

# A Different Kind of Journey

Advent as a Walk, Not a Sprint



Advent means to arrive, to come. It refers to both past and future as we celebrate the coming of Christ into our world and look forward to his coming again. With that in mind, I invite you on a journey to claim the best of what Advent is and can be. Perhaps we can find ways to better clear a highway across the desert for our God. In so doing, we can claim the truth of how deeply God loves us, and we can open our hearts to receive that unconditional, expansive and outrageous love.

Advent is my favorite liturgical season. You may think that I'm completely crazy, given the societal excesses and out-of-control, overloaded calendars of that season. For many, the pre-Christmas season has become a frenetic dance. I've come to prefer a slow dance: a walk rather than a sprint.

## What's to like about Advent?

I'm not talking so much about what goes on outside and around us as what goes on inside us. That's the part I like so much.

I like Advent for the same reason that my favorite roses are those that aren't fully opened: I love the promise and possibility. I get jazzed about the questions that arise when I live in anticipation. When I take the time to reflect on them. And when I walk rather than run through life.

We spend a lot of our lives waiting. Waiting at stoplights. In stores or ticket lines. Waiting for results from medical tests. Or for an important phone call, text message or e-mail. (It used to be waiting for letters in our mailboxes!) As I complete the writing of this resource, I am waiting for the birth of my ninth grandchild. I am so excited; I anticipate the precious times I will enjoy with this little one just as I have and do with my other grandchildren.

Some of our waiting is not fun. Some waiting is done in fear and trembling (biopsy results), and some is done with great joy (babies, weddings and celebrations). How do you approach Advent? In joy? Or fear? What emotions do the words anticipation and waiting stir in you?

Do you dread the pre-Christmas season because of all the shopping, baking, bad Christmas music blaring in stores jammed with shoppers and your overloaded calendar? Or do you dread it because of the loneliness of the entire season? Why not change all that and focus on Advent in a new way? The focus need not be on gifts, parties, baking and huge family gatherings. Instead you can center on the real deal: preparing yourself to observe the gift of God breaking into our world in the Incarnation.

**Question: How are you approaching Advent this year?**

## Getting started

First of all, think about your current practices. How do you begin your Advent preparations? Where do you start? What frames your experience of Advent? What practices and rituals do you find helpful as you wait expectantly to celebrate the coming of the Christ child? What have you done in the past that's been especially meaningful? Are you open to exploring new ways to mark these four weeks? Perhaps you can blend something new with some of what you've liked in your past practices.

I like to begin the Advent season with the question:

**What wants to be born in me now?**

When I reflect on that question, I'm always aware that birth entails darkness, waiting and quiet time. What are the gifts to be found in darkness and in waiting?

## How to Use This Resource

*Advent is a journey we undertake as individuals, as families and as congregations. This resource focuses largely on the journey of the individual throughout the days of this liturgical season. Although the first major activity is designed primarily for a group, it can be adapted easily for individual use. The same is true, in reverse, for the other activities. Let your imagination out of the box as you adapt the remaining activities for your current women's group or even a group you form especially to observe Advent this year. Tailor the time spent in activities to the time available to your group.*

In my part of the world, Advent comes in a time of darkness. The days are shorter. We don't see as much of the sun. While I sometimes complain about that, I know there are gifts as well. Think of the darkness of the womb that, in time, produces a precious new life. Or the darkness of the ground in which a seed is planted, from which a green and growing shoot will appear. Or the darkness in a cocoon from which will emerge a beautiful butterfly that can soar among the flowers. In those images we understand the nurturing and nourishing aspect of darkness.

These images cause me to reflect on the penitential side of my Advent journey, too. Of what do I need to let go? What do I need to shed? What needs changing in my life so that I can bring more of God's light into the world? So that I can be a Christ-bearer?

**Question: What is waiting to be born in you this Advent?**

## Advent practices to explore

As I reflect on the questions of what needs to be born and of what I need to let go, I find a variety of practices helpful. Here are just a few:



## Telling the story

For several years I reclaimed Advent from the commercialized experience that surrounds us with a practice that developed in a women's spirituality group of which I was a part for many years. It's adaptable for family, friends or any existing group. This practice can be personalized for individual use, too. Here are the basic steps of the activity:

- Draw names. At the start of Advent, each person draws a name, but not for a gift exchange. These names are of characters or objects that would have been present at the Nativity: Mary, Joseph, shepherds, angels, the innkeeper, the manger, star, various animals and even the straw. Here's a place to get extremely creative. The inanimate objects can teach us Advent lessons just as much as can the people.
- Become familiar with your "name." The name you drew is one you'll live with throughout Advent. Read Luke 2:1-20 and see what part this person or object played. Read other books to learn more about the name you drew. Pray about it. Journal. Imagine. Think about what it meant to be that person or object. For example, what might it have meant to be the manger and to have cradled the baby Jesus? What does it mean now for you to cradle or carry Jesus? How important was the straw that night of Jesus' birth? What might that teach you this Advent season? Or what lessons can the innkeeper or the shepherds teach you as you think about their role in the Nativity? Are you starting to get the idea of this exercise?
- Tell the Nativity story. If you're doing this with a group rather than alone, set a time just before or after Christmas when your group can gather for what's called "the telling." This is a holy time when you tell the Nativity story from your hearts. Without any scripting, someone will begin speaking, telling who or what they are and sharing what they did on the night of Jesus' birth. Perhaps the angel who came to Mary starts the telling. Or maybe Mary does. Or the star. It

doesn't matter. Others will follow when it seems appropriate for them to jump in - and continue telling the story from their particular view.

It's quite amazing how the story flows - and how the story comes alive with new meaning when told in this manner. This experience isn't about performing but about hearing the Christmas story in a completely new and fresh way. It's about deepening our experience of Advent since we've each been living with the Nativity story and our particular role in it throughout the weeks of preparation. I remember each year my group did the telling that I was struck by how right for each person was the name that person drew. Most often we all agreed that we'd drawn the name we needed that year.

One year a woman who drew the star reminded each of us to learn what God had called us to be and do and then to shine with those gifts. Another person was the donkey on whose back Mary rode to Bethlehem; she reminded us that no task is too humble.

I can't forget the year I drew the name of Jesus. It seemed daunting. Yet I took an amazing journey through Advent, reflecting on what it might have meant to be both human and divine. Among other things I said at the telling: "As I make this transition into human flesh, I'm aware of my senses...I hear the tender lullabies my mother sings to me, and I hear my father's voice in concern asking my mother if she is okay.

"The sensory part of my new existence fills me, but it doesn't eliminate my awareness of what I came to do. I'm aware of the pain of all creation and my ministry to restore it. I'm aware, too, of what hurt I will bring to my mother and father because of my ministry. I realize how outrageous my mother was to say 'yes' to the angel and, so, to God. And how courageous my father was to stick with my mother in the face of all the whispers and his own suspicions and doubts."

One year I was the stable. Here's part of what I wrote in my journal: "Somehow I knew this baby was a very special baby. But it wasn't until shepherds from the

nearby hillsides arrived a little later that I learned what the angels had told them. Then I knew: I had opened myself to receive the God Incarnate, the Christ child...I realized that it's often when we're simply doing just what we're supposed to be doing that the most surprising things happen...Becoming a home for Jesus means being open to the light breaking through your darkness, too. It means being open to new life."

Let your creative juices flow. And let the Holy Spirit work in you, raising new awareness of God's amazing gift in sending Jesus. You will be brought to the manger in a new way that touches your heart as well as your mind.

This activity can be adapted for personal use by creating your own basketful of names from which you'll draw each year. In Advent of any given year, simply live with the name you draw, journaling, praying, researching and discovering what that person or object can teach you. This will deepen your Advent experience. It may well spur new questions about what God is calling you to do, and it may answer questions you've been carrying around inside. Open yourself up to an adventure.

### Reflecting on Advent hymns

Choose an Advent hymn (or two). Reflect on one line (or one verse) each week, journaling and praying with what its words mean in your life journey. How do the words deepen your relationship with God during this time? What do they say about how you might better become a Christ-bearer to the world?

### Picturing the Advent journey

Make a collage during Advent. Clip pictures from magazines and other sources that symbolize what's happening as you walk your Advent journey, gluing them to poster board. Perhaps a butterfly image stirs thoughts within you about the similarity between time spent in a cocoon and the darkness and waiting of Advent, for example. What are the Advent songs

and images living inside you right now? And what are they saying to you?

### Affirming justice in Advent

Perhaps you feel a sense of real longing this Advent, longing for justice in a world of injustice, yearning for hope and deliverance. This might be a good time to spend the four weeks of Advent reflecting and journaling on Mary's words in the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55). Notice that after Mary has been affirmed by her cousin Elizabeth in her knowledge of carrying the Divine within her body, she breaks into a song of exultation and a declaration of God's concern for justice. Justice will be established. And it will be done in a radical way: through God's love in sending Jesus. Spend time thinking about what a revolutionary message Mary proclaimed. No passive, sweet young thing, this Mary. No, she was courageous, strong and insightful! And the baby she carried within her body brought reconciliation to the world. This baby brought a radical message of love to a world more interested in power, prestige and who's in and who's out, who's up and who's down (a state of being we still see today).

As an aside, this is a good time to remember the important role of being an encourager, an affirmer to others. In a women's group of which I was once part, we spoke about "Elizabething" one another; that is, affirming God's call in each other just as Elizabeth did to Mary in the verses preceding the Magnificat. We don't always have a clear sense of our own callings, and it's helpful to have others tell us what they see in us.

### Experiencing Advent through art

Maybe you want to experience Advent through art. So if you prefer, create a different mandala each week to represent that week's journey. Mandalas are circle forms into which shapes and patterns are added as you are drawn to do so. The various shapes and the colors you use on your particular mandala contain the

symbolism you wish for them and can represent what you're feeling or experiencing at the moment. See [www.free-mandala.com/en/start.html](http://www.free-mandala.com/en/start.html) to download examples. You either can color one from there or create your own. Many art supply stores carry books about mandalas.

Note: Either the collage or the mandala may be combined with journaling to draw as much from your Advent journey as you'd like.

## Making an Advent calendar

You might create your own version of an Advent calendar. Perhaps each day will contain an appropriate Scripture verse on which you can reflect. Or you might prefer to fill your calendar with images that remind you of Advent waiting and anticipation. Let your creativity have free rein.

## And finally...

Make this the year you try to reduce the outside noise that surrounds us all in the pre-Christmas season (which begins in stores earlier each year, it seems). Whatever practice you create or use from those suggested here or elsewhere, try to follow Mary's example and ponder things in your heart. It's the inner journey that's essential as we seek to be Christ-bearers. As the mystic Meister Eckhart said, "What is the good if Mary gave birth to the son of God two thousand years ago if I do not give birth to the son of God today? We are all meant to be mothers of God. For God is always needing to be born." Truly, God needs to be born in many hearts, in many places all around us.

And we are called, each in our own way, to prepare the way in our own hearts first.