



ADVENT

Advent 2017

A new liturgical year begins with the First Sunday of Advent, December 3. Once again, the Church repeats its cycle of celebrating in word and sacrament the events of Salvation History. We return to the beginning as we listen to the Gospel of Mark for most of the year. On the first Sunday of Advent, we begin Year “B” of a three-year cycle for the Sunday Gospels and Year “2” of the weekday cycle. We hear the entire Bible every few years, but every year we focus on one of the three synoptic Gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke



We always have four Sundays of Advent. The total number of days varies from year to year. December 25 falls on a Monday this year, and so we have the fewest possible days in Advent. Advent can have between twenty-two and twenty-eight days.

Each Sunday introduces themes and symbols from the Evangelists and Prophets: Week One poses the universal questions of salvation; Week Two presents John the Baptist’s cry to “Prepare the way of the Lord;” Week Three continues the story of John’s role as the “messenger sent ahead” to announce the Kingdom; Week Four brings the familiar story of the Archangel announcing the conception of Christ in the womb of Mary. (We hear from Mark’s gospel for the first two weeks. Since Mark’s gospel does not

include an *infancy narrative*, the third and fourth Sundays use the John and Luke's accounts, respectively.)

Throughout Advent, we intensify the call for the Lord's return. We invoke the "O" antiphons during the eight days leading up to Christmas. Developed as part of monastic prayer to introduce the *Magnificat* during vespers (prayer in the evening), in recent years, the Church uses them at the daily Eucharists between December 17 and 24 as the verse for the Gospel Alleluia. Most people are familiar with them as the verses of the hymn "*O Come! O Come, Emmanuel*"

First Sunday of Advent

(Isaiah 63:16b-17, 19b; 64:2-7 1 Corinthians 1:3-9 Mark 13:33-37)



The days of advent begin with the *big picture* of God's relationship to humanity. Isaiah prays the Lord returns for the sake of his people. He wants God to "rend the heavens and come down." During this first week, the

Church reminds of our frailty, looking to the strength we receive as we await Jesus' taking on our mortal nature in history. We trust the Lord who is our Father and Creator, "the potter" who forms us in his hand. The Creator of the Universe who gives to each of us the attention of an artist who creates a unique piece.

The Church reminds us that what comes from God returns to him. Everything is part of the Kingdom when Jesus returns. Each week the readings move us closer to witnessing Jesus' birth when God fulfills his promise to Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, and to the entire universe in the

birth of Jesus.

Mark describes Jesus telling his Disciples: "Be watchful! Be Alert!" By extension, Jesus says the same thing to us. Jesus provides practical advice regarding *watchfulness* whether we are driving down a dark road at night or looking for Jesus' impending return. Like the early Church, we live in expectation of Jesus' imminent return.

We face the same challenge as the early Church. Our eyes scan the road ahead. Our hearts long for the fulfillment of God's promise. We believe/know the Lord will come. Whether he arrives at morning, noon, or night does not matter. As the Church, our constant prayer implores the Lord "to rend the heavens and come down." but we live from day to day, one leg working to live in the present the other stretching to the coming kingdom.

The Advent call to *watch* challenges each believer to be alert to the signs of Jesus' return. Believers live each day going to work, school, play, etc. We have a plan for the day (as best we can!) In the end we never know what might happen that day. We might find a new bottleneck on the highway. We might encounter a new challenge at work or home. We might discover that elusive solution to a problem at work. Watching requires that we live *attentively* to the world around us.

Second Sunday of Advent

(Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11 2 Peter 3:8-14 Mark 1:1-8)

Fans of George Frederic Handel will recognize the first reading as inspiration for the beautiful "Comfort Ye," the song introducing the "Messiah." The Church accepts the challenge to "give comfort," "speak tenderly," and "proclaim" that our guilt is at an end.





John the Baptist echoes other words of Isaiah to “Prepare the way of the Lord!” To accept the comfort offered by the first reading, John challenges us to transform our lives and accept the baptism of water he offers, remembering the “One mightier than [he]” who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

John presents a powerful message. Not surprisingly, the reaction of people seeing someone dressed in camel’s hair and munching on insects may seem not to offer the comfort promised by Isaiah. (People found it as odd two thousand years ago as they would today. John would not conform to the expectations of any generation.) Encountering a character such as John, challenges the Church to find God in **every** encounter—regardless of the prophet’s dress. Prophets challenge believers to expand their understanding of God and adjust or confirm their life—probably a little of both. “They comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable,” as someone once said. (I found multiple attributions for the quotation: from a fictional bartender in the **Chicago Post** from 1893 to the early 20th-century American journalist HL Mencken and the 20th-century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. I lean toward the bartender.) The idea illustrates the role prophets can play in the world.

Driving down Hwy 109 or Big Bend reminds us of the need to straighten roads. We all desire the most direct route. If the Baptist grabs our attention and our experience assists us to work to achieve peace of heart, our lives will develop a fundamental orientation toward God. Advent sets us on a course to encounter God in

the most intimate and most universal ways through the Christ child and the Church. A Divine encounter occurs every day in myriad ways: prayer, family life, work, recreation, and walking down the street. As



believers, we must grow in the awareness of God’s presence.

Peter reminds us that the Church waits for a “new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.” We gather near the beginning of winter with its cold, dreary days. We decorate our homes and create a welcoming space for families and friends (and the Holy Family should they stop by on the way to Bethlehem). Our homes are places where righteousness (goodness and morality) dwells and where we live, pray, and work to create a mirrored image of the Kingdom. All families are on their way to perfection. No home is perfect, despite the promises of HGTV, DIY Network, or Home Depot. Living the righteousness and truth to which the gospel calls us empowers each member of the Church to “prepare the way” at home, school, work, and play. Believers often find the crooked roads that need straightening and the valleys that need raising in the confines of our homes. Beginning with family, we can straighten the way to Lord. We can find the comfort that God provides through our family and friends, that most intimate manifestation of God’s love. We rely on God’s grace to assist us as we extend the kingdom from the love of God and family to all dimensions of our lives.

Third Sunday of Advent

(Isaiah 61:1-2A, 10-11 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24 John 1:6-8, 19-28)

The universal Church refers to the third Sunday of Advent as *Gaudete* Sunday.

“Gaudete in Domino Semper!”

Rejoice in the Lord
always!



As we begin to focus on the events leading to the coming of Jesus into human history, the Church reminds of the great joy that will be ours on Christmas Day.

The first reading recalls the beginning of Jesus' ministry when he announces his call to “bring good tidings,” to “heal” and “to proclaim” the vindication of the human race by the grace and love of God. God has been faithful to the covenant he made to our ancestors in faith. As Paul reminds us: “Test everything; retain what is good.” We will always find God faithful to his promise, despite our frailty.

We must ask ourselves during this season: For whom are we looking? How do we test to know the Messiah? We keep searching and asking: Are you the prophet? Are you Elijah? Are you the Christ? With eyes, ears, heart, and mind open, we will recognize the one who comes to bring us the fullness of the revelation of God in our world. Having accepted baptism by water, we welcome the one who, though we are not worthy to untie his sandal, loves us and offers us the fullness of God's Love and Grace. We have been baptized in the Spirit through our sacramental life and by sharing the grace received with those we meet each day. Advent prepares us, as a result, for our search to bring Jesus into our lives and our world. We find the one for whom we search.

Advent is the season when we need to rejoice. Decorations, parties, dinners, TV specials—whatever we do to celebrate—should help us rejoice in the love of God and family. Catholicism has taught the

world to celebrate the joy God brings to the world. The great celebrations of the world from joyful Christmas festivals to the exuberance of Mardi Gras to the ever-renewing hope of Easter, find their source and summit in the Church's relationship with the Divine.

Humanity longs to hear and understand John's testimony. The Church must see the beautiful images of Scriptures in the context of the life of the Church and every community and individual belonging to the Church. The light God created on the first day of Creation illuminates the star above Bethlehem, reflects in the transfigured Christ on the Mountain with Elijah and Moses, and dispels the darkness of sin and death through the light of the Easter candle.

God reveals these truths in those moments when we rejoice—big or small/fancy or plain; gain insight about our life after a struggle or after receiving a new opportunity; experience anything that pulls us out of ourselves and connects us to a greater understanding of life—a birth, sunrise/set. Any occasion to understand ourselves in relation to the Divine validates the Advent experience.

Fourth Sunday of Advent

(2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8B-12, 14a, 16 Romans 16: 25-27 Luke 1:26-38)

The final Sunday of Advent is the final day of Advent this year.

The Church proclaims the story of Gabriel's Visit. Gabriel, whose name means “messenger of God,” greets the young woman with words of comfort:

“Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you!” God favors her and chooses her as the mother of a son whom she will name Jesus. The promised fulfillment of the ancient promise, he will inherit the throne of his ancestor David.



Richard A. Wagner