



The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined. ISA 9:2

Advent Light

Advent is a time for new understanding, for putting different pieces of God's revelation together so as to see the divine plan more clearly. We listen to the words of the ancient prophets, to the wisdom of Jesus, to the stories of his birth and infancy, and we make connections between them. Then we connect those truths to our own lives and our contemporary world and see ways God is acting anew, ways God continues to reveal the coming of Jesus to us today.

Our best model for this Advent search for understanding is Mary of Nazareth. Luke's text says of her, "Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:19). What were these words that Mary treasured and pondered? They were the words of the ancient Scriptures that she had learned throughout her life, the words the angel had revealed to her, the words the shepherds said to her about her child, and the words that welled up within her as she sang her canticle of praise. By making connections between the ancient and the new, between her people Israel and her own life, Mary grew in understanding of God's plan and responded to God's will with her acceptance: "Let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:38).

Our task during the Advent season is to imitate Mary by pondering the word of God and allowing it to resonate within our hearts and pour into our lives. This study will put us in contact with the treasure of that word—the

Waiting with Expectancy and Joyful Hope

Advent is all about watching and waiting. It is an opportunity to focus on the attitude that is so essential to the Christian life—expectancy. This is a time to set our sights on the promise, reflect on the significance of that promise, and long for its realization. Our waiting is not a passive whiling the time away, but rather a time for standing on tiptoes with anticipation.

What is this promise for which we watch and wait? The word “advent” comes from the Latin *adventus*, which means “coming” or “arrival.” It is the Advent of Christ, the coming of our Messiah, the arrival of the world’s Savior. But hasn’t Christ already come? Hasn’t the promise of the Messiah’s arrival already been fulfilled? Yes and no. Does the world look like it is experiencing its messianic age? Do our lives feel like our Savior has arrived? To the degree that we have not yet experienced the fullness of salvation that God wills for us, then Christ has not yet come fully into our world and into our lives.

Yes, the Messiah has come; salvation is offered to us; we trust in God’s power to bring us the fullness for which we long. But we still live in Advent, watching and waiting. We know that Christ comes to us each day, through insights, people, and sacramental experiences. We know that Christ will meet each of us when our lives are complete in a much fuller way than we experience him in this life. We know that the world lives in hope because Christ will come again in glory to complete the work he has begun, the work of bringing all people and nations into the peace of God’s kingdom.

So why set aside these four weeks to celebrate Advent, if Advent is really what our whole life—year-round—is about? Because in a historical period of time, the Messiah came into our world and left his mark. Though his coming was prophesied and anticipated for centuries, some recognized the Messiah when he came and others did not. Advent is the season for us to return to that time in which the Messiah first came into our world and to relive the anticipation of our ancestors. The Scriptures of Advent, which express the watchful waiting of our ancestors, form the model and inspiration for us as we continue to watch and wait for our Savior’s coming. If we learn from the successes and the failures of our ancestors, maybe we will not be so neglectful of Christ’s continued arrival in our lives and in our world.

Reflection and discussion

- What in my life have I anticipated with joyful hope? What can this experience tell me about waiting for Christ's coming?

- What is the difference between active and passive waiting? What are the implications for our spiritual lives?

Active Preparation

We often hear admonitions about the abuses of this season in our modern, consumerist society, about how we have turned Advent into a frenzied “To Do” list rather than a period of quiet hope. True, our December calendars often serve us more as a countdown of shopping days than as Advent calendars of holy anticipation. Yet, we do not have to be disparaging of the many events that mark this “most wonderful time of the year.” The shopping and gift wrapping, decorating and baking, cards and parties, can all be expressions of the real “reason for the season.” If our busy activities reflect the great activity of God in history and if our shopping and gift-giving reflect the great gift that God has given us, then everything we do this Advent can help us prepare and be watchful. It is not so much what we do, but how we do it and why we do it that is important this month. Awareness of our own hearts and reflection about our activities can be key ingredients to our becoming watchful people in this season of expectancy. Our exterior preparations must be matched by an interior preparation.

If the season of Advent had a patron saint, it would surely be John the Baptist. He was the last of that long line of prophets preparing God's people throughout history for the Messiah's coming. But he didn't prepare with a

sweet sentimentality about a smiling baby born on a starry night. He proclaimed the message that those who were anticipating the Messiah must renew their own lives to get ready. “Reform your lives,” he said, “God’s reign is now at hand. . . . Prepare the way of the Lord; straighten out the paths of his coming.”

In ancient times, forerunners went ahead of a king who was making a journey. They would announce the king’s coming and encourage the people to prepare themselves and their town for the royal arrival. John was this kind of herald for Jesus. He was the one who prepared the way for the Messiah.

This is the role of John the Baptist for us during the season of Advent. He helps us prepare our lives so that we will recognize the Messiah and give him a welcome that is appropriate for his royal presence. The real preparation to which John calls us is transformation of life. This Advent prophet tells us that our task is urgent, and halfway measures are not appropriate for Christ. “Bear fruits worthy of repentance” (Luke 3:8), he proclaims. Real conversion of our hearts must be evident in the way that we live. We should heed the call of the prophets and make this Advent a time of real change so that our royal Messiah will be welcomed into our lives.

Reflection and discussion

- How could the modern culture of December actually enhance rather than detract from the spirit of Advent for me?

- How could my exterior preparation and my interior preparation be more closely matched this year?

Anticipatory Light Before the Dawn

December is a season of light for many people. In ancient times, participants in the pagan Yule celebrations lit oil lamps during the dark winter when the days are shortest. Our spiritual ancestors in Judaism burned lamps during their Festival of Dedication, and today light the candles of the Hanukkah menorah, or Hanukiyah, as a sign of gratitude for God's saving presence. Christians light the candles of the Advent wreath as a symbol of increasing expectation. People of many religious persuasions light their homes and their cities during December.

Too often we call attention to what separates us from others; too seldom we highlight what joins us together. Christians often underline the fact that the Jewish people do not believe that the Messiah has come. Yet, during the season of Advent we can emphasize the fact that both Jews and Christians look forward with joyful hope to the Messiah's future coming. Both Jews and Christians look to the ancient prophets to understand the dawning light that God will bring in our future. Of course, the Jewish people hope for the Messiah's first manifestation, while Christians await his return in glory. But we can be sure that Jews and Christians together look forward to the future appearance of the same Messiah of God. The whole world awaits a time of peace and justice in the world; all people dream of a better future. And the God of all creation and all nations is the source of that trusting optimism. What better way to highlight our unity with the expectant people of our world than to celebrate Advent in a spirit of mutual hope.

The light of this season is light that brightens the darkness, the light that comes before the rising dawn. This is the anticipatory light that we will experience these weeks as we wait for Christmas. It is the light of ancient Israel's experience, the light of hope, as they awaited the dawning light of the Messiah.

With this flickering light of Advent, we can explore the darkness. By illuminating the shadows and reflecting on the gloom of our lives and our world, we can open our lives to watch and stand ready for what God is going to do next. Christ is the light of the world, the light for the nations, the light that will shine on those in darkness.

Christ has come and Christ will come again...and again, and again. We are people who wait in joyful hope. The Advent prayer of the early Church, "Come, Lord Jesus," is still answered in new and surprising ways.

