



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 What Are We Waiting For?
(*Advent Ethics*, pp. 17-25)

Suggested Article:

📖 Taking Advent Seriously
(*Advent Ethics*, pp. 89-93)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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What Are We Waiting For?

The prophet Isaiah's oracles in the Advent liturgy challenge us to become the bearers of good news to the poor and the marginalized of society. Through images of the mountain of the Lord's house, the peaceful kingdom, the desert highway, and the child Immanuel, Isaiah describes the coming of the new son of David and the establishment of the reign of God.

Prayer

Lord God, fill our hearts with your love and our minds with your wisdom so that our actions will be pleasing to you.

May your peace, which surpasses all understanding, guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, through your Holy Spirit. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 11:1-10

Reflection

Isaiah's striking visions of hope – first delivered to the frightened leaders of Judah eight centuries before Christ's birth – transcended their original context to shape the early Christian imagination. The writers of the New Testament relied on his oracles to interpret Christ's birth, death, and resurrection.

"What Isaiah saw as God's will for the future can become a vision that changes things in the present," Claude Mariottini notes. Thus, Christians return to these visions during Advent to reorient their hearts to the coming of God's kingdom and renew the contours of their discipleship. Mariottini explains four of Isaiah's oracles that are used in the Advent liturgy.

- ▶ *The Mountain of the Lord's House* (Isaiah 2:1-5). The prophet foresees the Lord's house, now established as "the highest of the mountains," drawing people from many nations who are eager to know the way, the Torah, of the true God. "Isaiah saw that when God's kingdom is established, there will be an end to wars; nations will stop their contentions and establish peace," Mariottini writes. "Through the message of Advent, God encourages and empowers the Church to proclaim and practice peacemaking in our society and around the world."
- ▶ *The Peaceful Kingdom* (Isaiah 11:1-10). Here the agent of God's peace will be a leader from King David's line – a shoot coming out of Jesse's stump – that establishes peace and protects the weak and the poor. "During the Advent season we must again realize that Isaiah's vision for the Messiah has not yet become a reality," notes Mariottini. "Advent challenges the Church to accept God's call to minister to a world in need and challenges Christians to become the bearers of good news to the poor and the marginalized of society."
- ▶ *The Desert Highway* (Isaiah 35:1-10). This oracle "announces the restoration of God's people, their return to Zion, and the renewal of the land through which they will travel back to Jerusalem... from their exile in Babylon. God's coming means the renewal of creation. Because of God's work, the wilderness will rejoice and the desert will blossom," notes Mariottini. "The message of Isaiah is that the coming of God to redeem his people will bring life and



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vitality to the world and make a difference in the lives of those who live with spiritual and physical limitations. This is the same message the coming of Christ brings in the Advent season...to trust in God's power to renew and bring wholeness to our broken lives."

- ▶ *The Child Immanuel* (Isaiah 7:10-16). The gospel of Matthew reads the prophecy of a young woman with child – originally a reassuring sign to King Ahaz during the Syro-Ephraimite war – as referring to Christ's birth. The child's name means "God with us." In Isaiah's time, "God was present in the hopes and faith of the people. Although God's presence was spiritual, in the hearts of the people, it was nonetheless real," Mariottini writes. In the child born in Bethlehem, however, God's "presence was physical, which allowed people to know...God was reconciling the world unto himself."

"Isaiah's message directs our faith to a future in which justice will prevail, in which creation will be restored, and universal peace will be established," Mariottini concludes. "Advent heightens this hope and impels us to journey together with Immanuel on this Holy Way, a journey that will culminate with the establishment of God's kingdom."

Study Questions

1. Isaiah is often called "the fifth gospel" since it has profoundly shaped views of Christ's birth, ministry, and death. From each passage Claude Mariottini discusses, what promises do New Testament writers apply to Christ's coming?
2. How are three Messianic titles – Highest Wisdom, Lord of Israel, and Root of Jesse – prefigured in Isaiah 11:1-10? What does each title imply about our Christian discipleship?
3. "Advent is widely ignored, being sucked into the gravity well of Christmas, or misunderstood as entirely a preparation for the Nativity," Mark Oldenburg warns. "Gone is the opportunity for our honest cry that things are not as God has promised they would be. Gone even is the notion that God comes to us here and now." Do you agree?

Departing Hymn: "O God Among Us, Come" (vv. 1, 2 and 3)

O Highest Wisdom, come.
While reaching end to end
in sweetness ord'ring all,
to us, O mighty Savior,
discerning judgment, teach.

O Lord of Israel, come.
Through bushes breathing fire,
to Moses you gave Law;
O come, redeeming Ruler,
with arms outstretched to save.

O Root of Jesse, come.
This ensign raised for all
to whom the nations pray,
before whom kings keep silent:
to rescue quickly come.

Latin, 8th century, tr. Robert B. Kruschwitz (2010)

Tune: O ANTIPHONS

What Are We Waiting For?

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Isaiah 2:1-5; 11:1-10	Isaiah 35:1-10; 7:10-16
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Discuss mountain of the Lord's house and the peaceful kingdom	Discuss the desert highway and the child Immanuel
Question 1	Questions (selected)	Questions 1 and 2	Questions 1 and 3
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To survey Isaiah's oracles that are prominent in the Advent liturgy – for what they meant in the prophet's day, how they apply to Christ's coming, and what they mean for the Church.
2. To examine three Messianic titles in the "O Antiphons" – Highest Wisdom, Lord of Israel, and Root of Jesse – related to Isaiah 11:1-10.
3. To discuss why we should not ignore Advent, or see it merely as preparation for Christmas.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Advent Ethics (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Background Comment

Who was Isaiah of Jerusalem, the prophet we encounter so often in Advent readings? The book of Isaiah records his oracles and perhaps those of prophets he inspired; scholars speak of second Isaiah (chapters 40-55) and third Isaiah (chapters 56-66) to mark the words of his followers.

"Even the prophet's name – Isaiah means 'Yahweh saves' – foretells the Christmas story," Joe Paprocki notes. "In the earlier chapters of Isaiah, the prophet gives us quite a bit of information about himself. His father's name was Amos and he was a lifelong resident of the city of Jerusalem. His concerns are those of the city, the king, and the Temple. Isaiah was called to prophetic service in the year King Uzziah of Judah died, which would have been around 742 B.C. He appears to have been around eighteen years old at the time. He was married to a woman who was herself a prophetess (there were many more men and women prophets in those times than those whose writings have survived in Scripture). He had two sons. Isaiah preached at a critical time in the history of the Jewish people. The original nation of Israel had divided into two, Israel to the North and Judah to the South. Each had its own king, and they were constantly in conflict with each other and with larger, more powerful nations. Isaiah tried to advise three successive kings of Judah (Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah) who sometimes accepted his counsel but more often ignored him to follow their own priorities. Isaiah disappeared from the scene sometime around 701 B.C." (Joe Paprocki, "Why do we read so much from the prophet Isaiah during Advent and Christmas?" *www.bustedhalo.com*, May 18, 2008; used by permission.)

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading the unison prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Isaiah 11:1-10 from a modern translation.

Reflection

This study surveys four of Isaiah's oracles that are prominent in the Advent liturgy. (In church lectionaries these passages are read, in the order discussed by Claude Mariottini, on the four Sundays of Advent during Year A.) Since these oracles are rich with allusions that shape the New Testament understanding of God's work through Christ, consider extending the study to several sessions.

Review the Messianic titles in the first three O Antiphons when you discuss Isaiah 11:1-10. Use the discussion of Mark Oldenburg's observation in "Taking Advent Seriously" to lead into the topic of the next study guide: Bernard of Clairvaux's account of "three advents."

Study Questions

1. In addition to the allusions that Claude Mariottini mentions, members will surely think of others. If you discuss several of these passages in one session, divide members into small groups to explore one of the passages in detail.

In regard to Isaiah 2:1-5, Mariottini notes that Jesus promises a distinctive peace (John 14:27) and calls his disciples to be peacemakers (Matthew 5:9). Ephesians 6:15 describes Christ's way as "the gospel of peace." Members might note that Hebrews and Revelation describe the future hope as life together in a great city, a "new Jerusalem," prepared by God.

In regard to Isaiah 11:1-10, he mentions that Matthew says Jesus is a Nazarene (2:23; from Hebrew *nēcer* for branch) and is welcomed into Jerusalem as "the son of David" (21:9). Furthermore, the genealogies in Matthew 1:1-17 and Luke 3:23-38 emphasize Christ's being in the lineage of David; the angel Gabriel emphasizes this to Mary (Luke 1:26-33); and his birth in Bethlehem signifies this relationship. Notice that Paul specifically traces Christ's drawing Gentiles and Jews together in the Church to his Davidic kingship (Romans 15:7-9, 12).

Jesus echoes themes from Isaiah 35:1-10 when he explains his ministry to the disciples of John the Baptist (Luke 7:21-22). The joy at the Messiah's arrival is like the joy the shepherds experience when the angels announce Christ's birth (Luke 2:10-11). We are reminded of Christ's miraculous healings of those with physical and spiritual diseases.

Isaiah 7:10-16 explicitly appears in Matthew's account of Joseph's dream (1:23); its central idea of God dwelling with us in order to redeem us is found in the prologue to the Gospel of John (1:1, 14) and in Paul's understanding of Christ's work (2 Corinthians 5:19).

2. The themes of great wisdom (Isaiah 11:2-3a) and righteous lordship (11:3b-5) are implicit in Isaiah's description of the future king who brings peace. This ruler is identified as a Davidic king who grows from the root of Jesse (11:1, 10). In the first three O Antiphons, Christ is our teacher who guides us with the authority of wisdom that undergirds creation; Christ is our redeeming ruler whose salvation comes through the Law (or Way) given to Moses; Christ is the awe-inspiring leader ("before whom kings keep silent" but "to whom all nations pray"). These titles – drawn from God's acts of creation, redemption in the Exodus, and leadership expressed through the righteous Davidic kings – remind us that Christ restores our mind, reorients our way of living, and evokes our ultimate loyalty.
3. Mark Oldenburg calls us to resist temptations to ignore Advent (by starting the celebration of Christmas early) or reduce it to preparation for Christmas (be treating it as merely a season of anticipation of the Nativity). "By saying that 'during these four weeks, we are preparing for Christ to be born,' we encourage make-believe in a way beyond even the purveyors of the Santa myth," he writes. "Advent and Christmas become time machines, taking us back to the days before the Incarnation; and so we focus on the Nativity to the exclusion of everything else. Gone is the notion that we are in the 'meantime' between the Incarnation and the Eschaton." (He also warns against a less common temptation from another direction – to downplay the theme of hope and overemphasize the role of penitence in Advent.)

Encourage members to begin examining how the season of Advent is celebrated in their congregation. How has the celebration changed in recent years? Which themes are central, and which are ignored?

Departing Hymn

The piano accompaniment for the "O God Among Us, Come" is on pp. 64-65 of *Advent Ethics*. A version with the melody only is available online at www.ChristianEthics.ws. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.