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PART 1

AN INVITATION

Just when everything is bearing down on us to such an extent that we can scarcely withstand it, the Christmas message comes to tell us that all our ideas are wrong, and that what we take to be evil and dark is really good and light because it comes from God. Our eyes are at fault, that is all. God is in the manger, wealth in poverty, light in darkness, succor in abandonment. No evil can befall us; whatever men may do to us, they cannot but serve the God who is secretly revealed as love and rules the world and our lives.

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER¹

INTRODUCTION



What words, sights, sounds, and smells come to mind when you think of Advent?

Depending on your upbringing, church tradition, culture, and perspective, you might consider Advent a foreign concept (perhaps you've heard of the word, but you're not sure what it means beyond a type of cardboard-cutout calendar you can buy from the holiday aisle at the grocery store), or you might picture a lengthy, 40-day Orthodox season of fasting from meat, dairy, fish, wine, and olive oil before celebrating the beloved Feast of the Nativity on December 25. Many of us probably sit somewhere between these two ideas.

Regardless of your relationship with Advent, you most likely have some kind of relationship with Christmas. It might be your favorite time of year, and you employ all your restraint and willpower to refrain from blasting carols from your speakers in October. Or you might flat-out dread this time of togetherness, tradition, and toasting to indulgence, and you have to muster all your strength to power through it while longing for life to return to "normal." Once more, many of us probably sit somewhere between these two ideas.

No matter your position, Advent is a gift. It's an invitation to move slowly and methodically, looking inward with honesty about your relationship with God

incarnate. It doesn't matter where you begin your Advent journey. What matters is that you're invited.

This book is written as a guide for the journey: intentionally short, ecumenical, and requiring almost no preparation. Many of us don't respond to our invitation to participate in Advent because of busyness, confusion, or overload. This guide aims to remove those barriers, offering a sensory-rich summons to enter the season as we are, wherever we are in life.

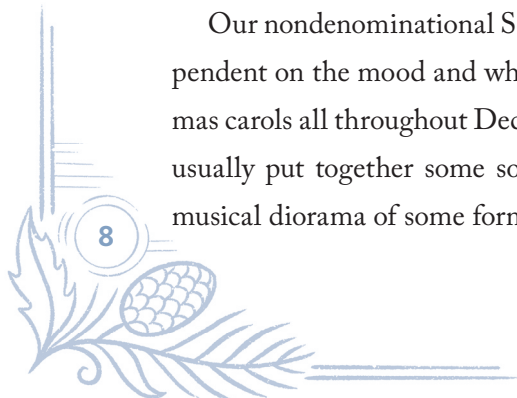
Working long, ten-hour shifts five days a week? This invitation is for you. Sleep deprived with small children who have overtaken your house and life? This invitation is for you. Young and immersed in studies with barely enough time to eat? This invitation is for you. In your second half of life, feeling a bit lost on what's beyond the bend? This invitation is for you too.

I first wrote this devotional to meet my own family's needs for an Advent guide that was short but rich with meaning—marinated in tradition, yet fit for a family of laypeople. Because Advent is for all of us. Honoring the season doesn't need to be complicated. It simply requires that we take the first step and respond to the invitation.



Having grown up in a Christian home and attended church regularly, I knew *about* Advent. I'd heard of it, watched someone light a candle every Sunday, and saw the store aisles of cardboard calendars with perforated doors hiding mediocre chocolate. But I never understood what Advent was.

Our nondenominational Southern church traditions were fairly low key and dependent on the mood and whim of our local pastoral leadership. We sang Christmas carols all throughout December, had a Christmas Eve candlelight service, and usually put together some sort of Christmas production for the community—a musical diorama of some form of the Nativity story.



At home, we would participate in our own family traditions, such as movie watching, tree trimming, gift wrapping, baking—the usual for an American family. Christmas Day was a joy-infused, colorful mess of wrapping paper and Andy Williams on the record player, followed by extended family time replete with over-eating and more gifts. And then—it was over.

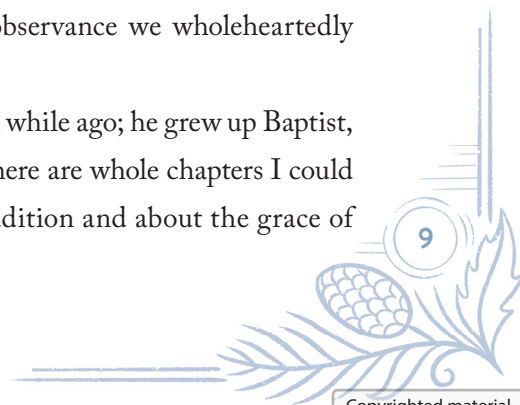
December 26 was always an abrupt letdown, when it felt as if the literal and figurative lights were promptly switched off and the celebrating ceased. Our family managed to keep our outdoor lights lit through January 1, but our tree was usually tossed out on the curb sometime during the last week of the year. By the start of the new year, Christmas was little more than a recent memory, with the adults eager to get back to routine and regularity.

I share this as an explanation of my Advent backstory. For me, *Advent* was simply another word mentioned around December, and it had something to do with lighting a candle at church. As a child, my priorities were more aligned with watching *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* on TV. That's not a bad thing, of course. I simply didn't know what Advent was. It was another vague and foreign holiday word, like *frankincense*, *sugarplum*, or *tidings*.



I'm an adult now and a mother of three growing children. My family of five has lived in many different settings, both in the States and abroad, and our holiday traditions varied widely during our family's early years. There isn't one particular thing we have always done the same. Recognizing Advent, however, is the most consistent practice in our familial repertoire, an observance we wholeheartedly and collectively anticipate.

My husband and I were confirmed as Anglicans a while ago; he grew up Baptist, and I was raised in a nondenominational setting. There are whole chapters I could write on what I love about the Anglo-Catholic tradition and about the grace of



sacramental theology, but a favorite is observing the traditional Church calendar. The calendar isn't at all unique to Anglicanism. Catholics, as well as several Protestant denominations, have long recognized this same liturgical calendar, and there's been a resurgence of interest among other Christians.

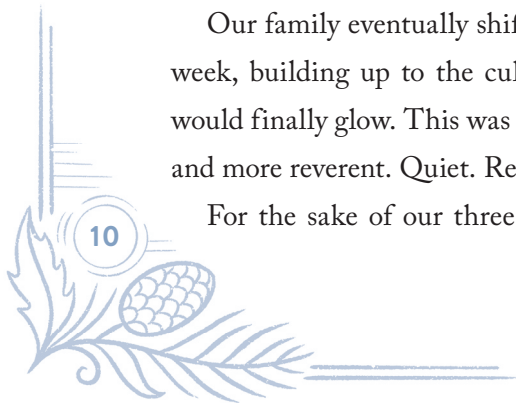
There are shelves of weighty books written about the full liturgical calendar, and this short book isn't meant to replace them. But because Advent is of paramount importance to that calendar, I'll explain the basics in the next section in order to help you better understand how our observance of Advent rests in context with the rest of the year.

I have long loved (and still love) the Christmas season, so even before we became Anglicans, I relished the idea of doing something for Advent as a parent. I loved the childlike idea of stretching out Christmas as long as possible, of being a fun mom who helped cultivate holiday anticipation with crafts and cookies (this was during my early foray into parenthood, when I ignored my innate wiring and denied the basic truth that *crafty* is not a word to describe my style). I truly wanted to recognize the spirit of Advent even though I didn't understand it, and the internet gave me a plethora of ideas—like hanging homemade ornaments on a Jesse tree or following a streamlined Advent calendar with activities I had chosen for daily holiday merrymaking.

These ideas left me exhausted, resentful, and befuddled about the actual purpose of Advent in our life—and therefore eager for the holidays to just end already. My spirit wanted to honor Advent because it would bring more depth and meaning to Christmas, but I couldn't figure out how to “do it” the way that would work best.

Our family eventually shifted to simply lighting Advent candles at home each week, building up to the culmination of Christmas Day, when all five candles would finally glow. This was much better—it felt less pressured, less complicated, and more reverent. Quiet. Reflective. Soulful.

For the sake of our three kids, I wanted each gathering to have meaning—



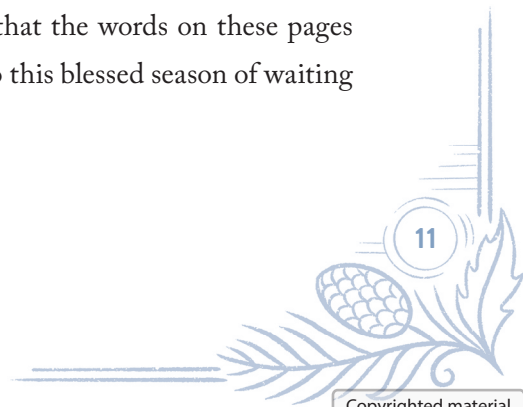
I didn't want us to light a candle, say, "Well, that's nice," then hear someone ask to pass the butter. So we added a devotional reading to our candle-lighting ritual. We tried quite a few books meant for reading aloud as a family, and some were better than others. But there were two problems: We couldn't find one that rested on a simple but historical and ecumenical explanation of Advent, and the pressure was still too much.

Sometimes our readings were confusing for the younger set, so we would then read a child-oriented book—but those were watered down and belittling. Plus, with our three children spanning five years, each one was in a different developmental stage. What worked for our oldest was over the head of our youngest, and what could have passed for our youngest was eye-roll worthy for our oldest.

I just wanted something simple—something that spoke to me as an adult who longed for an invitation to focus on the incarnation of Christ, and something that spoke to my growing children as well. I wanted something rich, but nothing so theologically dense that it was a slog. And, to be honest, we needed something quick. Our kids have school and extracurricular activities during Advent, so by the end of the day our bodies are tired and our minds are restless. I wanted something steeped in mystery but fuss-free, something that would help us savor the anticipation of Advent as we ended our evenings.

This book is the result of honoring our need to venerate the true season of Advent as separate from Christmastide without complicated cultural pressure or excess activity. It leans heavily on the artistry of others and on the good work of the historic Church mothers and fathers who have already laid the foundation.

Advent has grown in my life from a meaningless holiday word to my favorite liturgical season of the year. My prayer for you is that the words on these pages will give you the freedom you need to dive fully into this blessed season of waiting and anticipation.



THE BASICS OF ADVENT



Before diving into the meat of this Advent guide, let's explore a few whys, whens, and whatnots. What is Advent, really? And how is it not just part of the Christmas season?

THE LITURGICAL YEAR

Liturgy is an invitation for the people of God to participate in the work of God. The liturgical year, therefore, is a recognition and celebration of feasts and seasons, transforming our ordinary 12-month calendar into sacred time. We inherited the idea from our Jewish ancestors in the Old Testament, who commemorated both holy days, such as Yom Kippur, and holy ordinary practices, such as recognizing a sabbath day every one day out of seven. People have marked time and seasons since the beginning of written history, and followers of Christ have continued this ancient Jewish tradition since the early days of the Church.²

The Christian liturgical calendar has evolved over time, but it began with the global Church's desire to set aside Sunday as a sabbath day to recognize the resurrection of Christ. The rhythmic seasons in the Church calendar also reflect the natural world's cycles of sowing and reaping. These organic cycles speak to the mystery of birth, growth, death, and resurrection that we recognize in the

earthly and divine life of Christ.

There are differences between the Western and Eastern Christian calendars, and this guide is written with the Western calendar in mind, in which the main liturgical seasons progress as follows:

- *Advent*
- *Christmastide*
- *Epiphany*
- *Lent*
- *Holy Week*
- *Eastertide*
- *Ordinary Time*

There are important feast days within these seasons, such as Trinity Sunday and All Saints' Day, as well as specific saints' days, such as Saint Nicholas Day and Saint Patrick's Day, but the liturgical calendar is largely divided into these seven seasons. And like the gospel itself, the calendar revolves around two divine movements: the welcome of the Incarnation, commemorated in the Christmas cycle from Advent through Epiphany, and the victory of the resurrection, remembered in the Easter cycle from Lent through Eastertide. In Ordinary Time, the Church's primary focus is to live out its missional calling in the world and to encourage daily growth in its members.

The overall purpose of the liturgical calendar is to “trace the mystery of salvation and the course of salvation history”³ and to proclaim this salvation as a redemption of time. We lean into the natural, created rhythms of time and let God use them in our lives for personal growth and communal unity.

WHEN, WHY, WHAT, WHO, WHERE, HOW

When Is Advent?

Advent is the first season in the liturgical year, beginning four Sundays before Christmas and ending on Christmas Eve (which is why it's not always the same

length every calendar year). The first day of Advent is the “New Year’s Day” of the Christian calendar. For specifics, check page 143 for the dates of the first Sunday of Advent through 2030.

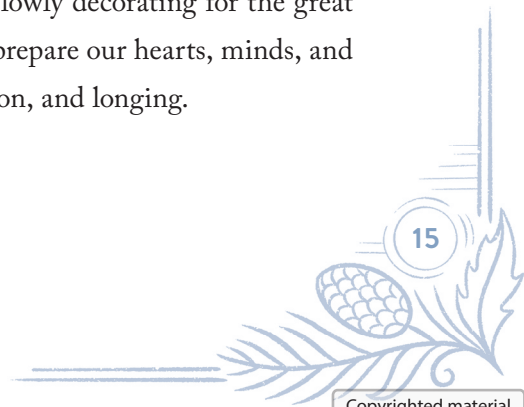
Why Do We Commemorate Advent?

The daily readings in this book will unpack this big idea slowly, from the first Sunday of Advent through Christmas Eve. But to summarize, the word *Advent* comes from the Latin word *adventus*, which means coming or visit. Advent is the season of preparation before Christmas, when we celebrate the human incarnation of Christ.

As we prepare, we remember history’s longing for a Messiah before Jesus’s birth and what it would have been like to wait and wonder. Advent is also a reminder of our anticipation of the return of Christ, when he will restore the earth to its original state and make right all wrongs. This season is a recognition of the current state of life here on earth, acknowledging the fraught tension of living between the time of the *already* of the first Advent of God and the *not yet* of its full, redemptive completion. Advent is about remembering that Christ has already come to save the world while recognizing that the work of redemption will not be finished until he comes again.

Advent is also a realization of our daily, ongoing preparation—the work of inviting the Holy Spirit into our lives and making room for Christ to do a good work in us. We lean into the reality that though we are saved from death because of the cross, we are still a work in progress.

Much like the way we ready our homes for guests when company is coming, we prepare ourselves. We prepare our homes, yes, by slowly decorating for the great Feast of the Nativity on December 25, but we also prepare our hearts, minds, and souls. Advent is the season of expectancy, preparation, and longing.



What Is Our Posture for Advent?

Remember the childlike feeling of giddy excitement about Christmas's arrival, wondering what was inside the boxes under the tree and drooling at the thought of the table spread? This is an accurate posture for Advent. We recognize Advent because our souls long for the full redemption of the world and because Advent aligns our minds with what we already anticipate: a full feasting with Christ.

As a season of reflection, Advent provides the space and freedom necessary to feel and understand what it means to wait on God. Like a child who needs to eat her vegetables before she has dessert, Advent is wisely designed to help us contemplate what it means to need the presence of God before feasting in it.

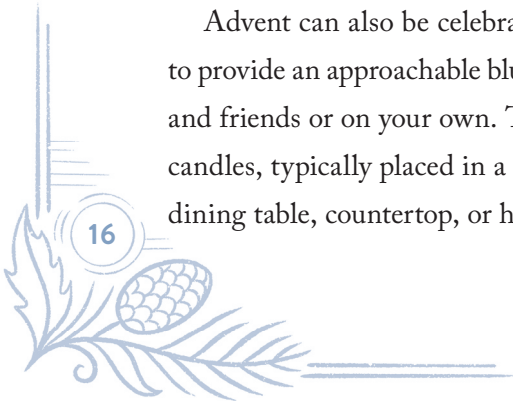
Who Can Commemorate Advent?

Because Advent is part of the Church calendar and marks our anticipation of Christmastide—when we remember the Incarnation of Jesus Christ—it follows that recognizing Advent is most common with Christians. But you can recognize and participate in Advent even if you're unsure about what you believe. In fact, Advent is a wonderful time to test out the waters of Christian tradition if you'd earnestly like to learn more about what it means to follow Christ. Advent is for everyone.

Where Can We Recognize Advent?

Catholic churches and some Protestant churches, such as certain Anglican and Lutheran congregations, almost always celebrate the Advent season in their parishes during the four weekly services before Christmas Day. Lately, other churches have also found richness in the celebration, so it's quite possible to see at least an Advent wreath with candles lit somewhere in the sanctuary.

Advent can also be celebrated in the home, which is the purpose of this book: to provide an approachable blueprint for commemorating the season among family and friends or on your own. The visual focus is usually a wreath with four or five candles, typically placed in a gathering area in the home, such as the coffee table, dining table, countertop, or hearth.



How Do We Recognize Advent?

There are as many ways to commemorate Advent as there are Christmas traditions, so there is no one right way. But remembering the focus of Advent—preparation, both inward and outward—I find it most helpful to keep things simple. There’s no need to burden ourselves with a laundry list of to-dos at the expense of practicing the acts that remind us of what we’re really doing when we recognize Advent. Too many good ideas are overwhelming, and they can keep us from doing anything at all.

This is the main reason this book includes only readings and straightforward practices that are life giving. Less is more when it comes to Advent. It provides space to chew on Scripture readings and the meaning of days as we progress, and it also allows the beauty of art and music to wash over us. Let those who have blessed the Church with their gifts bless you and your home.

Feel free to tweak, add, or omit anything in this book, because again, there is no one right way to *do* Advent. Some years you’ll find yourself craving more, and other years you’ll be grateful for the grace of doing only that which needs doing.

SUPPLIES NEEDED

I say “supplies needed” rather tongue in cheek, because there’s hardly anything truly necessary for Advent. You already have this book, so you don’t need anything more unless you want it. You don’t even need a Bible, because this book includes all the text for Scripture readings (which is helpful if your hands are full or life is busy). If the only thing you desire for Advent is a daily reading, you’re set.

But if you’d like to do a bit more, here are a couple ideas.

Candles and a Wreath

Homemade beeswax Advent candles provide a few minutes of tangible communal participation for your family, and they take about five minutes to make (kits are available that include sheets of dyed beeswax and cotton twine for wicks). The upside is the aesthetics of the candles: natural, rustic, and delightfully ordinary.

The downside is that these homemade candles burn quickly, so by Christmas Day, they're usually puddles. You'll most likely need a new kit every year, so if you prefer candles you can use year after year, you might want to buy long-lasting premade ones.

Wreaths can be made from anything, but there's something decidedly poignant about them when they're crafted from nature. Use twigs and leaves from your backyard, pine boughs cut from your local Christmas tree seller, or a bowl filled with cranberries and pine cones. Our family typically drills five holes into a simple log from a backyard tree. It pairs well with beeswax candles, and there's a symbolic resonance to recognizing Advent with nature as a reminder that all creation waits in anticipation along with us. We keep the log on our coffee table or our dining table as the centerpiece for the season.

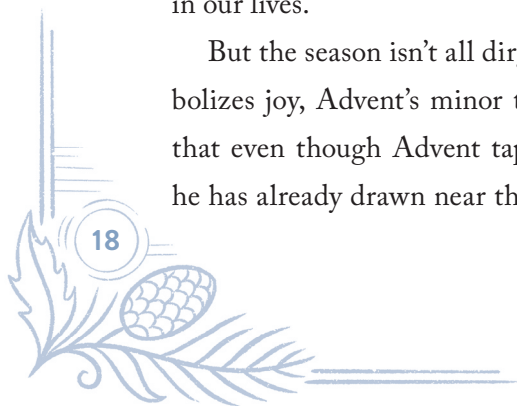
You simply need five candles and a place to hold them: one candle for each week of Advent, plus a Christmas candle.

The Meaning Behind the Colors

Advent candles can be any color you like, but purple is the traditional color for the Advent season in the liturgical calendar. (In some traditions, purple is replaced by blue.) This means that most of the season's candles are purple, with an additional pink candle for the third week and a white candle for the Christmas season.

Why these colors? There's not one universally accepted answer, but the most common idea is that purple is the color of both royalty and repentance. This color helps us remember that the coming Christ is the Prince of Peace, but also that we're meant to repent and reflect on the inner state of our souls as he arrives daily in our lives.

But the season isn't all dirge, because the pink candle for the third week symbolizes joy, Advent's minor theme. With this candle, we're asked to remember that even though Advent taps into our yearning for God's nearness, we know he has already drawn near through the incarnate Christ, whose earthly birth we



will soon celebrate. Thus, the combination of one pink and three purple candles paints a portrait of Advent's overarching theme: sober anticipation mixed with a hint of joy.

Each candle also has several themes associated with it, none of which are universal in the broader Church. Some traditions say the candles represent, in order, hope, love, joy, and peace. Others say they represent expectation, hope, joy, and purity.

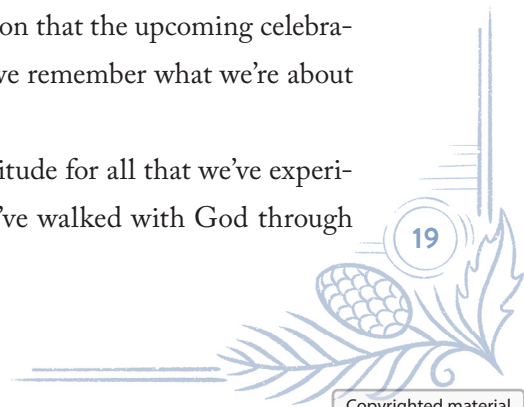
To provide structure for our Advent practice, I look to the uncomplicated weekly meanings of hope, faith, joy, and peace as our scaffolding. I also see the connection between hope and expectation, faith and preparation, joy and anticipation, and peace and gratitude. Therefore, this guide is divided into those four stages: expectation, preparation, anticipation, and gratitude. I find that most of us naturally flow through these emotional rhythms during the holiday season.

In the first week, I'm eager to begin and can't help but come to the table with expectation. I have hope that the following weeks will be full of right focus, and God, in turn, asks for my trust that right hope in the incarnate Christ will not be misplaced.

Sometime around the second week, our family begins to pull the Christmas decorations down from the attic in preparation for feasting in a few weeks' time. I prefer to do this slowly, partly so I don't burn out on garlands and gingerbread before Christmas even begins—but also to symbolize the faith we have in our good God, who provides the world with redemption through Jesus. We can rest in hope that God will meet us in due time with all we need.

By week three, our entire family is eager for the arrival of Christmas. We adults sense a mild panic, but the kids are full of anticipation that the upcoming celebrations will be all that they imagine. The joy, when we remember what we're about to celebrate—the Lord's arrival—is palpable.

Finally, by the last week of Advent, there is gratitude for all that we've experienced in the previous three weeks: goodness as we've walked with God through



expectation, preparation, and anticipation. And there's peace about what's to come.

This book helps you walk through Advent as a four-week focus on hope, faith, joy, and peace. Let yourself feel the expectation, preparation, anticipation, and gratitude pulsing through your veins.

Music and Art

There is no shortage of hauntingly beautiful music and artwork, both ancient and modern, to accompany Advent. It's often hard to wade through the deluge of Christmas carols to find the hymns and compositions that dive into the specific Advent notions of anticipation and expectation. So each day's reading in this book includes a suggested song to listen to (or sing, if that's your preference) as you light the candles, pray, and reflect. There have also been many great artists who have captured the themes of Advent visually, so you'll find suggested artwork to explore and appreciate for different days.

Recommended tools for enjoying these works of music and art are listed in the resources section.

ABOUT THE FORMAT

This book comprises a Scripture reading plan based on the *Book of Common Prayer*, an ecumenical, Anglican collection of prayers, liturgies, and catechisms whose origin stretches back to 1549. Many churches still use it as a guidebook for their weekly services, but it's not necessary to be Anglican or Episcopalian to use and find value in this prayer book—it's friendly to Catholics, evangelicals, and all Christians in between.

The *Book of Common Prayer* also includes the comprehensive Daily Office Lectionary, a plan for reading most of the Bible in two years. By using the Lectionary as a personal or familial reading plan, you're joining thousands of Christians around the world who are reading the same passages of Scripture. It's a lovely, historical instrument of Church unification, and as such it's a fitting framework for Advent readings.

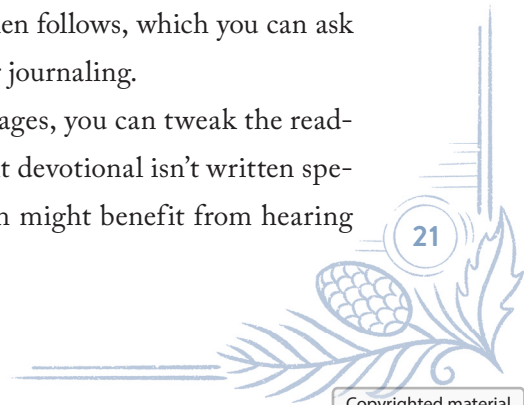
The Lectionary provides guidance for daily readings from the Old Testament, Psalms, New Testament, and Gospels. That can indeed be a lot of reading, but in this book we're not going to read from every category for Advent (though you're most definitely welcome to do so on your own).

Psalms is the Old Testament prayer book. Israelites used these sacred songs and poems to express devotion to the Lord, and they remain in regular use today among church traditions of all types. They range in mood from joyous celebration to solemn hymn and bitter protest. The psalms are some of our earliest examples of creative liturgical expression, providing words that God's people can use even today to connect with their Creator through honest, poetic imagination. Because these psalms touch so well on both our common humanity and God's never-changing presence in our lives, we will park mostly on the book of Psalms as our Advent prayer guide.

Though the psalms aren't usually the sole scriptural focus of Advent, there is a richness found in reading them together as we wait with expectation for the coming Messiah. Then, in the final days of Advent, we'll move to different forms of Scripture found throughout the Old and New Testaments (and not specifically prescribed on these dates in the Revised Common Lectionary) to shift our posture from hopeful expectation to ardent anticipation, ready for Christ incarnate.

Each day's reading includes a quiet reflection, which you can read on your own or out loud as a family or community. A Scripture passage follows (or precedes) the devotion, prescribed from the Daily Office Lectionary. The passages from Psalms for the first few weeks are each meant to be used as a collective prayer, a response to the daily reflection. A contemplative question then follows, which you can ask and answer collectively or use for personal prayer or journaling.

Because families are comprised of people of all ages, you can tweak the reading however it best serves you. Though this Advent devotional isn't written specifically for kids alone, consider that your children might benefit from hearing



your own honest answers to the daily questions—questions that don't always have simple answers.

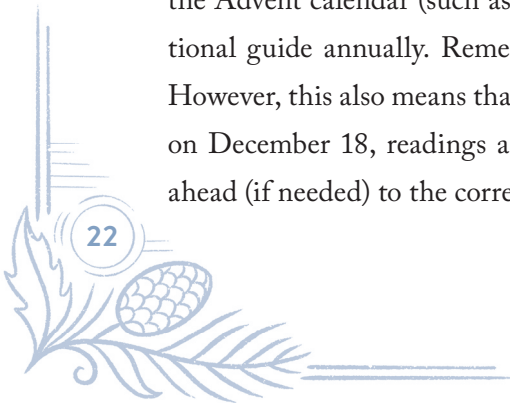
At the end of each reading you'll find suggested music and artwork to ponder. You could press the play button for each day's song as you light the candles, then keep it on as a backdrop as you read and discuss the day's reflection. Or you could wait to listen to it in silence to end your devotional time. Depending on your needs, you could even divide up each daily entry to bookend your day, listening to the song and looking at the artwork in the morning, then reading and reflecting in the evening. There's no one right, prescribed way to approach each day's offering.

You could stretch out this time as long as you want, perhaps lingering over a shared meal, or it can be as quick as the last two minutes before bedtime. Because the candles burn quickly, our family lights them as part of our bedtime routine, but you might want to enjoy the candlelight longer and light yours earlier in the day.

Finally, because this book is open-and-go (meaning there's no advanced preparation necessary on your part), simply turn each day to the corresponding day of Advent, read the passage, ask the question, play the music, and reflect on the day's artwork. That's it. If you need to skip a day or two—or even a week—that's fine. The season is busy for many of us. Simply pick up the book again when you're ready, move forward to the current day, and continue reading. You'll never be behind.

ABOUT THE DAYS AND DATES

Days are separated not by specific dates (such as December 12), but by day within the Advent calendar (such as “Week 3, Tuesday”), so that you can use this devotional guide annually. Remember, Advent begins on a different date each year. However, this also means that Advent is never the same length of time, so starting on December 18, readings are listed by date. When December 18 arrives, shift ahead (if needed) to the corresponding reading so that you're going through these



entries during the final days of Advent.

If you find this confusing, you might want to refer to the Advent dates section at the end of the book, then pencil in the calendar date on each day's entry to help you keep track of where you are in your reading.

The Scripture readings are mostly taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible, which is fairly easy to read while remaining faithful to the original meaning. This translation serves the devotional, liturgical, and scholarly needs of the broadest possible range of Christian traditions, including both Protestants and Catholics, and using this translation makes this open-and-go guide as ecumenical as possible.

AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE CHOSEN SCRIPTURAL FOCUS

If you prefer to focus your Advent Scripture reading mostly on the story of Christ's birth, instead of the prescribed Lectionary readings from the Psalms—or if you'd like to add further readings to tell the story of the Messiah's arrival—I've included an alternative plan with Gospel readings of Jesus's life on earth, using the New Living Translation (NLT) because it's easy to understand. You can add this to your Advent reading plan or replace the readings from the Psalms. The additional readings are simply dated December 1–25.

ABOUT CHRISTMAS

Advent is a separate season from Christmastide. During Advent, our focus is on inward and outward preparation for the arrival of the incarnate Christ. Christmastide is a different liturgical season that begins with the Feast of the Nativity on December 25—what we commonly know as Christmas. This is a season, not just a day; Christmastide is technically 12 days long (which is the origin of the carol featuring a partridge in a pear tree). Christmas is a true period of feasting!

Sometimes people are hesitant to focus on Advent because they don't want to delay Christmas—they might feel like the holidays already go by so fast that it's

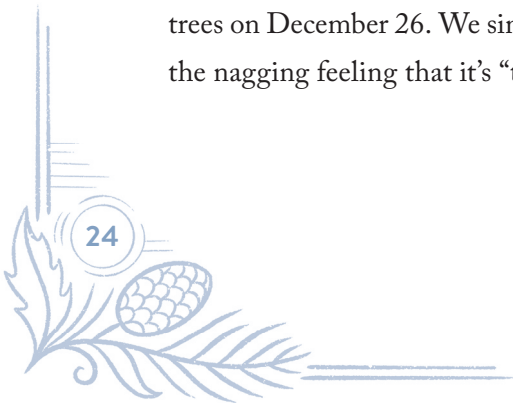
hard to withhold Christmas merriment because the season is so delightful. I get this. I really do. And I have a two-part answer.

First, I'm personally not a cultural purist with Advent. And second, acknowledging Christmastide means that instead of feeling disappointed on December 26, as though the festivities are now over, we can keep celebrating—all the way to January 6, when the season of Epiphany then begins in most cultures. This is a welcome relief to those who want more of Christmas, not less!

Western culture often recognizes the Christmas season as beginning the day after American Thanksgiving and lasting through December 25. This makes it difficult not to sing along to carols playing at the coffee shop, toast with your coworkers during your office Christmas party in early December, or drive around looking at lights in your neighborhood with hot cocoa. It's fun! This is why I say "grace upon grace upon grace" during the Advent season. There's no reason to be a purist and expect the culture around us to bend to our liturgical whims.

Ease into Christmas through Advent in your own home and inwardly in your mind and soul, but enjoy the holiday season with your community. No big deal. Keep in mind that your purpose in observing Advent is to draw near to God's heart for redeeming the world, not to earn points with God for avoiding cultural Christmas affairs.

Because Christmastide is 12 days long, our family keeps the decorations up in our home until January 6, and it's in these weeks that we feast, enjoy as many Christmas movies as we can stand, and generally make merry by delaying the end of the holiday until it historically ends. Again, we're not purists, and we don't tackle our non-liturgical friends to the ground when they start taking down their trees on December 26. We simply enjoy Christmas our way in our home and avoid the nagging feeling that it's "too late" according to cultural standards.



ABOUT SAINTS' DAYS DURING ADVENT

There are several saints' days that fall during the season of Advent—but for the sake of simplicity, I'll only mention the two most well known: Saint Nicholas Day, December 6, and Saint Lucia Day, December 13.

Saint Nicholas Day

The life and legend of Saint Nicholas, as is commonly known, is the origin story of our modern-day Santa Claus. He was born in the third century in the village of Patara, in modern-day southern Turkey. His parents were wealthy, but they died while he was young. He supposedly spent his inheritance helping the sick and poor in his village and eventually was made bishop of the town of Myra. He lived during the reign of the Roman emperor Diocletian, known for his persecution of Christians. Nicholas was imprisoned at some point of his service, but he was also present at the Council of Nicaea.

Nicholas was known for his generosity in the name of Christ by sharing his wealth among those who needed it most. The most well-known legend of his service involves three poor sisters who had no dowry, which meant they were unable to marry (and, in fact, could possibly be sold into slavery, as was the custom in those days). One morning, the family woke to three bags of gold mysteriously waiting for them in their home—dowries for the girls. Some versions of the story say that Nicholas tossed the bags of gold into their window at night so as to remain anonymous (with the gold landing in socks or shoes drying by the fireplace).

I love celebrating the example of the historic Saint Nicholas and his symbol of generosity during the holiday season. Learning about his life also helps answer children's questions about what Santa Claus has to do with Jesus and Christmas: Saint Nicholas was a Christian and loved giving in the name of Christ. We, too, do this on Christmas.

Adding a day to honor Nicholas on December 6, during Advent, adds to our expectant hope. This guide includes an additional Saint Nicholas Day reading for

December 6 in the back, if you'd like to use it to replace that day's regular Advent reading. In addition, many cultures have Saint Nicholas Day traditions, but if you don't live immersed in such a culture, there are a few simple things you could do.

The evening of December 5, our kids leave their shoes outside the front door (or if it's cold, inside by the door). We'll then read a book about the historic Saint Nicholas for story time before bed, then proceed with our Advent reading. In the morning, the kids find a few chocolate coins wrapped in gold foil in their shoes.

As a family, we also like to give a few dollars anonymously on this day, to pay homage to Saint Nicholas's reminder to give generously without a need for recognition. Some years, we ask our church for the name of a family who could use a little extra cash, then we put \$20 in their mailbox with a typed note saying we love them and are thinking of them. Other years, we dine out and leave a generous tip for our server (doing our best to leave the restaurant as fast as possible!). Sometimes, we'll donate to a charity we like.

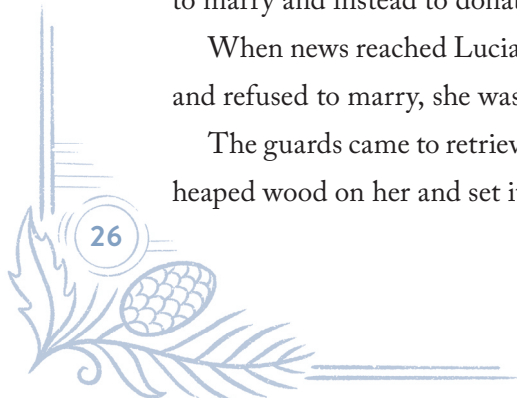
These ideas serve as simple, tangible reminders of the real Saint Nicholas and how he is worthy of emulation. But if recognizing his feast day feels overwhelming, release any burden to do so. Advent is still very much Advent with nothing more than a simple remembrance of Nicholas's life.

Saint Lucia Day

Lesser known than Saint Nicholas Day in much of the Western world, Saint Lucia Day recognizes the life of Lucia of Syracuse. Also known as Saint Lucy, she lived during the reign of the emperor Diocletian, like Saint Nicholas. We don't know much about her, but she supposedly consecrated her life to God by vowing never to marry and instead to donate her dowry to the poor.

When news reached Lucia's betrothed that she planned to give away her dowry and refused to marry, she was ultimately sentenced to a life of prostitution.

The guards came to retrieve her, but legend says they couldn't move her, so they heaped wood on her and set it on fire—but she wouldn't burn. They finally sliced



through her neck with a sword.

Because legend also says she was blinded by those soldiers—and she previously wore candles to see in the cavernous dark when she brought provisions to Christians hiding in the catacombs—Lucia is connected to light. Thus, she is honored on one of the darkest days of the year, which reminds us that God pierces dark with light.

This guide includes an additional reading for Saint Lucia Day in the back, should you want to read it on December 13 instead of that day's Advent excerpt. In addition, you could recognize her day in your home like other cultures' traditions around the world, even if it's not common in your area.

In celebration of Saint Lucia Day, the eldest girl wears a wreath-crown with (electric) candles and wakes up the family with breakfast—usually a pastry of some sort. Her rising before the break of day and summoning the family to do the same symbolizes the arrival of light to earth: both in nature, as the northern hemisphere soon reaches its darkest night and begins the turn toward light, and spiritually, with eternal light coming through the incarnate Christ.

SHADOW AND LIGHT

For those in the northern hemisphere, Advent begins in a season of ever-growing dusk, creeping toward the shortest and darkest day of the year. In a time of cooler temperatures and grayer skies, there's a glad welcome when the invitation comes to shift our focus to a new beginning: an arrival.

Jesus of Nazareth arrived in a world of poverty. Born to parents of no renown and raised in a town known for nothing good coming from it (John 1:46), God incarnate made his way from the right hand of the Father into a common world rife with political unrest and injustice. He cloaked himself as a person of insignificance, where very few people knew his true identity.

When the angel Gabriel visited Mary, she lived in a world of shadows. Her betrothed, Joseph, made ends meet as a carpenter, quite possibly *barely* making ends

meet because of the outrageous taxation from the imperialist Roman government. Herod the Great's bloody, paranoid reign demanded tactics of mass terror and widespread surveillance. (It really is a wonder that God brought the world's Savior into this time and place in history.)

A young woman who became pregnant out of wedlock in this ancient Jewish culture would have been terrified. But God's promise to Mary wasn't stability or security. His promise, as given through Gabriel, was that the power of the Most High would overshadow her (Luke 1:35).

God redeems darkness. He wants to infiltrate the shadows the hardest life has to offer and bring light beyond our comprehension.

We begin Advent aware of the shadows in our world, big and small. Yet, over the weeks we slowly move toward the light of the world. The candles we light every evening remind us of the impending arrival of our good gift from God, given to all of us more than 2,000 years ago. Those candles also remind us of the hope yet to come, when Christ returns to fully redeem the world.

Advent is pregnant with anticipated arrival. Advent acknowledges shadows and dims them with burgeoning light. So we wait in expectation for the full, radiant, overwhelming light to one day wipe out all darkness forever. This is the hope of Advent.

