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Introduction

For many of us, entering the season of Advent (whether we know when it begins or not), is like the start of a big race. We run to the shopping mall, we dash from one get-together to another, we zip off to another shopping mall, we scurry around the kitchen making cookies, and we make one last quick stop at the mall. The four weeks of Advent are sometimes the busiest weeks of the year, and in the middle of all this activity, we sometimes struggle to remember what's really at the “finish line”—a baby in a manger, Jesus, the Savior of the world.

The weeks prior to the first Christmas were filled with busy-ness, too. Mary and Joseph and others struggled—as all people do—to make it through each day. Imagine the tasks involved in traveling on foot with your family from one town to another to be counted in a census. This was a camping trip in which the people had to carry all that was needed—food, clothing, and shelter. Bear in mind also that one of the travelers was eight-plus months pregnant.

When we read the story of Jesus' birth in the Gospel of Luke, however, we hear the quiet, humble beginnings of a story that has affected the world in dramatic ways. Perhaps that's a clue for us—to live the Advent season in a humble, quiet peace, while reflecting on the real reason for the season.

Advent traditions developed long before the season was officially named and became part of the church year. For centuries, Christians have spent the weeks before Christmas preparing their hearts and minds for an important festival. This likely involved personal reflection, confession, and recognition of their need for forgiveness. At the same time, church leaders preached and taught about the importance of celebrating Jesus' birth and anticipating his return.

This book, by offering reflections and activities for every day in Advent, maintains the tradition of remembering Jesus' birth and looking forward to his return. The benefit of this book comes in part from the daily discipline of taking time out for a conversation with Scripture, with friends or family, and

ultimately, with God. This discipline involves a few minutes a day and can be connected to things you already do—meals, walks, morning coffee. Make a decision at the start of the Advent season to set aside time for Advent reflections. That one choice creates a link with the first people of the story and millions since who have joined to celebrate the difference Jesus makes in this world.

In 2007 the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) affirmed the centrality of the Bible to Christian life and faith, and at the same time recognized the reality of biblical illiteracy in the church. This resulted in the ELCA's Book of Faith initiative, which invites us to open Scripture and join the conversation. By looking at the Bible through different lenses—historical, literary, Lutheran, and devotional—anyone can enter into a dialogue with God's Word in ways that lead to deeper understanding and spiritual growth.

As a Book of Faith resource, this book offers opportunities to open the Scriptures and join the conversation each day during Advent. The emphasis here is on the devotional lens, but the other lenses are used to provide insights into Scripture as well. The conversation can be shared with others through the questions provided, or it can go deeper in personal reflection. Daily activities offer hands-on experiences of the texts and what they mean for today.

Taking time for reflection during Advent can help us forget some of the busy-ness of the season, appreciate this time of waiting and watching, anticipate the second coming of Jesus, and find joy in God's presence every day. May your Advent reflections excite you and energize you to celebrate God's love come to earth that first Christmas morning.



How to Use This Book

This book offers daily Advent reflections and activities, as well as Bible studies for each Sunday in the season. On the first Sunday of Advent, open the book to Day 1. (The season of Advent begins four Sundays before Christmas—the last Sunday in November or the first Sunday in December.) Keep the book in a prominent location where you'll have to see it—or perhaps move it—every day, so that it's easy to pick it up and read.

Daily Reflections

This book contains three pages of reflections and activities for every day in Advent. The first page for each day is a reflection on a particular Bible text. Have a Bible handy to read the text first, and then use the reflection in the book to enter your own conversation with that Bible passage. The Questions to Ponder will help guide you through your devotional time.

Faith Connection

The second page for the day offers you a thought-starter or a look at the Bible text through a historical, theological, Lutheran, or devotional lens. After reading the Faith Connection and the questions provided under the Journal Reflections heading, take some time to write in this book. Just let the words and thoughts or doodles flow. This is between you and God, so enjoy a quiet spiritual time. Don't worry about full sentences, grammar, or legibility. Write down things that are happening in your life, good and bad. List the things that are bothering you and let God give you the strength to take care of them. Allow the Spirit to work through you and enjoy a moment with God.

The Work of Preparing

The third page for the day provides options for using different parts of your brain and body to respond to Scripture and do some of the Advent work of preparing.

The first option listed for the day gives you ideas and suggestions for creating an Advent tablecloth over the course of the Advent season. If a tablecloth won't work for you, feel free to use other materials, such as a bed sheet, a very large sheet of paper, or placemats. (This is an activity for all ages. If you have younger children in your home, get them involved with drawing, coloring, painting, punching out shapes, gluing, choosing and placing stickers, and so on.)

The second option provided for the day has a more adult perspective. Generally, the activities listed here can be done on your own or with others.

The third option provides ideas for families to make sense of Scripture through hands-on activities that stimulate all the senses.

Prayer for Today

Each daily reflection ends with a prayer. In addition to the printed prayer, feel free to add your own. Open your heart to the Spirit's work during this season.

Bible Studies

This book also provides a one-page Bible study for each of the four Sundays in Advent. Use the Bible study pages on your own or in a group to explore the Gospel texts for the Sundays in Advent. (Each study facilitates group conversation around three readings, which cover the Gospel texts for all three years of the lectionary.) If you are in a small group using the Bible studies in this book, take time for the daily Advent reflections during the week as well.

First Sunday of Advent

Be Watchful!

Matthew 24:36-44

Mark 13:24-37

Luke 21:25-36

Waiting . . . watching . . . reading the signs. These are the themes of the Gospel texts for the first Sunday of Advent. Today's texts are strong reminders to stay alert and watchful, living as though Jesus might return at any time.

1. Before you read the texts for today, list the expectations you have for this Advent season. What do you think may happen in the next four weeks? What events do you have planned? Are you looking forward to these days, or are you anxious?
2. Review each of the texts now. Notice the “signs” of the end mentioned in the texts. Draw or “doodle” what the world might look like according to these passages.
3. The first generations of Christians probably expected Jesus to return in their own lifetimes. How might living with this expectation change the way they read these texts? How do you think it might have changed the way they lived?
4. Each new generation has waited and watched for Jesus to return. And still we are waiting for it to happen. Does this situation change the way you read these texts? If so, how?
5. When you think about the future, which words most often come to mind?

___ gloom and doom

___ peace and prosperity

___ questions and mystery

___ joy and wonder

___ Other _____

6. What do you think of the following statement? What, if anything, does it have to do with “being watchful”?

Looking to the future is really about how we live in the present.

Day 1: Sunday

Who said Jesus will come again?

Acts 1:6-11

 *Key Verse:* They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

Acts 1:11

All thoughtful parents teach their children not to enter into conversations with strangers, or even to listen to them. It’s a safety issue. But sometimes it’s the stranger who brings the good news we really need.

Our daughter once drove from Indiana to visit her sister, a student at Wartburg College. It was winter and she found herself caught in a classic Midwestern blizzard. Entering Waverly, Iowa, her car slid into a snowbank. She couldn’t get out. She told us later that, as she puzzled over what to do, a stranger suddenly appeared at the driver’s window of her car and told her to try again while he pushed. He got her back on the highway, but when she turned back to thank him, he was gone and there was no evidence of his having been there. The incident made her, and her parents, reflect on the possibility of angelic visitations, even in our day.

In today’s reading, Jesus’ dispirited followers are in a panic. They just watched their powerful best friend, with whom they’d only recently enjoyed an unexpected and amazing reunion, disappear. It doesn’t seem like the right time to be encountering or listening to strangers. Yet a pair of them appear.

Their message? “He’s coming back. It will be in a way as unexpected as his departure.” Implied in their words is another message: “Don’t stand around waiting. Remember what he taught you, and do something useful in the meantime.”

Advent begins today. While we wait for the one we know and love to appear, let’s keep our eyes and ears tuned to strangers in our midst. God has a way of using them, on our behalf, when we least expect it.

Questions to Ponder

- How do you visualize Jesus’ location, as we continue to wait for his return?
- How do you think the disciples felt when angels appeared?

The Work of Preparing

■ *Advent Tablecloth*

1. Find a tablecloth you can write on (or use a very large sheet of paper) for the next four weeks. Keep it out, if possible, to remind you to complete each day's activities.
2. Write "Advent" and the year on the tablecloth, and then sign your names.
3. Optional: Use letter stickers to spell out your names and the word "Advent," and number stickers to show the year.

■ *Who Said This?*

1. List some well-known sayings of famous people, including storybook characters, like "To be or not to be . . ." or "You can't lie! So tell me, puppet, . . . where . . . is . . . Shrek?"
2. Devise a simple scoring system and conduct a "Who said this?" quiz. You can play this as a team game.
3. Pose the question: "Who has said that Jesus will come again?" Search the Scriptures to find out (Matthew 24:30-31; Acts 1:9-11; 1 Thessalonians 4:14-17; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-2; 2 Peter 3:8-13).

■ *Sky Gazing*

1. Go outdoors; if this is not possible, gather on a balcony or near a window. Have everyone sky gaze and name different things they see (or would usually see) in the sky (clouds, stars, sun, airplanes, birds).
2. Challenge players to make a creative connection—even a vague one—between each object and some aspect of the story in today's reading (for example, airplanes rise from the ground into the air; Jesus was taken from earth to heaven).

Prayer for Today

Loving God, you do not leave your faithful people without hope. Thank you for the promise of Jesus' return. Thank you for his life and ministry in our world. Thank you for speaking to us, even when the messengers who come seem strange and unsettling to us. We look forward to meeting Jesus. We pray in Advent hope. Amen.