

Hope in the Time Between: An Advent Reading Guide

If you've ever been lost while walking through a forest, then you'll know just how alarming that sense of disorientation can be. The trees seem to cloister, their branches reaching out, as you scramble to find anything that looks familiar, anything to push back the rising panic threatening to crest and fall like an unrelenting wave. The light filtering through the leaves no longer carries the soft warmth it once did but, rather, serves as an ominous reminder of the fading daylight and approaching dark. Things bear a sinister edge when you're lost.

What you need in those disoriented moments of panic is perspective. You need the vantage point found at the top of a hill or in the upper limbs of a tree to provide purchase for your sanity as you regain a proper sense of direction. Only when the miles behind and the destination ahead become clear are you able to move your feet confidently toward home.

It is a terrible thing to be lost. Perhaps you have felt that way a great deal over these last several months, hoping that once you finally come over the next rise in the road, you'll feel confident but, instead, find yourself more confused than ever before, holding questions that pound like a drum over and over again in your mind. What's true? How should I respond when it seems like conflict is the only language anyone speaks? Why is there so much fear? What does it mean to be a Christian in this mess? What might God be doing in all of this?

We need high ground, a space to consider where we've been and where we're heading so that we can rightly fix our location and forge ahead. Advent offers us that vantage point. Conflict, confusion, and a sense of disorientation are nothing new for the Church. Karl Barth once said, "What other time or season can or will the Church ever have but that of Advent?" What did he mean by that? Fleming Rutledge answers for us:

"Advent calls for a life lived on the edge, so to speak, all the time, shaped by the cross not only on Good Friday but wherever and whenever we are, proclaiming his death to be the turn of the ages "until he comes" (1 Cor 11:26). The gospel is incarnate in our lives in "this present evil age" (Gal 1:4), not in a faraway empyrean but in "the sufferings of this present time," which are endured because of the promise that they "are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Rom 8:18)

In a very real sense, the Christian community lives in Advent all the time. It can well be called the Time Between, because the people of God live in *the time between* the first coming of Christ, incognito in the stable in Bethlehem, and his second coming, in glory, to judge the living and the dead...Advent contains within itself the crucial balance of the now and the not-yet that our

faith requires.

The disappointment, brokenness, suffering, and pain that characterize life in this present world is held in dynamic tension with the promise of future glory that is yet to come. In that Advent tension, the church lives its life.” (Rutledge, *Advent*, 7.)

The tide of ages has transformed the curve of the coastline where the Kingdom of God meets a world groaning in anticipation of a coming glory, but it is here that the Church remains stationed. There is still the siren song of idols that has been sung for innumerable generations. There is still the intoxicating aroma of power and wealth that invites us to abandon all in our pursuit. There is still the language of pride with which we recite our corporate creeds as we worship at the shrines of our base desires. This is the ground the Church occupies. This is the ground the Church has occupied since Christ told us to wait and watch, and so we wait and watch and hope.

Here we find the somber beauty of Advent: as we wait, we remember. We remember that our Savior's hard-won victory over sin and death and our Enemy is assured but not yet ours in full. We remember that the pain we might feel now vanishes like a vapor when held up to the glorious light of eternity. We remember that love and peace and joy and hope aren't just seasonal vocabulary embroidered on dish towels, but they are the language of the Kingdom that has come and one day will come. So as we anticipate our celebration of Christ's birth, let us get our bearings as men and women who are situated precisely in this in-between, acknowledging the grief of sin, anticipating the glory of eternity, and allowing the holy beauty of our promise-keeping God to shape our hope in the midst of it all. May we, filled with joyful anticipation at the coming of Christ, spread the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere this Advent season (2 Cor 2:14).

It is our sincere hope that this guide provides you with a tool which will serve you well as you dedicate time and space in your life to sit with the Lord this Advent season. These meditations, musings, and questions are intended as a means of encouraging you, challenging you, and pointing you toward the power and beauty of communion with the Lord as you spend time in God's Word. We all need hope and comfort and rest right now. We trust that the Lord will be faithful to meet you as you seek Him. May the somber yet hopeful honesty of Advent, and the celebratory joy of Christmas, strengthen your faith and heighten your anticipation of the glorious return of King Jesus.

Advent Week 1

How Did We Get Here? | John 1:1-5

It would be fair to ask the question, why begin Advent on a solemn note? Isn't the primary appeal of the holiday season the fact that it offers a chance to escape the hard things in life amidst the colors and sounds and smells of Christmas mirth? Indeed, there is a pervasive joy that is present around Christmas, but it is uniquely tinged this year with the sober awareness that things are different. For many, it feels a bit like Christmas lights are being strung over damaged boards in the aftermath of some great storm.

So we begin Advent with lament. Lament is something other than sadness for its own sake. Lament is a biblical category that gives us language, and permission, to offer to the Lord our worries and our wounds, our frustrations and fears. Pastor Mark Vroegop describes lament as "the prayer language for God's people as they live in a world marred by sin. It is how we talk to God about our sorrows as we renew our hope in his sovereign care." That last bit is especially important — lament always leads us to hope, not because our circumstances change or because we arrive at some deep insight into the hidden plans of God for our lives, but because we are led to the One who is truth and love and who calls us sons and daughters.

Below you'll find a suggested schedule for daily time in God's Word. It is our hope that this provides helpful handrails, with specific Scripture and prompts related to our text and message each week, so that you feel equipped to spend time with the Lord this Advent season. These passages and questions are intended to provide brief but meaningful moments of Scripture meditation and prayer each day. Life is surely busy. Would you be intentional to pause and spend time with the Lord? He knows you, He loves you, and He desires to meet with you.

Monday Morning

Read | Psalm 42

Pray | Pray, verbatim, the words of Psalm 42.

Monday Evening

Read | John 1:1-5

Pray | Offer a prayer of honesty and gratitude to the God who came as Light into darkness.

Tuesday Morning

Read | Psalm 42

Pray | Allow Psalm 42 to shape an honest prayer over your life.

Tuesday Evening

Read | John 1:1-5

Pray | Offer a prayer of honesty and gratitude to the God who came as Light into darkness.

Wednesday Morning

Read | Psalm 42

Pray | Allow Psalm 42 to shape an honest prayer for the Church and the world around you.

Wednesday Evening

Read | John 1:1-5

Pray | Offer a prayer of honesty and gratitude to the God who came as Light into darkness.

Thursday Morning

Read | Luke 1:67-79

Pray | Pray, verbatim, the words of Luke 1:68-79.

Thursday Evening

Read | John 1:1-5

Pray | Offer a prayer of honesty and gratitude to the God who came as Light into darkness.

Friday Morning

Read | Luke 1:67-79

Pray | Allow Zechariah's prayer to shape a prayer for peace, both in your own heart and in our world.

Friday Evening

Read | John 1:1-5

Pray | Offer a prayer of honesty and gratitude to the God who came as Light into darkness.

Saturday Morning

Read | Luke 1:67-79

Pray | Allow Zechariah's prayer to shape a prayer of hopeful gratitude to the Lord.

Saturday Evening

Read | John 1:1-5

Pray | Offer a prayer of honesty and gratitude to the God who came as Light into darkness.

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. **2** He was in the beginning with God. **3** All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. **4** In him was life, and the life was the light of men. **5** The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

John 1:1-5

1 As a deer pants for flowing streams,
so pants my soul for you, O God.
2 My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.
When shall I come and appear before God?
3 My tears have been my food
day and night,
while they say to me all the day long,
“Where is your God?”
4 These things I remember,
as I pour out my soul:
how I would go with the throng and lead them in
procession to the house of God
with glad shouts and songs of praise,
a multitude keeping festival.
5 Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you in turmoil within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my salvation **6** and my God.
My soul is cast down within me;
therefore I remember you
from the land of Jordan and of Hermon,

from Mount Mizar.
7 Deep calls to deep
at the roar of your waterfalls;
all your breakers and your waves
have gone over me.
8 By day the Lord commands his steadfast love,
and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the
God of my life.
9 I say to God, my rock:
“Why have you forgotten me?
Why do I go mourning
because of the oppression of the enemy?”
10 As with a deadly wound in my bones,
my adversaries taunt me,
while they say to me all the day long,
“Where is your God?”
11 Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you in turmoil within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my salvation and my God.

Psalm 42

67 And his father Zechariah was filled with the
Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying,
68 “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has
visited and redeemed his people
69 and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in
the house of his servant David,
70 as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets
from of old,
71 that we should be saved from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us;
72 to show the mercy promised to our fathers
and to remember his holy covenant,
73 the oath that he swore to our father Abraham,
to grant us
74 that we, being delivered from the hand of our
enemies, might serve him without fear,

75 in holiness and righteousness before him all
our days.
76 And you, child, will be called the prophet of
the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to
prepare his ways,
77 to give knowledge of salvation to his people in
the forgiveness of their sins,
78 because of the tender mercy of our God,
whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high
79 to give light to those who sit in darkness and
in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the
way of peace.”

Luke 1:67-79