

by Ryan Flanigan



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What Is Advent and Why Should We Practice It?

Advent is the first season in the Church Year. It begins on the Sunday four weeks prior to Christmas and ends on Christmas Eve. It is the season in which followers of Jesus begin again our annual journey with Jesus from his conception to his coming again. During Advent we enter into the Story of Israel, identifying with the children of Israel held captive in their own land, longing for a Messiah to come and rescue them. It is also a season for us to ready ourselves and wait with eager expectation for the Second Coming of Christ.

Like Lent, Advent is a fresh start for Christians. It is an opportunity for us to purge ourselves of our false messiahs and to turn our hearts back toward the one true Messiah Jesus Christ. We live in a world of false gods and powerful kings that vie for our allegiance and oftentimes succeed at capturing our hearts. Just look at the frenetic and materialistic way our culture celebrates Christmas. If we allow ourselves to simply go with the flow, we'll be swept into the currents of idolatry and self-worship. We need seasons like Advent in order to renounce and re-order our rhythms into Christ.

Advent is also a time for us to prepare for the arrival of Christ. The word "advent" means, "awaiting the arrival." Jesus came to us once as a baby in Bethlehem. He will come to us again in the end. And he comes to us now by his Spirit, as we seek his presence daily and call upon his name. It is this past, future, and present advent that we are invited to prepare for this season.

So, we put ourselves in the countercultural posture of silence and waiting. We refrain from the instantaneous gratification of getting whatever we want when we want. And we allow ourselves to feel the need for a Savior. The season of Advent can lead us in this way, and if we choose to follow, our celebration of Christmas will be more joyful and meaningful than ever.





How to Use Advent for the Family: A Simple Guide

It takes practice to wait and prepare for the coming of Christ. Practices shape us into certain kinds of people who love certain kinds of things. The practice of Advent intends to spiritually transform us, to re-direct our desires from false messiahs toward the things of God, and to prepare us for the arrival of Christ. But it will only work if we submit our hearts and bodies to the practice.

This resource is designed to guide groups, families, and churches into a simple practice of Advent. Cards 1-4 lead us through the first four weeks of Advent, and Card 5 helps us celebrate all twelve days of Christmas as well as the Epiphany. The front of each card includes a brief explanation of the season, instructions how to use the card, and a decorating tip. The back of each card consists of a very simple prayer guide. All the cards are self-explanatory and user friendly so that anyone can pick one up and follow along. They are also generalized for annual use without the need for changing dates.

There are two PDF versions for each card. The Ready-for-Print cards (3 per page, front and back) can be printed on cardstock and handed out to your congregation. The Ready-for-Web files can be posted to your website for easy accessibility. It may also benefit folks who are new to Advent if you give them a copy of the Introduction page: "What Is Advent and Why Should We Practice It?"

May our practice of Advent draw us deeper into the Story of God. May we faithfully wait and prepare for the coming of Christ, so that we may find greater joy and meaning in our Christmas celebration.



Advent
Week 1: Hope

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Advent Wreath: One way you can start your Christmas decorating is with an Advent wreath to use as a centerpiece on your dining table. You can buy a wreath from a craft store, or get creative and make your own. It just needs a place for 5 candles: 3 purple and 1 pink in the wreath, and 1 white candle placed in the center. You can also search the web to find instructions.

Wreaths have been used for thousands of years in celebrations of many kinds. A circle often represents God and eternity, and the evergreens that make up the circle symbolize everlasting life.

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Sunday:	*Isaiah 7:14*
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★ Be silent, then read and discuss:

Hoping is different than wishing. Hope is the desire and trust in God that *he* will do what *he* wants to do. Wishing is the desire or feeling that *something* will do what *I* want it to do. Wishing seeks to remove me from my real life, so that I can escape and transport to a place that makes me feel better. Hope roots us in our real lives, where God can break in and transform us in the midst of darkness and chaos.

What are you hoping for today?
How have you seen hope fulfilled in your life?
What hope does this Scripture give us about Jesus?

★ Sing this song:

O come, O come, Emmanuel
and ransom captive Israel
That mourns in lonely exile here
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Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
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★ Close with this prayer:

O Lord, shine the light of your hope into our lives. Help us to look to you in all we do, and as we look, to see you and your hand in all that happens to us. Help us to be able to share that hope with those around us who are in darkness. Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.

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St. Francis of Assisi may have made the first nativity scene in the 13th century. He believed Christmas should be special, so he assembled live animals and people on a hillside to enact Jesus' birth. Then he brought people from the surrounding villages to see it. The tradition continued to develop and spread even into our own homes today.

Stars are used in Christmas decorating to represent the star that appeared at Jesus' birth and led the wise men to him. Jesus is also called the Morning Star who shines bright that we might see and come to him (Rev. 22).

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Each day, gather around the table, turn out the lights, and, if you have an Advent wreath, light the first purple candle, the Hope candle, as well as the second purple candle, the **Peace** candle. If you use a flashlight, it can represent searching for peace.

★ Read aloud the daily Scripture:

Sunday:	*Isaiah 11:6-10*
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★ Be silent, then read and discuss:

Biblical peace—*shalom*—isn't just the absence of war or violence. *Shalom* is perfect and complete contentment, blessedness, and health flourishing in relationships and responsibilities. *Shalom* brings reconciliation to divided relationships, order and safety to unjust societies, and calm to our anxious hearts. The peace that Jesus Christ brings at Christmas is one that touches everything in our lives.

Where do you need peace in your life today?
How has peace replaced turmoil in your life?
In what ways does the Prince of Peace rule your life?

★ Sing this verse from "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel":

O come, Desire of Nations, bind
In one the hearts of all mankind
Bid thou our sad divisions cease
And be thyself our King of peace

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
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★ Close with this prayer:

O Lord, as we search for peace, we seek to find it in you. Help us to be aware and to renounce what the world says will bring us peace, and instead to receive your *shalom* in the gift of your Son, our Prince of Peace. *Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.*

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Week 3: Joy

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Advent is the four weeks before Christmas. It is a time associated with *waiting* and *preparing*. Just like new parents prepare their homes to receive the birth of a child, so also we prepare our hearts and our homes for Jesus to come into them in new ways on Christmas Day. At the same time we look forward to the day when Jesus will return, set the world right, and establish his kingdom. When Jesus comes back, we want to be ready for him.

How to Use This Card

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Christmas tree: Many cultures throughout history have revered the evergreen as a symbol of immortality. Christians began using it as a symbol of everlasting life in the 700's. Around 1500, Martin Luther, inspired by a snow-covered fir tree standing in starlight, brought a small tree indoors and decorated it with candles in honor of Christ's birth. We put **Christmas lights** on our trees and houses, representing Christ the Light of the World who shines in the darkness.

Candy canes came on the scene early in the 1600s. They were straight at first, but not long thereafter they took the shape of a shepherd's crook. This can represent the shepherds in the Christmas story, as well as Jesus our Good Shepherd. (the "J-for-Jesus" shape also makes them easier to hang on our trees.) It wasn't until the early 1900's that the red stripes and the peppermint flavor were added to the sugar cane. The bittersweet flavor can represent the joys and sorrows of life. The stripes can represent our healing in the blood of Jesus.

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Each day, gather around the table, turn out the lights, and, if you have an Advent wreath, light the first and second purple candles, Hope and Peace, as well as the pink candle, the **Joy** candle. If you use a flashlight, it can represent searching for joy.

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Sunday:	*Isaiah 9:1-7*
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Tuesday:	*Luke 2:13-16*
Wednesday:	*Luke 2:17-20*
Thursday:	*Isaiah 35:10*
Friday:	*Isaiah 55:12*
Saturday:	*Zephaniah 3:14-17*

★ Be silent, then read and discuss:

One of the reasons Jesus came as a babe in Bethlehem, walking and talking and modeling what life with God can really be, is that he wanted his followers to experience his joy. Jesus came to inebriate people with joy TODAY, right where we are, even in the middle of our messes. Jesus came to bring us joy that is not determined by our circumstances. Jesus came to bring his joy right into this very moment.

What brings you joy in your life?
What is stealing joy from you today?
In what ways does Jesus make your joy complete?

★ Sing this song:

Joy to the world, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare him room,
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven, and heaven and nature sing.

★ Close with this prayer:

O Lord, you are the most joy-filled being in the entire universe. Help us to recognize the joy that is available to us in Christ. Let us experience your joy in the midst of our daily lives and relationships, and let us share it with the world. Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.

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Christmas gifts represent the gift God freely gives to us in Jesus, who was "wrapped" in swaddling clothes. Receiving what is freely given to us is not easy, but this is what is intended in the act of gift-giving. Christmas gifts also represent the offerings of the Wise Men, who brought costly gifts to Jesus. And so exchanging gifts teaches us to both receive and give. Freely we have received God's love, and freely we give it.

Stockings come from the historical figure St. Nicholas, who lived in the 4th century. He is known for secretly putting coins in shoes left outside the doors of the poor. Legend has it that a father was so poor he was going to sell his three daughters as slaves. St. Nicholas threw two bags of gold into their window, one falling into a stocking that was hung to dry, and a third bag down the chimney. To remember and follow the saint's example, it became a tradition to put shoes out on Dec. 6, St. Nicholas' Day, or to hang stockings on the chimney, for loved ones to secretly fill with goodies.

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Daily Prayer

Each day, gather around the table, turn out the lights, and, if you have an Advent wreath, light the Hope, Peace, and Joy candles, as well as the last purple candle, which represents **Love**. If you use a flashlight, it can represent searching for Love.

★ Read aloud the daily Scripture:

Sunday:	*Isaiah 40:1-5*
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Wednesday:	*Luke 1:46-56*
Thursday:	*Luke 2:1-5*
Friday:	*Matthew 1:18-25*
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★ Be silent, then read and discuss:

Of all these—hope, peace, joy, and love—the greatest of these is love; a love that lasts. Love cannot be reduced to a sentimental feeling, a moving thought, a stirring of emotion, or a mere passion of the flesh. In the Advent of Jesus, God has made a decisive commitment to love. And this love is fierce, passionate, and strong, but also courteous. It will not coerce or force or insist or demand. It knocks, it nudges, it woos, it invites. God doesn't have love, or give love, or do love—God IS love. Will we receive this gift of love this Christmas?

Why do you love the things/people you love?
What keeps you from receiving love?
How can you surrender to God's love today?

★ Sing this song:

O come let us adore him
O come let us adore him
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Christ the Lord

★ Close with this prayer:

O, Lord, you shine the light of your love over the whole world and into our lives. Help us to receive it and to reflect it in how we live. Show us better how to love you and how to love others. Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.

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Christmas & Epiphany

Dec. 25 - Jan. 6



What Is Christmas & Epiphany?

Christmas is the season of celebrating Christ's birth. The celebration lasts *TWELVE DAYS* from Dec. 25 through Jan. 5. We have just spent four weeks waiting and preparing for this. It would be a pity for the celebration to be over and done with in a single day. The light that we have been longing for has finally come. Let the celebration begin!

Epiphany, which means revelation, appearance, or manifestation, follows the Christmas season. It is the season (beginning Jan. 6) that celebrates Christ as the light and salvation to both Jews and Gentiles.

How to Use This Card

This card is designed to help us joyfully and intentionally celebrate the birth of Christ for twelve days, and his Epiphany on Jan. 6. The card includes a **Decorating Tip** (below) and a **Daily Prayer** (back). We invite you to join with your family or small group in this way as together we celebrate the birth and life of Jesus.

Decorating Tip

Bells can be used to audibly signal the presence of Christ. Many cultures throughout history used bells to drive away evil spirits. In Christian worship Jesus Christ comes to deliver us from evil. He is the light of the world that drives away the darkness. Churches have used bells to call people to worship and to signal the presence of our High Priest. The distinct, reverberating sounds of bells help us stop and hearken to the Word made flesh. Bells may have been associated with St. Nicholas (the 4th century priest) because of his heart for the poor and needy, those among whom Jesus is present.

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Christmas is the season of celebrating Christ's birth. The celebration lasts *TWELVE DAYS* from Dec. 25 through Jan. 5. We have just spent four weeks waiting and preparing for this. It would be a pity for the celebration to be over and done with in a single day. The light that we have been longing for has finally come. Let the celebration begin!

Epiphany, which means revelation, appearance, or manifestation, follows the Christmas season. It is the season (beginning Jan. 6) that celebrates Christ as the light and salvation to both Jews and Gentiles.

How to Use This Card

This card is designed to help us joyfully and intentionally celebrate the birth of Christ for twelve days, and his Epiphany on Jan. 6. The card includes a **Decorating Tip** (below) and a **Daily Prayer** (back). We invite you to join with your family or small group in this way as together we celebrate the birth and life of Jesus.

Decorating Tip

Bells can be used to audibly signal the presence of Christ. Many cultures throughout history used bells to drive away evil spirits. In Christian worship Jesus Christ comes to deliver us from evil. He is the light of the world that drives away the darkness. Churches have used bells to call people to worship and to signal the presence of our High Priest. The distinct, reverberating sounds of bells help us stop and hearken to the Word made flesh. Bells may have been associated with St. Nicholas (the 4th century priest) because of his heart for the poor and needy, those among whom Jesus is present.

Daily Prayer

Each day, gather around the table, *LEAVE THE LIGHTS ON*, and, if you have an Advent wreath, light the Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love candles. Then, as you light the white Christ candle in the center, *RING A BELL* to signal his presence.

★ Read aloud the daily Scripture:

	12/25:	*John 1:1-4*
	12/26:	*Isaiah 49:6*
	12/27:	*Luke 2:25-33*
	12/28:	*Luke 2:36-40*
	12/29:	*Isaiah 60:1-3*
	12/30:	*Isaiah 60:19-20*
	12/31:	*Romans 15:7-12*
	1/1:	*Psalm 43:3*
	1/2:	*Psalm 27:1*
	1/3:	*Psalm 119:105*
	1/4:	*Ephesians 5:8-10*
	1/5:	*John 8:12*
(Epiphany)	1/6:	*Matthew 5:14-16*

★ Be silent, then read and discuss:

'Tis the season to finally celebrate the birth of Christ. The angels rejoice in songs of praise, peace has come to every man on earth, and we are invited to respond in worship. The incarnation of Christ demands a response from everyone. Every man without exception will either say "yes" or "no" to Jesus.

Where do you need Christ in your life today?
What will you offer the Newborn King this year?
How will you shine the light of Christ to others?

★ Sing a Christmas carol (ideas below):

Angels We Have Heard	O Come All Ye Faithful
Away in a Manger	O Holy Night
The First Noel	O Little Town of Bethlehem
God Rest Ye Merry	Silent Night
Hark the Herald	What Child Is This
Joy to the World	*Jan. 6* – We Three Kings

★ Speak this blessing:

May the hope, peace, joy and love represented by the birth in Bethlehem this season fill our lives and become part of all that we say and do. May we share the divine life of Jesus Christ, even as he humbled himself to share our humanity. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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