

Feasting on the Word®

ADVENT COMPANION

A THEMATIC RESOURCE
FOR PREACHING AND WORSHIP

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Introduction

Advent comes every year, with the same challenges for church leaders everywhere. While it is the beginning of a new liturgical and lectionary year, the approach of the calendar year's end looms with pressure for church budgets and record keeping, not to mention the crush of holiday to-dos and travel plans making the presence and participation of members and staff alike a bit spotty.

Telling the incarnation story afresh each year to busy and distracted people is perhaps one of the greatest challenges for pastors this season, even more so because this may be the one time of the year when disaffected and dechurched people decide to give church another try. The high calling to edify lifelong disciples while engaging those on the margins of the church demands continual reconsideration of the stories and themes that form the foundation of our Christian faith.

Feasting on the Word Advent Companion is designed for those who do not follow the lectionary during Advent, or those lectionary preachers who want a different option during Advent. It offers an alternative and supplement to the Revised Common Lectionary for the Sundays of Advent as well as Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. This resource suggests an Old Testament and Gospel passage for each service, presenting opportunities to explore traditional Advent themes through prophetic announcements of the Lord's coming, the narratives surrounding Christ's birth, and Jesus' own declarations about the Day of the Lord still to come. These texts were chosen from Old Testament and Gospel passages that are frequently preached from during the Advent season. The resources in this *Companion* are a combination of material from existing *Feasting on the Word* volumes as well as newly written material.

In keeping with other *Feasting on the Word* resources, the *Advent Companion* offers pastors focused resources for sermon preparation along with

ready-to-use liturgies for a complete order of worship. Four essays provide theological, pastoral, exegetical, and homiletical perspectives on each of the day's two texts. These essays are written by scholars, pastors, seminary professors, and denominational leaders, offering a bounty of starting points for the preacher to consider. Hymn suggestions are included to support each day's scriptural and theological focus. Optional prayers for use during the Eucharist are provided in the back of the book. In addition, a children's sermon is included for each service, making the themes and texts of Advent accessible to all ages in the congregation. These stories will enrich their experience of worship while respecting both a child's intelligence and theological integrity.

To expand and enhance the congregation's experience of Advent, mid-week services are also provided in this volume. These abbreviated liturgies and sample homilies are ideal for use in an existing morning or midday worship offering, Wednesday night programming, or a special series offered just for the weeks of Advent. These resources may also offer additional inspiration for planning Sunday worship. Finally, a service of healing, often called a Longest Night service, is provided for the many churches who hold such a service during the Christmas season.

As Christmas's cultural and commercial value increases evermore, the spiritual grounding of Advent expectation becomes more and more essential. Taking time for personal reflection and family devotion becomes just another item on parishioners' long to-do lists, often falling below endless shopping, wrapping, baking, and hosting. Sunday worship and Christmas Eve services are their primary opportunities to stop and consider the timeless truth and lasting promise of Advent, and pastors' primary opportunity to touch hearts and lives during this special season.

Overview of Advent

Advent, which marks the beginning of a new church year, begins four Sundays prior to Christmas Day. It can be as long as twenty-eight days, if December 25 falls on a Sunday, or as short as twenty-two days, if December 25 falls on a Monday, making Christmas Eve the fourth Sunday of Advent.

During the Advent season, the church prepares for the coming of Christ. Even as we make ready for the baby to be born in Bethlehem, the themes and texts explored during Advent take us beyond the birth, and even beyond the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, to a new moment of expectancy as the Day of Christ approaches and the reign of God is made fully manifest.

People who “faint from fear and foreboding” (Luke 21:26) intrude on our sanitized image of the manger scene in Luke 2, revealing the complexity of Advent’s scope. It may seem strange and uncomfortable for some in the congregation to begin Advent with weeping and laments, but it is a discomfort with meaning. It is where we need to begin. The coming of Advent jolts the church out of Ordinary Time with the invasive news that it is time to think about fresh possibilities for deliverance and human wholeness. Peace is at the heart of the promise born at Advent, but it is difficult to arrive there safely and without becoming vulnerable along the way. It is difficult to set out on the journey without repentance and forgiveness.

At Advent, God’s people summon the courage and the spiritual strength to remember that the holy breaks into the daily. In tiny ways, we can open our broken hearts to the healing grace of God, who opens the way to peace. May that peace come upon us as a healing balm, as a mighty winter river, gushing and rushing through the valleys of our prideful fear and our own self-righteous indignation. Advent is not a season for passive waiting and watching. It is a season of wailing and weeping, of opening up our lives and our souls with active anticipation and renewed hope.

Weekly Texts and Themes

| | Old Testament | Gospel | Theme |
|-------------------------|----------------------|---------------------|--|
| First Sunday of Advent | Jeremiah 33:14–16 | Luke 21:5–19 | Hope, expectation, preparation |
| Second Sunday of Advent | Malachi 3:1–4 | Matt. 24:36–44 | Purification, righteousness, fulfillment |
| Third Sunday of Advent | Zephaniah 3:14–20 | Mark 13:24–37 | Love, peace, the presence of the Lord |
| Fourth Sunday of Advent | Psalms 146:5–10 | Luke 1:46b–55 | Justice, joy, salvation |
| Christmas Eve | Isaiah 9:2–7 | Luke 2:1–14 (15–20) | The promise fulfilled, God with us |
| Christmas Day | Isaiah 52:7–10 | John 1:1–14 | New creation, light of the world |

Texts for Midweek Services

| | Old Testament | Gospel | Theme |
|------------|----------------------|-----------------------------------|---|
| Week One | Isaiah 57:14–19 | Luke 1:5–25 (optional, vv. 57–80) | John prepares the way as a new prophet, turning hearts to God |
| Week Two | Isaiah 40:1–11 | Mark 1:1–8 | John preaches repentance in advance of Christ's coming |
| Week Three | Isaiah 11:1–10 | John 1:29–34 | John proclaims Jesus as the Messiah long promised |
| Week Four | Isaiah 35:1–10 | Matthew 11:2–11 | John lets Jesus take center stage |

First Sunday of Advent

Jeremiah 33:14–16

¹⁴The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ¹⁵In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. ¹⁶In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: “The LORD is our righteousness.”

Luke 21:5–19

⁵When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, ⁶“As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.”

⁷They asked him, “Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?” ⁸And he said, “Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and, ‘The time is near!’ Do not go after them.

⁹“When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately.” ¹⁰Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; ¹¹there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.

¹²“But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. ¹³This will give you an opportunity to testify. ¹⁴So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; ¹⁵for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. ¹⁶You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. ¹⁷You will be hated by all because of my name. ¹⁸But not a hair of your head will perish. ¹⁹By your endurance you will gain your souls.”

ORDER OF WORSHIP

OPENING WORDS / CALL TO WORSHIP

The days are surely coming, says the LORD,
when I will fulfill my promise to my people.

Jer. 33:14–16

**Justice and righteousness will fill the land
and all will live in peace and safety.**

LIGHTING OF THE ADVENT CANDLES

[Reader 1]: We light this candle as a symbol
of the hope we have in the promise of the
Lord's coming.

[Reader 2]: For the Lord will fulfill his promise
to the house of Israel and the house of Judah.
A righteous Branch will spring up for David;
and he shall execute justice and righteousness
in the land.

[All]: **Come, Lord Jesus, come!**

HYMN, SPIRITUAL, OR PSALM

CALL TO CONFESSION

Testify with honesty the condition of your souls.
Give defense not for yourself but only the
Lord's grace,
which will save you in your time of trial.
With confidence in God's mercy,
let us confess our sin.

Luke 21:13–14

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

**Lord, have mercy on us.
We are not ready for your coming.
We live in sin, as though there were no justice.
We live in fear, as though there were no grace.
Forgive us, Lord.
Show us your mercy and steadfast love.
Lead us in your truth, and teach us your paths,
for you are the God of our salvation. Amen.**

DECLARATION OF FORGIVENESS

The Lord is our righteousness.
In Christ, we are forgiven.

Jer. 33:16

PRAYER OF THE DAY

Holy One, you have promised us
that the day of our salvation is near.
Keep us faithful in love and watchful in prayer,
so that we may stand with confidence and joy
at the coming of Christ, our redeemer and Lord. **Amen.**

HYMN, SPIRITUAL, OR PSALM

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Amid much confusion,
signs leading away from you,
we seek your truth.
Open our hearts
to the wonders of your work
and the wisdom of your word. **Amen.**

Luke 21:15

SCRIPTURE READINGS

SERMON

HYMN, SPIRITUAL, OR PSALM

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION

[A brief silence may follow each petition.]

Let us pray to the Lord, saying,
in your mercy, Lord, save us.

Merciful God,
you call us to goodness and lead us on right paths.
You encourage us with signs of your coming
and urge us to keep watch,
that we might greet you with heads raised high
when you come to restore all of creation.
Watching and waiting, we pray for this world that
needs your saving power.

For nations at war,
in your mercy, **Lord, save us.**
For all who suffer from violence, in the streets or in their homes,
in your mercy, **Lord, save us.**
For all who live in worry or fear,
in your mercy, **Lord, save us.**
For those who have forgotten the ways of righteousness,
in your mercy, **Lord, save us.**
For those who have never heard of your rescuing love,
in your mercy, **Lord, save us.**
For all those who have lost hope, or never had it at all,
in your mercy, **Lord, save us.**

We pray, too, for your church in the world,
that we may increase in ardor for you and your children,
and work in confidence for your coming reign.
Now by the power of your Holy Spirit, make us ever more faithful,
that we may greet you in confidence and joy on that great day;
through Christ, in whose name we pray. **Amen.**

LORD'S PRAYER

INVITATION TO THE OFFERING

Trusting in the sure promises of Christ,
and grateful for the Spirit's sustaining power,
let us bring our tithes and offerings to God.

PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING/DEDICATION

God of righteousness,
you have saved us from the worst the world can do
and have promised to redeem the whole creation when
Christ comes again.
In faith and hope we offer our gifts of money and self,
that we may be part of what you are doing in the world even now,
as we watch for Christ's coming in glory. **Amen.**

HYMN, SPIRITUAL, OR PSALM

CHARGE

Hear with your hearts
the word and wisdom of the Lord.

Luke 21:15

BLESSING

May the God of mercy keep you,
the Holy Spirit cheer you,
and Christ in glory greet you,
now and at the day of his coming.

SONG SUGGESTIONS

Included are songbook numbers for *Chalice Hymnal* (CH), the Episcopal Church's *Hymnal 1982* (EH), *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW), *Gather Comprehensive*, 2nd ed. (GC), *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal* (GTG), *The New Century Hymnal* (TNCH), and the *United Methodist Hymnal* (UMH).

“Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus” (CH 125, EH 66, ELW 254, GC 323, GTG 82–83, TNCH 122, UMH 196)

“Comfort, Comfort Now My People” (CH 122–123, EH 67, ELW 256, GC 326, GTG 87, TNCH 101)

“Light One Candle to Watch for Messiah,” stanza 1 (ELW 240, GTG 85)

“O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” (CH 119, ELW 257, GC 317, GTG 88, TNCH 116, UMH 211)

“O Day of God, Draw Nigh” (TNCH 611, UMH 730)

“The Days Are Surely Coming” (GTG 357)

“To a Maid Whose Name Was Mary” (GTG 98, UMH 215)

“While We Are Waiting, Come” (GTG 92)

CHILDREN’S SERMON

Based on Jeremiah 33:14–16, with references to Isaiah 43 and Malachi 4:5–6

Things look different in church this time of year. We use blue or purple cloth and candles, and we have evergreen wreaths and garland. This time of year, when we start getting ready to celebrate Jesus’ birth at Christmas, is called Advent. Advent is a time of expectation. “Expectation” means “looking forward to something,” and during Advent, we are looking forward to Jesus being born. During Advent, we read about the things that happened before Jesus was born and imagine what it would have been like to be living before Jesus was born, looking forward to when he would come.

God's people in Judah a long, long time ago had a lot of scary things happen to them. Armies and kings from other countries invaded their land and took over. The people were scared, but God promised to send a savior to rescue them. God gave people called "prophets" messages to give the people hope. The prophets said, "Do not give up hope. A savior is coming. God promised, and God does not break promises."

The prophets used stories the people already knew, to help them watch for the savior. They said that when the savior comes, it would be like the great king David was still on the throne, back when you were safe and no armies and kings from other countries were taking over. It would be like when Moses parted the sea to lead the people out of slavery in Egypt, into the promised land. It would be like that very special prophet, Elijah, coming back to make our people righteous again.

The people knew about David and Moses and Elijah. David and Moses and Elijah were heroes to these people, so they knew that if the savior would be like these heroes—or even better than them—this savior must be really, really special. So they kept watching and hoping for when God would send the savior.

Even though we live a long time after Jesus, we still watch and hope for him, because he really is a very, very special savior.

Prayer: Thank you, God, for sending Jesus to us. Amen.

SERMON HELPS

Jeremiah 33:14–16

THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

This brief essay will attend to the continuing theological significance of (1) the reality of human despair, (2) a reading of the promise in light of both the experience of exile and the practice of waiting in Advent, and (3) the collective and sociopolitical aspects of the promise.

The Reality of Human Despair. Much of the story told in Jeremiah has to do with the threat and fulfillment of the destruction of Judah and, in particular, Jerusalem. The people have been violating their covenantal relationship with God, and the subsequent Babylonian control would serve as punishment for their infidelity. The complete sacking of Jerusalem, however, is more horrific and absolute than the people might have imagined. The destruction is so severe that God's voice, through the prophet, also wails in lamentation.

In view of the devastation that characterizes the sociohistorical context of the “Book of Consolation,” Kathleen O’Connor describes the situation of the people in this way: “The people... are taken captive, dragged from their land, and deprived of their Temple. They are beaten, imprisoned, and face death as a people, and, like Jeremiah, they cry out to God in anger and despair.”¹ John Calvin imagined the context in even more explicit terms: “As they were then exposed to slaughter, . . . the children of God saw thousand deaths; so that it could not be but that terror almost drove them to despair; and in their exile they saw that they were far removed from their own country, without any hope of a return.”²

When faced with such death, slaughter, and imprisonment in a strange place, who would not despair? While despair is among the most human of human conditions, it cannot be fully understood apart from its theological implications. In a number of his writings, Reinhold Niebuhr associated despair with our failed attempts to procure security for ourselves, optimistically pretending that we are not subject to the vicissitudes of creatureliness. Despair is characterized primarily by the conspicuous absence of theological hope. Humans meet despair when they cannot imagine God’s promised alternative future.

The remainder of this chapter is not included in this excerpt.

1. Kathleen O’Connor, “Jeremiah,” in *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 174.
2. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah and the Lamentations*, vol. 4, ed. and trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 247. <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom20.i.html> (accessed from Christian Classics Ethereal Library).