

Advent

“May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.”

Good morning. And Happy New Year! What a strange thing to say! Right? Today is the first day of Advent. The first day of Advent is the first day of the Christian liturgical year.

Many of us just think of today as “Sunday of Thanksgiving weekend,” or “the beginning of the Christmas season.” After all, two days ago we had “Black Friday,” the biggest shopping day of the year.

What **is** Advent? When I was growing up, my family wasn’t religious, and we celebrated Christmas and Easter in mostly secular ways. I didn’t know what Advent was. But we always had Advent calendars. You remember those, right? I still have a paper Advent calendar from my childhood [[show calendar](#)], a beautifully illustrated scene of Saint Nicholas bringing a sack of gifts to a group of eager small children, accompanied by angels and overseen by the Virgin Mary and baby Jesus. The picture is filled with small paper windows, each one with a number on it corresponding to its date in December, which opens to reveal a special visual treat. When we were children, my sister and I loved those Advent calendars, and we patiently waited each day to see what treat would be revealed. On December 24th, there was a larger window which opened to reveal Jesus lying in the manger.

After we stopped receiving Advent calendars as gifts, my sister and I continued to send each other Advent calendars, a special bond and memory from childhood. Later on, we discovered online Advent calendars. Jacquie Lawson, an English artist who created a company of online greeting cards, also creates animated digital Advent calendars, which we still share and enjoy. In even more recent times, the consumer culture has caught up with the custom and there are Advent calendars featuring all manner of products, including candies, jams, toys, bath salts, toothpaste, beauty products, socks, candles, jewelry, coffee & tea, and even dog and cat treats!

Our word Advent comes from the Latin word for “arrival” or “coming.” Advent is a season of expectant waiting and preparation for the celebration of the birth of Jesus. It is also the time when we contemplate meeting Jesus at the end of time as our Judge and Redeemer.

We don't know exactly when the practice of Advent began, but it has been around since at least the 400's. For centuries, it was observed as a time of prayer, penitence, and fasting similar to Lent. Church authorities believed that such a season of austerity would make Christmas and Epiphany all the more joyful, during the darkest time of the year when the days were the shortest.

At the second Vatican Council—what we call Vatican II—Advent was differentiated from Lent, and was emphasized less as a time of **penitence** and more as a season of **hope** for Christ's coming now and as a promise of his Second Coming. As the observance of Advent evolved through the ages, the liturgical colors of the season also evolved, from black (which was decreed by Pope

Innocent III in the 1100's) to purple to blue. And the beautiful blue hangings are what you see in our sanctuary today.

There are all sorts of different explanations for how the liturgical colors came into use, and how various groups have used colors to differentiate themselves from other Christian traditions. The use of blue is somewhat controversial. Many traditionalists still prefer the use of purple for Advent, and some parishes simply cannot afford extra vestments. The use of blue by Anglican churches is believed to come from an ancient tradition from Salisbury Cathedral. The Latin name of Salisbury is Sarum, so the color is sometimes called "sarum blue." The deep blue conveys a feeling of solemnity because of its association with the Virgin Mary; it also conveys the Advent themes of hope and expectation.

The hope and expectation of the Second Coming is one of the traditional themes of the first Sunday of Advent. We state our belief in the Second Coming every week when we recite the Nicene creed together: "He [Jesus] will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end." We also affirm this belief in the mystery of faith when we say, "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again."

In today's Gospel reading from Luke, Jesus talks about the dramatic arrival of someone who will come to earth amid tremendous upheaval and cataclysm: "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the

heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory."

So who is the Son of Man? The truth is that we don't really know. The phrase "son of man" was used dozens of times in both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. Biblical scholars have offered a lot of interpretations of the phrase "son of man," and they still debate the topic. It is probably safe to say that most people believe that the Son of Man is Jesus, the Christ, the anointed one, the Messiah.

But we also don't know what Jesus meant by his own reference to the "coming of the son of man." Jesus said a lot of things in the Gospels that refer to the coming of a messiah. The messiah was written about for centuries in Jewish apocalyptic writing. We know that Jesus believed in a messiah, but we don't know if he believed that **he** was the messiah.

He also talked about the messiah coming in the near future: "Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place." Not only was this messiah coming to save his people, he was going to come during their lifetime!

But here we are, two thousand years after Jesus lived, and he hasn't returned, at least not that I know. Have **we** seen "signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars?" Have we seen "the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory?" I haven't. Will he come during our lifetime?

Too bad we can't ask Jesus what he meant by those words. We don't even know if he really said them. We only have the writings of some people who knew Jesus and

a lot of other people like St. Paul who **didn't** know him to tell us about Jesus's life and teachings. Maybe, if the messiah comes to earth, when we meet him, we can ask him.

St. Paul seems to believe that we **will** meet Jesus. In today's letter to the Thessalonians he states, "Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face...And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints."

Personally, I believe that it is possible for us to hope for and believe in Jesus's return without actually committing ourselves to a specific idea about exactly how or when that will happen. That idea might not sit well with a lot of people. In these times we expect and demand precise and definitive answers to our questions. Waiting and patience, especially for something unknown like **if** and **when** Jesus will come back, are not qualities that come naturally to most of us.

But we have no choice. We **have** to wait. Advent is the season of expectant waiting, of hopeful anticipation, of joyful preparation. Advent is a time when we wait for Jesus to be born again in our lives and in our hearts. We wait for the Christ Child. We wait for a glimmer of light in the world's darkness. We wait for the renewal of hope in our own lives.

To believe in Advent is to believe in waiting. To believe in Advent is to believe in hope. To believe in Advent is to believe that Jesus will arrive as a newborn baby in

4 weeks time. To believe in Advent is to believe that a time will come when we will meet Jesus face to face.

As our closing hymn for today says, “Come thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free; from our fears and sins release us, let us find our rest in thee.”

I wish you all a Happy New Year and a blessed Advent.

Amen.