

Awaiting Emmanuel

He Is Coming!

Isaiah 2:1–5; Romans 13:11–14; Matthew 24:37–44

Today begins a time of extraordinary joy and thoughtful preparation ... and not just the kind that involves frosting cookies or choosing gifts (though there's room for that, too).

It's the First Sunday of Advent, the start of the Church's liturgical year and a season of waiting for Christ to arrive, ever so humbly, as a miraculous baby boy. Consider the immense love that God bears for us, to send his son in this most vulnerable expression of humanity.

We celebrate this momentous love with Christmas every year on December 25, and each year we mark four Sundays on a calendar for Advent. But today's Gospel makes it clear that we can't make firm plans for Christ's coming — the Second Coming, when Jesus returns at the end of the world. "Stay awake! For you do not know on which day your Lord will come" (Mt 24:42). We must always be ready.

This is difficult for a society of people who like to be in control. We live by schedules! We like to put dates into our phones, write events on wall calendars, and break down projects into steps with all kinds of management tools to ensure we are meeting deadlines. Being ready

at any moment is tricky. Imagine telling friends to drop by any time ... and then discovering that they are on your doorstep while you are knee deep in dirty laundry.

Of course, we're frequently reminded that the world works according to God's plan, not ours. "At an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come" (Mt 24:44), we are told. Being ready to meet Jesus isn't a goal; it has to become a lifestyle.

We are provided with opportunities at every turn to develop this way of being, by the very nature of how we engage with those around us. Pope

Francis encourages us to "work and ask for the grace to build a culture of encounter, of this fruitful encounter, this encounter that returns to each person their dignity as children of God, the dignity of living" (For a Culture of Encounter, September 13, 2016, morning meditation).

When you see Christ alive in the people around you, and every day you return that immense love that he shows us, then you have no need to fear the uncertainty of his coming. Advent is the opportunity to align your life with his teachings.

It's time not to plan, but to become.



POINTS TO PONDER

- ▶ What would you need to do to be ready for Jesus' Second Coming if it were tomorrow?
- ▶ What changes or efforts have you been putting off until "someday"?
- ▶ How do you address others as children of God?





The Advent Wreath

Join in a centuries-old tradition by marking the weeks until Christmas with an Advent wreath. Each element holds significance: The evergreen wreath symbolizes everlasting life, and the four candles represent the light that Christ brings into the world. In particular, the rose candle we light on the Third Sunday of Advent highlights our growing joy at the approach of Christmas.

You can purchase a premade Advent wreath or a candleholder made to hold four candles in a ring. You might fashion your own, using real or artificial greenery.

Decide what kind of ceremony with which you'd like to observe the lighting of each week's candles. It can be as fancy or informal as you'd like! It can include singing, music, and/or prayers. You

could turn off the lights to set the scene. Perhaps you would like to incorporate the adding of characters to your Nativity scene — place the animals one week, the shepherds the next. You could take turns with family members lighting the candles or planning a meditation. Consider how you might create your own tradition to hand down for generations.

To begin this week, light one of the purple candles today. You can light it again each night at dinner, if you choose. Next week, light the first candle and another purple candle. On the Third Sunday of Advent, light the previous two purple candles, as well as the rose candle. On the Fourth Sunday of Advent, light all four candles. If you'd like, add a white candle in the center to light on Christmas Eve.



The Example of **ST. NICHOLAS**

St. Nicholas is not just another name for Santa Claus; he was a real Greek bishop in the fourth century. He was the son of wealthy parents who died when he was young, and he donated his inheritance to help the less fortunate.

Legend has it that he specifically aided three young women who couldn't be married because they didn't have dowries. When each was of the age when she had to leave home, he would toss a bag of coins through the window that allegedly landed in the girl's shoes drying by the fire.

The feast day of St. Nicholas is December 6. Your family can celebrate by taking a bit of time to learn about the saint during this First Week of Advent, then putting out shoes the evening of December 5 for St. Nicholas (or Mom and Dad!) to fill with candy during the night.

Keeping Watch *Together*

What are some ways you might be ready for Jesus' coming, and for those whom you encounter every day? Try these ideas, or think of your own.



- Freeze a pot of soup and a batch of cookies so you are always ready to extend hospitality to guests at dinner.
- Investigate ways to be of service to those who have recently joined your community. Catholic Charities operates programs to assist migrants, those who've recently left prison, and infants.
- Just as you might with a healthier eating regimen or exercise plan, determine some ways to make awareness, service, and hospitality part of your everyday lifestyle. Maybe even schedule it!

An Advent Prayer

Heavenly Father, please give me eyes to see you in every encounter, and strength to align my life with your teachings, so that I'm ready for the coming of Jesus whatever the hour and day. Thank you for the immense love that you've shown, especially in sending your only Son. Amen.

