

Advent Schedule

Sermon Date	Study	Topic	Schedule
12/3	1	Hope	Homegroups meet
12/10	2	Peace	Homegroups meet
12/17	3	Joy	No Homegroups (individual study)
12/24	4	Love	No Homegroups (individual study)
	5	The Christ	No Homegroups (individual study)

Directions for using this Study Guide

This study is broken into five parts. Each study will follow the lighting of the Advent wreath on Sunday. The first two studies are full length, since we will be meeting in homegroups. The last three studies are for individual/household use, as we will not be meeting in homegroups.

At the end of each study you will see one page entitled **Celebrating Advent at Home**. They are to be used in your home with your family, alone or with roommates. Each session is designed to combine with an Advent candle wreath, but it's not necessary. You can cover all of the material on the Sunday you light the candle or you could spread it out during the week. For example, light the candle on Sunday and ask the first question to ponder. Ask the second question on Tuesday, and then choose one or more of the activities to apply the lesson to your lives. You will find some other good ideas (including instructions for making an Advent wreath) in the **Resource Section** in the back of the study guide.

Parents may consider reading each session over and tailoring it to fit the ages of your children. If you have older children, be sure to involve them in leading the activities. You might give them the whole session and let them do the editing. Make it a fun activity, enabling them to see the eternal gifts Christmas represents. Your children will be bringing home additional resources from Sunday school and Children's church. Allow these to influence your family celebration as well.

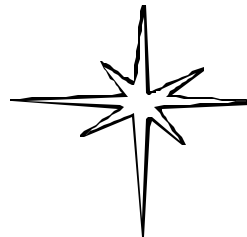
May this Christmas season bring glory to God in our hearts, in our homes and in his Church!

This study guide was written and designed by Christian Schalesky. Tricia Popp wrote the sections *Celebrating Advent at Home* and *Additional Resources*. Thanks to all who proofread this text.

Introduction

*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.
We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only,
who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

John 1:14



For as long as humanity has been worshipping God the changing seasons have served as sacred markers calling us to celebrate the Lord of all life. For centuries Jews have organized seasonal celebration around the Exodus from Egypt.¹ As Christians the focus of seasonal celebration revolves around the life and ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ. Throughout the history of the Christian Church the cycle of the liturgical year was instrumental in teaching the biblical stories of God's redemptive work in the world to a people shrouded in poverty, illiteracy and lack of education.²

The Advent season marks the beginning of the ecclesiastical year. It begins the 4th Sunday before Christmas and culminates in the celebration of the birth of Christ. The celebration of Advent is not a biblical mandate nor does it have a Scriptural precedent, yet it has a rich tradition in the Christian Church as a season of reflection upon the life, death, resurrection and future return of our Lord Jesus. This season, like all others, has worship of God as its purpose.

The word Advent comes from the Latin *adventus* meaning “coming” or “arrival.”³ The focus of the season is upon the birth of Christ in his First Coming [Advent] and the future return of Christ in his Second Coming [Advent]. The biblical Greek term is *parousia* [παρουσία] which means “presence” but can also mean “coming” or “arrival.”⁴ When we celebrate Advent, therefore, we are not only mindful of the First and Second Advents of Christ but also his unique and powerful presence in our lives today. A focus on the past and the future must affect our lives in the here and now.

Celebration, Anticipation, Self-Examination

Advent is a time of *celebration*. The infinite and unknowable God of the universe became one of us that we might know him. He was born in a far away land into the humblest of circumstances for the express purpose of redeeming the world from sin and reconciling humanity to himself. It is a celebration of the Incarnation of Christ. And the

¹ We see the Old Testament principle of seasonal celebration inaugurated by God in Exodus 12-13 and Leviticus 23. Throughout its history Israel has recognized festivals, celebrations and holy days as reminders of God's goodness and faithfulness.

² Prior to the 16th century the great majority of people were illiterate. In their ardent determination to instruct followers to read the Bible in their native language, leaders of the Reformation extended literacy to the masses. The invention of the printing press made widespread publication a reality.

³ Toon, p. 15

⁴ The Greek term is composed of the preposition *παρὰ*, “alongside, beside” and the substantive form of the verb *εἶμι*, “to be.” Its literal translation is “being along side of” or in the English sense “presence.” The majority of times it is used in the NT in the future tense to identify the person whose “coming” or “presence” is in view. [Scott, p. 601]

Incarnation cannot be separated from the Crucifixion. The baby Jesus was born under the shadow of the cross. He not only came to teach, heal and perform wonders, but also to suffer, die and rise again. For us the Incarnation is the bridge from death into life. This is cause for *celebration*.

But the Advent season is also, like unto the prophets of old, a time of *anticipation*. The Old Testament prophets, with eager anticipation and preparedness, foretold the coming of the Messiah. In the New Testament their visions and signs were confirmed in the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. Advent is a time of longing and hope as we prepare our hearts for the Second Coming of our Lord.

As we stand between the ages, between the first Advent and the Second Advent of our Lord, this season should also be a time of *self-examination*. We are called to reflect upon our relationship with the Lord and his mighty and merciful presence in our lives. It is a time to prepare ourselves for his glorious return to judge the living and the dead.

Hope, Peace, Joy, Love

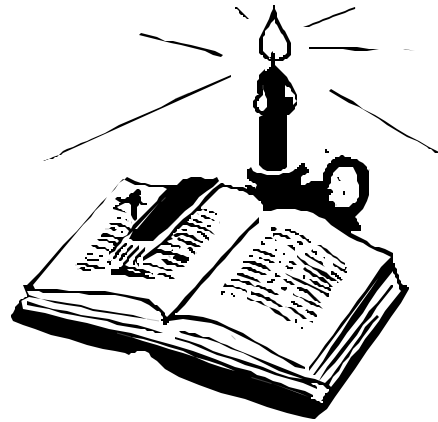
The Advent season is filled with meaningful symbolism. We will be celebrating each week by the lighting of the Advent wreath. For each of the four weeks there will be four corresponding candles on the wreath. Three of the candles are purple; the royal color of our King, and one of the candles is rose-colored. Each candle represents a biblical theme. This Advent season will follow the themes of **hope, peace, joy and love**. In the center of the wreath will be a fifth candle, the Christ candle, which we will light on Christmas Eve to mark the Messiah's arrival. Christ came that we might experience these wonderful benefits of the cross. Yet we wait in eager anticipation for the full realization of the hope, peace, joy and love that he offers. Therefore let us not only say "Merry Christmas" but may we cry "Maranatha," "Lord come quickly!"

The First Week of Advent: Hope
Isaiah 11:1-5 The Shoot From the Stump of Jesse

*The people walking in darkness have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of the shadow of death a
light has dawned.*

Isaiah 9:2

Over the centuries the first Sunday of Advent has come to honor Isaiah and his place as the first prophet to foretell the promise of the Messiah. More than 700 years before the birth of Christ, Isaiah prepared Israel for his coming. As Isaiah and the prophets brought *hope* to Israel by pointing to the promised Messiah, so we look forward in *hope* to his future glorious return.



The story of Isaiah's life and ministry is as complex as it is intriguing. As you read, notice the similarities between his day and our own.

Isaiah's prophetic ministry began in the year 742 BC and extended about 40 years through times of prosperity, war and captivity.¹ His ministry was one of prophetic pronouncements against the waywardness of God's people. During times of prosperity Judah had corrupted its relationship with God. In their wealth and comfort they had become an evil and sinful nation. Their sin was both an affront to God and a disruption of *shalom* (peace) among their own people.

They have allowed their love of material wealth to lead to the suppression of the rights of the weak and the defenseless. Isaiah would have been aware that the coronation of every Davidic king involved the imperative laid upon the monarch to protect the interests of the poor and powerless (see Ps. 72:1-4, 12-14). The failure of the king and those about him to fulfill this charge was loathsome in God's eyes... They allow the pure worship of God to be compromised by their awe of magicians and fortune-tellers and by their worship of false gods (2:6-8). There is drunkenness and debauchery (5:11-12, 22-23), and the sinfulness of the nation has caused even the proper rituals of worship to be repugnant to God (1:10-11).²

Israel's idolatry, rebellion, and greed summoned judgment in the form of a fierce enemy raised up by God against his people. This prophetic warning was pronounced in the words of Isaiah.

¹ During this time the nation of Israel was divided and had two kings, one in Israel (Northern Kingdom) and one in Judah (Southern Kingdom).

² Newsome, p. 63-64

He will raise a signal for a nation afar off, and whistle for it from the ends of the earth; and lo, swiftly, speedily it comes!...And if one look to the land, behold, darkness and distress; and the light is darkened by its clouds.

Isaiah 5:26, 30

It wasn't long before the rise of Assyria began to confirm Isaiah's terrifying predictions. Ahaz, the king of Judah, found himself caught in an international tug-of-war. In 734 Damascus and Syria invaded Judah in an effort to force Ahaz into an alliance against the impending onslaught of the ruthless Assyrian conqueror Tiglath-Pileser III.¹ In his lack of faith Ahaz turned to Tiglath-Pileser for assistance against Isaiah's vehement protest.² The Assyrians responded by annihilating Damascus and Syria and making Ahaz their puppet. Under the Assyrian yoke Judah's waywardness continued. Newsome writes,

This subservience to Tiglath-Pileser is best symbolized by the construction of an Assyrian-type altar in the Jerusalem Temple, the plans of which Ahaz sent to Jerusalem from Damascus where he had seen firsthand (and doubtless participated in) the worship of the Assyrian deity Asshur (2 Kings 16:10-13). Other forms of sacrilege, including the sacrifice of one of Ahaz' own sons, are mentioned in 2 Kings 16 and 2 Chronicles 28.³

Yet God's love for his people did not wane. *Both judgment and hope are inherent in the relationship we see between God and Israel.*⁴ God's dealings with Judah extended far beyond the judgment affected in the Assyrian captivity. There would be an act of redemptive love. Although Ahaz and other contemporary Davidic kings failed, Isaiah pointed forward to God's raising up of a king who would surpass them in faith and power. Israel's *hope* was in the future Messiah.

Isaiah 11:1-10 is a magnificent prophetic oracle of *hope*. It follows a passage (chapter 10) in which the Assyrian tree is felled by the axe of divine judgment. Read through this passage, taking note of its poetic beauty. How would these words have produced *hope* for the people of Israel? How does this passage offer *hope* to us as New Testament Christians?

¹ Details regarding the costly Syro-Ephraimitic war are recorded in 2 Kings 16 and 2 Chronicles 28.

² Isaiah's objections were not based on political or military reasons but rather upon theological reasons. These are recorded in Isaiah 7-8. Ahaz did not put his trust in YHWH to defeat the two nations opposing Judah. Isaiah declared to Ahaz the message of God, *Take heed, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint because of these two smoldering stumps of firebrands (7:4)*. Ahaz did not listen, rather he sought help from Assyria thus prompting Isaiah to prophecy, *If you will not believe, surely you shall not be established (7:9)*. The alliance was a turning away from the nation's ultimate reliance upon God to reliance upon political and military means.

³ Newsome, p. 61

⁴ Lasor, p. 279

Notes and Questions:

Within this text the Church has discovered profound theological meaning. The *shoot from the stump of Jesse* refers to an offspring of the Davidic royal family. Most prophecies of the Old Testament had a double fulfillment. They had immediate application but also looked further into the future. Many scholars consider this passage to be a royal hymn to Hezekiah, Ahaz' son, who found favor in God's eyes as a godly, reforming king.¹

Although this prophecy may have found partial fulfillment in Hezekiah, the fact remained that no king had ever lived up to the high ideals of the king described. *The earliest Christians, therefore, realized that only in Jesus Christ could the sweeping claims of the prophets find their fulfillment.*²

How has Christ fulfilled these prophecies? Are these words yet to be realized?

11:1 The *stump of Jesse* is an accurate metaphor for the condition of Israel at the time of the birth of Christ. The Davidic dynasty had not been on the throne for nearly 600 years and the nation was under the yoke of Roman rule. Often we can feel like we have been cut down to a *stump* and the yoke of everyday life is weighing us down. What do you do during these times to remind yourself of your *hope* in Christ? How do you encourage others in this *hope*?

11:2 The Spirit of the Lord will rest upon the coming Messiah. The new king will receive the Spirit (as David did in 1 Samuel 16:13). The Spirit will endow the king with a number of qualities. Make a list of these qualities. How have these been manifest in the person of Jesus?

¹ Under the strong leadership of Ahaz' son Hezekiah, efforts were made to restore the purity of the Temple worship and the political independence of Judah. Hezekiah removed offensive practices and objects from the Temple and reintroduced proper worship of YHWH. Among the greatest of his reforms was the reinstatement of the Passover. About this 2 Chronicles 30:26 records, *There was great joy in Jerusalem, for since the days of Solomon son of David king of Israel there had been nothing like this in Jerusalem.*

² Newsome, p. 77

As Christians we have been given the Spirit and mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16; 6:19). Therefore, our lives should be characterized by these same qualities. Take some time to examine your life. Are you growing in these areas? Be prepared to share with your homegroup.

11:3 What does it mean that *he will delight in the fear of the Lord*? Do you *delight in the fear of the Lord*? How can you cultivate this delight?

11:3-4 Ever since the Fall, the world has been subjected to the frustrations of sinfulness. True righteousness and justice are difficult to find. G. W. Grogan writes,

The word “judgment” has an ominous ring to us; but when used of the poor, it is almost a synonym for salvation. Where there is corruption in the law courts, it is the poor who long for a righteous judge.¹

Read Psalm 72:1-4, 12-14. The Messiah’s concern will be with justice for the poor and oppressed. How has Jesus fulfilled this messianic mandate?

Has your life been characterized by *righteousness* and *justice*? Have you been concerned to the point of action for the poor and oppressed? How can you grow in this area? How can you and perhaps your homegroup make a concerted effort to extend this *hope* to those who are hurting?

11:4 *Earth* (eres) can be interpreted in a broad sense as *the world* and also in a narrow sense as *land*. While either interpretation can be applied we can be sure that the justice and righteousness of the Messiah will be extended to all the people of the world. No one shall escape his judgment.

¹ Grogan, p. 88

11:5 *Righteousness and faithfulness* will characterize the rule of the new king. In Ancient Near Eastern garb the belt or sash was the garment that stabilized the entire outfit. To “gird your loins” (KJV) was to get ready for work. *The Messiah would be prepared in character for his work of judgment.*¹

Take some time to consider the righteousness and faithfulness of Christ. How has he been faithful in your life? How have you experienced his righteousness? How do these truths create *hope* in the Church?

God is at work now, extending his kingdom, his rule and reign in the hearts of his people throughout the earth. The work of Christ on the cross has sealed the victory over sin and evil. Yet the world has not experienced the fullness of redemption. As Israel yearned for a return to the time when God was dynamically present with them, so we also look forward with eager expectation, with *hope*, to the Second Advent of Christ.

Read:

- Romans 8:18-27
- 1 Corinthians 2:9-10

God has gone before us to prepare a future. This is our hope. Spend some time in prayer expressing to God your eager anticipation for the return of his beloved Son. Ask him to prepare your life for that glorious day.

¹ Grogan, p. 88

The First Sunday of Advent: Hope

Readings: Isaiah 9:1 & Hebrews 10:23-25

The first candle reminds us of the light of hope that the prophets had as they looked forward to a Messiah who would bring peace and love to the world. Because we believe Jesus did come, and now hope for the Second Coming, we have the gift of hope to give others. Since we know Jesus came we can share that Good News with those who haven't heard.

We are also told to remember Jesus is coming back and live differently because we are hoping for that Day. One way we are to live differently is in the way we treat each other. We are told in Hebrews to encourage each other to live in love and good deeds as we wait for Jesus to come back.

Light the first candle

Questions to Ponder:

- Who do we know who has no hope? How can we share our hope with them? Let's pray now for them.
- How is our household doing in spurring one another on to love and good deeds? Can we think of ways to encourage each other? How would you go about doing this?

Optional Activities for the Week:

- 1) Pray for those without hope. Ask God for opportunities to reach out to them and share the Good News. Talk at dinner about the different ways we witness to the gospel in our lives.
- 2) Consider how to spur one another on to love and good deeds (Heb.10: 24). One great way to spur one another on is by doing a good deed yourself. Think of a loving thing you can do for someone at home. Give everyone present a sticky note to write his or her plan on. Take time for people to put it in a spot so they'll see their own reminder.

See Resource Section for more idea

The Second Week of Advent: Peace
Isaiah 11:6-10 The Kingdom of Peace

*And he will be called Wonderful Counselor,
Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*
Isaiah 9:6



Peace is a precious and rare commodity in many parts of the world today. Upheaval and revolution ring consistently in the Balkans; the Middle East continues to march along its centuries old trail of conflict; civil war and disorder run rampant through many parts of Africa. All the while Americans enjoy the greatest time of peace and prosperity in the 200 plus year history of our country. Yet, *peace* can be rare in our homes as well. Often times our homes can be characterized by chaos, worry and frustration instead of God's *peace*.

Despite the grim realities of violence in the world and unrest in our homes we gather this Sunday to light the second candle on the Advent wreath, the *peace* candle. We light this candle symbolically to celebrate the *peace* that Jesus has brought to our lives and to the world. Those of us who have been called by the Lord and, by faith, received him, have experienced his *peace* in our lives. Having tasted it we anxiously anticipate the fullness of his *peace* when he comes again.

In Scripture, *peace* is a favorite greeting found at the beginning and end of the New Testament epistles.¹ *Peace* (*shalom* in Hebrew; *eirene* in Greek) in the simplest, biblical sense can be considered *completeness*, *wholeness*, and *soundness*.² It is not only expressed by cessation from war but also in friendship between two people (Gen. 26:28-29), and covenantal relationship with God (Num. 25:12; Isa. 54:10). The very purpose of Christ coming into the world was to bring *peace* with God through redemption and reconciliation.

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.

Romans 5:1-2

Take a moment and reflect upon what Christ has done in your life. Has knowing God through Christ brought *peace* to your life? How have you experienced this *peace*? Share this with your homegroup.

¹ With the exception of James and 1 John. They must not have been hippies.

² Feinberg, p. 833

What do the following passages have to say about *peace*?

- Ephesians 6:15
- Ephesians 2:14-15
- I Thessalonians 5:23
- Philippians 4:9

One scholar describes *peace* as:

...a conception distinctly peculiar to Christianity, the tranquil state of a soul assured of its salvation through Christ, and so fearing nothing from God and content with its earthly lot, of whatever sort that is.¹

Do you agree with this description? Why or why not?

Do you agree that peace is *peculiar to Christianity*? Why or why not?

According to these passages how are we, as Christians, to approach the subject of *peace*?

- Psalm 34:14
- Colossians 3:15
- Romans 8:6
- II Corinthians 13:11.

¹ Quoted in Feinberg, 833

Read Isaiah 11:1-10 again. Is there a particular image that strikes you? What are your observations of this passage?

Notice the structure of the passage:

- **11:1-5** An offspring of Jesse will come, full of the Spirit and fear of the Lord. He will judge rightly and justly. He will reign in righteousness and faithfulness.
- **11:6-9** His kingdom will be characterized by peace and harmony. All the earth will know the Lord.
- **11:10** The focus of the kingdom will be upon the Root of Jesse. Rest and glory are his standards.

Isaiah has presented a picture of the *hope* of the Messiah and his coming kingdom of *peace*. The fully blossomed kingdom will not only be characterized by *peace* among human beings, but also will result in the harmony of the entire created order. It will be a universal acknowledgement of the rule and reign of God over all creation.

This passage is a portrait of the New Earth restored to its pre-fallen conditions. It is difficult for us to imagine what life will be like in this kingdom. Nature will be at peace with itself and with humankind.

What do you think life will be like on the New Earth? What do you hope it will be like? Can you think of any other Scripture passages that tell us more about this hope? Spend a few moments discussing this in your homegroup.

11:9 We eagerly wait for the time when *the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord*. Yet, our waiting is to be an active waiting as we have the privilege of spreading the knowledge of the Lord to those around us. Have you been actively sharing with others who do not know the Lord? Whom can you share with this week? Spend some time praying for that person and initiate a conversation with him or her this week.

The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.¹

Romans 8:20-21

11:10 All of creation has been tainted by the pollution of sin.² Yet, the Kingdom of God is to be characterized by peaceful unity between the people of God from all nations. They are to rally around Christ whose *place of rest will be glorious*. Does Santa Barbara Community Church represent these Kingdom characteristics? Are we a place of rest? Are we a place of unity between different peoples? Are we a people who rally around Christ as our banner? How can we grow in these areas this Christmas season?

Respond to the following words of Cornelius Plantinga Jr.,

The webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and delight is what the Hebrew prophets call ‘shalom.’ We call it peace, but it means far more than mere peace of mind or a cease-fire between enemies. In the Bible, ‘shalom’ means ‘universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight’ – a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed, a state of affairs that inspires joyful wonder as its Creator and Savior opens doors and welcomes the creatures in whom he delights. Shalom, in other words, is the way things ought to be.³

How is *shalom* in your life? Are things the way they *ought to be*? Share (or don’t if you are not compelled) the state of your soul in light of the *peace* of Christ. Spend some time praying for one another that the God of peace would make his presence uniquely felt in each of your lives.

¹ Interestingly the Greek translation of this passage employs the same word for *frustration* [mataiotes] as does the Greek translation of the Old Testament (Septuagint) for the word *vanity* or *meaningless* repeatedly used throughout the book of Ecclesiastes. We might conclude, therefore, that under the curse, apart from God, all of creation has been subjected to *meaninglessness* or *vanity*.

² The first sin of Adam has affected all of creation. In a sense it has disrupted *shalom* (peace). We see something of the effects of the fall on creation in Genesis 3:17-18, *Cursed is the ground because of you...It will produce thorns and thistles for you...*

³ Plantinga, p. 10.

The Second Sunday of Advent: Peace

Readings: Isaiah 9:6 & Ephesians 6:13,15 (Colossians 3:15)

Today we light the candle of peace. Jesus is the Prince of Peace and we are to live in His kingdom in peace. Our feet need to be ready to spread peace as we serve the Prince of Peace.

Light two candles

Questions to Ponder:

- Do I have peace in my heart today? Do I need to ask God to fill me with His peace?
- Is their peace in our home? Is there something we need to talk about to help the Prince of Peace be the ruler here?
- Are we being peacemakers in the world? Can we pray now for our brothers and sisters in difficult places to have peace? Pray for specific locations you know of that are in turmoil.

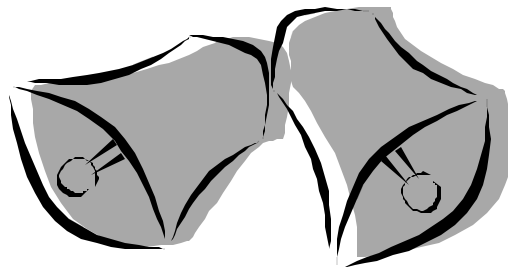
Optional Activities for the Week:

- 1) Is there someone you need to make peace with? Seek her/him out this week and reach out in Christ's power to make peace.
- 2) Is someone you know unhappy? Write a note to them or do something kind for in the name of Jesus. Use your "feet" to make peace.
- 3) Choose a place in the world you know is in turmoil and pray daily for peace.

See Resource Section for more ideas.

The Third Week of Advent: Joy

The third candle to be lit on the Advent wreath is pink or rose-colored and symbolizes *joy* at the coming of Christ. We have so many reasons to be *joyful*. Every good and perfect gift comes from the gracious hand of the Father and brings great *joy* to our lives. Yet all of the *joys* of life are like fireflies compared to the light of the sun. The true *joy* giver is our Lord Jesus Christ.



Though humble, there was much *joy* surrounding the birth of Christ. John the Baptist wasn't even out of the womb before he leapt for *joy* in the presence of the unborn Jesus (Luke 1:44). Mary's spirit rejoiced in God (Luke 1:47) for choosing her to bear the child. The angel declared to the frightened shepherds "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great *joy* that will be for all the people (Luke 2:10)." *Joy* to the world, the Lord is come!

Despite all of the *joy* that is Christmas it is remarkable how fickle and fallible our affections tend to be. God jealously covets our affections and when we turn them away from him, toward some infinitely inferior object, we not only deride God but also snuff out the very *joy* our lives were meant to have. As C.S. Lewis put it, *God cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from Himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing.*¹ Let's make this season a season of *joy* in the Lord.

Read the following passages:

Our *joy* is grounded in God and flows from him.

- Psalm 16:11
- Romans 15:13

God commands us to pursue *joy* in him.

- Psalm 37:4
- Psalm 100:2
- Philippians 4:4

¹ Lewis, *Mere Christianity* p. 75

How can you best cultivate a deeper *joy* in the Lord?

- Psalm 119:14-16
- Jeremiah 15:16
- John 15:9-14
- Galatians 5:22

Christmas has been marketed as a season of *joy*. Where does the world tell us to find *joy* during the Christmas season? How is it different than the *joy* found in Christ?

Consider this quote by C. S. Lewis,

If we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.¹

Take some time to examine your affections. Is there anything that comes between your heart and God?

Spend some time praying that God would give you *joy* in him this Christmas season.

¹ Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* p. 3-4

The Third Sunday of Advent: Joy

Readings: Luke 1:39-44 & John 15:10-11 (Psalm 16:11)

Today we light the candle of Joy. We read in Luke that Elizabeth's baby leaped with joy at the baby Jesus' presence. Jesus came to give all of us joy. He says we will have joy as we draw near to Him and obey His commands. Happiness goes away, toys break, things don't always turn out right, but in His presence is fullness of joy.

Light 3 candles

Questions to Ponder:

- Do you feel joyful now? Is it because you need to draw near to God? What would help you draw near? Singing? Prayer? Sharing with other believers? Reading the Bible? When will you do this?
- Are there areas of your life where you are disobeying God's commands and are not feeling joyful? Take time to confess your disobedience to God and thank Him that He gave us His commands so our lives could be lived in joy.

Optional Activities for the Week:

- 1) Read some of the Psalms of joy. Write your own Psalm of joy and use it in worship.
- 2) Sing some songs of joy together this week.
- 3) Spread the Good News of God's joy this week with someone who is needy. Think of a neighbor, classmate, family member who might need to see your joy.

See Resource Section for more ideas.

The Fourth Week of Advent: Love

The fourth candle on the Advent wreath is lit to remind us that God is love.¹ It is the very nature of God that compelled him to send his Son into a sinful world to die unjustly on a cross for us. This is a time to celebrate the love of God and to show that love to those who have not experienced it in their own lives.



God's love is a love that is unmerited and unselfish. This is seen most profoundly in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In Jesus, God's amazing love became flesh and died for sinners like ourselves who at one time stood as God's enemies deserving only the wrath and judgment our sinful actions warranted. Instead of giving us our just penalty he sent his one and only Son to be punished in our stead. God's love is sacrificial.

Read the following passages describing God's love for us. How have you experienced this love in your life? Spend some time fellowshiping with God in prayer, expressing your gratitude for his love.

- Hosea 11:1-4
- Zephaniah 3:17
- Romans 5:5-11
- John 3:16-17

Read I John 4:7-21. God's activity is love, which eagerly longs for your reciprocation of love. How is God's love demonstrated in this passage? How are we to respond? How does this passage characterize your life? How can your love for the Lord more closely resemble John's words?

¹ This is indeed a lofty thought. The New Testament unequivocally declares that *God is love* (I John 4:8, 16). Consider what H.W. Hoehner writes in regard to this, *God does not need to attain nor attempt to maintain love; it is the very substance and nature of God. It is from this very essence of God's being that the activity of love springs.* [Hoehner, p. 657] Or consider what Rudolph Bultmann states, *The sentence cannot be reversed to read, 'Love is God.'* In that case, 'love' would be presupposed as a universal human possibility, from which a knowledge of the nature of God could be derived. [Rudolph Bultmann, *The Johannine Epistles* p. 66. quoted in Hoehner, p. 657]

God's love is the basis for our love. Having experienced the love of God, we are to exhibit this same love in two directions, toward God, who is deserving, and toward others, even enemies, who are undeserving.¹ This is to be the preeminent characteristic of the follower of Christ. When asked which is the greatest commandment, Jesus answered,

'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.²

Matthew 22:37-40

Consider the following words written nearly a millennium ago by Bernard of Clairvaux,³

God certainly is well within his rights in claiming to himself the works of his own hands, the gifts himself has given! How should the thing made fail to love the maker, provided that it have from him the power to love at all? How should it not love him with all its powers, since only by his gift has it got anything? Man, called into being out of nothing by God's free act and raised to such high honor, how patent is his debt of love to God's most just demand!

If then I owe myself entire to my Creator, what shall I give my Re-creator more? The means of our remaking too, think what they cost! It was far easier to make than to redeem; for God had but to speak the word and all things were created, I included; but he who made me by a word, and made me once for all, spent on the task of my remaking many words and many marvelous deeds, and suffered grievous and humiliating wrongs.

What reward therefore shall I give the Lord for all the benefits that he has done to me? By his first work he gave me to myself; and by the next he gave himself to me. And when he gave himself, he gave me back myself that I had lost. Myself for myself, given and restored, I doubly owe to him. But what shall I return for himself? A thousand of myself would be as nothing in respect of him.⁴

May we begin afresh this Christmas season to give ourselves to the One whom we owe a double-debt of love. *We love because He first loved us (1 John 4:19).*

¹ Jesus commands us to love our enemies in Matthew 5:43-48 and Luke 6:27-35.

² No other command stands above these two (Mark 12:31).

³ Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) wrote the words, "Jesus the very thought of thee, with sweetness fills my soul." He was a medieval monk, mystic, and leader who founded the monastery at Clairvaux. "His theology was deeply appreciated by both Luther and Calvin, the latter quoting only Augustine more frequently." [Allison, p. 135]

⁴ CDB, p. 1441

The Fourth Sunday of Advent: Love

Readings: Matthew 1:20-23 & I John 4:9-11

The fourth lighting celebrates the reason Christmas happens at all. It is because God loved us and sent Jesus as the best gift we can ever receive. When our Christmas gifts are all used up and the decorations taken down, He will still be there offering to give us hope, peace, joy and love because He loves us. We can show we love Him back by the way we love others here on earth. This is the gift we can give to God (with His help, of course!).

Light 4 candles

Questions to Ponder:

- We know God loves us because He sent Jesus to be our savior. What other ways do you see His love in your life now?
- How can people see that you love God? How will you love those people you live with and show God that you love Him?

Optional Activities for the Week:

- 1) Work on being loving to the person you live with that is the most difficult to love. Start by praying daily for her/him. Then seek to do something loving for her/him this week to open your heart to greater love.
- 2) Seek to show love to someone in church or your neighborhood that could use some help (offer to baby-sit? Mow the lawn? Make a meal?). Do it to show love to God.

See Resource Section for more ideas.

The Fifth Week of Advent: The Christ

He could have come in full glory as a blazing light visible to all, or as a mighty warrior king marching on a helpless Roman army, or as a brilliant Greek philosopher unlocking the depths of the knowledge of the cosmos. Yet, he chose the way of humility and suffering; he chose the way of the cross. The Creator of the universe was born a helpless baby to a peasant Jewish girl in a tiny town in the eastern corner of the Roman Empire.



The final candle on the Advent wreath is the Christ candle. With the lighting of the Christ candle we celebrate the pinnacle of all history, the coming of the Lord. We ponder what it meant that *the Son of God became a man to enable men to become the sons of God.*¹

Read Philippians 2:5-11 Here we see the entire span of Jesus' life from eternity past to eternity future and we are invited to take a look at the breathtaking purposes of God in salvation.² Examine your attitude. Is your attitude the *same as that of Christ Jesus?* How can you adjust your attitude to be more like that of our Lord?

C.S. Lewis writes,

In the Christian story God descends to re-ascend; He comes down...down to the very roots and seabed of the nature he has created. But he goes down to come up again and bring the whole ruined world up with him.³

Read Luke 2:1-20 As you read consider the incarnation. What did it mean for the God of the universe to become man?

¹ Lewis, *Mere Christianity* p. 154

² Notice how this passage contains the distinctive articles of the Christian creed: the divinity of Christ, his pre-existence with God, his equality with God the Father, his incarnation and true humanity, his voluntary death on the cross, the certainty of his triumph over evil at the cross, the certainty of future full realization of that triumph at his Second Coming, the permanence of his reign now and his reign in perfect power one day. Some have tried to attribute this core of Christian thought to centuries of slow development by the Church. This passage, an early church hymn written no more than 30 years after the resurrection, annihilates that argument. Christianity has always been Christ!

³ Lewis, *Miracles* p. 111.

Read the following passages. What new insights do they offer about the first Advent of Christ? What should be our response to this Jesus who was God in the flesh?

- Isaiah 9:6-7
- John 1:1-18
- Galatians 4:4-5

Christmas is a season of celebration, anticipation and examination. Spend some time in prayer as a family or household. Celebrate the birth of Jesus, exclaim your eager anticipation for his Second coming and pray that he would prepare you for that day.

Merry Christmas and Maranatha (Lord come quickly!)

The Fifth Sunday of Advent: The Christ

Readings: Matthew 24:42-44 & II Peter 3:1-14 (can be read in two parts: v.1-9; 10-14).

This is the last candle of the Advent season. Today we celebrate that Christ was born. We have prepared during Advent for Christmas but the waiting should still go on. As we celebrate Christ's birth, let us also live for Christ each day, knowing He will return soon. He wants to find us taking His light of hope, peace, joy and love to the dark world.

Light all 5 candles

Questions to Ponder:

- Think back over the last 4 weeks of Advent. What have you learned about living for Christ?
- Which gift (hope, peace, joy, love) do you value most today and why?
- Is your life ready for Jesus to come back today? What needs to change?

Optional Activities for the Week:

- 1) As you begin each day this week, read II Peter 3:14. Ask God how you can be better prepared for His coming as you plan your day.
- 2) Thank God for each of the gifts we have looked at during Advent. Be specific about how you have been blessed by hope, peace, joy and love.
- 3) Before opening your Christmas gifts, take time to tell each person how they are a gift (how you see hope, peace, joy or love in their lives).
- 4) Be intentional in sharing Christ with one person this week. Think of a person today and look for opportunities as you pray daily for them.

See Resource Section for more ideas.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

This is a sprinkling of ideas to help you celebrate Advent.

1. Advent Wreath:

The never-ending circle of greenery reminds us of God's love and the source of our hope. The lighting of more candles each week reminds us of the coming of the light of Christ into a dark, cold world.

Supplies:

- 6-8 evergreen boughs between 6"-12" long
- Wire coat hanger
- Lots of green twist ties
- 3 purple candles (about 10" since they will be lit several weeks)
- 1 pink candle and 1 white candle

Directions:

- 1) Shape coat hanger into a circle. Bend the hook toward the center of the circle or clip off.
- 2) Fasten boughs to coat hanger with twist ties
- 3) Put candles into holders (can be 5 lumps of clay shaped into holders)
- 4) Place candles in the wreath.

2. "Krist Kindl"

Krist Kindl is German for "Christ Child." It refers to an activity during Advent in which you try to share Christ's love with others in your household. It can be tailored to your own schedule.

Write everyone's name on a piece of paper. Put the papers in a container. Each person is to draw out a name and keep it secret. The name will be your Advent friend. You will have the chance to do things secretly for this person in the name of the Krist Kindl. It could be a chore, note, homemade gift, kind word or prayer. It should never be a bought gift.

You may draw new names each Sunday in Advent or keep the same name all month. Reveal identities at Christmas.

3. Jesse Tree (Isaiah 11:1; Matt. 1:1-17) A family tree shows the names of the relatives who lived before a person. The family tree of Jesus is called the Jesse Tree because Jesus came from the family of King David whose father was Jesse.

Materials Needed:

Branch	Scissors	Glue
Symbols*	Paper Punch	Cardboard
Crayons or Markers	Yarn	

*Sample of names and suggested symbols:

Adam (apple)	Moses (tablets)
Noah (ark)	Jesse (stump with roots)
Abraham (pile of sand)	David (star)
Isaac (altar)	Solomon (scales)
Jacob (number 12)	Mary
Joseph (coat)	Jesus (Cross)

Directions:

- 1) Draw symbols for different family names.
- 2) Glue each symbol to cardboard and cut out.
- 3) Color each symbol.
- 4) Punch a hole in symbol and use yarn to tie it to your branch.

4. Books for Additional Resources:

Christ in Christmas: A Family Advent Celebration, James Dobson, etc., Navpress
Celebrate the Seasons by Phyllis Stanley and Miltinnie Yih, Navpress
Advent is for Children by Julie Keleman, Liguori Press
Countdown to Christmas by Susan O'Keefe, Paulist Press

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All Scripture passages were taken from the *New International Version*.