

Making the Most of the Season – An Advent Cheat Sheet

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Advent – A Wake-Up Call

Have you ever had one of those days when you just wish God would show up, snap his fingers and work miracles? The people of Israel had about 500 years' worth of days like that, groaning under the oppression of one tyrant after another. The book of Isaiah gives voice to these sentiments: "O that you would rip open the heavens and come down, with the mountains quaking before you!" (Is 63:19).

The problem is that he answered their prayer. He showed up, in person, working miracles beyond anyone's wildest expectations. But they failed to recognize him. In fact, they crucified him.

How could this have happened? The analysis of Jesus is that they were asleep on the job (Mark 13:33-37). Sure, they busied themselves with a variety of activities, including pious practices. But constant movement can lull you to sleep, like a baby on a long car ride. Asleep means unconscious. Unaware. Lethargic. "There is none who calls upon your name, who rouses himself to cling to you" (Is. 64:50).

Lip service is not enough. Making God a manageable part of one's life is not enough. He demands to be worshiped, which is to say that He must take center stage, be at the top of the priority list. We are not just to believe He exists, but to avidly pursue Him.

Advent Means "Coming"

He promises to come again. But this time it won't be in a hidden way. He won't be wearing swaddling clothes, but judge's robes. Advent first and foremost is a time to remember that he's coming back and that we must be better prepared for his second coming than the Israelites were for his first.

So what has our society done with Advent? It has turned it into the shopping days before Christmas. As if we weren't already distracted enough from the things of God, now it's time to totally drown out the still, small, voice with the "fa-la-la-la-la" of Christmas carols. Between the frenzy at the mall and the party at the office, it is easy to get anesthetized, numbed to the true reason for the season.

Busy-ness

Have you heard the joke about the young priest who rushes into the pastor's office and says "The Lord has been spotted walking up the aisle of the church. What do we do?" The pastor looks up with alarm and says: "For God sake, Father, look busy! Look busy!"

Jesus in Mark's gospel (13:33-37) makes it clear that it won't be a pretty sight if he shows up only to find us spiritually snoozing. The proper approach to Advent is not a question, though, of

just being busy, but being busy with the right things, busy pursuing God and doing his will.

Practical Tips: Before or at the start of Advent

- 1) **Planning Christmas Parties:** Christmas parties at work, school, neighborhood and home are certainly a good thing. The problem is that they usually don't occur during the twelve days of Christmas (Dec 25-Jan 5) or Epiphany (traditionally January 6) but during Advent. The Christian approach is always *first the fast, then the feast*. The world's approach is first the feast, then the hangover. We shouldn't be grinchers or Puritans and refuse to attend Christmas parties before Dec 25. But if we have a say in planning a Christmas party for family, neighbors, Catholic School or parish, why not try to make it a Three Kings party and celebrate Epiphany? Or a Twelve days of Christmas party after the 25th?
- 2) **Advent Angel** – you may be familiar with Advent Angel tradition whereby everyone in a class, or family, or small discipleship group picks a name from a hat and intercedes for the person picked, doing acts of kindness and service in hidden ways. It is an awesome way for both children and adults to prepare the way of the Lord during Advent. Here's a little twist from our family tradition – set up a manger scene at the beginning of Advent, minus the baby Jesus. Buy a bag of Decorative Nativity Straw (at least one such, FloraCraft, can be easily bought online) and put it in bowl beside the manger. Each time an Advent angel prays a prayer or does a good deed for their special intention, he or she may put a piece of straw in the manger scene. This is highly motivating for kids but even fun for adults!
- 3) **Jesse Tree** – The ancient custom of the Jesse tree helps us retrace the people and moments in salvation history leading up to the first coming of Christ. Before Advent, set up a tree or branches with or without leaves. For the ornaments, you can either buy a Jesse Tree kit or just craft them yourself. Traditionally, there is one ornament for each day of Advent. You start at the base of the tree with Adam and Eve. At the top of the tree at the very end of the season comes a crib representing the baby Jesus. There's a brief scripture reading for every symbol. If you read these readings and contemplate them and the symbols to which they are linked, by December 25th you and your family, class or small group will have a much deeper understanding of the history of salvation and the meaning of Christmas! For a list of ornaments and readings, see <https://www.crossroadsinitiative.com/media/articles/jesse-tree-an-advent-tradition/>
- 4) **Advent Wreath** – so often, several days after Advent has started, we are still scrambling to find the Advent wreath we packed away last January. And then we realize that we don't have fresh Advent candles! Let's be ready this time to hit the ground running on the first Sunday of Advent. But this year, let's also discover and use in our home or school the official liturgical blessing of an Advent wreath which can be led by a lay person. You can find this brief service in the *Shorter Book of Blessings* (if you don't have one, get one) or online here <https://www.crossroadsinitiative.com/media/articles/blessing-of-the-advent-wreath/>

- 5) **Prayer Resources** – procure resources before the start of the season that will enrich your experience of Advent. First and foremost, put yourself in a position to feast on the great sources provided by the liturgy. If you have a smart phone, be sure you’ve installed an app which provides you with the Mass readings of the day, but also the Liturgy of the Hours, particularly the Office of Readings which is especially rich during Advent. Several apps which qualify are *iBreviary*, *Laudate*, and *Universalis*. If you don’t use a smart phone, these apps have websites that contain the same texts. If you prefer paper, get a *Daily Roman Missal* or the *Magnificat* for the daily Mass readings. The only way to get the Office of Readings in book form is to buy the four-volume set of the *Liturgy of the Hours* (Catholic Book Publishing Co). Consider it a life-time investment in your spiritual life.
- 6) **Music** – some radio stations begin playing Christmas music the day after Thanksgiving. Switch the station! And if you select your own recorded music via *iTunes*, *Spotify* or another service, avoid Christmas playlists.

What to Do DURING Advent

- 1) **Music** – Try putting Christmas music on hold until at least the third if not fourth Sunday of Advent. The first few weeks of Advent are really more about longing for Christ’s second coming than dwelling on his first coming. Gregorian chant is awesome Advent music. So is Handel’s *Messiah*, which was specifically written as an Oratorio to be performed during Advent. Want a special Advent treat? Plan to go with friends or family to a local live performance of Handel’s *Messiah*. And before you leave, look up the lyrics, which are all Scripture quotes, and print out a copy for each of the concert-goers. Make of it not just an aesthetic experience of great music, but a contemplative experience of the mystery of Advent.
- 2) **Fasting** – In our society, it is very difficult to fast from all treats during Advent, since anticipatory Christmas goodies are served everywhere you go. Perhaps the most effective fasting during this season would be to fast from noise, franticness and media. Try to cut back on news, sports, entertainment, politics, frantic errands, and other avoidable distractions, to open up some more space for prayer.
- 3) **Manger** – if you take advantage of the Advent angel suggestion above, you’ll need to set up the manger before the first Sunday of Advent. In this case, bless it with the Manger Scene Blessing found in the *Book of Blessings* reproduced online at <https://www.crossroadsinitiative.com/media/articles/blessing-of-christmas-manger-or-nativity-scene/>.
- 4) **Christmas Tree** – in more traditional Catholic society, the Christmas tree was often not set up and decorated until Christmas Eve. Consider this, especially if you have a Jesse Tree, which you would replace with the Christmas tree. If not, at least try to delay the setting up of the tree until the third or fourth week of Advent. And perhaps you could at least consider not lighting the lights until Christmas Eve. Whenever you do set it up and decorate it, gather the family or class and use the Blessing of the Christmas Tree service found in the *Book of Blessings* online here

<https://www.crossroadsinitiative.com/media/articles/blessing-a-christmas-tree/>

- 5) **Advent is a season of Hope** – as Israel longed for the coming of the Messiah, so we joyfully anticipate and yearn for his Second Coming. Hope, however, is the most neglected of the theological virtues. Dedicate your Advent to strengthening the virtue of hope. On the first day of Advent, read the two pages dedicated to this virtue in the Catechism (CCC 1817-1821). Then read two paragraphs per day for the rest of the season from Pope Emeritus Benedict's Encyclical on Hope, *Spe Salvi*. You can buy a paper copy or read it free online on the Vatican website
http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20071130_spe-salvi.html
- 6) **Rosary** – essentially, the rosary is entering into our mother's prayer. Mary "pondered all these things in her heart." During Advent, use the book called the Scriptural Rosary which makes meditation easier by inserting a short scripture verse between each Hail Mary. You can purchase a copy in your local Catholic bookstore or online here
<https://www.crossroadsinitiative.com/product/scriptural-rosary-booklet-luminous-mysteries/>. The first three weeks of Advent focus on the second coming, heavenly glory, and the preparation for the coming of the kingdom through the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus. It's a good time to favor the Luminous and Glorious mysteries with the Sorrowful reserved for Fridays. During the fourth week of Advent, favor the Joyful mysteries. If your class, small group, or family does not have time to do a full scriptural rosary together, consider praying just one decade at a time. Kids, by the way, love to read the scripture verses between the Hail Mary's and thus, lead the group in prayer.
- 7) **Liturgy of the Hours** – If you are not currently praying the Office of Readings, determine to pray it daily throughout Advent. Though morning (Lauds) and evening (Vespers) prayer are the most important of the hours, the Office of Readings inserts you into the Catholic Tradition in a particularly wonderful way since it gives you a full page from the bible and a page from non-biblical Catholic authors, usually the Fathers of the Church. These are seasonal, so the biblical and patristic readings will provide you with an incredibly rich contemplation of the themes of Advent. If you followed tip #5 for what to do before Advent begins, you are already set up to do the Office of Readings.
- 8) **Daily Mass** – if you can get to Mass daily, great. If not, be sure to read the daily Mass readings together with your class or family, or in your personal prayer time. These readings are seasonal. These Mass readings together with the Office of Readings provide us with the Church's official Advent Bible study.
- 9) **Confession** – The Baptist's cry was "Prepare the Way of the Lord!" Valleys must be filled in – mountains must be brought low. Plan to receive the sacrament of penance and reconciliation sometime during the season, preceded by a good examination of conscience. And why not invite someone to go with you?
- 10) **Christmas Shopping List** – What if, this year, the Christmas gifts you buy for at least

some on your list, actually have the potential to bring them closer to Jesus, the reason for the season? Some of the people on the list are not super religious? Still, they might like literature. Or a movie! Fiction like the *Chronicles of Narnia* (CS Lewis) and the *Lord of the Rings* (JRR Tolkien) are powerful ways to get people thinking about virtue and the most important things of life. Or stories of inspiring people who just happened to be disciples of Jesus – *A Man for All Seasons* (about St. Thomas More), *Unbroken* (about a WWII hero), *The Judge* (about Ronald Reagan’s closest aid, Bill Clark). This sort of Christmas shopping fits into the meaning of Advent, preparing the way of the Lord!

- 11) **The “O” Antiphons of Advent** - In the final days of Advent, the Church has an incredibly rich and beautiful tradition in the Liturgy of Hours: from December 17th to the 23rd, the antiphons for the *Magnificat* at Evening Prayer (Vespers) are collectively called the “O” Antiphons. Each evening, the antiphon draws from Old Testament imagery and messianic titles to proclaim the coming of Christ, but also to express our urgent longing with the imperative “O Come!”. You may be familiar with these antiphons without even realizing it - the verses of the traditional Advent hymn *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel* are taken from the O Antiphons. There are several ways to explore and celebrate the deep theological meaning in these antiphons, not just for adults but for children as well. A fun project can be creating an “O” Antiphon House, or “O” Antiphon ornaments (you can put them on your Jesse Tree if you are using one). We’ve linked some online resources below for these activities.

O Antiphon House:

<https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/liturgicalyear/activities/view.cfm?id=957>

O Antiphon Ornaments & Printables:

<https://www.catholicicing.com/o-antiphon-ideas-for-catholic-families-an-advent-tradition/>

The “O” Antiphons (December 17th – 23rd)

December 17th: O Sapientia (O Wisdom)

O Wisdom, O Holy Word of God, you govern all creation with your strong yet tender care. Come and show your people the way to salvation. (Isaiah 11:2-3; Wisdom 8:1; Proverbs 9:1)

December 18th: O Adonai (O Mighty Lord)

O Sacred Lord of Ancient Israel, who showed yourself to Moses in the burning bush, who gave him the holy law on Sinai mountain: come, stretch out your mighty hand to set us free. (Exodus 3:1-8; 20:1-20; Deuteronomy 26:5-9)

December 19th: O Radix Jesse (O Root of Jesse)

O Flower of Jesse's Stem, you have been raised up as a sign for all peoples; kings stand silent in your presence; the nations bow down in worship before you. Come, let nothing keep you from coming to our aid. (Isaiah 11:1-4; 45:23; 52:13; Luke 1:32-33)

December 20th: O Clavis David (O Key of David)

O Key of David, O Royal Power of Israel controlling at your will the gate of heaven: come, break down the prison walls of death for those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death; and lead your captive people into freedom. (Isaiah 22:22; 42:6-7; Luke 4:16-19)

December 21st: O Oriens (O Dawn)

O Radiant Dawn, splendor of eternal light, Sun of Justice: come, shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death. (Malachi 3:20; Isaiah 9:1; Psalm 107:14)

December 22nd: O Rex Gentium (O King of the Nations)

O King of All the Nations, the only joy of every human heart; O Keystone of the mighty arch of man, come and save the creature you fashioned from the dust. (Isaiah 28:16; Genesis 2:7; Matthew 21:42; 1 Peter 2:4-5)

December 23rd: O Emmanuel (O Emmanuel = "God with Us")

O Emmanuel, King and Lawgiver, Desire of the Nations, Savior of all People, come and set us free, Lord our God. (Isaiah 7:14; Malachi 3:1; Matthew 1:21-23).

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