

Gratitude: An Introduction to Advent



Our devotions during Advent will look a little different than what we normally do throughout the year. On Sunday mornings during December, we will publish a weekly devotional resource to guide you through the season. Each week, you will receive this devotion email with a link to the web page with the full guide. There are six practices each week, which we are labeling by day of the week so you can do one practice each day, but please use it in any way that works for you! Remember, the point is to discern God's presence, not to add a list of to-do's. Each week will include the following elements:

Try it out this Thanksgiving week! You can get an idea of what each element looks like and what to expect during Advent with this sample based on our Thanksgiving devotion.

1. Practicing Together

On Sunday evening (or whenever your group regularly meets during the week), consider gathering with your family or your community group. One idea is to gather for a weekly meal. Start the time with the "Practicing Together" section of the Advent guide, and then enjoy the meal together afterwards.

2. Reading

On Monday morning, begin with a devotional reading to set your sights on the theme of the week.

3. Digging

On Tuesday, we'll introduce a passage of Scripture which will be a focus for the week, and we'll offer a few study prompts to frame it in your mind.

4. Listening

On Wednesday, we'll go deeper into the same Scripture through guided meditation. We may lead you in a practice of *lectio divina* (Latin for the ancient practice of "divine reading") or invite you to engage your imagination by entering the story as though you were in the scene. The purpose of these practices is to move the Scripture from our heads to our hearts.

5. Seeing

For Thursday, we have selected a work of art that illustrates the theme of the week. Like *lectio divina*, *visio divina* is a form of meditation, using an image or a work of art instead of words or text. This practice may be new to you, but we think you will enjoy it.

6. Doing

The purpose of the study and meditation of Scripture is for it to become something we put into practice, not just more knowledge. So, let's get out there and serve!

Sun, Nov 24 • Practicing Together



We will forego this section today, but please take time to plan how you will incorporate these weekly gatherings into your practice. Will you get together with your friends, or your family, or a combination of both? (The *Practicing Together* guide for December 1 is included at the end of this PDF, so you can prepare for next week's gathering.)

**Practicing
Together**

Reading

Digging

Listening

Seeing

Doing

Mon, Nov 25 • Devotion



PHILIPPIANS 4:4-7

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

At dinner tables loaded with turkey and sides this week, all of us will probably be asked to rummage through our memories of the passing year to name something for which we are grateful. You might as well do it right now. Choose two or three items that you will mention when the question comes up. What are you thankful for?

Now that you have started, keep going. Write them down on paper, or start a note on your phone. Add to it daily until you have a list of 100 things for which you are grateful. How long do you think it would take to get to 1000? This was the venture of gratitude that author Ann Voscamp embarked upon after the tragic death of her sister compounded a litany of heartaches that had been cultivating a sense of “brokenness of heart by loss and pain.” She learned that gratitude is a powerful tool for happiness, and she wrote about it in a beautiful book entitled “One Thousand Gifts.” If your spirit could use a boost, I highly recommend it.

Along with the therapeutic value of gratitude, Thanksgiving cues our souls for the beginning of Advent, which is the beginning of the liturgical year. Advent is a four-week season of preparation for the big celebration of Christmas, the birth of Jesus, the long-awaited Messiah. Because it usually (though not always) begins on the Sunday after Thanksgiving, the two are linked in my imagination. While the leftover turkey and stuffing is heating in the microwave, we are boxing up the pumpkins and pulling out the tree!

This year, for the first time ever, Crossings will mark the beginning of the season with a service called “Hanging of the Greens.” We will gather in the OKC Chapel to sing our favorite Christmas songs and to acknowledge the rich significance of the Christmas symbols all around us. The evergreens, the lights, and the red poinsettias are all significant, meaning they are signs of the coming king!

Our New Testament was set in the context of the ancient Roman Empire. The Emperor, who was like a king to them, sometimes traveled from Rome to the far reaches of the empire. This was a big undertaking that required a large entourage to accompany the Emperor. Teams of

Practicing
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Mon, Nov 25 • Devotion



construction workers preceded the Emperor by months in order to repair potholes in existing roads and to build quality roads where there were none. Crooked roads were made straight, and if necessary, the steep hills were manually flattened, and low spots were elevated to make the highway smooth and straight for the arrival of the sovereign. When the day finally came, all of the subjects, whether from cities or the countryside, crowded along the road to wave and cheer and welcome the king! This practice was established long before Roman Empire, and is probably the image Isaiah had in mind when he wrote these words:

ISAIAH 40:3-5

“A voice of one calling: In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

Israel was a nation in waiting. They had lived out their history in expectation of a Messiah who would finally set them free from oppression and reign in peace forever. Through the season of Advent, we enter dramatically into the spirit of expectation. Even while our secular world races to Christmas like a finish line, our sacred world slows down, tempers our anxious hearts, and seeks the presence of God in silence.

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Tues, Nov 26 • Bible Study



In honor of Thanksgiving, let's focus on Philippians 4:4-7. Follow these steps to dig into the meaning of this passage in Paul's letter to the believers in Philippi.

PHILIPPIANS 4:4-7

Practicing
Together

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Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

- Read the passage two or three times and highlight or notice key words.
- Notice (mark) all of the verbs. What is Paul telling the believers to do?
- What is Paul's antidote for anxiety?
- What is the place of thanksgiving in our lives?
- What does this passage tell us about God?

Wed, Nov 27 • Lectio Divina



PHILIPPIANS 4:4-7

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

1. Pray

The first step is always prayer. Ask God to lead your heart and mind to the word that he has for you today.

2. Read

Read the passage, and let your mind rest on a word or phrase that captures your attention.

3. Read Again

Read it again, and hold that word (or phrase) in your mind, taking it to God in prayer. Ask God what that word may signify for you. How does that word connect with your life right now? Does it apply to a relationship, or a circumstance, or something that is burdening you? How might God be asking you to respond? (Is there something to believe? To do? To say to someone? Something else?)

4. Respond

Having heard from God, respond to him in prayer. Tell him how you feel about the instruction or guidance you may have received. Then decide what obedience would look like in this situation. Be specific and make a plan. How might you take action?

5. Read

Read the passage one more time, and sit quietly before God, simply resting in his presence. Thank him for being with you, and take that gratitude into the rest of your day.

Practicing
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Thurs, Nov 28 • Visio Divina



Each week through Advent, we will be providing an image you can use to learn about the practice of *visio divina*. This approach to prayer dates back to the very early days of the church as an aid to worship. The catacombs were filled with images and symbols of the faith. For centuries, in cultures where very few people could read, images were considered a legitimate means of sharing and reflecting on the Gospel. In essence, it is about looking at a work of art, or a scene from nature, or even nature itself, and asking God to reveal himself through that visual imagery. The steps involved in this practice are preparation, first look, meditation, prayer, contemplation, and action. We will include some possible prompts; use as many as you would like to help guide you through the steps.

Practicing
Together

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"FREEDOM FROM WANT"
by Norman Rockwell for
the Saturday Evening Post.
(Via Wikimedia Commons,
in the public domain.)

Thurs, Nov 28 • Visio Divina



1. PREPARE

Find a quiet space. Take several deep breaths as you quiet yourself. Ask God to open your heart to his presence.

PROMPTS

- How am I feeling as I enter this time of prayer?
- What distractions do I need to release to the Holy Spirit?

2. FIRST LOOK

Observe the image silently, uncritically. Take in the whole image without analyzing. Let your eyes rest on the entire piece. Notice colors, shapes, figures, composition.

PROMPTS

- What is my first reaction to the whole image?
- Is my eye drawn to any specific part or parts of the image? Which parts?
- Am I responding physically to any aspect of the image (faster or slower pulse, excitement or displeasure, etc.)

3. MEDITATE

Focus prayerfully on particular aspects that draw your attention, asking God to teach you in this moment. What might God be saying through these elements.

PROMPTS

- What emotions or thoughts arise?
- What symbols or elements seem meaningful to me?
- Which figure or part of the image draws me most strongly? Why?
- What memories or experiences does this image evoke?
- What tensions or contrasts do I notice?
- What might this image be saying about God's nature?
- Do I sense God is saying anything to me through the image?

4. PRAY

Enter into a dialogue with God about what you see. Share with him your feelings, questions, and insights. Listen for God's response in your heart. Connect the image and this exercise to your life and faith journey.

PROMPTS

- What questions arise in my heart?
- What invitation might God be extending to me through this image?

5. CONTEMPLATE

Take your time and rest quietly in God's presence. For the moment, let go of words and analysis. Simply sit with the insights received and allow them to deepen your relationship with God.

PROMPTS

- Is any truth or wisdom emerging in me?
- What gift am I receiving through this image?
- How is God's love being revealed?

6. ACT

Once you have completed the steps above, consider how this experience is calling you to respond. Think about ways to embody the insights you have gained. Plan concrete steps to live out what you've learned.

PROMPTS

- How might this image influence my daily life?
- Who needs to hear what I've learned?
- How can I embody the truth I've discovered?
- What practice might help me remember this insight?

For more about the background and details on the steps of visio divina, as well as a sample using this week's art, see pages 10-14.

Practicing
Together

Reading

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Doing

Fri, Nov 29 • Activity



Start a list of things you are thankful for. Write them down on paper, or make a note on your phone. Commit to adding to it daily this week until you have a list of 100 things. *(These do not all have to be profound, some can be simple pleasures, like morning coffee or a beautiful sunset.)*

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- Practicing Together
- Reading
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- Doing

VISIO DIVINA

BACKGROUND

Each week through Advent, we will be providing an image you can use to learn about the practice of *visio divina*. This approach to prayer dates back to the very early days of the church as an aid to worship. The catacombs were filled with images and symbols of the faith. For centuries, in cultures where very few people could read, images were considered a legitimate means of sharing and reflecting on the Gospel. In essence, it is about looking at a work of art, or a scene from nature, or even nature itself, and asking God to reveal himself through that visual imagery.

It is vitally important to remember: this is not a way to “worship a graven image.” In Exodus 35:21, God, through Moses, selected Bezalel—and others—and “filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, with intelligence, with knowledge, and with all craftsmanship, to devise artistic designs” to bring beauty to the construction of the Tabernacle. (In case you were wondering, Bezalel was the first person, perhaps since Adam and Eve, that Scripture describes as being “filled with the Spirit of God.” An artist!) We have no difficulty with the idea that the Holy Spirit might use music to help us experience the presence of God. The visual arts are also gifts from God for our benefit.

Visio divina, especially if one is using an image from nature, is certainly not “nature worship.” In Psalm 19:1 we read, “The heavens declare the glory of God ...” We truly can learn about God from what we see in the natural world. In fact, Romans 1:20, makes it even more clear: “For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made ...”

Below are six steps to the practice of *visio divina*. Following each step is a series of prompts that may help to guide you in your observation, contemplation, and prayer. You may also find the prompts useful should you decide to journal your experience—a practice that many people find very helpful. Rest assured that it is not necessary to answer every question each time you engage in this practice. Always let the Holy Spirit be your guide—and your teacher—as you sit with any kind of art created by anyone who God has created in his own image.

For this Advent season, the team has chosen images done by Norman Rockwell (1894-1978). Nearly everyone is familiar with his work and his distinct, near photo-realistic

style. He was a man of his times and an astute observer of American culture. His paintings and illustrations, which numbered over 4,000, included 323 covers for The Saturday Evening Post. The Post was one of the primary chroniclers of Americana while it was published. Rockwell’s point of view was more that of an affectionate observer than an editorial critic, although he did not turn a blind eye to social issues including civil rights and poverty. In 2024, looking at his work may evoke feelings of nostalgia, but perhaps we should not look at them as a record of an unrealistically idyllic past that we might long to recover. Instead, we can see an idealized way of life that was never as pure as it looks and consider the ways our own era may look to future observers.

1. PREPARATION

Find a quiet space. Take several deep breaths as you quiet yourself. Ask God to open your heart to his presence.

PROMPTS

- How am I feeling as I enter this time of prayer?
- What distractions do I need to release to the Holy Spirit?
- What do I hope to receive from this time with God?

2. FIRST LOOK

Observe the image silently, uncritically. Take in the whole image without analyzing. Let your eyes rest on the entire piece. Notice colors, shapes, figures, composition.

PROMPTS

- What is my first reaction to the whole image?
- Is my eye drawn to any specific part or parts of the image? Which parts?
- Where do my eyes naturally rest?
- Am I responding physically to any aspect of the image (faster or slower pulse, excitement or displeasure, etc.)

VISIO DIVINA

3. MEDITATE

Focus prayerfully on particular aspects that draw your attention, asking God to teach you in this moment. Ask yourself what emotions or thoughts arise. Consider what God might be saying through these elements.

PROMPTS

- What symbols or elements seem meaningful to me?
- Which figure or part of the image draws me most strongly? Why?
- What memories or experiences does this image evoke?
- If I were in this image, where would I place myself?
- What tensions or contrasts do I notice?
- What might this image be saying about God's nature?
- How does this image connect to scripture I know?
- Do I sense God is saying anything to me through the image or the Scripture?

4. PRAY

Enter into a dialogue with God about what you see. Share with him your feelings, questions, and insights. Listen for God's response in your heart. Connect the image and this exercise to your life and faith journey.

PROMPTS

- What would I like to say to God about what I see?
- What questions arise in my heart?
- How is God present through this image for me today?
- What invitation might God be extending through this image?
- What aspects of my life relate to this image?

5. CONTEMPLATE

Take your time and rest quietly in God's presence. For the moment, let go of words and analysis. Simply sit with the insights received and allow them to deepen your relationship with God.

PROMPTS

- Is any truth or wisdom emerging in me?
- What gift am I receiving through this image?

- How is God's love being revealed?
- What remains mysterious or unclear?
- Is there a new (for me) insight about God, myself, or others being formed?

6. ACTION

Once you have completed the steps above, consider how this experience is calling you to respond. Think about ways to embody the insights you have gained. Plan concrete steps to live out what you've learned.

PROMPTS

- How might this image influence my daily life?
- What specific action is God calling me toward?
- Who needs to hear what I've learned?
- How can I embody the truth I've discovered?
- What practice might help me remember this insight?

HERE ARE A FEW RELATED PRACTICES THAT YOU MIGHT FIND HELPFUL:

- Write a dialogue between yourself and a figure in the image.
- Describe the image from God's perspective.
- List words or phrases that capture your experience.
- Draw your own response to the image.
- Write a prayer or a poem inspired by your meditation.
- Take a story from Scripture and write yourself into it, either as a character in the story or as an interested observer of the scene.

Remember, you are writing for yourself and for God, not for your 8th grade English teacher. You don't have to answer each prompt. You may even be prompted to journal without using these prompts entirely. That's okay. Simply use this as a means to help you experience and hear from God.

VISIO DIVINA

1. PREPARATION

Find a quiet space. Take several deep breaths as you quiet yourself. Ask God to open your heart to his presence.

PROMPTS

- How am I feeling as I enter this time of prayer?
EXAMPLE: *I am generally rested, having been to church this morning. Looking forward to spending some Sabbath time with the Lord in this practice.*
- What distractions do I need to release to the Holy Spirit?
EXAMPLE: *I want to be in this moment, not focusing on my Monday thru Friday to-do list.*

2. FIRST LOOK

Observe the image silently, uncritically. Take in the whole image without analyzing. Let your eyes rest on the entire piece. Notice colors, shapes, figures, composition.

PROMPTS

- What is my first reaction to the whole image?
EXAMPLE: *This looks like a very happy scene. A “typical” American Thanksgiving celebration.*
- Is my eye drawn to any specific part or parts of the image? Which parts?
EXAMPLE: *Although the composition seems to direct the eye to the roasted turkey as a kind of centerpiece, my gaze moves immediately to “Grandma and Grandpa,” then the turkey, then the people around the table on the edge of the painting. If I think of the composition as a triangle, the triangle comes to a point at Grandma’s right shoulder, and Grandpa seems to float a bit behind her.*
- Am I responding physically to any aspect of the image (faster or slower pulse, excitement or displeasure, etc.)
EXAMPLE: *My first reaction is positive, feeling very nostalgic for similar scenes around my grandparents’ dinner table. Perhaps a little hungry and excited as I imagine the aromas of the food and anticipate all the flavors of my favorite foods from turkey to pumpkin pie at the end.*



“FREEDOM FROM WANT” by Norman Rockwell for the Saturday Evening Post. (Via Wikimedia Commons, in the public domain.)

VISIO DIVINA

3. MEDITATE

Focus prayerfully on particular aspects that draw your attention, asking God to teach you in this moment. Ask yourself what emotions or thoughts arise. Consider what God might be saying through these elements.

PROMPTS

- What symbols or elements seem meaningful to me?

EXAMPLE: *The entire scene, even without an overloaded table, speaks to me of abundance, even super-abundance, perhaps affluence. This would seem to be a modestly well-off, white American family from the 1940s celebrating with gratitude for the blessings of life and liberty. The fruit, a traditional symbol of fertility, is echoed by the number of people around the table. The “good China,” the silver cutlery, silverware, silver salt-and-pepper shakers, and the silver serving bowl speak of a kind of affluence, but not necessarily extravagance. I notice they are only having water to drink—no wine, not even iced tea which would have been the case in my family.*

- Which figure or part of the image draws me most strongly? Why?

EXAMPLE: *The standing figure of Grandpa, the family patriarch, draws me in. I wonder if he will be saying Grace in a moment before everyone eats.*

- What memories or experiences does this image evoke?

EXAMPLE: *This reminds me very much of Thanksgiving at my grandparents in south Arkansas—except my grandfather would not likely have had a suit on. He might well have worn a tie, though.*

- What tensions or contrasts do I notice?

EXAMPLE: *Grandma and Grandpa put on a nice meal. Grandpa is dressed to the nines in his dark suit, white collar, striped dress shirt and maroon tie. Grandma is not so dressed up in fairly typical house-dress of the era and still wearing her apron, almost a symbol of subservience. Obviously she has been hard at work preparing the meal. As was so often the case during that time, neither Grandpa—nor any of the men—likely helped prepare the meal or cleaned up after.*

EXAMPLE: *Another bit of tension strikes me. The painting was done in 1943. The entire world was engaged in a war to end all wars. People in Europe were starving, and soldiers as well as civilians were sacrificing their lives for the cause. That seems like an awfully big turkey at a time when so many were living on rationed food. I also notice that, although America was considered a “Christian” nation at that point in time, there are no overtly Christian symbols present in the image—no cross or crucifix, no Warner Salliman portrait of Jesus.*

- What might this image be saying about God’s nature?

EXAMPLE: *God remains present with us, regardless of the situation that exists in the world. He provides. His abundance may not always be an abundance of food, but out of his abundance of love, we can choose to love those around us. Yet knowing this was painted during World War II and used to remind citizens of what our soldiers were fighting for, there is a kind of hopefulness present that seems to flow out of gratitude for what we have, and for that we can give thanks to God.*

- Do I sense God is saying anything to me through the image?

EXAMPLE: *I am first of all struck by how easily I can judge. The artist. The culture. The people in the painting. It is good to know the time and culture within which a work of art was formed, but I must be very careful not to judge it by my contemporary understanding.*

VISIO DIVINA

4. PRAY

Enter into a dialogue with God about what you see. Share with him your feelings, questions, and insights. Listen for God's response in your heart. Connect the image and this exercise to your life and faith journey.

PROMPTS

- What questions arise in my heart?

EXAMPLE: *I notice the whiteness of the painting. These are white people, in front of a white curtain, at a table with a white tablecloth, eating from white plates, celebrating a holiday taught to white people by indigenous people and experiencing abundance at a time when many people go hungry at home in the U.S. or are trapped in homes that have been ravaged by war. The scene is far from a depiction of reality of the world at the time.*

- What invitation might God be extending to me through this image?

EXAMPLE: *In addition to an invitation to reflect on my judgmentalism toward earlier eras, I think God is inviting me to reflect on my own privilege, to see where I have been taking for granted the gifts of God for my life. But that is not to say that I should not celebrate the life I have been given. I must allow a deep gratitude to grow in my heart as I remember the One who is the giver of all good things. And as that gratitude grows I must also diligently cooperate with God to accomplish his ends in my heart and in the lives of the others around me.*

5. CONTEMPLATE

Take your time and rest quietly in God's presence. For the moment, Let go of words and analysis. Simply sit with the insights received and allow them to deepen your relationship with God.

PROMPTS

- Is any truth or wisdom emerging in me?

EXAMPLE: *Even an image like this, perhaps wholly secular, can speak to us of God's love, provision, and our responsibility to love God and others in return.*

- What gift am I receiving through this image?

EXAMPLE: *A reminder to cultivate a heart of gratitude.*

- How is God's love being revealed?

EXAMPLE: *God's love is self-giving, ever self-sacrificing, and an unrestrained outpouring of grace into our lives even when we are unaware.*

6. ACTION

Once you have completed the steps above, consider how this experience is calling you to respond. Think about ways to embody the insights you have gained. Plan concrete steps to live out what you've learned.

PROMPTS

- How might this image influence my daily life?

EXAMPLE: *As a reminder to cultivate a heart of gratitude and a heart of self-sacrifice and giving.*

- Who needs to hear what I've learned?

EXAMPLE: *I do. Over and over and over.*

- How can I embody the truth I've discovered?

EXAMPLE: *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or empty pride, but in humility consider others more important than myself. I should look not only to my own interests, but also to the interests of others.*

- What practice might help me remember this insight?

EXAMPLE: *Memorize Philippians 2:3-4.*

Sun, Dec 1 • Practicing Together



Practicing
Together

Reading

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Doing

INTRODUCTION

The word “Advent”—derived from the Latin word *adventus*—means coming or arrival and is woven into the fabric of the church to signify that the wait is over. The Advent season begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas. As Christians, we use this special time to prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus, recalling how the Israelites longed for a Savior. Now, we live between the fulfilled promise of Christ’s first coming and the yet-to-be-fulfilled promise of his second coming. Advent, then, calls us to look back upon Christ’s coming in celebration, while at the same time looking forward in eager anticipation to the future coming of Christ’s Kingdom when he returns for his people.

Use this guide to help prepare your heart for the coming of Christ that we celebrate at Christmas. Each Sunday of Advent starts a new theme of the season, and this guide is broken into one experience for each of those four weeks, plus an experience for Christmas Day (or Christmas Eve). For each experience, this guide includes lighting of the candles, Scripture reading, an element of worship, an optional service activity, and a prayer. We pray this guide will enrich your Advent season.

THE ADVENT WREATH

If you don’t have an Advent wreath, you can find them at any craft store, like Hobby Lobby, or consider putting one together. This simple project can be a great way to include friends or family in your first gathering and talk about the symbolism of each element as you go.

As we progress through the Advent season, the candles are lit one at a time, on each Sunday of Advent. The four themes of Advent are hope, peace, joy and love, in that order.* We will explore these themes as we journey through the season. Additionally, the element of light is woven throughout the whole season. As a new candle is lit each week, you will have the impression of dawning (growing, increasing) light, culminating with the Christ candle.

This year, the first Sunday of Advent falls on December 1, 2024. You’ll light one of the purple candles on this day, signifying hope. The second purple candle, to be lit on December 8, represents peace. On the third Sunday, light the pink candle, which stands for joy. And light the last purple candle on Sunday, December 22. This candle symbolizes love. The four candles—nestled in evergreen which signifies eternal life—represent the 400 years of “silence” between the Old Testament and the New Testament. From the final words of Malachi to the opening words of Matthew, there were 400 years during which God did not speak. No prophetic words were spoken, and the people of God, the children of Israel, waited for the coming of their king, an event promised and prophesied hundreds of years before. Then, on Christmas Eve, as the Apostle Paul says “in the fullness of time” (Galatians 4:4), the final white candle is lit, representing the birth of Jesus Christ, the true light of the world.

Scan QR
code or
[CLICK HERE](#)
for simple
instructions
on creating
an Advent
wreath.



**Note: If you research Advent, you may find these themes in a different order, but this is the order Crossings follows.*



Sun, Dec 1 • Practicing Together

On this first Sunday of Advent, gather your people around the Advent wreath, and ...

Practicing Together

LIGHT

One purple candle on the Advent wreath. This week's candle represents hope.

PRAY

God of hope, we light this candle as we prepare for the coming of your Son. Remind us of the hope we find only in you. Awaken our hearts to you this Advent season, so when Christ arrives, we are ready to receive him. Amen.

DISCUSS

- What is something you are wishing for this Christmas?
- Are wishing and hoping the same thing?

Wishes feel a little bit like dreaming about something coming true—like we see in Disney movies. Biblical hope is different from a wish. Our culture's use of the term *hope* is very weak. We hope it doesn't rain. We hope we get a promotion. We hope to win the lottery. Our use of hope is more like wishing. We really want what we are hoping for, but it's not something we have great confidence in.

The biblical idea of hope, on the other hand, involves certainty. It is the confident expectation that something **will** happen. It is based on God's capacity and his promises, not on a whim. The uncertainty—or waiting—is based on **when** it will happen, not **if** it will happen.

This is the kind of hope the Israelites had while they waited for the Savior God had promised.

READ - ISAIAH 9:2, 6-7

The Israelites waited, longing for and expecting a Messiah who would come into their world and set everything right. And they had good reason to hope because God had told them many times—like in this passage from Isaiah—that he would send a Savior. They hoped and they waited—they had faith. They anticipated and looked forward to the day when the promise would be fulfilled.

READ - LUKE 2:25-33

Simeon was an Israelite who hoped for the promised Messiah with even more faith and anticipation because the Holy Spirit had promised him that he would get to see the Messiah with his own eyes. Did Simeon wake up each morning and wonder if this was the day the promise would be fulfilled?

Luke tells us the Holy Spirit led him to the temple on the very day Mary and Joseph brought Jesus. Imagine how Simeon must have felt to see the very thing he had been waiting for and anticipating his whole life. That day had finally arrived. The joy he felt must have been overwhelming. God had kept his promise to the Israelites—and to Simeon!

We are like the Israelites—and Simeon before he saw Jesus—because God has made us a promise, too. Jesus will come again. Advent readings traditionally include passages about the second coming of Christ. Because we are in a second advent, we now wait in eager expectation for our Savior's promised return. With anticipation and longing, we look forward to that day when Christ will come again and make all things new.

Reading

Digging

Listening

Seeing

Doing

Sun, Dec 1 • Practicing Together



WORSHIP

Read or listen to these songs. Consider how the words demonstrate our longing and hope for Jesus' second advent.

COME, THOU LONG-EXPECTED JESUS

[youtube.com/watch?v=pFloWX1yuyQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pFloWX1yuyQ)

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.
Israel's Strength and Consolation,
Hope of all the earth Thou art;
Dear Desire of every nation,
Joy of every longing heart.

Born Thy people to deliver,
Born a child and yet a King,
Born to reign in us forever,
Now Thy gracious kingdom bring.
By Thine own eternal Spirit
Rule in all our hearts alone;
By Thine all-sufficient merit,
Raise us to Thy glorious throne.

O COME, O COME, EMMANUEL

[youtube.com/watch?v=xQP0JsxEdPo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xQP0JsxEdPo)

O come, O come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear.

Refrain:

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, Thou Wisdom from on high,
Who orders all things mightily;
To us the path of knowledge show,
And teach us in its ways to go.

Refrain

O come, Thou Branch of Jesse's stem,
Unto Thine own and rescue them!
From depths of hell Thy people save,
And give them vict'ry o'er the grave.

Refrain

O come, Thou Key of David, come
And open wide our heav'nly home;
Make safe for us the heav'nward road,
And bar the way to death's abode.

Refrain

O come, Thou Bright and Morning Star,
And bring us comfort from afar!
Dispel the shadows of the night
And turn our darkness into light.

Refrain

O come, Desire of nations,
bind In one the hearts of all mankind;
Bid all our sad divisions cease,
And be Thyself our King of Peace.

Practicing
Together

Reading

Digging

Listening

Seeing

Doing

Sun, Dec 1 • Practicing Together



Now, we live between the fulfilled promise of Christ's first coming and the yet-to-be-fulfilled promise of his second coming. We celebrate the birth of Jesus, while at the same time looking forward in eager anticipation to the future coming and ultimate fulfillment of God's promises.

This week, whenever you hear the word *hope*, let it remind you of the certainty we have because of God's great faithfulness.

PRAY

God of hope, thank you for all of your promises—the ones you have already fulfilled and the ones for which we continue to hope. Teach us to trust while we wait, knowing that the waiting will cultivate in us a character that reflects your own. Amen.

ACTIVITY FOR THE WEEK

GIVING TO OTHERS (GIFTS OR TIME)

The holidays can be hard for people, especially when they are going through a tough time. Consider how you could help ease that burden and be a voice of hope for someone this week. Here are some ideas to get you thinking:

- Choose your favorite non-perishable food items to fill a grocery sack or two and donate them at your local food bank.
- Sponsor a child or family from your church or school to provide Christmas gifts. (Also: Angel Tree, Operation Shoebox, Toys for Tots, Children's Hospital Toy Drive).
- Donate to City Rescue Mission, Bethany Children's Health Center, Regional Food Bank.
- Bake holiday goodies (cookies, bread, candy, etc.) and give to neighbors or public servants (police, firefighters, librarians, mailman, etc.).
- Invite a neighbor or acquaintance over for dinner.
- Volunteer at a food pantry or soup kitchen.
- Ring the bell for the Salvation Army.

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