

Exploring Advent Maureen Gallagher

Advent Week One Cycle A

The Four W's!

Advent is celebrated the four weeks before Christmas. “W” words help us remember the meaning of Advent. The first Sunday of Advent we will look at Advent as the **W**inter of the Church year. The second Sunday of Advent we will reflect on **W**atching; watching for surprises. The third Sunday we will explore **W**aiting and what it means to wait for a wonderful gift and the last Sunday we will think about **W**ishing—wishing people well, wishing for peace and being energized by the wishes of the community during our celebration of Christmas.

Each week will further examine and reflect upon passages from the Scriptures of the week and the lives of a few of the important saints that are celebrated during the week. We will then offer activities for home or classroom which may be adapted to several settings, but which help integrate the themes of Advent into the lives of the community.

Winter of the Church Year

In the northern hemisphere we experience the shortest days of the year and the most darkness during winter. Winter can be bleak. It is a somber time. The winter solstice is December 21—the shortest day of the year. Christmas is the celebration that follows the darkest day. Christmas celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ—the bringer of Light to the World.



Advent is the beginning of the Church's year. Each year the Church celebrates the major events in the life of Christ and the early Christian community. The celebrations are not just about what happened many centuries ago, but about the community today who experience the joy of the birth of Jesus, his life, his death-resurrection-ascension and the beginning of the Church. By reviving the memories, we make them present today and are called to respond to in much the same way as the early believers in Christ were called to respond.

Advent is a new beginning. From the darkness and harshness of winter will come light, a light permeated with the insights of Christ's presence in 2001. Our encounter with Christ occurs concretely in the daily events of life. Amid the tensions and struggles of human existence we experience Christ's presence.

Advent celebrates Christ's presence in our lives, the long period that humanity waited for Christ to come as well as Christ's coming at the end of time. It reminds us that we must be vigilant, be attentive and respond to Christ now and at the end of time. Advent is a time to ready ourselves anew for the service that is called of us as active Christians who

continue to build the reign of God. Service is a key component of Christianity. Albert Schweitzer once said: “The only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found a way to serve.”

The darkness of winter will erupt into the warmth of Christmas—the initial celebration of Christ our Light which culminates in lighting the Easter candle at the vigil on Holy Saturday.

Advent Wreath



Advent wreaths are used both in churches and in homes to represent the long time the people waited for the coming of Christ. Advent is a celebration of the waiting and watching for the coming of Christ. During Advent we pray that Christ will come anew into our hearts.

The Advent wreath is made up of four candles; three are purple or deep blue and one is pink or rose. The later is lit on the third Sunday of Advent when the second reading begins with the phrase “rejoice.” At times a fifth candle, a white one, is added to the center of the wreath and is lit on Christmas Eve. During the first week of Advent one candle is lit; the second two and so on. Appropriate prayers are said each week.

Advent Wreath Symbols

The shape of the wreath reminds us that God has no beginning or end.

The boughs of evergreens point to the fact that God is always with us as a sign of hope and new life.

The unlighted candles remind us of the many years people waited for the coming of Christ.

The lighted candles show us that Christ is the light of the world. As each candle is lit the intensity of the light grows. It is brightest on Christmas.

Blessing of the Advent Wreath

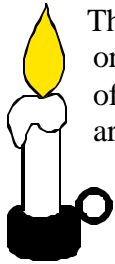
Advent wreaths can be made for home or church. A blessing is appropriate the first time the Advent wreath is lighted. As you say the blessing, sprinkle the wreath with holy water.

Loving God our Creator, bless us and this Advent wreath as we reflect on Christ’s coming into our hearts anew. This wreath recalls the many centuries people waited to see the light of Christ, your son. May this wreath be a sign of our preparation and watchfulness as we prepare and wait for the glorious celebration of your Son’s birth. Let peace and justice reign on this earth as we continue to build your kingdom. We ask this blessing in the name of your Son, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Seeing Connections

During Advent we celebrate the lives of people who have gone before us. The life of Mary and John, the Baptist, are people who have left a profound influence on the Church. They enabled Jesus to be who he was destined by God to be. They said “yes” to service under very difficult and trying circumstances. Mary said “yes” to being the mother of Jesus before she was married, which probably raised a lot of eyebrows. John, the Baptist, had his own ministry and did not need to be overshadowed by Jesus. Today people are also saying “yes” in very difficult situations. Today, December 2, we celebrate the anniversary of the women martyrs in El Salvador. In 1980 Sisters Maura Clarke, Ita Ford, Dorothy Kazel and a lay minister, Jean Donovan, were brutally murdered as they served the poor in Central America and spoke out against injustice. They gave their lives in service of Christ. God’s Spirit was as alive and poignant in their lives as the Spirit was in the lives of Mary and John the Baptist. Mary, John, the Baptist, and the women of El Salvador all responded to God’s presence and said “yes” to making a more just world. At the time of their positive response, they did not know fully to what they were saying “yes.”

Readings for the First Sunday of Advent (Isaiah 2:1-5; Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:37-44)



The readings set the tone for Advent. The Isaiah reading describes the “new world order” that we can expect. It is a world of peace where we will walk in the light of the Lord. It is a time to wake from the sleepiness of the winter and put on the armor of light as Paul reminds us. Matthew forcefully tells us to stay awake—even in the darkness of winter—so that we can be ready to spot the Lord’s coming. The readings are full of hope with a need for us to be attentive, attentive to the “more” in life.

Naming Connections

Given all the recent tragedies how can we still embrace the vision of a peaceful world, a world where the Light of Christ can shine?

What will have to change for this to happen? Change in our own lives? Change in the lives of our family and friends? Change in the life of our nation?

Do you think the world was as bleak for Isaiah, Paul, and Matthew as it is today?

Explain.

Describe any progress you have seen since the time of Christ that points to a greater sensitivity of humanity response to other people. What keeps more progress from happening?

Acting upon the Connections

We can see the connections between Isaiah’s, Paul’s and Matthew’s expectations and our own needs and expectations today. We expect and want a peaceful world, a peaceful nation, a peaceful community, a peaceful family.



What can you do alone or with others to bring about peace whether it contributes to global peace or peace in your home? Which of your actions do you think will make the most significant difference?

What are ways you can be more attentive to Christ's presence in your life?

Weekdays the First Week of Advent

Monday December 3 Matthew 8; 5-11

One of the major threads in Matthew's Gospel is to help the Jewish people to understand that Jesus Christ came to save more than the house of Israel. Jesus is for everyone—all people in the world. The story of the centurion's son is a good example of the universality of the mission of Jesus.

A contemporary idiom is "thinking outside the box." It refers to examining assumptions that things will never change or that we have the last word. Matthew tries to get his listeners to think outside the box.

a) When you reflect upon the events of the past few months, how has it caused you to think "outside the box?"



b) Advent is a time of imagination. What new images or insights have you come to as you celebrate Advent this year?

c) Name one thing you can do to act upon your new insights?

d) Make a collage of "thinking outside the box" based on the new images or insights of Advent 2001.

Tuesday December 4 Isaiah 11, 1-10, Luke 10, 21-24

Read and reflect on the first reading. Select your favorite passages and share these. Tell why they appeal to you. Note how peace is described in this passage.

Pray with the gospel reading. Note the openness needed to encounter Jesus. The attentiveness in this story is without guile.

a) The image of the "root of Jesse" is found several times in the first reading. Jesse was the father of King David. (Remember how important it was that Jesus be born as a relative of King David. The messiah was expected from the line of David.)

b) Begin building a Jesse tree as a poster or artifact. Imagine it to be a "family tree." Use symbols or names of the ancestors of Jesus such as Abraham, Moses, Jesse, David, Solomon, Joseph and Mary. Include your family on the tree going back as far as you can to name your ancestors. Remember you are a faith descendent of Jesus and his ancestors.



- c) Reflect again on the first reading. What are the images of peace found in the reading? If you were to rewrite the passage using contemporary images, what images would you use?
- d) Summarize the last paragraph of the Gospel in one sentence. What actions can you take based on the reading?

Wednesday December 5 Isaiah 25; 6-10, Matthew 15; 29-37

The readings and responsorial psalm are all about being nurtured by the Lord. The gospel refers to being fed by the teachings of Jesus and being cared for by his disciples. Notice how Jesus has others feed the multitudes. The disciples are those deliberately entrusted with feeding the hungry. As disciples we are challenged to care for others. St. Teresa of Avila noted that we are the only hands Christ has today. Christ will work through us to nurture others. Mother Teresa is a good example of someone who did everything in her power to help the poor in India's slums. She started small and through God's power working through her, her work multiplied many times over.

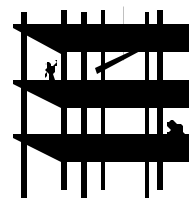
- a) Jesus was a man of action. He did more than just talk about a new world order. He did something about it. He used everything in his power to make people whole. This is what we are called to do. Examine the readings and psalm and list all the actions taken to help others.
- b) Examine the list and in a separate column write down how you can do similar things attributed to God and Jesus Christ. What difference would these actions make in the lives of others?
- c) Study the hunger needs in your community. Talk to people who can tell you about the causes of hunger. Develop an action plan to feed the hungry as well as begin to make some inroads to eliminate hunger.
- d) Study the world hunger problem. What are the causes of this? What can be done to eliminate some of these? How is your lifestyle contributing to world hunger?

Action Alert

Don't forget that Thursday, December 6 is the feast of St. Nick! Candy and treats are in order as well as retelling the "story" of St. Nicholas. See below for some ideas.

Thursday December 6 Isaiah 26; 1-6, Matthew 7, 21. 24-27

The readings point to building a solid foundation of faith and trust in the Lord. The need to be open to other nations of justice and peace, the need to not only hear the Word of the Lord, but also to put it into practice is emphasized. The people of God are people of action who care for the poor, who trust in the Lord.



The celebration of St. Nicholas is based largely on legends. There is evidence that on December 6, 360 Nicholas, bishop of Myrna died. He was known for his prayerful life and his generosity to the poor. He is noted to have attended the Council of Nicea in the fourth century.



Throughout the centuries various customs have developed surrounding St. Nicholas. The common practice of children leaving their shoes out on the evening of December 5 with the hope of getting candy, fruit or simple toys developed from a Dutch custom and has taken on an American flavor. If children are good they receive these treats, if they are bad they receive coal from St. Nicholas dressed in his bishop robes. “Father Christmas” an English rendition of the St. Nicholas legend has also become popular. Santa Claus’ ancestor is also St. Nicholas!

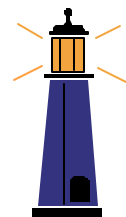
If you are concerned about children being disillusioned when they come to find out that St. Nicholas or Santa Claus are “not for real,” from the beginning you can allude to the fact that parents or teachers are St. Nicholas’ or Santa Claus’s helpers. We are the hands and feet of God’s presence to our children, so this is in keeping with a solid spirituality, a la St. Teresa!

The important point of all this is to celebrate St. Nicholas as a reinforcement of the Gospel which calls us to build the foundation of faith on solid rock. The element in the legends about St. Nicholas that reinforce the faith dimension of the Gospel is that of care and concern for others as the rock upon which our faith can be built.

- a) “Blessed is the person who comes in the name of the Lord” is the responsorial psalm for today. Name ways you “come” in the name of the Lord, even though you may never mention the Lord’s name. Think about this at home, work, with friends, etc.
- b) Think about ways to celebrate St. Nick’s Day that reinforce Gospel values.
- c) How are you the presence of God in the lives of those with whom you work?
- d) Create ways to get others involved in being St. Nick to people who are poor and lonely.

Friday, December 7 Isaiah 29; 17-24, Matthew 9; 27-31

Today’s readings are about seeing and light. The first reading describes the Messiah as a guiding light—one who brings brightness to the gloom and darkness of life. It describes how the poor and the lowly will hear the Word of the Lord and give praise and honor to God. The responsorial psalm reinforces the theme that God is our light and salvation. This sets the stage for the Gospel about the blind men. Because of their faith, they are no longer blind.



Blindness in the scriptures is a metaphor for “not getting it.” In other words sometimes we see things, but we miss the meaning. We fail to make connections. We see, but we don’t understanding God’s call for service, mercy or forgiveness. The blind

men had a radical faith in Jesus. They abandoned themselves to the presence of Jesus through trust and he helped them to see and respond to Jesus' graciousness.

- a) When have you had moments when all of the sudden you got a great insight and saw something as if for the first time?
- b) Advent is a time to take stock of what is really important in our lives. The winter of the Church year calls us to get in touch with who we really are and who we want to become. What insights did today's readings give you about your Christian identity?
- c) Decorate a large box as an individual or a group with pictures and words under the headings: What I see; What I believe; What I can do about it. Repeat one of these titles on each side of the box.
- d) What insights have you gotten about how the first week of Advent can be seen as the "winter of the Church's year?" (at least in the northern hemisphere!)

What I See

What I can do
about it

What I Believe

Saturday December 8, Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception
Genesis 3; 9-15, 20; Ephesians 1;3-6; 11-12; Luke 1; 26-38

What a wonderful way to end the first week of Advent with the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. It is truly a celebration of Mary's readiness for service and her belief in the Word of God. The juxtaposition of the Genesis story of the "fall" where Adam and Eve did not obey God's word and the Lukan Gospel story of Mary who did respond positively to the word of God is dramatic. Mary's "I'm ready to serve" even though there were still a lot of unanswered questions makes her a terrific role model for us. In this dark and gloomy winter of the Church, we get a great jump-start on our own readiness to say "yes" to service by entering into Mary's story.

Activities for Service

Our readiness for service is shown by our serving actions. Some ideas for service follow.

- 1) **Celebrate Kriss Kringle.** Sometimes this custom is called "secret Santa." The origin of this celebration is German. It was called *Christ Kinder* in German or "Christ Child" in English because children were taught that the Christ Child bought gifts to the children. It later became known as Kriss Kringle and was popularized in the United States by the early Dutch settlers. The custom involves choosing someone secretly and giving that person small gifts in secret throughout the Advent season. On Christmas Eve the Kriss Kringles or "secret Santas" give up their identity. This is a fun custom for families or groups of young people. If employed, it is very important to be sure are receivers of small, simple gifts as well as all give the same kind of gifts.



- 2) **Advent Angels** Advent Angels also work in secret. They do not give gifts but they do acts of kindness to the same person every day or two. Their identity is also made known before Christmas.



- 3) **Chains of Connectedness** This is a process of giving everyone involved about ten strips of construction paper cut in strips four inches long and two inches wide. All who participate write down acts of kindness, love, concern, forgiveness they have done—one activity per strip—and then the strips are stapled or pasted to form a chain and used to decorate a Christmas tree. The connection is made between Jesus coming to bring love to all people and we being the continuation of Jesus' mission of love.
- 4) **Community Project** If you are going to do something significant for the a groups of people in the community now is the time to start. Some ideas include
- Making placemats for a nursing home
 - Collecting food for the poor
 - Making ornaments for a prison
 - Making Christmas cards for shut-ins