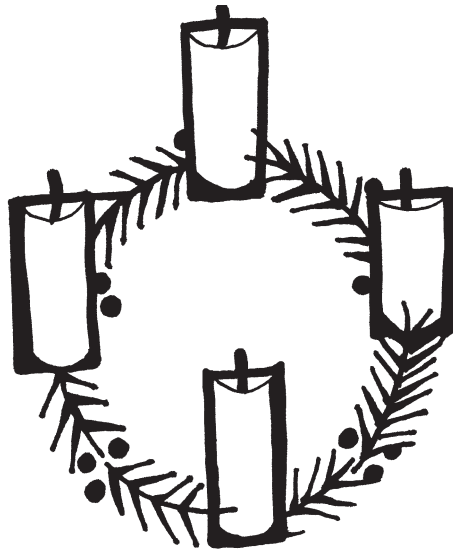


Advent

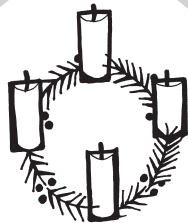


ADVENT

CHRISTMAS

TIME AFTER EPIPHANY

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Preparing for Advent

Lectionary

“You know what time it is” (Rom. 13:11).

The cycle of the church year orders our time in Christian community around the central mystery of our faith: the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our experience of this mystery, however, is not linear—a simple narrative path from beginning to end. Our lives are full of endings and beginnings happening all at once, interspersed with waiting, lament, and hope.

The “now-and-not-yet” nature of the fulfillment of our hope in Christ is never more rhetorically real than in the season of Advent. In its great wisdom, the lectionary launches us into this wheel of time with a season that, much like our own lives, is full of endings and beginnings—and, of course, waiting.

While Advent has often been understood as Christmas’s Lenten counterpart—a season of preparation for a particular feast—our readings in this season serve a deeper liturgical purpose than simply helping us resist the commercialization of the holiday season and more reverently celebrate Christmas. Advent is indeed a season of anticipation, but also of revolution: “The world is about to turn,” as we sing in Rory Cooney’s fiery paraphrase of the Magnificat (ELW 723). The readings in Advent prepare us to receive not only a new baby, but a new world where God’s justice and mercy reign.

For this reason, the first Sunday of Advent begins not with a reference to Jesus’ impending birth but with the “coming of the Son of Man” at an unexpected hour in Matthew 24. This text disrupts our sense of time by declaring that we don’t, in fact, know what time it is—and need time to prepare. The prophecy in Isaiah 2 gives us hope for a world at peace, and Paul’s encouragement in Romans 13 tells us “the day is near.” And yet references to Noah and a thief in the night in the gospel reading give us the sense that the coming day of the Lord will be so bright it might singe our hair. Of course it won’t. But we will be changed.

The readings on the second Sunday further develop this theme of conversion. From Isaiah foretelling a world where the “wolf shall live with the lamb,” to Paul’s admonition that Christians “live in harmony with one another,” the readings this day are full of reconciliations that are impossible without a drastic change in the world order. In fact, the promise held out by these readings sounds perfectly ridiculous if left to human will or

strength. But the change at hand is directed and empowered by the “Spirit of the Lord” (Isa. 11), the Spirit given in baptism, and of which John the Baptist is a herald (Matt. 3): Repent! Be cleansed! Bear fruit!

These are not soft and comforting words that echo the sentiments often expressed in the movies constantly rerun on cable television this month. They are piercing and disorienting words. And yet therein lies their beauty, as most people in worship on these Sundays are keenly aware that something is not right in the world—or within themselves, for that matter—and they are longing to be set free. They might also be longing to have language in worship that allows them to pray and sing for that freedom in community, if the church would give them the space and the permission.

This longing is perhaps perfectly captured on the third Sunday: “Are you the one who is to come,” John asks through the disciples in Matthew 11:3, “or are we to wait for another?” But on this Sunday, sometimes called *Gaudete*, or “Rejoice” Sunday, the heaviness of our preparatory task begins to lift, and the fear and foreboding of the previous two Sundays starts giving way to joy—joy such that even the creation itself breaks forth into praise (Isa. 35). Mary’s Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55) is an option as a response to the first reading on this day, calling us to rejoice with her in God’s saving work. While the Mighty One’s “bringing down” and “lifting up” may prove unsettling for the powerful, it will be received by the lowly as a blessing and a promise kept.

Only now, on the fourth Sunday of Advent, are we ready to hear of the Child. We have considered our world: its structures of power, its systems of justice and injustice; we have considered the earth: the land, the sea, and their creatures; and we have considered ourselves, and our relationship with the all these powers, places, and living things. We are now ready to be changed and receive the gift, for now we know what to look for: not a new program or politician or product to come and save us, but a sign that says, “God is with us” (Isa. 7, Matt. 1).

It’s all here: hope, longing, fear, comfort, repentance, restoration, death, birth, endings, and beginnings. And like our lives, it doesn’t all come at us in a tidy package. But over these four Sundays, the arc of the story is clear: the darkness is giving way to the light, the world is being reborn, and God is on the way.

Visual Environment

The readings in Advent are some of the most visually evocative of the entire church year. The prophecies from Isaiah paint a rich picture of a world made new by the promised coming of God: a new branch growing from an ancient tree, predators and prey playing together, weapons and ammunition disfigured into farming tools, crocuses blossoming and waters gushing in the desert, and a major highway construction project. The possibilities for drawing upon these images are seemingly endless. Add in the apocalyptic, baptismal, and birth imagery in the gospels—everything from pyrotechnics to gynecology—and you have a treasure trove of sights, sounds, smells, and other sensations to experiment with.

Rather than attempt to do artistic justice to all of these images—or even some of them—a congregation might adopt the “less is more” approach and focus on one particular image that can be developed and lived into over the course of the four Sundays in much the same way the Advent wreath functions in many congregations.

The worship environment, though, extends beyond symbols and pieces of artwork that exist in the space. The space itself can be a sign. Take, for instance, the image of a road prepared in the wilderness. How might the existing pathways in your worship space—or entire building—be adorned or modified to help the assembly experience this image more deeply? What if the traffic flow in the parking lot was reversed—or more daringly—the line at coffee hour? What if the gathering procession took a different and more extended or circuitous path than on an ordinary Sunday—and if the whole congregation was part of the procession? What if the worship space was reconfigured so that worshippers couldn’t find their usual seats but were forced to experience the space in a different way?

While building an actual road through artistic means may be fun and even beneficial, how might this radical reorientation behind this image be practiced in ways that are not only admired by the congregation but that invite its full and active participation?

While much of the world does not observe Advent in cold weather, it will be winter in the United States and Canada when these readings are heard. We often think of bringing foliage, flowers, and other living things into the worship space during the summer. But doing so in the winter—when such bounty is not expected—is a way of lifting up the new and unexpected life prophesied in the Isaiah texts, and gives the assembly a visual focus when it makes its own sung response to this life in the psalms.

Other ideas for visually embodying the new world Christ is coming to create:

- A congregation could sponsor together with the local police department a “Swords into Plowshares Day,” on which weapons could be traded in for food, clothing, job

training, or access to other community resources that might seem inaccessible.

- A congregation could adopt an actual highway or stretch of road and take turns beautifying it.
- Go on a “crocus crawl” (an idea that first came to life at Valparaiso University through Pastor David Kehret), planting crocuses on the church property—or around the neighborhood with the proper permission—that will bud in unexpected places at springtime. This is also a way to visually connect Advent and Christmas with the promise of Easter.
- If a congregation uses or creates banners or any kind of blue draping materials, consider introducing them progressively. Make whatever is visible on the first Sunday of Advent look intentionally unfinished. People will ask why the altar guild didn’t do its job. Such questions are good.

Music

If your congregation has not yet discovered the musical treasures in *Music Sourcebook: All Saints through Transfiguration* (Augsburg Fortress, 2013), do them a favor and stop reading this essay long enough to go purchase it. In the same way that the visual environment of a worship space has the power to inspire, challenge, and transform, so does music—and not just hymns! Rather than introducing more elements into the service, this resource provides musical options for singing what is already there in new and beautiful ways. Among them are:

- Sung prayer responses
- Taizé-style refrains inviting singers to slow down and breathe
- Advent canticles written in plain language with simple melodies
- A litany with the refrain “Stir up your power,” drawing from the language in all four prayers of the day in Advent

If your congregation always sings “Let the vineyards be fruitful” as the bread and wine are brought forward, substitute it with “We Are Awaiting the Coming” (S536) or “Now Is the Moment to Wake from Sleep” (S537). If you end each petition in the intercessions with “Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer,” try singing “Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus” (S532–S534). If your congregation prays evening prayer together during Advent, consider singing “Filled with Hope and Gratitude” (S528) as Mary’s Song, or Ike Sturm’s amazing jazz setting (S527). Instead of simply lighting a candle on the Advent wreath and speaking a prayer, surround the whole ritual action with Paul Friesen-Carper’s “Thanksgiving for Light for Advent” (S524). When we hear familiar words in new ways, ours can be the eyes that are opened, the ears that are unstopped, and the tongues that sing for joy (Isa. 35:5-6).

We should not bemoan that many people want to sing Christmas hymns during this season, for their desire to sing them is a testament to the hymns’ durability. Instead of

debating whether it is “okay” to sing them, however, consider what could be lost by not singing the hymnody of Advent.

The readings in Advent conjure up a mixture of images and emotions that often intersect with what we are feeling in ourselves this time of year: longing, lament, judgment, hope, and promise. Advent hymns, with their sometimes solemn, sometimes joyful, always hopeful texts and melodies are uniquely poised to give voice to this full spectrum of praise and lament. How unfortunate if a congregation was deprived of the experience of praying and singing with their full hearts—and all that is within them—in order to only celebrate.

For a congregation that especially loves Christmas hymns, consider having a hymn festival on one of the twelve days of Christmas.

Reformation 500

“How is this Advent different from all other Advents?” Perhaps no Advent is ever the same. But this one will usher us into a year of commemorating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation: a global event that will involve not only celebrating the Lutheran theological heritage but also the ongoing work of reformation of our own church and steps toward reconciliation with other churches.

The theme of the report prepared by the joint Lutheran-Catholic Commemoration of the Reformation is titled “From Conflict to Communion.” Five hundred years ago, those words would have sounded as impossible to hold together as the wolves sleeping with lambs and streams flowing through deserts that Isaiah prophesied!

It is precisely because of their seeming impossibility that Advent is a perfect time to lift them up. Lutherans and Roman Catholics sharing the eucharistic meal at the same altar? “When hell freezes over,” our grandparents might have said. But Advent dares us to hope, to stay awake, and to bear fruit worthy of repentance—including for the unkind words and assumptions we have so often made about each other.

If we can hold out hope that the new world God is bringing about in Jesus Christ is indeed coming—and coming soon!—and with it will come “new highways opened, new protocols declared” (ELW 266), then even to this prayer of unity at the table we can add our own “Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus.”

Seasonal Checklist

- Order candles and greens for the Advent wreath. Consider a smaller, table-sized wreath for gatherings outside the main worship space.
- Recruit volunteers of all ages to decorate the worship space.
- If it is not your practice, try scheduling midweek morning or evening prayer each week in Advent.
- Use the Kyrie. Omit the canticle of praise. Explore and use *Music Sourcebook: All Saints through Transfiguration* (Augsburg Fortress, 2013).
- Select a musical setting of the liturgy that differs in its tone than what you would use during Christmas or Easter.
- Use the O Antiphons of Advent—if not during evening prayer from December 17–23, then at a special Advent vespers.



Worship Texts for Advent

Confession and Forgiveness

All may make the sign of the cross, the sign marked at baptism, as the presiding minister begins.

Blessed be the holy Trinity, † one God,
who comes to wake us from sleep,
who leads us into the light of grace.

Amen.

Let us prepare the way of the Lord
by confessing our sin against God and neighbor.

Silence for reflection and self-examination.

God of all time,

**we confess that we have not prepared
for your merciful reign among us.
We ignore our neighbors in need
and fail in the labor of justice and peace.
In your mercy forgive us.
Grant us wisdom to welcome your light
and to seek the things that will endure
until Christ comes again in glory. Amen.**

Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.

In † Jesus Christ your sins are forgiven
and all things are made new.
Rejoice in this good news!

Amen.

Offering Prayer

Savior of the nations, come.
Make your home here in us.
Feed us with your love,
that our faith shine ever new
and our lives reveal your light.

Amen.

Invitation to Communion

Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to you.
Share in the feast of salvation.

Prayer after Communion

God for whom we wait,
you come to us
in the broken bread and the cup we share.
Make us ready always
to welcome Christ into our hearts,
and send us forth to be your people in the world,
announcing your coming among us
in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Blessing

May Christ, the Sun of righteousness, shine upon you
and scatter the darkness from before your path.
Almighty God, Father, † Son, and Holy Spirit,
bless you now and forever.

Amen.

Dismissal

Go in peace. Prepare the way of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.



Seasonal Rites for Advent

The Advent Wreath

One of the best known customs for the season is the Advent wreath. The wreath and winter candle-lighting in the midst of growing darkness strengthen some of the Advent images found in the Bible. The unbroken circle of greens is clearly an image of everlasting life, a victory wreath, the crown of Christ, or the wheel of time itself. Christians use the wreath as a sign that Christ reaches into our time to lead us to the light of everlasting life. The four candles mark the progress of the four weeks of Advent and the growth of light. Sometimes the wreath is embellished with natural dried flowers or fruit. Its evergreen branches lead the household and the congregation to the evergreen Christmas tree. In many homes, the family gathers for prayer around the wreath.

First Sunday of Advent

Use this blessing when lighting the first candle.

Blessed are you, O Lord our God, ruler of the universe.
 You call all nations to walk in your light
 and to seek your ways of justice and peace,
 for the night is past, and the dawn of your coming is near.
 Bless us as we light the first candle of this wreath.
 Rouse us from sleep,
 that we may be ready to greet our Lord when he comes
 and welcome him into our hearts and homes,
 for he is our light and our salvation.
 Blessed be God forever.

Amen.

Second Sunday of Advent

Use this blessing when lighting the first two candles.

Blessed are you, O Lord our God, ruler of the universe.
 John the Baptist calls all people to prepare the Lord's way
 for the kingdom of heaven is near.
 Bless us as we light the candles on this wreath.
 Baptize us with the fire of your Spirit,
 that we may be a light shining in the darkness
 welcoming others as Christ has welcomed us,
 for he is our light and our salvation.
 Blessed be God forever.

Amen.

Third Sunday of Advent

Use this blessing when lighting three candles.

Blessed are you, O Lord our God, ruler of the universe.
 Your prophets spoke of a day when the desert would blossom
 and waters would break forth in the wilderness.
 Bless us as we light the candles on this wreath.
 Strengthen our hearts
 as we prepare for the coming of the Lord.
 May he give water to all who thirst,
 for he is our light and our salvation.
 Blessed be God forever.

Amen.

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Use this blessing when lighting all four candles.

Blessed are you, O Lord our God, ruler of the universe.
 In your Son, Emmanuel,
 you have shown us your light
 and saved us from the power of sin.
 Bless us as we light the candles on this wreath.
 Increase our longing for your presence,
 that at the celebration of your Son's birth
 his Spirit might dwell anew in our midst,
 for he is our light and our salvation.
 Blessed be God forever.

Amen.