

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 2

Where Are We Going? | Revelation 21:1-4

We sat in the darkness a bit last week, not for the sake of the darkness itself, but to acknowledge that once we call out the darkness for what it is, the Light that has come and is coming shines all the brighter in our lives and onto our hope for the future. And it's the other end of that trajectory that is before us this week — *where is this hope leading us?*

Some may be wondering what this picture from Revelation 21 of the promised future that is ours in Christ has to do with Advent or Christmas? Look around you. It's likely that wherever you are right now, there is some evidence of the season. Maybe it's the tree in your living room, the scent of the candle that has shifted from pumpkin spice to sugar cookie or spruce, the lights outlining your porch, or the ever-present echoes of Christmas music — it's as if the whole world is dressing in anticipation of Christmas. So we see in Revelation 21 the portrait of a Bride preparing to meet her Groom, the Church holding her breath as she waits. The King is coming.

Whereas the building anticipation for Christmas tends to erupt on Christmas morning then quickly fade like the afterglow of a firework, there will be no end to Christ's anticipated return. He is coming to destroy sin and death and suffering. He is coming to bring peace that we see by flickering candlelight in the present, shadowed as it is by the wars and struggles and shouting matches, which are really just a ploy for the power that ultimately belongs to Christ anyway. He is coming not simply as a conquering hero who will right these wrongs and then ride off into the sunset, but also as a loving and present and kind and gentle spouse who brings the Kingdom of God *and* a caring, outstretched hand to clear away the tears from your wearied face.

This is a promise from our God. This Advent season likely won't provide answers to all of the questions you carry. It won't unravel the many knotted strands of uncertainty that this past year has woven together. But the hope of the gospel, the hope of Advent, is that though we cannot know how all of the puzzle pieces of life fit together, we look with hope toward One who is good to His Word. His promises are more certain than your next breath. He is coming. He loves you. So hold onto that truth, and hope.

Below you'll find a suggested schedule for daily time in God's Word. We 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 | Isaiah 11:1-10

Pray | Use the language of Isaiah 11:1-10 to offer a prayer of hope.

Tuesday Morning

Read | Isaiah 11:1-10

Pray | Offer a prayer of gratitude for the ways in which the promises of Isaiah 11:1-10 speak to your present challenges.

Wednesday Morning

Read | Isaiah 11:1-10

Pray | Pray the words of hope and promise from Isaiah 11:1-10 over your church family, your community, and the world at large.

Thursday Morning

Read | Ezekiel 37:24-28

Pray | Use the words of Ezekiel 37:24-28 to offer a prayer of gratitude for God's presence in your life, both now and in the new heavens and new earth.

Friday Morning

Read | Ezekiel 37:24-28

Pray | Offer a prayer of hopeful anticipation of the Lord's restoration and final presence amongst his people.

Saturday Morning

Read | Ezekiel 37:24-28

Pray | Allow the language of Ezekiel 37:24-28 to shape a prayer for the peace that accompanies the presence of the Lord.

Monday Evening

Read | Revelation 21:1-4

Pray | Allow Revelation 21:1-4 to color a prayer of gratitude for the Lord's faithful promises.

Tuesday Evening

Read | Revelation 21:1-4

Pray | Allow Revelation 21:1-4 to shape a prayer asking the Lord to help you live in anticipation of his promised return and restoration.

Wednesday Evening

Read | Revelation 21:1-4

Pray | Allow Revelation 21:1-4 to color a prayer of gratitude for the Lord's faithful promises.

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Pray | Allow Revelation 21:1-4 to shape a prayer asking the Lord to help you live in anticipation of his promised return and restoration.

Friday Evening

Read | Revelation 21:1-4

Pray | Allow Revelation 21:1-4 to color a prayer of gratitude for the Lord's faithful promises.

Saturday Evening

Read | Revelation 21:1-4

Pray | Allow Revelation 21:1-4 to shape a prayer asking the Lord to help you live in anticipation of his promised return and restoration.

1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. **2** And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. **3** And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. **4** He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

Revelation 21:1-4

1 There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.
2 And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.
3 And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear,
4 but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.
5 Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins.
6 The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young

goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them.

7 The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

8 The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den.

9 They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

10 In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples—of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious.

Isaiah 11:1-10

24 "My servant David shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall walk in my rules and be careful to obey my statutes. **25** They shall dwell in the land that I gave to my servant Jacob, where your fathers lived. They and their children and their children's children shall dwell there forever, and David my servant shall be their prince forever. **26** I will make a covenant of peace with them. It shall be an everlasting

covenant with them. And I will set them in their land and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in their midst forevermore.

27 My dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. **28** Then the nations will know that I am the Lord who sanctifies Israel, when my sanctuary is in their midst forevermore."

Ezekiel 37:24-28