

The Season of Advent

The Season of Advent is a far too often over-looked time of year. While the secular world rushes headlong into Christmas glitter and holiday shopping, the Church spends the weeks leading up to December 25 in quiet anticipation of God's greatest gift.

The Season of Advent begins on December 1 this year. It is marked by 4 Sundays leading up to the Solemnity of the Incarnation and the holy Season of Christmas. Advent means "coming". During this sacred time, we enter into the longing of our ancestors of faith who waited for the fulfillment of God's promise of a Messiah, we prepare our hearts to more fully welcome the coming of Christ into our world every day and we eagerly anticipate the final coming of Christ in glory at the end of time.

Purple is the color in which the Church dresses for this season. This deep purple, which can be substituted with a midnight blue, draws us into that time of quiet anticipation. Reminiscent of the sky just before the first light of dawn, this color invites us to be watchful. Like that midnight hour, our hearts are quieted and reflective. Just as certain as the dawn, Christ is coming; the promise will not fail.

The Advent Wreath is a popular Advent tradition. The four candles of the wreath signify the 4 weeks of Advent. Each week, an additional candle is lit, reminding us of the Light of Christ coming into our hearts, our homes, our entire world. At Christmas, these tiny flickering flames will be transformed into the blazing light of the fully lit Christmas tree. The three purple or deep blue candles of the wreath remind us of the quiet waiting that characterizes this time of year. The pink candle, often used for the third Sunday of Advent, reflects the joy that is present in this waiting. The Scripture Readings proclaimed at Mass on this Sunday are filled with the command to rejoice. The green of the wreath stands in contrast to the barren trees outside, just as the life we have in Christ can stand in contrast to the death of sin all around us. The Advent Wreath is always constructed in a circle, just as our Liturgical calendar is circular, a recognition of the eternal love and goodness of God.

The Advent calendar has become a favorite childhood item. Many commercially available Advent calendars feature a small treat for each day of the season, pointing the way to the greatest gift of all, the birth of the Son of God in our world and in our hearts. As soon as children are old enough, families may want to use Advent calendars that highlight Scriptural passages or acts of service for each day. Scripture based Advent calendars remind us that this is a season of preparation and offer tools to aide in that process. An adult option would be a daily reflection booklet such as *The Word Among Us* which Our Lady of Mercy makes available at no charge.

The Jesse Tree is a family-friendly ancient Advent tradition. It keeps before us all the people of Salvation History who helped to prepare the way for the Lord's coming. Jesse, the father of King David, the ancestor of Jesus, gives his name to this practice. A large bare tree branch is secured in a stand. Each day of the Advent Season, the family gathers

to recall another important character in our story of salvation and to place a symbol on the tree. The journey begins with Adam & Eve symbolized by an apple and concludes with Emmanuel symbolized by a star. On Christmas Eve, the barren branch of the Jesse Tree becomes the green, living evergreen of the Christmas Tree with the star at its top. Look for a Jesse Tree prayer booklet and the first 4 ornaments in the Dec. 1 bulletin. Each week of Advent, a new set of ornaments will be inserted in the weekly bulletin.

The term “O Antiphons” may not be familiar, but you have heard these most ancient titles of Christ. They are featured in the well-loved Advent hymn “O Come O Come Emmanuel” and have been used by the Church to call the faithful to prayer on the final days of the Advent season for nearly 2 millennium. Taking a moment to reflect on each of these titles, from O Wisdom from on High to O Radiant Dawn, can open up the incredible Mystery we are about to celebrate, to rescue our Christmas thoughts from the easy sentimentality of talking donkeys and little drummer boys.

Generous service is an essential part of any Christian preparation, whether the Advent preparation of Advent for Christmas or the lifelong preparation of every Christian for the Day of Judgment. There are so many demands for our time during the days of December, that we can lose sight of the needs of others. From Angel Trees to caroling at hospitals, many opportunities are available to us. A Giving Tree for the Harborcreek Food Pantry is featured in our Gathering Space. The overflow shelter ministry, Our Neighbors’ Place, is currently scheduling volunteers to provide food or to assist on site. But, it is critical that we remember that service must be a way of life. The hungry and homeless, the sick and sorrowing are among us all year and have the right to expect our care as we continue to bring Christ into the world every day.

Like service and prayer, penance is a part of every season of Christian preparation. Penance enables us to take stock of where we are and where we want to be along the spiritual road; it is an essential means for getting ourselves back on track. The week of December 16 will host Penance Services at the area parishes, a time for participants to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation. At Our Lady of Mercy, we will hold the Penance Service at 7:00 PM on Wednesday Dec. 18.

Many opportunities for a truly holy Advent Season will unfold at Our Lady of Mercy over the coming weeks. A Mass of Remembrance will be celebrated on Saturday, Dec. 7 at 10:00 to honor all parish members and relatives of parish members who have died in the past year. Families are invited to an Advent party with children’s crafts, a visit from Santa and a potluck lunch at noon on Sunday, Dec. 8. A special healing service will be celebrated 7:00 the evening of Dec. 9. Song writer, Dan Schutte, will present an Advent concert at 3:00 PM Dec. 15.

Make sure that your December is about more than accumulating credit card debt, higher electric bills and a house full of tinsel. Let it be a time of deepening prayer, increased generous service and a house full of peace and love.

The parish family of Our Lady of Mercy wishes all a truly blessed Advent Season. May our hearts and homes be ready to welcome the Prince of Peace, the Christ Child at the holy Season of Christmas.