

Awaiting Emmanuel

He Is Coming!

Isaiah 2:1–5; Romans 13:11–14; Matthew 24:37–44

Today begins a time of extraordinary joy and thoughtful preparation ... and not just the kind that involves frosting cookies or choosing gifts (though there's room for that, too).

It's the First Sunday of Advent, the start of the Church's liturgical year and a season of waiting for Christ to arrive, ever so humbly, as a miraculous baby boy. Consider the immense love that God bears for us, to send his son in this most vulnerable expression of humanity.

We celebrate this momentous love with Christmas every year on December 25, and each year we mark four Sundays on a calendar for Advent. But today's Gospel makes it clear that we can't make firm plans for Christ's coming — the Second Coming, when Jesus returns at the end of the world. "Stay awake! For you do not know on which day your Lord will come" (Mt 24:42). We must always be ready.

This is difficult for a society of people who like to be in control. We live by schedules! We like to put dates into our phones, write events on wall calendars, and break down projects into steps with all kinds of management tools to ensure we are meeting deadlines. Being ready

at any moment is tricky. Imagine telling friends to drop by any time ... and then discovering that they are on your doorstep while you are knee deep in dirty laundry.

Of course, we're frequently reminded that the world works according to God's plan, not ours. "At an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come"

(Mt 24:44), we are told. Being ready to meet Jesus isn't a goal; it has to become a lifestyle.

We are provided with opportunities at every turn to develop this way of being, by the very nature of how we engage with those around us.

Pope Francis encourages us to "work and ask for the grace to build a culture of encounter, of this fruitful encounter, this encounter that returns to each person their dignity as children of God, the dignity of living" (For a Culture of Encounter, September 13, 2016, morning meditation).

When you see Christ alive in the people around you, and every day you return that immense love that he shows us, then you have no need to fear the uncertainty of his coming. Advent is the opportunity to align your life with his teachings.

It's time not to plan, but to become.



POINTS TO PONDER

- ▶ What would you need to do to be ready for Jesus' Second Coming if it were tomorrow?
- ▶ What changes or efforts have you been putting off until "someday"?
- ▶ How do you address others as children of God?





Keeping Watch *Together*

What are some ways you might be ready for Jesus' coming, and for those whom you encounter every day? Try these ideas, or think of your own.



The Advent Wreath

Join in a centuries-old tradition by marking the weeks until Christmas with an Advent wreath. Each element holds significance: The evergreen wreath symbolizes everlasting life, and the four candles represent the light that Christ brings into the world. In particular, the rose candle we light on the Third Sunday of Advent highlights our growing joy at the approach of Christmas.

You can purchase a premade Advent wreath or a candleholder made to hold four candles in a ring. You might fashion your own, using real or artificial greenery.

Decide what kind of ceremony with which you'd like to observe the lighting of each week's candles. It can be as fancy or informal as you'd like! It can include singing, music, and/or prayers. You

could turn off the lights to set the scene. Perhaps you would like to incorporate the adding of characters to your Nativity scene — place the animals one week, the shepherds the next. You could take turns with family members lighting the candles or planning a meditation. Consider how you might create your own tradition to hand down for generations.

To begin this week, light one of the purple candles today. You can light it again each night at dinner, if you choose. Next week, light the first candle and another purple candle. On the Third Sunday of Advent, light the previous two purple candles, as well as the rose candle. On the Fourth Sunday of Advent, light all four candles. If you'd like, add a white candle in the center to light on Christmas Eve.

- Freeze a pot of soup and a batch of cookies so you are always ready to extend hospitality to guests at dinner.
- Investigate ways to be of service to those who have recently joined your community. Catholic Charities operates programs to assist migrants, those who've recently left prison, and infants.
- Just as you might with a healthier eating regimen or exercise plan, determine some ways to make awareness, service, and hospitality part of your everyday lifestyle. Maybe even schedule it!



The Feast Day of **ST. NICHOLAS**

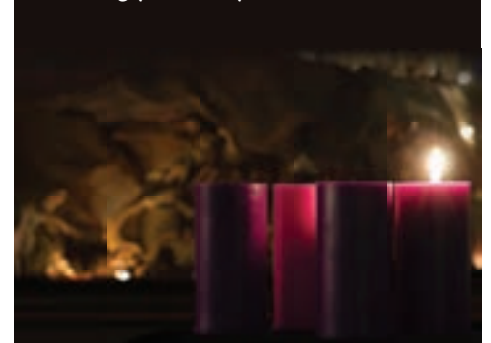
St. Nicholas is not just another name for Santa Claus; he was a real Greek bishop in the fourth century. He was the son of wealthy parents who died when he was young, and he donated his inheritance to help the less fortunate.

Legend has it that he specifically aided three young women who couldn't be married because they didn't have dowries. When each was of the age when she had to leave home, he would toss a bag of coins through the window that allegedly landed in the girl's shoes drying by the fire.

The feast day of St. Nicholas is December 6. Your family can celebrate by taking a bit of time to learn about the saint, then putting out shoes the evening of December 5 for St. Nicholas (or Mom and Dad!) to fill with candy during the night.

An Advent Prayer

Heavenly Father, please give me eyes to see you in every encounter, and strength to align my life with your teachings, so that I'm ready for the coming of Jesus whatever the hour and day. Thank you for the immense love that you've shown, especially in sending your only Son. Amen.



Awaiting Emmanuel

Bearing Fruit

Isaiah 11:1–10; Romans 15:4–9; Matthew 3:1–12

Maybe you've heard the phrase, "It's not what you know; it's who you know." And maybe you even know of a situation when this was the case — when someone secured an opportunity because of a connection rather than on ability alone.

John the Baptist tells the Pharisees and Sadducees that claiming to be a descendant of Abraham will not be enough when the wheat is separated from the chaff. "Produce good fruit as evidence of your repentance" (Mt 3:8).

There's no better time than Advent for us to begin bearing fruit for he who is coming, both at Christmas and the Second Coming. Fortunately, we have clear instructions on how to do that.

"The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law," St. Paul

writes in Galatians 5:22–23.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* adds, "The fruits of the Spirit are perfections that the Holy Spirit forms in us as the first fruits of eternal glory" (1832).

It's a challenge to bear such fruit. But with God's grace and the help of the Holy Spirit, we can "prepare the way of the Lord, / make straight his paths" (Mt 3:3). As you light the second purple candle on your Advent wreath this week, consider ways in which you can bear

fruit.

We learned last week that we can't know the hour at which Jesus will come again. But when he does, he will take into account what you know (the Faith); he'll consider who you know (the Father); and he'll consider what fruit you've borne. So may this Advent result in a lush and abundant harvest!



POINTS TO PONDER

- ▶ How can you keep the fruits of the Spirit in mind? Do you need a daily reminder on your phone? Can a book or journal help?
- ▶ What are some ways you can put action toward each of the fruits of the Spirit?
- ▶ Consider seeking the Sacrament of Reconciliation this week and, as John the Baptist urged, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mt 3:2).



The Sacrament of Reconciliation

Prepare the way of the Lord with a clear conscience. Most parishes offer times for confession or communal penance services during Advent. Feeling uncertain because it's been a while? That's okay — see the steps on the next page for a reassuring guide.

Steps in the Rite of Reconciliation



You may confess face to face with the priest or privately behind a screen. Either way, relax. The priest is there to help you experience God's mercy.

The priest will welcome you and invite you to make the Sign of the Cross. It will be helpful for the priest to know a little about you if he doesn't already, and the time of your last confession. You may choose to begin with the traditional opening, "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been (weeks, months, years) since my last confession."

Confess your sins in your own words to the priest. An appropriate way to conclude is by saying, "I am sorry for these and all the sins of my past life."

The priest will help you from there.

After you have confessed your sins, the priest will offer encouragement for your moral and spiritual growth. He then gives you a penance — which may include a brief prayer — and asks you to make an act of contrition. Then the priest absolves you from your sins. After this you may leave the confessional.

Complete the penance the priest gives you. Thank God for his mercy. Promise yourself and God that you will try to avoid these sins in the future. Talk to God and ask for his help especially in avoiding temptations — those near occasions of sin.

Awaiting Together

Make waiting for Jesus an active task with these ideas, or create your own list!

- Bring more *joy* to your days and those of others by consciously remembering to smile more, which can affect your mood and that of others.
- Increase your *generosity* with an offer of money, goods, or service to causes for the least of those in your community.
- Life presents endless moments that test our *patience* and *kindness*. Choose one aspect of your everyday experiences in which to be wildly patient or kind. Maybe it's toward other drivers when on the road. Maybe it's with your coworkers. Maybe it's those chaotic hours between the end of the school day through dinner and homework. Be extravagant, just as Jesus is with his love and grace.



THE IMMACULATE Conception



There's endless confusion about the Immaculate Conception. Many people think it refers to the conception of Jesus *by* the Virgin Mary. Instead, we celebrate the conception of the Virgin Mary — the doctrine that states that Mary was conceived without the stain of original sin.

This year we celebrate the Immaculate Conception on Monday, December 9. You could honor the Blessed Mother by praying the Rosary or the Hail Mary.

*Hail Mary,
full of Grace,
the Lord is with thee.
Blessed art thou among women,
and blessed is the fruit
of thy womb, Jesus.
Holy Mary,
Mother of God,
pray for us sinners now,
and at the hour of our death.
Amen.*

An Advent Prayer

Dear Holy Spirit, I ask you to fill me with your strength and guide my thoughts, words, and actions, so that I might bear great fruit worthy of your grace. Amen.



Awaiting Emmanuel

An Encounter with Christ

Isaiah 35:1–6a, 10; James 5:7–10; Matthew 11:2–11

Do you know what to look for? John the Baptist wasn't sure. He thought Christ would arrive in a big way, like a king, and with fire, as he told his followers in last week's reading (see Mt 3:10, 12). But Jesus hadn't brought wrath, nor ax, nor winnowing fork.

He asked Jesus, by way of his disciples, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?" (Mt 11:3).

Jesus responds by pointing out how the miracles and works he has performed have fulfilled the prophecies of Isaiah (see Is 35:5–6). Those are pretty clear signs of he who is to come. But what do we have today to help us see Christ?

"Jesus is not a personage from the past; he is a person living today," Pope Francis said in his Easter Vigil homily on April 20, 2019. "We do not know him from history

books; we encounter him in life."

Today begins the third week of Advent, known as Gaudete (Latin for "rejoice") Sunday, and we light the rose-colored candle in the Advent wreath. "Rejoice in the Lord always. The Lord is near" (Phil 4:4, 5).

What an amazing thing to celebrate!

Christ is alive, even now. We are awaiting Emmanuel, recalling with joy his arrival as a humble infant and preparing with hope for the Second Coming. At the same time, we can keep watch for him in the daily acts of kindness, the miracle of life, and the beauty of his creation all around us.

Let us see Jesus *in all things* — in all of creation.

When you come to know Christ, you can find him amid the sadness, hurt, and evil that still exist in the world today. And you can live out the joy of his promise that he will come again.



POINTS TO PONDER

- ▶ Where, in your daily life, is it more challenging to see Christ alive and at work?
- ▶ In what ways do you serve as a sign of Christ in the world today?
- ▶ Where did you see Jesus today?

Rejoice and Be Glad

"Go up onto a high mountain, / Zion, herald of good news! / Cry out at the top of your voice, / Jerusalem, herald of good news" (Is 40:9). "Sing out, heavens, and rejoice, earth, / break forth into song, you mountains / For the LORD comforts his people / and shows mercy to his afflicted" (Is 49:13). "Exult greatly, O daughter Zion! / Shout for joy, O daughter of Jerusalem! / Behold: your king is coming to you; / a just savior is he" (Zec 9:9).

Nor should we forget Nehemiah's exhortation: "Do not be saddened this day, for rejoicing in the LORD is your strength!" (Neh 8:10).





Keeping Watch *Together*

Signs of Jesus are all around. Consider these ways to grow more aware, as well as to bring evidence to others.

- Make it a habit after dinner to list the ways you or your family saw Christ in a person or a situation today. Be specific!
- Put technology to work. Set a reminder several times a day on your phone, laptop, or tablet to stop and consider what signs you might have seen in the world around you. If you spot something that calls to mind Our Lord, take a photo with your smartphone or jot a few words in your notes app.

Look for the spaces in which Jesus' love is needed and bring it. Defuse tension in angry circumstances. Offer the benefit of the doubt. Hold the door longer for the slower person walking behind you. Pick up trash or tidy a public space. Handle someone else's chore for them.

Meet St. John the Baptist

Even while John the Baptist questioned whether Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus in return offered his friend the highest praise.

Among those born of women there has been none greater than John the Baptist, Jesus said (see Mt 11:11).

So who was this man whom Jesus held in such high esteem? The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* gives us some background: "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John" [Jn 1:6]. John was 'filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb' [Lk 1:15] by Christ himself, whom the Virgin Mary had just conceived by the Holy Spirit. Mary's visitation to Elizabeth thus became a visit from God to his people [Lk 1:68]" (717).

John became a prophet, drawing

large crowds to hear his preaching about the coming of Jesus. He was baptizing followers at the Jordan River when Jesus arrived and asked to be baptized. John believed himself unworthy to do this, but Jesus insisted. When Jesus arose from the water, the Holy Spirit descended from heaven like a dove. Those present then heard a voice from heaven, saying, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Mt 3:17).

Soon after, John was arrested for criticizing King Herod's marriage to his brother's wife, Herodias. Angered by John's disapproval and wanting to avenge her mother, Herodias's daughter took advantage of Herod's offer to grant a wish and asked for John's head on a platter. John was beheaded in prison.



An Advent Prayer

Jesus, thank you for your magnificent works that heal and bring hope. I'm opening my heart to the good news and great joy that you offer. May I provide an encounter of Christ to everyone I meet! Amen.



Awaiting Emmanuel

Spend Time Listening

Isaiah 7:10–14; Romans 1:1–7; Matthew 1:18–25

Behold. Listen. Because, after a pregnancy that quietly changed the course of history, and a dream in the night that quietly changed history again, a baby is going to be born in a small stable, amid the hushed rustles and deep sighs of the animals slumbering in the dark.

Behold the calm before the arrival of the Lord, a child who will one day take the world by storm.

Behold the power that could move mountains and part seas, as its thunderous strength is corralled into the mewing and cooing of an infant.

It is magnificent all the more for taking the shape of vulnerability, humility, and love.

For many of us, the days leading up to the Fourth Sunday of Advent have been relentlessly busy, full of parties and planning, friends and feasting, giving and doing.

So, for today, as the moment draws near, we pause to contemplate the mag-

nitude of this greatest miracle.

It's a miracle dependent on vast reservoirs of faith — that of Mary, to say yes to the Angel Gabriel, and that of Joseph, to stay with Mary at the command of the angel in his dream.

How often do we buck the pressures of society to do as the Lord commands us, especially if we face great shame? Speaking truth is difficult.

Living truth is risky.

It could mean alienation, lost opportunities, or criticism. Mary and Joseph both knew that ... and yet they obeyed. Could you do it?

On this final Sunday of Advent,

just a few days away from the celebration of this great gift, take some time to pause amid the flurry of preparations and expectations. Maybe even say no to a few things today, so that you may say yes to the invitation to greet this new life. Spend some time listening. Behold the magnificent miracle that takes place in the quiet night.



POINTS TO PONDER

- ▶ Can you think of a time when it was risky or scary to say yes to Jesus' call? What did you do?
- ▶ How can you carve out some calm to behold the coming of Christ?
- ▶ Do you know someone who is a model of strength and courage on behalf of God?

The Celebration Doesn't End

The twelve days of Christmas aren't just the lyrics to an old carol; they are also part of Church tradition, when we wait for the coming of the three Wise Men. Look back at your plans and reflections from the four weeks of Advent and carry them forward through the Epiphany on January 6. Even better, as we described in the first week, shape your new habits into a lifestyle. Because, even when the Christmas season has ended, we still are watching and waiting for the day when he comes again!





What's in a Name?

Today's Gospel tells us that Christ will be called Emmanuel, meaning, "God is with us" (Mt 1:23). This fulfills a prophecy by Isaiah: "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign; the young woman, pregnant and about to bear a son, shall name him Emmanuel" (Is 7:14).

The Gospel also says that Joseph called the baby Jesus, as instructed by

the angel, for "he will save his people from their sins" (Mt 1:21).

While "Jesus" may have been the name his friends and family used in the usual way we think of a name, both of Christ's names — Jesus and Emmanuel — describe his roles, becoming man and saving man. As we await Emmanuel during Advent, we look forward to that time when God is with us here on earth.

Awaiting *Together*

Perhaps one of the most memorable traditions you can establish during Advent is carving out time for quiet. I have deeply spiritual memories of riding to Christmas Eve Mass with my sisters and parents in a silent car, through dark and silent streets, when everything closed early to honor the holiday. It lent a special intimacy and anticipation to the near arrival of Jesus. How might you behold him? Perhaps ...



Raising Your Hand

"Be generous in answering Jesus' call inviting you to put out into the deep and become his witnesses, discovering the trust he puts in you to devise a future together with him," Pope St. John Paul II said in a 2003 address to young people. "To fulfill this mission the Church is entrusting to you requires that you cultivate a genuine life of prayer nourished by the sacraments, especially the Eucharist and confession."

Prayer and the sacraments help inform our understanding of what the Lord commands, to discern what we're asked to do, and how and when we should speak out. And the Father will be by our sides to give us strength and courage to say yes.



- Turn off the lamps and dine by the light of all four Advent wreath candles now through Christmas.
 - Spend ten minutes each day in silence, meditating on courage, Jesus' miraculous birth, or God's call for you.
 - If you haven't already, set up a Nativity scene in your home. Invite members of your family to describe elements of the scene as they might imagine it.

An Advent Prayer

Dear God, be near me and give me strength and courage when I go out into the world to do your will. May my yes be as unshakeable as Joseph and Mary's. I'm listening for your call. Amen.

