

Advent Guide

CHRISTMAS 2021

Weekly Advent Readings

Advent is the four-week period of time leading up to Christmas. These four weeks are given special attention in the life of the Church - we sing familiar songs, gather for special worship, we light candles, and the feeling of anticipation grows each week as we get closer to celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ.

These weeks of Advent point us to the truth that God can do holy things while we wait. Thousands of years ago, the people of God waited...and waited...and waited on the fulfillment of God's promise of a Messiah. They were anticipating the one who would come and make things right. They were looking for hope in a world full of struggle, sorrow, darkness, and doubt. While these events may have taken place long ago, the things they were waiting for feel very similar to what we long for today.

The season of Advent can go by incredibly fast- December begins and before we know it, Christmas is here. So take this opportunity to make space each week to intentionally engage with God during this season.

- Join us for worship on Sundays, in person or online.
- Read the weekly Advent reflection, either on your own or alongside family and friends.
- Discuss or journal responses to the questions at the end of each reading.
- Live out what you read - at the end of this guide, you'll see some suggestions of how to serve and illuminate the true mission of Christmas all throughout Advent.

The pages in this guide can be used for personal or communal reflection. We've suggested pairing your reading with the lighting of Advent candles in your home. Creating an Advent wreath at home to light can be as simple or elaborate as you prefer. In its simplest form, you need five candles - one in the middle (the Christ Candle), and four surrounding it. Light the number of candles surrounding the Christ Candle each week, and on Christmas Eve, light the final center candle.

As you journey further into Advent, watch how the light grows. Consider the light that Jesus' birth brought to the world and the light that your life has the potential to be to the people and places around you.



Advent Week 1 (November 28)

Light & Sacrifice

Read: John 1:1-5

Light: One Advent Candle

Advent is the season of waiting, the season for reflecting on the events leading up to the birth of Christ. And, in our Western Culture, it is also the season for...shopping. The four weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas bombard us with advertisements, deals, and all the things we didn't know we needed. We shop, we wrap, we fill that empty space under the Christmas tree with boxes galore.

With all the buzz and excitement around the things that we can buy, give, and get, it might seem strange to focus on the idea of sacrifice leading up to Christmas. Sacrifice, or the giving up of something that is important to us, seems to contradict the glittery nature of the season. We often say that "it's better to give than receive," but sacrifice lands differently. It's heavy and even implies some element of loss.

When Jesus came to earth to live among people, he revealed a new kind of light. He embodied a new kind of love. And with that light and love, countless sacrifices would be made- by Jesus' parents, by those who followed him, and by Jesus himself. This new light to the world illuminated what it means to live in a totally selfless way, and as we reflect on the Advent and Christmas story, we are invited to live that way too.

John 1:5 says, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." It's no secret that there is a lot of darkness in our world. Maybe God is inviting us to be the light, right here and right now. Maybe our actions make a bigger difference than we think- and the invitation to embrace sacrifice this Advent might not only change us, but have the potential to have impact far beyond what we could even imagine.

This week, consider what living selflessly and sacrificially could look like for you or your family this Christmas. Journal about or discuss the following questions:

- What would it look like for you to live with extra generosity this season?
- Is there someone you could include in a favorite holiday tradition?
- Is there an activity, purchase, or habit that you might benefit from letting go of this year?

Pray: Jesus, as we look forward to celebrating your birth, help us see what it means to truly be light in this world. Show us where we might let things go and intentionally make sacrifices so that light can shine as brightly as possible. Amen.



Advent Week 2 (December 5)

Jesus Shows up in Messy Places

Read: Matthew 2: 1-3, 7-12, 16-18

Light: Two Advent Candles

This week, we read a story that illustrates just how messy the world was when Jesus was born. We see a ruler, obsessed with his own power, do the unthinkable. It's a setting full of chaos, dishonesty, and tragic loss. There's nothing peaceful or calm about this setting for the Savior of the world to be born into.

While there's great sadness in this part of the story, there is also incredible hope. The magi are moved by what God has revealed to them and by their encounter with Jesus. This experience has the power to change their plans and disrupt their route home. They become brave enough to take heroic action to keep Jesus and his family safe. They have seen the light, and that light has the power to illuminate - showing what's true and false; good and evil; just and unjust.

We are reminded in this story that God can show up anywhere, even in the bleakest scene. And we're reminded, too, that this isn't an experience limited to the magi long ago. Even in our world today, even in our own personal and communal moments of darkness, we have a God who shows up. We have a shared faith story that inspires us to be like Jesus when we encounter the messiness of life. And we remember that we, too, can be called to live out our faith in a way that keeps the story going.

This week, consider what it would mean for God to show up in a messy place.

- What is an area of life that seems messy?
- Why are you especially concerned about this particular situation?
- What would it look like to experience the hope of Jesus in this messy circumstance?

Pray: Lord, we lift up to you the messy places of our lives and the world. We ask that you would both remind us of your light and inspire us to be your light when we encounter darkness. Help us be brave and compassionate people as we live out our faith. Amen.



Advent Week 3 (December 12)

The Children of Christmas

Read: Isaiah 9:2, 6-7; Luke 1: 39-45

Light: Three Advent Candles

Children are at the center of the Christmas story. One child, who will become known as John the Baptist, is the fulfillment of a lifetime of longing for his parents, Elizabeth and Zechariah. Another child, Jesus, requires a great leap of faith for the soon-to-be wed couple, Mary and Joseph. Neither child fits neatly into the plans of the world around them, and both are a source of great joy and hope.

Children can help us see the possibilities around us. The birth of John showed Elizabeth and Zechariah that God was faithful and that they continued to have a holy purpose even as they grew older in age. There was still more to be written in their story! And from the moment Mary received the news that she would be the mother of this divine child named Jesus, she would find endless ways to say yes to God and keep moving forward, even when the next step was unclear.

Children can disrupt our routines. They can delight us like none other. They make us worry and become carefree, all within the same short timeframe. Children both bring and experience light in ways that adults can struggle to replicate. Just like John and Jesus, children can show us the creativity of how our God works.

This week, pay special attention to what the children around you have to teach you about how God brings light to the world.

- What hope do you see in them?
- What could God teach you about joy and wonder through these young ones?
- If you are reading this with children, invite them to share where they've seen joy and love throughout their day. Consider even inviting them to pray for your family during this reading time or over a meal this week.

Pray: Thank you God for the gift of children- for the way that they help us see the world and hope that they can bring. Teach us through them and help us be open to how you work in and through them. Help us follow you, Lord, with childlike faith and wonder. Amen.



Advent Week 4 (December 19)

Trust In The Mystery

Read: Luke 1: 26-38

Light: Four Advent Candles

Think about a time you've been in a situation that just didn't make sense. Maybe it was learning hard and unexpected news. Or the time you did everything right and things still didn't work out. Maybe a long-held belief was suddenly challenged, and you had to ask some difficult questions.

Living a life that trusts and follows God takes work most of the time, but especially when we encounter the unexpected. When things don't go according to plan, we can find ourselves overwhelmed with doubt. We can get into survival mode and have a defensive posture towards the world around us. It can be difficult to remain curious when you're just trying to figure out which way is up!

Mary's response to the angel's news that she will give birth to Jesus provides a helpful example of how to sit in the tension of feeling both uncertainty about the future and desiring to trust God. The news she receives is not easy to accept, this does not fit the script of how her life was supposed to go. People will talk, likely judge, and there are so many unanswered questions in front of her. But Mary doesn't have to understand all the details of what is going to come next; she simply must be willing to trust that God will be faithful even in the middle of a great mystery.

This week, reflect on when you have found yourself walking with God through a season of uncertainty.

- How would you have reacted if you were in Mary's situation?
- When have you had to trust God in the middle of a mystery?
- How have you experienced assurance of God's faithfulness when going through an unexpected time?

Pray: Thank you, God, for the mystery of Your work. May we trust you even when we're uncertain and are struggling in the waiting. Let us be like Mary, willing to remain faithful even in our most difficult times.



Christmas Eve (December 24)

The Brightest Light

Read: Luke 2:1-32

Light: All Five Advent Candles

Today, the light of your Advent Candles shines its very brightest with the addition of the Christ Candle being lit. Over the past few weeks we have reflected on the darkness that existed in Jesus' world and still lingers in our own. We have also been reminded of the hope that Christ brought through his birth and the hope that Jesus still offers us today. We experience the light and love of Christ, and we are also called to be that same light and love. Notice how God uses people from all walks of life to bring this light into the world. Every day people like Mary and Joseph are chosen to parent Jesus. Humble shepherds bear witness to this miracle that has happened and carry the message forward. A righteous man named Simeon confirms all that Mary and Joseph have been told about who Jesus will be and the amazing things he will do. Different people, acting in their own way, help this light shine bright.

The Christmas story inspires us to let the light of Christ shine through us. No matter who we are, no matter what we can or cannot do, no matter what the world has told us about ourselves, we all have a part to play. Try to imagine the Christmas story without one of these groups - immediately, something important goes missing. It's just not the same without the shepherds, as unassuming and unexpected as they might be for a story like this.

The characters in the Christmas story didn't need to become anything other than who they were or dramatically change the setting in which they lived. They simply had to show up, exactly as they were, and be open to what God would do in and through them.

Just like the people of the first Christmas, we have a call to bear Christ's light in the world. We can bring hope and healing wherever we find ourselves.

- What makes up your daily life? Think about the setting you live in, the people you encounter, and the ways you fill your time.
- How are you uniquely called to bring light to these people and places?
- What is a hope you have for the coming year?

Pray: Jesus, thank you for the way you came into an ordinary world surrounded by everyday people. Thank you for the way you brought your holy light into the darkness. Help us continue to live in a way that brings light and honors you. Amen.

Living The Mission of Christmas

OUTREACH OPPORTUNITIES & CHRISTMAS SERVICES

Afghan Resettlement Project

Our Afghani brothers and sisters have endured hardships and trauma beyond our comprehension. Are you interested in helping with any of the aspects of resettlement: finding a place to live, providing basic household furniture and other items, finding work, learning English, securing transportation, and having fun? Learn more at stlukesumc.com/christmas.

Angel Tree

Every year we have the opportunity to sponsor, shop, and bless hundreds of children and their families with Christmas gifts and household items. Please drop off gifts at St. Luke's between December 5-12, either outside your worship space or at the main office. You can also join the "heavenly chorus" by joining one of our wrapping and sorting shifts from December 12 through December 17. Sign up to be an "angel" today by visiting stlukesumc.com/christmas.

Operation Cookie Drop

Have your "cookie and eat it too" as we decorate Christmas cookies and deliver them alongside our gifts to Angel Tree Families on December 18th. This is a great way for families to serve together! Learn more at stlukesumc.com/christmas.

Christmas Eve Services

FAMILY SERVICE @ 3PM | ROBERTSON CHAPEL & ONLINE
TRADITIONAL @ 5PM, 7PM, 9PM | SANCTUARY & ONLINE
CONTEMPORARY @ 5PM, 7PM | ROBERTSON CHAPEL & ONLINE
CANDLELIGHT COMMUNION @ 11PM | ROBERTSON CHAPEL

Christmas Eve, one of the most special nights of the year, is always a time to worship and reflect on the story of Jesus' birth. This year, we find hope through the story and music of Christmas and rejoice in Christ. Reserve your seats for in-person services starting December 5 at stlukesumc.com/christmas.