

Grace Lutheran Church
Advent Devotions
2017
by Pastor Emmy Kegler

What is Advent?

The celebration of Advent counts down the four Sundays before Christmas. “Advent” comes from a Latin word meaning “arrival” -- the arrival of Christ. We know many different ways of getting ready for Christmas: picking out a tree, decorating the house, buying and wrapping gifts, making travel plans to see family. But Advent asks us to “get ready” for Christmas in another way: to prepare *ourselves* for the arrival of Jesus. Are we ready to receive a God who puts on flesh, who sees our suffering and becomes one with us, who trusts the divine into the care of a teenage girl and her fiancé, whose arrival in our world was not recognized by the supremely religious or the politically powerful but by humble shepherds out in dirty fields and pagan astrologers who followed a star?

The most honest answer to this question should probably be no. We are never perfectly “ready” to receive the mystery of God born among us. Yet every year we celebrate it again and again. We remember that Christ comes to us in many ways: in the flesh in Bethlehem over two thousand years ago; every day in our hearts, comforting and transforming us; in the needy and poor around us; and in Christ’s future glory at the end of the age, when all the hate and pain of this world will be overturned and creation will be made new.

Advent is a time when we try (and admit that we can never finish trying!) to be ready for the mystery of the incarnation, the miracle of Immanuel -- God-with-us.

What’s with the colors?

We know our Christmas colors, of course -- red and green. But the church, during Advent, puts on different colors: purple, pink, and blue. Using these colors dates back at least six hundred years! Because Advent was originally thought of as another Lent -- a time of waiting and preparation -- the purple of Lent was first used to mark Advent as well. Many churches still use purple. Within the past hundred years, blue has also become a common color for Advent. It distinguishes the season from Lent, while still using a royal color to symbolize our waiting and preparation for the coming of a King. Blue also is the color most often associated with Mary the mother of Jesus.

Some churches add pink on the third Sunday of Advent. For church traditions where Advent was a particularly solemn and self-reflective time, the pink colors and candles (sometimes called “rose”) were a visible reminder that Christmas was also a joyful time to be celebrated.

What's an Advent wreath for?

An Advent wreath helps us “count down” to Christmas by lighting a new candle each Sunday of Advent. On the first Sunday, one candle is lit; on the second Sunday of Advent, the first candle is lit and then a second candle is also; and so on. Many churches also have a candle in the center of the wreath, to be lit on Christmas Day.

Today we invite everyone and every family to work together to make their own Advent wreath to take home. Some choose to light their Advent wreath for a few minutes over breakfast or dinner, or at some other time during the day when there is time to pause, think, and pray.

What's this booklet for?

There is an entry for each day of Advent. This year, we are listening to the songs of Christmas, both old and new, and taking time each day to reflect on them. Each day, you can light your Advent wreath, listen to that day's song (gracenempls.org/adventsongs), and read the devotion.

Sunday, December 3 - *May You Find a Light* by The Brilliance

On this first day of Advent, we light one candle in our Advent wreath. Light has long been used as a symbol of hope amid struggle, and it is especially meaningful in climates where winter is dark and cold and grey. This song by The Brilliance particularly reminds us that light is meant to help and guide; it makes our way more clear. Sometimes that light is leading us home, where we are welcomed and loved; sometimes it is drawing us out into the world, like the wise men who followed the star. What kind of light are you looking for today?

Monday, December 4 - *Strange Way to Save the World* by 4Him

As we begin our celebration of Advent, this song reminds us of the strangeness of the miracle of Christ's birth. God chose to save the world not by tearing open the heavens with a loud declaration or by setting up rules and regulations to follow or fail. God did not use power and might to change the world, but rather became human and trusted the Divine into the care of “a simple man of trade” and “an ordinary girl.” Advent asks us to remember, as we wait for the arrival of Jesus, that God does not often come to us in ways that we expect. Where does God catch you by surprise today?

Tuesday, December 5 - *Emmanuel, God With Us* by Amy Grant

“Emmanuel” (or “Immanuel”) is a Hebrew phrase that means “God with us.” It appears first as a name promised to the prophet Isaiah: “Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14). The writer of the gospel of Matthew takes this name and prophecy and applies it to Jesus, saying that “All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,’ which means, ‘God is with us’” (Matthew 1:22-23). Jesus is still given the name Jesus (or Joshua, in Hebrew), but Matthew uses the symbolic name to

declare that this baby born of a virgin is the fulfillment of God's ancient promise. What is a promise you are still waiting on?

Wednesday, December 6 - *O Come O Come Emmanuel* by Pentatonix

This hymn, over one hundred and fifty years old, recalls many of the trials that the Hebrew people have survived. Israel, the people of God, had been in captivity in Babylon, dragged into exile away from their homes and their holy temple. Hundreds of years before the exile, the people had also been in a time of questioning and struggle, as they wandered in the wilderness after escaping slavery in Egypt. At Mount Sinai, they received the law of God, the ways that God called them to live as free people. Although the coming of God as a baby was entirely new, the Hebrew people (of whom Jesus was one!) had many stories of God's continued work to free them from sin and oppression. What is a lesson in your life that you keep having to learn again?

Thursday, December 7 - *Immanuel* by the Liturgists

As we wait for the arrival of Christ, we recognize how far we can feel from God. Our homes can feel like less than home; our world seems more interested in pursuing riches and prosperity than caring for those in need. How can we say that God is with us when we can sometimes feel so alone? One of the promises of Christmas is not only that God is with us, but that God is with us in our hardest times. God doesn't enter the world in glory and riches, but to a poor engaged couple with nowhere to sleep. Maybe it is in the most desperate times of our lives that God is working the hardest to be with us. Where are you longing for God to show up today?

Friday, December 8 - *In the Bleak Midwinter* by Brandon Heath

Another classic Christmas carol, this hymn was likely written shortly after the end of the American Civil War. Although there was probably little snow in the Middle East at the time of Jesus' birth, the author Christina Rossetti sought to convey the miracle of God's presence at a time when all seemed bleak. The final stanza asks, "What can I give him, poor as I am?" The answer is that God is honored by whatever we give, no matter how seemingly humble; the greatest treasure we can give is our hearts, preparing ourselves to receive the arrival of a surprising God who transforms the world.

Saturday, December 9 - *The Earth Stood Still* by Future of Forestry

Historically, it doesn't seem that anything significant happened in the years in which we guess Jesus was born. (Scholars aren't sure -- it could be anywhere between 6 BC and 9 AD.) Empires and nations rolled on, unaware of the King in their midst. Only a few knew that the creator of the world had put on skin and was born among us. Yet something did change that day, on both a worldly and a cosmic level: God's promise to always be with us was coming true in a whole new way. When in your life has it seemed like nothing was happening, yet later you realized it was the beginning of something new?

Sunday, December 10 - *You're Here* by Francesca Battistelli

Christmas is full of impossibilities. How is it possible that the hands that created the universe are now the hands of a tiny baby? Yet this was the way God chose to come to us: humble,

vulnerable, small and needy. We needed God, but now God needs us. By coming to us as a baby, God shows amazing trust and hope in who we can be when given the opportunity. Who will you meet today who needs you?

Monday, December 11 - *Winter Snow* by Audrey Assad

Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures we witness the beautiful diversity of ways in which God speaks and acts. Through the flood that covered the earth and in the burning bush, God moved in the lives of Noah and Moses. In the whirlwind, God spoke to Job. But it was in a “still small voice” (1 Kings 19:13) that God spoke to Elijah, promising protection for the prophet’s holy mission. It is that same still small voice that we celebrate at Christmas, an almost-missable moment in the life of the world when everything changes. In what small way is God speaking to you today?

Tuesday, December 12 - *Breath of Heaven* by Amy Grant

At Christmas, the greatest gift -- God in flesh -- is entrusted to an unmarried girl, possibly a teenager. Mary’s courage in accepting God’s offer is almost beyond our comprehension. As she faced everything to come, including the arduous journey to Bethlehem, she needed that same courage to continue. The angel had promised that the Holy Spirit would come to her, and it is to that same spirit (the Greek words for “breath” and “spirit” are the same) that she cries out to now. Who in your life is looking for courage right now? How can you be a breath from heaven for them?

Wednesday, December 13 - *Sing Mary Sing* by Jennifer Knapp

Mary’s courage did not end with the birth of Jesus. She and Joseph had to flee the wrath of King Herod, who ordered every baby boy in Bethlehem killed to eliminate any threat to his own power (Matthew 2:16). After living as refugees in Egypt, Mary and Joseph and the young Jesus would stay in hiding in Galilee rather than returning home. Thirty years later, Mary would see her firstborn son executed on a cross. How could she still have dreamed of a God who would soften what was hardened, who would bring down the powerful and lift up the lowly (Luke 1:52)? Yet Mary kept singing, kept holding on to the impossible hope that had begun in her willingness to bear the son of God. When have you held on to hope?

Thursday, December 14 - *Real* by Nichole Nordeman

The images of Mary that surround us this Christmas season are often porcelain sculpted to perfection. In most nativities she looks quiet and composed, in silent contemplation of the child before her. But she had just given birth -- and laid him in a feed trough! She was tired from the journey, hurting from her labor, crowded in by smelly animals. It was not a perfect picture by any means. God came to us in a real and messy way, and still comes in the same way. Where is there mess in your life right now? How might God be being born there?

Friday, December 15 - *It’s True* by Sara Groves

Mary’s first words to the angel Gabriel are, “How can this be?” We ask the same question in many different ways. How can it be that God comes down to us? Sometimes we ask it in awe, or

in skepticism, or in joyful hope. Sometimes we ask it in our lives without knowing it, by trusting in the “kingdoms and crowns” of this world, by working toward money and power instead of caring for those around us. But the story will always be there for us -- full of mystery and impossibility, and ready for our questions when we are ready to ask. What questions do you have today?

Saturday, December 16 - *Good King Wenceslas* by Blackmore's Night

This classic British hymn tells the story of Wenceslaus, the tenth century duke of Bohemia. Wenceslaus legendarily went walking every night, barefoot, giving generously to local churches and widows and those in prison. Tonight we celebrate our last community dinner of 2017, a time when we with Wenceslaus remember the promise of Jesus: “whatever you did to the least of these, you did to me” (Matthew 25:40).

Sunday, December 17 - *Hark the Herald Angels Sing* from A Charlie Brown Christmas

Sometimes the most beautiful song comes from the mouths of children. They don't always remember the words perfectly; they don't always sing exactly on key. What matters to them is that they are doing something they enjoy, and that we celebrate with them in whatever they can offer. The Christmas story in particular puts children at the center: a teenage mother, shepherds young enough to sleep in the fields, angels of all kinds come to sing praises, and of course, a child born in a manger. Join us for worship at 10am for our annual youth Christmas program on this third Sunday of Advent, and light your third candle today!

Monday, December 18 - *Do You Hear What I Hear?* by Whitney Houston

The good news of Christ's birth is passed on in many ways. Some of us learned it from storybooks as children; some of us came to understand its meaning and power as adults. It can be told in plays, musicals, poetry, and prose, but no matter how it comes to us, it is always a moment of one person saying to another: *I have something to share with you*. Who do you call when you have good news to share?

Tuesday, December 19 - *He Made a Way in a Manger* by Vicky Beeching

Christmas is not the end of God's amazing work among us. Jesus' teaching, death, and resurrection make the story complete. God was willing to become flesh, knowing that it would lead to death on the cross, and trusting in the promise of resurrection. In Jesus' birth, death, and resurrection, God declares there is no where that humanity can be, no depth that we can find, that God cannot meet us in. God is always seeking a way to be with us, even today.

Wednesday, December 20 - *The Christmas Song* by the Dave Matthews Band

Christmas is not the end of the impossibilities that are possible with God. As an adult, Jesus took drinkers, fishermen, tax collectors, and women of ill repute as followers and disciples. On the night of his betrayal he offered bread and wine to his friends promising that it would be a sign that his body was given for them. God took on flesh and, when faced with violence and hate, accepted the wounds of the world and died. But perhaps the greatest miracle of all is that God, source and ground of Love, came into a world that responded to that love with hate -- and responded, and responds still, with even more love.

Thursday, December 21 - *I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day* by Burl Ives

"I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day" first appeared in publication in 1865, written by the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Facing a Christmas without his recently deceased wife and his son who had enlisted in the Civil War, Longfellow surely didn't feel much like celebrating. It felt like the world was being torn apart at the seams; how could the bells of Christmas keep ringing? Yet the poet imagined he heard the bells repeating the angels' song: "Peace on earth, goodwill to men!" What will give you hope today?

Friday, December 22 - *Open Up* by The Brilliance

In this song we hear the words of Saint Francis of Assisi, who wrote the prayer "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace." The work of Christmas isn't just God's work. God invites us into the work too: offering hope where there is pain, light where there is darkness, love where there is hate. God comes to us not to keep us in reverence at the manger but to send us out to those who are in need. What do you have today that can help a hurting world?

Saturday, December 23 - *God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen* by Nat King Cole

This is one of the oldest still-sung Christmas carols, dating back to the sixteenth century; it is quoted in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. Although it may sound like the song is asking for God to give merry gentlemen some rest, "God rest ye merry" is an old-timey way of saying "may God keep you merry." What is making you merry and joyful? What is your favorite part of the Christmas season, and how can you find just a little more of it today?

Sunday, December 24 - *Silent Night* by Sufjan Stevens

This year, the fourth Sunday of Advent falls on Christmas Eve. We light the fourth candle on our wreaths, barely in time for the arrival of Christmas. As our Advent journey draws to a close, take some time to reflect on what space has been made inside of you to welcome Jesus. What songs have helped center your heart and mind? What has helped you be more aware of the needs of those around you -- the Christ child in our midst today?

Monday, December 25

This Christmas Day, we welcome the coming of God into the world and celebrate with friends and family. During this busy time, take a moment for yourself. Light the four candles of the Advent wreath and sit in silence, letting your body and mind rest amid the busyness of the day. In our frantic "getting ready," in our moments of calm, and in every time in between, Jesus is on his way -- Immanuel, God-with-us. May this Advent and all our days to come be a time of preparation, making us ready for the arrival of Christ in our hearts, our lives, and in the needs of those around us. Amen.