunday of Advent. The fact that God is just sets the unjust trembling. If God is bringing to fulfillment God's will in human history, then there will be no place for injustice. The God of mercy would not be merciful if he allowed others to continue to be victimized for eternity. C. S. Lewis speaks of the final destruction of injustice:

Either the day must come when joy prevails and all the makers of misery are no longer able to infect it; or else forever and ever the makers of misery can destroy in others the happiness they reject for themselves.<sup>2</sup>

**Read Matthew 24:36-44** and Mark 13:32-37. The emphasis in these passages is on being ready to participate in the fulfillment of history; the fulness of what the gospels call the kingdom of God. The message is clear: the priorities of our lives must center around the will of God—justice, love, mercy, forgiveness, life, wholeness, reconciliation, joy. If we are conscious of God's presence in the little "advents" of every day, we will already be in line with what is yet to come. The Christian life is lived with the will of God as its goal. The things the Christian does are done deliberately, trusting that the final consummation of life is abundant life lived solely on God's terms. We live our lives on alert. Until we are consciously aiming our lives toward the promises of God we are not ready to celebrate Christmas.

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1 Fred D. Gealy, *Celebration*, 1969, Graded Press, The Methodist Publishing House, page 16.

2 C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, Simon and Schuster, New York, New York, 1974, page 118.

**Read Luke 21:25-36.** The imagery here is more apocalyptic, but the core message is the same. Be on the watch! Do not let the mundane tasks of day-to-day life become the be-all and end-all of life. If they are, we will miss the real goals of life and end up out of sync with the purposes of God. The Christian must cultivate ways of staying alert and centered on what is important. Active life in the Christian community, prayer, meditation and study, and putting into practice compassion, forgiveness and mercy are some of the ways the Christian avoids being lulled to sleep by the routine of every day.

### ***The Behavior of Love***

Focusing on the future profoundly impacts the present. **Read Romans 13:11-14.** Paul's call to "wake from sleep" is the same as Jesus' call to "watch." Advent is our wake-up call to look again at how we are living our lives and to what ends. Deeds done "in the light" are deeds of which we have no need to be ashamed. Those deeds all center in right actions toward the neighbor. **Read 1 Corinthians 1:3-9** and 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13. Paul enumerates the "fruits of the Spirit" in Galatians 5:22-23. All of them have to do with loving actions and attitudes toward other people. These fruits are gifts, not qualities earned by force of character. Those who are open to God's future receive God's gifts that enable them to live in the present and in the future. In 1 Thessalonians, Paul especially mentions the young church's love for "one another," a technical term in the New Testament that always means fellow Christians. The gifts of love and mercy are first given in the Christian fellowship and from there are shared with others.

### ***On Not Rushing the Season***

The season of Advent which prepares us for Christmas focuses our minds, wills, and hearts not on the "end of the world" but on the beginning of life as God would have it lived—the kingdom in all its fulness, "abundant life." That life is possible when God has purged us of all that is not in line with life as God would have it lived and when we respond to the future that is already becoming present. Christians live between the First Advent and the Last Advent. We are granted a foretaste of that final life of love and joy as we deliberately and consciously live the life of mercy and love in our relationships with others. Only when we hear and incorporate the message of the Final Advent does the celebration of the First Advent make any sense. Only when we have truly celebrated the Advent season are we ready for Christmas.

## **For Further Study and Reflection**

### ***Memory Bank***

1. Memorize Malachi 3:1-4
2. Memorize the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23.

### ***Research***

1. In a Bible dictionary such as the **Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible**, read the article on the Exile to Babylon
2. Research the title "Christ" or "Messiah" looking especially at its meaning in the Old Testament and its connection with King David's dynasty.

### ***Reflection***

1. Think about this sentence: "If God does not judge us, there is no justice." Reread the C. S. Lewis quote on page 5. How is God's judgment part of God's mercy and love?
2. Have you ever skipped to the last page of a book to see how it turned out? How is the coming of Christ into our history like that? What do we know about the end of history because of Jesus' coming?
3. Why are some people in such a rush for Christmas that they want to ignore Advent? List at least three reasons why the Church should emphasize Advent.