



2017 ADVENT DEVOTIONAL FROM THE
DIOCESE OF VIRGINIA AND FORMA



THE EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF VIRGINIA



THE NETWORK FOR CHRISTIAN FORMATION

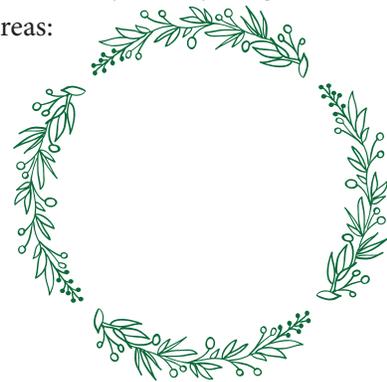
The Diocese of Virginia and Forma are thrilled to partner together to offer this simple Advent devotional to families. Please use this to deepen your faith and your understanding of this important, but often overlooked season in the Church year.

Paris Ball, the Director of Christian Formation and Shrine Mont Camps for the Diocese of Virginia, and Bill Campbell, the Forma Executive Director partnered together to create a few offerings for each week of Advent. You will find a brief overview of the scriptural themes for each week, ideas to try in your home to deepen your experience of Advent, and some short prayers and rituals to make your Advent experience complete.

This is merely a guide. Please do embrace the Advent season as a moment to pause, reflect, and push aside the secularization of Christmas. Advent was historically a penitential season. We certainly don't think that many people are going to return to a second Lent like season, but we are hopeful that everyone will find a few moments in each day to think about the coming of Jesus into your life. What does it mean to be waiting with anticipation for our Lord to come? What is holding you back from being with Christ as he is born? Now is the time to ask those questions.

We encourage you to explore a spiritual practice beyond these suggested activities. One suggested place to start is with the ancient daily practice called The Examen. This sounds daunting and severe – don't worry, it's anything but. All the Examen asks of you is to pause for a few moments at the end of the day and focus in 5 areas:

1. **Become aware of God's presence.**
2. **Review the day with gratitude.**
3. **Pay attention to your emotions.**
4. **Choose one feature of the day and pray from it.**
5. **Look toward tomorrow.**



The Examen has become such a popular tool for spiritual formation that there is now an app on Android and iPhone systems. Go to your app store and search for Reimagining the Examen. You will find this to be a simple, but profound tool for reordering your daily life in God's grace.

While we were purposeful when writing this devotional to make it as "supply free" as possible, we hope you will consider purchasing or creating you own advent wreath for your home ritual. Ask your priest or lay minister in charge of Christian Formation for more information about what an Advent wreath is and where you can get one.

There is nothing here that is complicated or unruly. This Advent devotional is designed for anyone to use this at home alone, with their friends, spouse, children, or anyone you want to deepen your faith with.

WE INVITE YOU INTO A HOLY ADVENT – LET'S BEGIN!!

NOTE – How the Church Tells Time

Most of the world thinks of time as a line. We have what once was, we have now, and we have what will be. The Church does not think of time in this way. Advent is the beginning of the Church liturgical year, but in practice, we have no beginning or end. We have seasons: Advent (4 Sundays), Christmas (12 days) ending on Epiphany, Lent (6 Sundays), Easter (7 Sundays) ending on Pentecost, and the Sundays after Pentecost (also called Ordinary Time). The cycle repeats over and over again living through the life cycle of Christ and the Church, calling us into memorial and remembrance of what was, is, and will be.

Advent, Week 1

Theme: Waiting in Hope

Scripture: *Isaiah 64:1-9, 1 Corinthians 1:3-9, Mark 13:24-37, Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18*

“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates.”

Introduction:

We have entered the first season of the church year; Advent. Advent means “the arrival” – a time where we prepare our hearts and minds for Christmas, for God incarnate and with us. Interestingly, very few assigned Advent scripture readings actually point to Jesus’ birth. Rather, each year we begin the Advent journey with warnings and preparatory comments surrounding the second coming of Christ.

Jesus speaks about our need to stay alert and aware of signs that point to Christ’s second coming. He asks his disciples, and us, to “stay awake” in this week’s gospel reading so that we will be ready when the time comes. At the same time, Paul comforts the Corinthian church that they are “not lacking in any spiritual gift” as they stand in waiting for the Lord’s arrival.

We are to be on guard, prepared and awake. There will be signs of change that will be revealed to those who are paying attention. But fear not, because all that we need to persevere through this time of waiting we already have.

Households with Adults and Children:

➤ **DISCUSSION STARTER AND ACTIVITY:** Advent is a time of waiting and getting ready. In our household, we are getting ready to celebrate Christmas. One way to get ready is to think about what we love about this time, so we will be watching for those things when they come.

○ **Ask:** What are some of the things that you love about this season?

(Feel free to brainstorm what you love about the WINTER or about Christmas more specifically.)

○ **Do:** Make a list together, talking together about why you love the various items on your household’s list. Have children decorate the list as they wish, and then hang somewhere everyone in the household can see it.

Households with Adults and Youth (or older children):

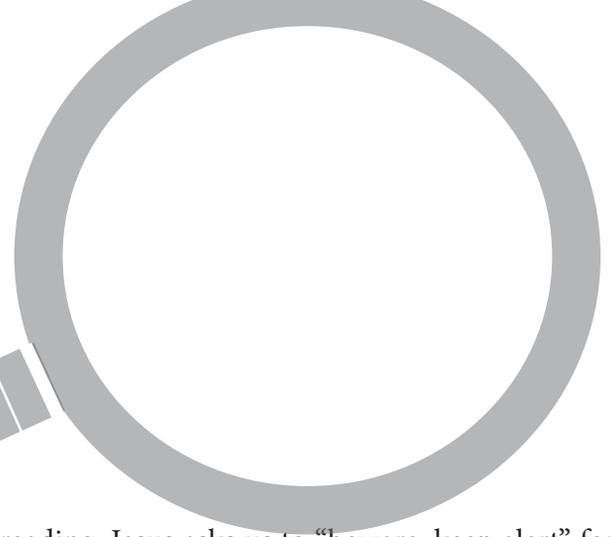
➤ **DISCUSSION STARTER AND ACTIVITY:** Advent is a special time where we prepare and wait for Christmas, when God comes to our world as a little baby. This is a good time for us to practice being patient and paying attention to the world around us. The Bible tells the story of people who waited for a long time for the first Christmas, and they had to be very patient. This is a good opportunity to discuss how to wait with hope for things that are on the way.

○ **Ask:** What kinds of feelings do you have while you are waiting for something special to happen? What do you like to do to prepare? How do you stay patient when you are waiting for something to happen?

○ **Do:** Read this week’s Gospel lesson together (Mark 13:24-37). Jesus is talking with his disciples and gives an example of how we can see that things are changing, if we only pay attention. Nature gives us clues to let us know that things are changing, such as the leaves on trees. When we see the clues, sometimes it makes it easier for us to be patient as we wait for something to happen. What are some of the clues we might see this month as we get ready for Christmas? (NOTE: your clues could be from nature or found in other places.) Take a piece of paper with a magnifying glass drawn on it (see next page for an example) and have youth list some of the “clues” they may see this month as we move toward Christmas.



PAY ATTENTION: LOOK FOR CLUES!



Households with Adults:

➤ **DISCUSSION STARTER AND ACTIVITY:** In Sunday's reading, Jesus asks us to "beware, keep alert" for the coming of the Kingdom of God. He gives his disciples some examples of how, in the springtime, we catch glimpses of trees beginning to bloom. Those changes, as subtle as they are, are indications that summer is already near to us, even if the weather is still chilly.

o **Ask:** Are there areas of your life today, at this time, where you can see subtle glimpses of change to come? How are you making yourself attentive to those glimpses? How do you manage feelings of impatience and anxiety while living in these "in between" moments?

o **Do:** Patience and attentiveness are two major themes of the Advent season. With your household, create a tangible reminder to KEEP ALERT and be patient. Maybe you could draw a symbol that you can hang somewhere visible to remind you to slow down and pay attention, or there is an item (like a smooth stone or a string around your wrist) that you can commit to carrying around. Whenever you see/feel the symbol, you will be reminded to stop what you are doing and pay attention to your surroundings. Each person in the household can make their own decisions about what will work best as a reminder for them, but share your items/symbols with each other.

For Everyone – Rituals and Prayer:

Light a small candle, LED candle, or the first candle of your Advent wreath. Gather with your loved ones as you are able and ask this simple prayer:

*God, we are waiting for something. Please stay with us and help us '
Has anyone seen a sign of change today (or this week)'
How have you been patient today (or this week)?*



Advent, Week 2

Theme: Peace

Scripture: *Isaiah 40:1-11, 2 Peter 3:8-15a, Mark 1:1-8, Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13*

“Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.” — 2 Peter 15a

Introduction:

In the second week of Advent, our focus is on Peace. What does it mean to be at peace? What is the Peace of God? If it passes all understanding, how are we to even begin understanding it? These are the sort of questions that can tie theologians in knots. They are also the sort of questions that can leave us wondering why so much of religion is difficult to grasp.

Peace can mean lots of different things. If you talk to a historian, they might tell you that we currently live in an unprecedented state of peacefulness. If you talk to anyone watching the 24-hour news cycle, they will tell you that the historian is crazy! Peace is indeed a relative idea. For many of us, living in peace means not having strife, stress, or chaos in our lives.

One of the gifts of the Christ-child coming among us is that God comes to this earth to bring peace to the people. During Jesus' ministry, he declared the year of our Lord's favor which historically would have forgiven debts, freed prisoners, and marked a period of peace against enemies. We can't control much of the world's machinations, but how can we bring peace into our lives? How can we invite a bit of peacefulness into our homes and into our minds as we prepare for the coming of Jesus?

Households with Adults and Children:

➤ **DISCUSSION STARTER AND ACTIVITY:** Children of all ages understand the nature of sitting still, not hitting, sharing, etc. We consider these actions to be “good manners” but they are also spiritual imperatives. We must find time to sit in the stillness of God, to share the gifts we have with others who have less, and we must turn the other cheek.

○ Using the simple messages that we teach all young children, what are ways they practice peace? (Parents, keep in mind that peacemaking is all about small actions that add up on a global scale – such as sharing a toy, being a friend at daycare or school, standing up for someone being picked on, giving to those who have less...)

○ Keep a list of the ways they have brought peace into the earth. Help them see that they are creating peace... from nothing into something.

Households with Adults and Youth

➤ **DISCUSSION STARTER AND ACTIVITY:** When was a time that the family felt at peace? There are many dynamics that go on inside families. We often focus on “fixing” the negative dynamics. Spend some time thinking about, talking about, and living in moments when you and your family were at peace.

○ What do these moments share? How can we create more of these moments together?

○ This week, find times to share moments of quiet intimacy with each other. A shared meal, prayers at bedtimes, in the car on the way from school or sports – find a time to share your moments of peace and ask God to create more moments together.

Households with Adults

➤ **DISCUSSION STARTER AND ACTIVITY:** As an adult, you have more autonomy than children or youth to bring peace to others. One of the greatest commandments we take on in our baptismal promise is to be Christ-like towards other people. To seek and serve Christ in others.

○ What are the ways you are going out to bring peace to others? What ministry can you join, or even create to bring about lasting peace to your neighbors?

○ Go get involved in a local ministry, even if you are already doing some good work in your community – take on one more action as you prepare for the coming of Christ.

For Everyone – Rituals and Prayers

Light a small candle, LED candle, or the second candle of your Advent wreath. Gather with your loved ones as you are able and ask this simple prayer:

*God, help us to see where we bring peace into the World.
Help us to serve others and see Christ in the world around us.*

Where are we seeing Peace?

Where are we seeing the opposite of Peace? How can we bring Peace into the world?



Advent, Week 3

Theme: Messages and Messengers of Joy

Scripture: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; John 1:6-8, 19-28; Canticle 15

“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”

“I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘make straight the way of the Lord.’”

Introduction:

As we move into the third week of Advent, our journey of inward preparation and outward observation draws us closer each day to Christmas. This week, the readings show a variety of ways that people have been and continue to be messengers of God’s love and hope for this world.

God speaks to the people of this world in many different ways. One of the ways that we know about God’s dreams for humankind is through words spoken by prophets and other messengers. Isaiah speaks boldly about God’s desire to turn the world as we know it upside down: those who mourn will be comforted and will rejoice, ruins will be rebuilt and captives will be freed. Mary, in her song of praise to the Lord, depicts a similar situation: those who are “low” will be lifted up and those who are hungry will be filled.

God’s messengers have been present throughout all generations, and they are around today. The message of hope and joy is present throughout this week’s scripture readings. Where is it present in your life?

Households with Adults and Children:

➤ **DISCUSSION STARTER AND ACTIVITY:** This week, we think about the people who have shared the message of God’s love and hope for our world. Isaiah, Mary and John the Baptist all told stories about God, but sometimes those messages were misunderstood by the people around them.

○ **Ask:** Have you ever tried to tell someone something, and they didn’t understand? How did that make you feel?

○ **Do:** If there are multiple people in your household, play a game of Telephone to explore how messages can change over time. Start with a goofy phrase, like “Mr. Smith enjoys eggs and grapes on Wednesday morning” – what happens after the phrase moves through several messengers? Talk about how, sometimes, it is hard to be a messenger – and you need to SHOUT your message rather than whisper it so people will hear and understand.



Households with Adults and Youth (or older children):

➤ **DISCUSSION STARTER AND ACTIVITY:** Mary’s life was flipped upside down: pregnant, unmarried, and without any real money to speak of. She had every reason to be scared and focused only on herself and her own problems. However, she was open to God’s presence in her life and chose to live with courage rather than let fear guide her. Because of her courage, she was able to hear God’s message when she went to visit her cousin, Elizabeth. When she saw Elizabeth and discovered that she, too, was unexpectedly pregnant, Mary’s words about God’s love and mercy seem to just fall out of her mouth. Without meaning to, she becomes a messenger of God’s love and intentions.

○ **Ask:** Have you ever been so moved by something that you couldn’t help but cry out? What was that like? What did you say or do?

○ **Do:** Read Mary’s Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55 or Canticle 15) together, splitting the reading so that each member of the household can read a portion. Talk about what stands out to everyone in this reading: what surprises you? What message does Mary give us about God’s hope for this world? What things does she think God would like to change in our world? What makes you feel excited? Is there anything in her song of praise that concerns you or that you don’t like?

Households with Adults:

➤ **DISCUSSION STARTER AND ACTIVITY:** John the Baptist plays an important role in Jesus' life and ministry, but the story is not about him. He, like Isaiah, comes in advance of Jesus to clear a way and help people prepare for the messages Jesus will be bringing to the world.

○ **Ask:** Consider that the role of John may be played by many people in our lives today. Who "pointed to the light" in your life? Who are the people who helped you learn more about faith or showed God's love to you through their lives? Did you ever talk to these people about the impact they have made on your life and your faith?

○ **Do:** Spend some time creating a response to God's message you have received from other people in this world. Do what works for you: consider writing a letter (to send or not) thanking someone for teaching you about God – create an art piece or collage to represent what you learned from someone else – write a poem as a response – etc. Share your response with the other person(s) in your household.

For Everyone – Rituals and Prayer:

Light a small candle, LED candle, or the third candle of your Advent wreath. Gather with your loved ones as you are able and offer this simple prayer:

*God, you send messengers to teach us about your dreams for our world.
Please help us hear those messages, and give us courage to be a messenger for others.
What do you think is God's message for us today?
(How) has that message changed since Jesus' time on Earth?*



Advent, Week 4

Theme: Love

Scripture: 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16, Romans 16:25-27, Luke 1:26-38

“Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.

And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.

He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God” – from the Gospel of Luke

Introduction:

So, we aren't delusional. We know that you are thinking that it's not Advent 4 – It's Christmas Eve! Yes, tomorrow is Christmas Day. But, it is NOT Christmas Eve until the sun goes down! We have been working this season to keep Advent and not rush into the Christmas season before its time. We are asking you to just give Advent a few more minutes... It's always strange when Advent 4 and Christmas Eve happen on the same day. In a perfect world, families might go to church in the morning for a service of Advent 4, followed by another church service that evening to mark Christmas Eve. If you can't do that due to travel or family commitments, try to find time for Morning Prayer out of the Book of Common Prayer. This might help you stay grounded in the journey you've been on this month, even as the fullness of "Christmas Eve" grows throughout the day.

There are no week-long projects this time around. We do want you to fully embrace the Christmas Season. We want you to have so much Christmas spirit left that you are ready to celebrate Christmas for its full 12 days! Keep the tree up and hold a few gifts until Epiphany. Celebrate all the way to the end. You have been pacing yourself, so you should be ready!

Activity for today

We have many names for God. If you go to a church that has a history of singing Handel's Messiah Chorus during Christmas (it was written for Easter...don't get us started), then you will hear many of the ways we refer to God and Jesus. Creator, redeemer, sustainer; Lord; God is Love; the true vine; the Good Shepherd; Wonderful; Counselor; Almighty King...the list goes on.

Today, your task is simple. What are the names you like for God (other than God, of course)? What are the names you find problematic? What metaphors or imagery do you love? Which ones do you wish to never hear again? Why? Write down your favorite and think about why you have descriptors for God that you don't like. Remember, God is beyond description, God is beyond gender, God is beyond and yet is still near to you.

Final Advent Prayer:

Light a small candle, LED candle, or the fourth candle of your Advent wreath. Gather with your loved ones as you are able and offer this simple prayer:

God, help us remember that you are Love, that you are beyond description.

*Help us remember that you love us. Help us live out your call to love you and to love others as
Jesus loved us, became one of us and died for us.*

We hope that you have enjoyed your Advent this year. If any of these activities helped you and your family deepen in your faith, don't give up the practice. Faith is deepened through practice and reading the scriptures. You will have greater faith in your life the more you practice your faith, read the scriptures, and live out your faith in the world. Blessings to you and have a truly Merry Christmas!

