



Christian Reflection
A Series in Faith and Ethics

Christian Reflection
Center for Christian Ethics
Baylor University
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Study Guides for

Advent Ethics

These guides integrate Bible study, prayer, and worship to help us explore how Advent, the first season of the church year, causes us to reexamine our desires as we prepare to welcome Christ, the Desire of Nations. Use them individually or in a series. You may reproduce them for personal or group use.

- Redeeming Time** 2
The church year is most meaningful, formative, and transformative when we embrace its seasons and their rhythms. It is necessarily communal, pushing us back to Christ, to the stories of his life and to the rites by which his disciples reenact his life and enter into it through worship.
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Through images of the mountain of the Lord's house, the peaceful kingdom, the desert highway, and the child Immanuel, the prophet Isaiah describes the coming of the new son of David and the establishment of the reign of God. Isaiah's oracles in the Advent liturgy challenge us to become the bearers of good news to the poor and the marginalized of society.
- The Three Advents** 6
For Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) and his modern interpreter, Thomas Merton, the season of Advent is a "sacrament" of the presence of God in his world, in the mystery of Christ at work through his Church, preparing in a hidden, obscure way for the final manifestation of his kingdom.
- Advent of the Heart** 8
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- The Advent Fast** 10
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- Distinctive Traditions of Advent** 12
Lighting candles on an Advent wreath, celebrating St. Lucia's Day, and decorating a Jesse Tree can help us faithfully narrate and prepare for the arrival of the Christ. These practices involve hearing the ancient and future stories of salvation that are formative for understanding the Incarnation.



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Focus Article:

📖 Redeeming Time
(*Advent Ethics*, pp. 11-16)

Suggested Article:

📖 Meeting God in the
Church Year
(*Advent Ethics*, pp. 83-88)

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Redeeming Time

The church year is most meaningful, formative, and transformative when we embrace its seasons and their rhythms. It is necessarily communal, pushing us back to Christ, to the stories of his life and to the rites by which we collectively reenact his life and enter into it through worship.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 2:17-22

Meditation[†]

The liturgical year is the year that sets out to attune the life of the Christian to the life of Jesus, the Christ. It proposes, year after year, to immerse us over and over again into the sense and substance of the Christian life until, eventually, we become what we say we are—followers of Jesus all the way to the heart of God. The liturgical year is an adventure in human growth, an exercise in spiritual ripening.

Joan Chittister

Reflection

“Marking time by the calendar of the Church instead of the calendars of our culture—the school year, the civic year, the fiscal year—sets you apart,” Kimberlee Conway Ireton observes. “Ordering my life by the Christian year means I am immersed year after year in the story of Jesus and the story of the Church.”

The first half of the church year focuses on the life, death, and resurrection of Christ; the second half focuses on our life together in Christ’s body, the Church. The first half features two cycles of celebration that center on the holy days of Christmas and Easter. Each cycle begins with a season of preparation (Advent and Lent) that leads to a season of celebration (Christmas and Easter) and a special day of rejoicing (Epiphany and Pentecost). The second half of the year is ordered by feast days related to saints and to Christ’s work (including Trinity, Transfiguration, and Christ the King Sundays) and a three-year plan of scripture reading to guide discipleship.

“To fully enter into the church year, and the life of Christ which is its heart, requires the community of believers gathered together in worship,” Conway Ireton writes. “Living the church year in community with other disciples of Jesus forms us as the people of God, the Body of Christ, as one part of a much larger whole. To be formed in community means our individual needs can be met by the community, our desires can be transformed by the vision of a larger purpose, and our fears can be assuaged by the assurance that we are not alone.”

Conway Ireton gives practical examples of how the distinctive church seasons are forming her into likeness to Christ:

- ▶ *With Advent’s spotlight on joyful and expectant waiting for the Messiah, she tries to practice “patience and self-control, perhaps by waiting until Christmas to eat a favorite holiday treat or listen to a favorite carol.”*
- ▶ *During the twelve-day Christmas season, which focuses on the incarnation of Christ in Jesus and in the Church through the hearts and lives of believers, “I seek union with God; just as Jesus was one with the*



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Father, so I too can be one with Christ," Conway Ireton notes. For this purpose she adopts a distinctive practice—continuous praying of the Jesus prayer ("Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me").

- ▶ *In the Epiphany celebration of God's glory made manifest to all peoples, she focuses on forming habits of relating to her family, friends, and strangers in hospitable ways—"habits like biting my tongue (sometimes literally) when I am frustrated, or really listening to others when they speak, instead of only half-attending and letting my thoughts wander."*
- ▶ *In Lent, a season of repentance, she fasts from a food or an activity in order to learn patience and to make space in her life for hearing God's voice. Whether she hears a call "to repent of some habit of thought, word, or deed," or "words of comfort, reminding me how deeply and wholly I am loved," she reports, "listening to God's voice helps me to see myself more clearly and draws me deeper into relationship with Christ."*
- ▶ *The Easter focus on Christ's resurrection teaches her to rejoice and "see beyond present darkness to the promise of new life. This season calls me to live a resurrection life: daily to die to sin and live the new life God has graciously given in Christ."*
- ▶ *Pentecost, which highlights God's Spirit indwelling and empowering the people of God, reminds her to "incorporate all the disciplines I embraced earlier in the year, seeking to allow them to create space for God to work in and through me, transforming me into the likeness of Christ."*

Study Questions

1. What are the best reasons in the article by Kimberlee Conway Ireton and meditation by Joan Chittister for ordering our time in Christian community by the church year?
2. What seasons or special days of the church year are emphasized within your congregation? Discuss the practices and rituals that make those times formative in your discipleship.
3. If your congregation does not follow parts of the church year, how can you incorporate those parts into your small group, family, or personal devotion? What other practices in your congregation continually "push you back to Christ"?

Departing Hymn: "All Praise to Our Redeeming Lord" (vv. 1 and 2)

All praise to our redeeming Lord,
who joins us by his grace;
and bids us, each to each restored,
together seek his face.

He bids us build each other up;
and, gathered into one,
to our high calling's glorious hope,
we hand in hand go on.

Charles Wesley (1747)

Suggested Tunes: ST. PETER (Reinagle) or NEW BRITAIN

† Joan Chittister, *The Liturgical Year: The Spiraling Adventure of the Spiritual Life*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2009), 6.



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Focus Article:

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

Suggested Article:

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

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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



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Focus Article:

📖 The Three Advents
(*Advent Ethics*, pp. 26-32)

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The Three Advents

For Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) and his modern interpreter, Thomas Merton, the season of Advent is a “sacrament” of the presence of God in his world, in the mystery of Christ at work through his Church, preparing in a hidden, obscure way for the final manifestation of his kingdom.

Prayer

Meditation†

Advent is the “sacrament” of the presence of God in His world, in the Mystery of Christ at work in History.... This mystery is the revelation of God Himself in His Incarnate Son. But it is not merely a manifestation of the Divine Perfections, it is the concrete plan of God for the salvation of men and the restoration of the whole world in Christ.

Thomas Merton

Scripture Reading: 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24

Reflection

“God comes among us precisely in order to bring us salvation,” Fr. James Conner observes, “But we are slow to recognize our true and profound need.” Both Bernard of Clairvaux and Thomas Merton view Advent as a time to recognize our deep need for transformation in Christ. Reducing Advent to a bustling preparation for Christmas can keep us centered on and distracted by immediate, superficial projects—implicitly denying our need for a savior by ignoring Christ’s coming.

Though we need Christ, our transformation is more a coming of God to us than our turning to God by our own power. If we abandon ourselves to God’s power, he will deliver us. According to Conner, “This is the mystery of Advent: God’s descent to our lowliness out of pure love, not for any merit of our own.” We must go to meet the transforming action of the Holy Spirit; but we do not need to travel far to find Christ. Bernard tells us: “If you wish to meet God, go as far as your own heart.” We do this not by introspection, but by spiritual self-examination and compunction. This spiritual encounter is an advent, in which God comes to our inmost self and we find ourselves in God.

Bernard enriches our reflection during Advent by calling attention to three advents in which God comes to humankind:

- ▶ In the *first Advent to humankind*, God comes to seek and save that which was lost. Christ comes as a human child, who is like us in all things except sin. Meditating on this Advent, we grow in hope for the promise of salvation offered.
- ▶ In the *second Advent into humankind*, Christ is present in our souls at every moment of life. He comes as the one who is hidden within our hearts, in every person we encounter, and in every event of life. Conner says this Advent is characterized by anguish and conflict: we are torn between fear that we will fail to recognize the Lord’s return and joy at recognizing God’s presence and call to us in love.



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► In the third Advent *against* humankind, Christ will return as the glorious Lord who is all in all. He will draw the redeemed of all ages to himself. The Apostle Paul's prayer in 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 reminds us that Christ is at work in our lives to prepare us for his return. If we face this final Advent with humility and sincerity of heart, we have nothing to fear.

We live in a moment between the first and third Advents, with an opportunity to welcome into our lives Christ, the Word of God. To do so we must first "unite ourselves with His truth by our *humility*," Thomas Merton writes, "to keep ourselves convinced that we can do nothing without Him and that therefore must receive all from Him."

We have nothing good that we did not receive from God, for God is ever coming with his life-giving presence: in the Christ Child of the first Advent, in the hearts of his followers of the second Advent, and in glory at the third Advent. "The mystery of Advent is the mystery of God coming to us at every moment," Conner concludes.

Study Questions

1. During Advent, why is it valuable to reflect on each of the three Advents described by Bernard of Clairvaux? What does each one teach us about the coming of God?
2. What does Thomas Merton mean when he refers to the season of Advent as a "sacrament"?
3. God must come to us precisely because we cannot go to God. "Lying paralyzed on our mats we could not reach the divine height," Bernard writes. What are Bernard's three explanations for our misery and helplessness? If this is accurate, how can we participate in our own sanctification?
4. How does the Charles Wesley's hymn "Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus" creatively incorporate all three Advents?

Departing Hymn: "Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus"

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.

Charles Wesley (1745)

Tune: HYFRYDOL

† Thomas Merton, *Seasons of Celebration: Meditations on the Cycle of Liturgical Feasts* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965), 61 and 53.



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Focus Article:

- 📖 Advent of the Heart:
The Prison Meditations
of Alfred Delp, SJ
(*Advent Ethics*, pp. 33-40)

Suggested Articles:

- 📖 Confronting the Powers
(*Advent Ethics*, pp. 56-59)
- 📖 Prepare the Way of the
Lord
(*Advent Ethics*, pp. 60-62)

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Advent of the Heart

Condemned to die in a Nazi prison, Alfred Delp, SJ, discovered that Advent is the time for being deeply shaken—the time not only to remember the birth of the Christ Child, but also to participate in this unfolding and ultimate revelation of God that began in the Holy Night.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Luke 21:25-33

Meditation†

Advent is a time of being deeply shaken, so that man will wake up to himself. The prerequisite for a fulfilled Advent is a renunciation of the arrogant gestures and tempting dreams with which, and in which, man is always deceiving himself...

But at the same time there is much more to Advent than this. The shaking is what sets up the secret blessedness of this season and enkindles the inner light in our hearts, so Advent will be blessed with the promises of the Lord.

Alfred Delp, SJ (1907-1945)

Scripture Reading: Revelation 3:7, 11-12

Reflection

Imprisoned in a Gestapo prison cell with his hands bound in chains, Alfred Delp managed to write Advent meditations—like the one above based on Luke 21:25-33—that he smuggled out to his Munich congregation with his dirty laundry. Jenny Howell writes, “Delp’s prison meditations are a penetrating account of the gutted society he lived in, where because of disordered lives—lives not properly ordered toward the God in whose image we are made—humankind was losing its very humanity. He believed Advent was the event through which order could be properly restored. This was his great hope.”

Delp was horrified by the concentration camps and by the condemnation of ministers who publicly prayed for their Jewish brothers and sisters or dared to criticize Hitler. “What was most horrifying to him was not only that these crimes were committed,” Howell notes, “but that those involved could do what they did without being shocked or surprised. It was the tragedy of what Delp called the ‘mass-men’—those with a dehumanized bureaucratic consciousness who could practice the greatest of evil with ritual as if it were somehow noble and intelligent, not seeing the absurdity, the horror, or sin of their actions.”

Howell highlights three themes in Father Delp’s remarkable Advent sermons and meditations:

- ▶ *Courageous honesty.* The first step toward what Delp calls “the Advent of the heart” is to squarely face the terrible reality of our distorted hearts and collective actions. “We must step down from the pedestals we are quick to raise for ourselves, from the vanity and self-grandeur with which we deceive ourselves,” Howell summarizes. This sort of honesty is necessary for our spiritual conversion, which makes possible what Delp calls “density of life”: life brimming with a joy that opens us to encounter the life of God.



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- ▶ *Authentic dreams.* God replaces false dreams that obscure reality and our own limits with true dreams that expand our horizon, calling us out of what Delp calls “the unthinking mass social order,” says Howell. Our lives become characterized, like John the Baptist’s, by “service and annunciation”: we do not inflate our own importance, but courageously point to the true Messiah through our worship and praise.
- ▶ *Glimpses of grace.* The visions that help us recognize evil and transform the world are not for the lone individual. “What [Delp] is writing about is a renewal of the entire social order. ‘Moments of grace,’ he writes, ‘both historical and personal are inevitably linked with an awakening and restoration of genuine order and truth.’ The road toward God leads us to become totally engaged in the historical task of the Body of Christ for the redemption of humanity and the world.”

Reflecting on his spiritual journey, Delp was grateful for even partial vision. “I know perfectly well the many sources from which joy can flow out to man—and that all these sources can also fall silent,” he writes. This kind of joy is not what sustains him. Rather, “It’s about that old theme of my life: man becomes healthy through the order of God and in nearness to God. That is also where he becomes capable of joy and happiness. Establishing the order of God, and announcing God’s nearness, and teaching it and bringing it to others: that is what my life means and wants, and what it is sworn to and abides by.”

Study Questions

1. How is the Advent season “a time of being deeply shaken”?
2. How is corrected “vision” in two senses—undistorted ways of seeing the world and proper dreams of hope for its salvation—central to Advent, according to Father Alfred Delp?
3. Delp saw his situation as a metaphor for the imprisoning depravity of the social order: “You have no key, and your door has no inner keyhole, and your window is barred and set so high that you cannot even look out. If no one comes and releases you, you will remain bound and poor in misery. All the mental struggles do not help at all.” How is the fourth O Antiphon, based on Revelation 3:7, a message of hope for us?
4. Discuss how Tosini’s *Saint John the Baptist* and Caravaggio’s *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist* depict the prophet’s vigor and courage. How, according to Delp, is John the Baptist a model for our discipleship?

Departing Hymn: “O God Among Us, Come” (v. 4)

O Key of David, come.
Unlock what none shall bind,
and lock what none shall loose:
the captives in the darkness
imprisoned, now set free.

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

Tune: O ANTIPHONS

† Alfred Delp, S.J., *Advent of the Heart: Seasonal Sermons and Prison Writings 1941-1944* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2006), 23.



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Focus Article:

📖 The Advent Fast
(*Advent Ethics*, pp. 41-46)

Suggested Article:

📖 The Advent Invitation
(*Advent Ethics*, pp. 79-82)

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The Advent Fast

As we recover and creatively appropriate the tradition of fasting during Advent, we identify with and proclaim God's narrative of love in a counter-cultural way. We resist the instant gratification, materialism, and gluttony that increasingly characterize cultural holiday celebrations.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 58:6-8 and Luke 2:22-38

Reflection

"The earliest celebrations of Advent, from the fourth century, involved some form of fasting," Thomas Turner notes. "The wisdom of the Church is simple: the gravity of Christ's Incarnation beckons us to feast and rejoice, but only after a period of preparation that includes fasting. Just as a wedding feast requires the bride and groom and their families to devote months of sacrificial effort to carefully planning and preparing for the celebration, so we are called to prepare ourselves for the joy of Christ's coming through a time of sacrificial fasting."

Eastern Orthodox traditions continue to encourage the Advent fast. Yet it is uncommon among congregations in the West where Advent is too often submerged in the secular holiday season running from Thanksgiving to New Year's Day, "a festival of overeating and gadget purchasing," Turner notes. "Advent is no longer a prelude to a holy banquet [of Christmas], but a foretaste—like lavish appetizers—of a grand secular meal."

Turner commends recovering and creatively appropriating the Advent fast as "a prophetic, redemptive rejection of the personal instant gratification, materialism, and gluttony exhibited in cultural holiday celebrations."

- ▶ *Rejecting personal instant gratification.* We'd prefer to skip the patient preparation and waiting for Christ's advent. "Fasting teaches us to push back against this desire through setting aside something important in our lives and filling that sacrificed time with reflection and prayer—orienting our bodies and souls toward dependency on God," Turner writes. He takes Israel's yearning over the centuries for the coming of the Messiah as a model for our corporate preparation during Advent. Simeon and Anna are remarkable examples of Israel's patient longing. Simeon travels to the Temple to await "the Lord's Messiah" who would be the "consolation of Israel" (Luke 2:25-26); daily prayer and fasting from food are important parts of Anna's preparation (Luke 2:37).
- ▶ *Rejecting materialism.* Bishop Kallistos Ware observes that "The primary aim of fasting is to make us conscious of our dependence upon God." This insight can extend to fasting from other good things, like material possessions, which when we improperly desire or carelessly use them, can distort our relationship to God. Turner suggests that "fasting from possessions during Advent would allow us to step back from what most threatens to control us—the deluge of advertising, hype of the latest technological gadgetry, and incessant hustle and bustle of shopping—in order to reclaim the season as a time of spiritual attunement and discipleship."



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► *Rejecting gluttony.* “Fasting from food during Advent can be a counter-cultural witness that we will fight hunger, resist waste, and eat mindfully so that those who are less fortunate can partake of the bounty of healthy food that is available,” Turner writes. “Using the food or other resources that we do not consume to help the poor makes the Advent fast a communal and missional act” that takes seriously God’s desire that our fasting will “loose the bonds of injustice” and lead us “to share [our] bread with the hungry” (Isaiah 58:6-8). “The point is not to flaunt the abundance of our own lives, but to become more fully engaged in the continuing story of God’s redemption of the world through Christ by working to correct the imbalance of hunger and poverty. The Advent fast calls us to join with all God’s people in hopeful waiting for the Lord and to stand in solidarity with them by resisting the unjust patterns of this world.”

In an Advent fast, whether we cut back on food or possessions, we join other disciples in taking “a small step to greet the Christ who is graciously coming to us and (this is the mystery) has been drawing us to himself. The spiritual effects of fasting are like those of lighting the Advent wreath,” Turner concludes, “we open our hearts to God’s presence in the world.”

Study Questions

1. From the earliest celebrations of the season of Advent, why was fasting from food an important part of the Church’s preparation for Christ’s coming?
2. Why, according to Thomas Turner, would it be appropriate today to extend the Advent fast to include cutting back on material possessions?
3. Discuss how the tradition of the Advent fast has been creatively appropriated by the Advent Conspiracy movement, created in 2006 to “make Christmas a revolutionary event by encouraging their faith communities to Worship Fully, Spend Less, Give More and Love All.”
4. Consider how the final two “O Antiphons” emphasize that in Christ, God is restoring the created unity of humanity. How would an Advent fast bear witness to this truth?

Departing Hymn: “O God Among Us, Come” (vv. 6 and 7)

O King of Nations, come.
The hope and cornerstone
who makes from many, one,
you fashioned us in Eden—
your earthen vessels, save.
O God Among Us, come.
Great king, who gives the Law
to gather nations nigh,
O Lord our God, Redeemer,
to save your children, come.

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

Tune: O ANTIPHONS



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Distinctive Traditions of Advent
(*Advent Ethics*, pp. 47-53)

Suggested Article:

📖 The Coming Light
(*Advent Ethics*, pp. 54-55)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to
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Christian Reflection

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Distinctive Traditions of Advent

Lighting candles on an Advent wreath, celebrating St. Lucia's Day, and decorating a Jesse Tree can help us faithfully narrate and prepare for the arrival of the Christ. These practices involve hearing the ancient and future stories of salvation that are formative for understanding the Incarnation.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 9:1-2

Meditation[†]

The sacred story, to be understood aright, has to be read backward. Just as the birth and ministry of Jesus are incomprehensible until we know of the Lord's death and resurrection, so too the whole of the past is muddled unless first we have a grasp on the nature of the future.

Laurence Hull Stookey

Reflection

Recovering the distinctive traditions of Advent, both in congregations and at home, can "turn our hearts and minds away from a commercialized interpretation of the season and toward stillness and reflection," Amber and John Inscore Essick write. Not only will they help us prepare to celebrate Christ's coming, they will also form the rich memories and spiritual habits we need to be faithful witnesses. These Advent traditions help us understand and winsomely share the story of God's redeeming love.

- ▶ *Lighting candles on an Advent wreath* and reading the corresponding lections—on Jesus' teaching about the final judgment, John the Baptist's witness to the coming Christ, and Mary's preparation to give birth to the long-awaited promised one—"habituate God's people in hope, expectation, and patience as they await both the arrival of the child and God's future reign," the Inscore Essicks observe. Various Advent themes or virtues may be associated with the candles, but we need not "overburden each candle with arbitrary meanings," they note. Just the progressive lighting of the four candles is a simple, sacred practice. "When it is difficult to recognize the divine at work around us, the lighting of an additional candle each week signals ever so subtly the imminent arrival of the Light of the World. This progression illustrates that God's redemptive activity operates less like a roaring wildfire and more like a series of small, steady flames."
- ▶ *Celebrating St. Lucia's Day on December 13* introduces the theme of the growing light of God's redemption once again. "Lucia (or Lucy), whose name derives from the Latin root for 'light,' was martyred during the reign of the Roman Emperor Diocletian around the year 303," they explain. "Lucia's triumph over the darkness is reenacted each year when a young girl, representing Lucia, dons a white dress and a crown of glowing candles, to deliver coffee and buns to all in attendance. Variations on the practice include 'Lucia' leading a procession in which each processant carries a single candle.... Lucia's story provides ample material for discussions of virtues such as faith, hope, courage, and charity."



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

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▶ *Decorating a Jesse Tree* helps adults and children recount “the history of God’s redemptive work from creation, through the birth of Jesus, and on to Jesus’ final reign. The story unfolds through short daily readings as ornaments representing each reading are hung on a tree.” Whether the decorations are store-bought or homemade, ornate or simple, “as we gather each day to participate in the ritual of readings and decorations, we learn that not only the story of our faith, but also the manner in which it is told, are counter-cultural. We learn that the best stories take time to unfold and are worth retelling,” they write. “God’s people become storytellers.”

“The continual and communal celebration of Advent over many years yields the richest meaning for Christians,” the Inscore Essicks conclude. “In reclaiming Advent we rehearse our witness to the world as we prepare the way of the Lord.”

Study Questions

1. In each of the distinctive Advent traditions that Amber and John Inscore Essick survey, what are the essential elements to recover? What variations do they suggest for adapting and personalizing these traditions?
2. Consider how the distinctive Advent traditions discussed here can be adapted for the family as well as the congregation. Is it important that they be kept in both contexts?
3. What does Lawrence Stookey mean (in the meditation) by reading the sacred story of God’s love “backward”? How do the distinctive traditions of Advent help us do that?
4. Discuss some common themes that run through Amber and John Inscore Essick’s appreciation for the distinctive Advent traditions. How are some of these themes reflected in the third and fifth O Antiphons?
5. How is Christ portrayed as the coming Light of the World in Georges de La Tour’s *The Dream of Saint Joseph* (cover art)?

Departing Hymn: “O God Among Us, Come” (vv. 3 and 5)

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

O glorious Dayspring, come.
The bright eternal light
and sun of righteousness,
on those who sit in darkness
and death’s cruel shadow, shine.

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

Tune: O ANTIPHONS

†Laurence Hull Stookey, *Calendar: Christ’s Time for the Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 122.

Appendix: Optional Lesson Plans for Teachers

For each study guide we offer two or three optional lesson plans followed by detailed suggestions on using the material in the study guide:

- ▶ An *abridged lesson plan* outlines a lesson suitable for a beginning Bible study class or a brief group session.
- ▶ A *standard lesson plan* outlines a more thorough study.
- ▶ For some guides a *dual session lesson plan* divides the study guide material so that the group can explore the topic in two meetings.

Each lesson plan is for a 30- to 45-minute meeting, with about one-third of the time being set aside for worship.

Redeeming Time

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To briefly outline the structure of the church year (which is also called the Christian year or liturgical year).
2. To consider how the practices and rituals that are distinctive to each season of the church year can be formative of our discipleship.
3. To discuss how observing the church year “is necessarily communal, pushing us back to Christ.”

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 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. For the departing hymn “All Praise to Our Redeeming Lord” locate one of the familiar tunes ST. PETER (Reinagle) or NEW BRITAIN in your church’s hymnal or online in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

“Most of my childhood spiritual formation occurred in the context of an Assemblies of God elementary school,” Kimberlee Conway Ireton writes. “Weekly chapel and Bible memory verses formed the spine of my understanding of faith. In junior high and high school, I internalized much of what I had learned in elementary school and embraced it as my own. But my faith really came alive when I learned of older traditions, ones that had been around for centuries, ones with strange customs like marking foreheads with ashes or refraining from the word ‘Alleluia’ for weeks on end. Such customs fascinated me, and through them I slowly entered into the tradition variously known as the liturgical year, the church year, and the Christian year.”

Reflecting on her experiences among friends in the Church, she concludes, “I’m not alone in my hunger for traditions that are older than I am” (*Advent Ethics*, 83).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to draw us to himself through each of the seasons of the church year.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Ephesians 2:17-22 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

This introduction to the church year precedes five study guides that treat the special emphases of Advent, the first season of the church year, and how they form our discipleship. However, you may use this study guide as a stand-alone discussion of the value of observing the church year or as an introduction to other studies based on church seasons.

For further study of the church year, see the four excellent resources that Kimberlee Conway Ireton reviews in “Meeting God in the Church Year” and her own book *The Circle of Seasons: Meeting God in the Church Year* (InterVarsity Press, 2008). Among the most helpful Internet resources on the church year are *The Text This Week* (www.textweek.com) and *The Revised Common Lectionary* (<http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu>).

Study Questions

1. Kimberlee Conway Ireton writes, “Embracing this way of marking the year has formed my faith and my character, in large part, because I am repeatedly thrust back into the life of Jesus through the stories told and retold each season.” The weekly lections (readings), practices, and rituals “place Christ daily before my eyes and point me back to the One whom I am all too prone to forget in the busyness and bustle of my life.” She allows the distinctive emphasis of each season to suggest a particular practice or focus for spiritual reflection.

Joan Chittister agrees that the church year shapes Christian character through thoughtful repetition of scriptural reflection, practices, and rituals: the church year is “an adventure in human growth, an exercise in spiritual ripening” as it “sets out to attune the life of the Christian to the life of Jesus, the Christ.” It accomplishes this by immersing us “over and over again into the sense and substance of the Christian life.”

Conway Ireton also highlights the communal nature of the church year. It is one way that, by God’s grace, we “are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God” (Ephesians 2:22b). “To be formed in community means our individual needs can be met by the community, our desires can be transformed by the vision of a larger purpose, and our fears can be assuaged by the assurance that we are not alone,” she writes. “We are not the center; Christ is the center – the head and the heart; we are the body, bound to one another by our mutual sharing in the life of Christ in Scripture and sacrament. The church year deepens this community by calling us, both individually and collectively, year in and year out, to re-live and live out the life of Christ, to be formed in the likeness of Christ, to become the body of Christ incarnate in the world.”

2. Most congregations feature special communal celebrations of Christmas and Easter; many are beginning to mark the associated periods of preparation (Advent and Lent) and days of rejoicing (Epiphany and Pentecost); some may mark some of the special days during Ordinary Time. Many congregations add “local” annual emphases – such as revivals, or seasons of commitment, preparation, celebration, and remembrance – to their calendars. After you briefly review together the congregation’s shared calendar, invite each member to choose a meaningful day or season in the church year and talk about how its associated practices and rituals have been formative of their discipleship.
3. After the group has canvassed the congregation’s use of the church year (including its local annual days and seasons of commitment, preparation, celebration, and remembrance), look for parts of the church year that are ignored or deemphasized. Ask members to share how they have marked some of these ‘missing’ parts of the church year in other congregations or through small group, family, or personal devotions. Members might select one of the ‘missing’ parts and brainstorm on how they could begin to mark it within the congregation or with other Christians.

List other practices in your congregation that continually “push you back to Christ.” These might include regularly scheduled days of Christian social service, church maintenance, communal singing, Scripture study in small groups, and so on. How do these days or seasons supplement or replace elements of the church year in your local congregation? Would there be an advantage of relating some of these local activities to the church year?

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

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.

The Three Advents

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Meditation	Meditation
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To examine how God comes to humankind through “the three Advents” discussed by Bernard of Clairvaux and Thomas Merton.
2. To consider how the season of Advent is a “sacrament.”
3. To explore how Advent helps us understand our profound need for God and prepare to receive the transforming action of the Holy Spirit.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 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 before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Come Thou Long Expected Jesus” locate the familiar tune HYFRYDOL in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with an Observation

How does Christ come to us today in what Bernard of Clairvaux calls the “second Advent”? Christ comes in a way that fits our desperate need. Humanity, through the persons of Adam and Eve, tried to steal what belongs to the Son of God. We bought Satan’s deceptive invitation to “be like God” (Genesis 3:5). Bernard writes that to this sin the Son responds:

“Therefore, so that they may know that I love the Father, let those whom he seems somehow to have lost on my account be restored to him through me....

“They all envied me. I am coming and I am showing myself to be such that anyone who chooses to be envious, who aches to imitate me, may do so, and this emulation may become a good thing.” (“On the Six Aspects of Advent,” Sermon 1, paragraph 4).

We had been overthrown by malice from without, so love from without can benefit us.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God for grace to meet the transforming action of the Holy Spirit in our souls.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 from a modern translation.

Reflection

This study explores how the Advent season is characterized by a strange mixture of holy fear and joy. Bernard of Clairvaux, reflecting on three Advents (*to* humankind, *into* humankind, and *against* humankind) explains

how hope, examination, and contrition are related in the Christian life. As we examine our helplessness and need for the light of God, we take a first step to meet the transforming action of the God who ever comes.

Study Questions

1. Bernard of Clairvaux says, "We know His threefold coming: *to* humankind, *into* humankind and *against* humankind. *To* all He comes without distinction, but not so *into* all or *against* all." God through Christ comes *to* us as a child through the Incarnation of Jesus in the first Advent. He comes mysteriously *into* the hearts of those who welcome his coming in the second Advent. And in the third Advent, he will come again in glory *against* all the powers of evil in order to judge the living and the dead.

Invite three small groups to discuss the significance of each Advent. What does each one reveal about God, and about humankind? What emotions and attitudes are appropriately formed in our hearts as we remember each one during the Advent season? Through what practices is each one best remembered and celebrated?

As the groups come back together and report their conversations, encourage members to examine how each of the three Advents is emphasized or ignored in their congregations.

2. A sacrament, as the term is used here, is an action or practice that reveals God's working in our lives; it is a window into the divine life that becomes a conduit of God's grace.

"The liturgical year brings us the life of Christ from his birth at Christmas to his death, resurrection, and bestowal of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost," Fr. James Conner, OCSO notes. Participating in, meditating on, and celebrating each season of the church year can lead to real transformation in Christ.

Thomas Merton writes, "Evidently, the work of Christ in us as 'Lord of virtues' is to produce in us His own virtues, to transform us into Himself as we contemplate Him in the Mystery of Advent, imitating his humble, hidden and sacrificial life." For Conner, the heart of the "sacrament of Advent" is God's divine action within us, transforming us with humble eagerness to receive God through Christ, who is the revealed Word.

3. Conner writes, "Bernard says that there are three reasons for our misery and helplessness: we are easily deceived in our judgments of good and evil; we are weak in our attempt to do good; and we are slow in resisting evil." Though our state of being is lamentable, "the presence of Christ in us overcomes these obstacles. By faith he dwells in our hearts and shows us how to judge between good and evil. By fortitude he strengthens our weakness, so that we can do all things in him. And finally, he resists evil within us." Encourage members to give specific examples of how they have experienced helplessness in each of these ways. How have they experienced Christ's help in response to each form of our helplessness?

We cannot overcome our helplessness in our own power. "The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it," Paul assures us (1 Thessalonians 5:24). Conner writes, "The secret is to abandon ourselves to Christ, the power of God, and then he will deliver us from forces that we could not resist by ourselves."

This does not mean that we do *nothing*; indeed, there is much work to do. "To find the Word in our heart we must enter into ourselves not so much by introspection as by compunction," Conner reminds us. "We must go to meet the transforming action of the Holy Spirit within our souls. This spiritual encounter is an advent in which God comes to our inmost self and we find ourselves in him. Bernard conceives this as liberation, a breaking from the prison of 'selfhood.'" Discuss the difference between introspection and compunction. In what other ways can we affirm and assist the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts?

4. Charles Wesley's hymn beautifully incorporates all three Advents. Christ comes as a child in the first Advent: "born a child and yet a king." He comes into our receptive hearts in the second Advent: "born to reign in us forever.../ By thine own eternal Spirit / rule in all our hearts alone." And he comes in glory to judge evil and draw the redeemed to himself: "By thine all sufficient merit, / raise us to thy glorious throne." Discuss how Wesley draws out subtle truths of the season by integrating the three Advents in this way.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Advent of the Heart

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading: Luke 21:25-33	Scripture Reading: Luke 21:25-33
Meditation	Meditation
Scripture Reading: Revelation 3:7, 11-12	Scripture Reading: Revelation 3:7, 11-12
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To introduce the startling Advent meditations of the Christian martyr, Father Alfred Delp.
2. To reflect on the meaning of the fourth messianic title in the O Antiphons – “Key of David.”
3. To discuss how John the Baptist’s vigor and courage are depicted in Christian art.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 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 Story

While Father Alfred Delp was locked in a Gestapo prison cell, “he returned again and again to John the Baptist’s life as an example of authentic and faithful living for his own chaotic and confusing generation,” Jenny Howell writes. “Outside his jail cell, the Third Reich launched their last futile offensive in the Ardennes. Defeat was certain for Hitler, though the Nazis refused to acknowledge this. Delp had long resisted the epic myth of the new Germany. In 1943, with the permission of his Religious Superior, Delp met with members of the Kreissau Circle – an anti-Nazi gathering of like-minded individuals who sought to envision and plan for a post-Nazi German society built on Christian virtues and practices. This was why Delp was imprisoned. To participate in such conversations was to deny the myth of Nazism – and this was high treason” (*Advent Ethics*, p. 34).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God for grace to examine our hearts and our culture for deception, and to be open to receiving God’s truth in Christ Jesus.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Luke 21:25-33 from a modern translation. (This passage is the basis for the meditation that follows.)

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Revelation 3:7, 11-12 from a modern translation. (This passage introduces the messianic title “Key of David” in the fourth “O Antiphon.”)

Reflection

This study introduces the remarkable Advent meditations that Father Alfred Delp, SJ (1907-1945), smuggled out of a Nazi prison. If members are not familiar with this twentieth-century Christian martyr, spend a few minutes reviewing his background story as it is told in Jenny Howell's article or on Internet resources like <http://ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-voices/20th-century-ignatian-voices/alfred-delp-sj/> or www.companymagazine.org/v211/delpjoesuit.htm. If time permits, emphasize how Father Delp saw John the Baptist as an exemplar of faithful discipleship when one must confront the social order and rulers, and relate this characterization to the portrayals of John in the paintings by Michele Tosini and Caravaggio.

Study Questions

1. Delp draws the image of being “deeply shaken” from Luke 21:26. On the first Sunday of Advent each year, the Gospel reading focuses on Christ's prophecy of his second coming; Luke 21:25-33 is the reading for Year C. Anticipating Christ's return in judgment can “shake” us from our idolatrous trust in the current social order, which Delp calls “arrogant gestures and tempting dreams with which, and in which, man is always deceiving himself.”
2. Use the root idea of corrected vision to link the three themes Jenny Howell summarizes. The central problem of modern culture, Delp warns, is deception and comfortableness: we fail to recognize and challenge great evil in society around us. Advent shakes us to “see” our personal and collective sin, and courageously admit and humbly confess this to God; to embrace the liberating “dreams” of God's way of living that come as we worship and praise of God in community; and to be emboldened by “glimpses of grace” to act for God's kingdom.
3. The phrase “Key of David” derives from an obscure prophecy (Isaiah 22:20-25) concerning the promotion of Eliakim to replace Shebna, a pompous manager in King Hezekiah's household. Its use as a title for Christ begins with Revelation 3:7, the introduction of the letter that encourages the church at Philadelphia in Asia Minor to endure a sinfully distorted social order. (The image may be behind Christ's instructions on “binding” and “loosing” in Matthew 16:19 and 18:18). In the fourth “O Antiphon,” Christ is depicted as the Key of David who frees “captives in the darkness.” In the midst of a depraved society, Christ has provided the Philadelphian congregation an optional way of faithful living: “Look, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut” (3:9). As they live faithfully, Christ is incorporating them into God's life—a pillar in God's temple, a resident in the new city of Jerusalem that comes down from God's heaven (3:12).
4. Tosini portrays John the Baptist as a muscular young man. “This is in sharp contrast to other depictions of John the Baptist with an old and emaciated body, which encourage us to reflect on his hermetical life-style,” Heidi Hornik writes. “Tosini's painting emphasizes characteristics of innocence, determination, and strength—traits that served the young prophet well.... He reminds us of the great vigor and intensity required by John the Baptist's spiritual preparation and expectant waiting for the coming of the Christ....”

John the Baptist's strength of commitment is the focus of Caravaggio's painting in another way—as a martyr for forthrightly telling the truth in the face of societal injustice. In this way, his execution prefigures Christ's death. “The body of John lies on the ground like a sacrificial lamb that has been slaughtered,” Hornik notes. “The hairshirt, an iconic attribute of the saint, has its animal hooves placed near the Baptist's head to reinforce that his martyrdom paves the way for Christ's own sacrifice.”

Howell notes that for Father Delp, “John was the personification of Advent. In his prison meditations, he returned again and again to John's life as an example of authentic and faithful living for his own chaotic and confusing generation.” Delp surely identified with John's imprisonment and execution for prophetically confronting a depraved ruler. Yet he also identified with John's humility. Howell summarizes: “Just as John the Baptist confessed ‘I am not he’ to those followers who hoped he was the Savior of Israel (Acts 13:25), so we too must confess that we are not God, with the utmost of clarity and honesty. This is the beginning point for what Father Delp describes as ‘the Advent of the heart.’”

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.

The Advent Fast

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To review the historic practice of the Advent fast.
2. To consider how fasting from food or material possessions can be a prophetic, redemptive rejection of the instant gratification, materialism, and gluttony in holiday celebrations.
3. To discuss the theme of restoration of humanity in the “O Antiphons.”

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-12 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 Story

“A sad realization we reached in our congregation recently is that this holy Advent season...is co-opted by the season of Tinsel—a season of selfishness, as we drop broad hints about the gifts we want for Christmas, and then drive to the ‘After Christmas Sales’ to purchase for ourselves what our family failed to give us,” writes Larry Parsley, Senior Pastor of Valley Ranch Baptist Church in Coppell, Texas. “It is a season of stress, as our calendars are overbooked and our credit cards are overtaxed.”

He continues, “Several years ago our congregation was blessed to discover the Advent Conspiracy movement that mourns the fact that our obsessive, consumption-focused Decembers cause us to sleep through Advent. This movement conspires against the forces of consumption and stress, creating time and space to *worship fully, spend less, give more, and love all*” (*Advent Ethics*, p. 80-81). The congregation’s determination to “fast” from excessive consumption gave members new focus. They began, as the Apostle Paul says, “to wake from sleep” (Romans 13:11) and notice the distortion in themselves and suffering in the world around them.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God for grace to identify with and winsomely proclaim God’s narrative of love during the Advent season.

Scripture Reading

Ask two group members to read Isaiah 58:6-8 and Luke 2:22-38 from a modern translation.

Reflection

This study suggests ways of recovering and creatively appropriating the tradition of fasting during the Advent season. Thomas Turner extends the Advent fast to include cutting back on material possessions. For concrete ways of implementing this and similar practices that resist holiday consumerism, he and Larry Parsley (“The Advent Invitation”) commend the Advent Conspiracy movement (www.adventconspiracy.org). Encourage members to discuss how they can nurture these practices in their families and congregation.

The Advent fast is still practiced within the Eastern Orthodox tradition, where the fasting season from November 15 to December 24 is called the Nativity Fast (as a time of preparation to celebrate Christ’s birth) or

St. Philip's Fast (since the season begins after that saint's feast day on November 14). For more information, see the page on fasting at the Orthodox Church in America's website, www.oca.org/OCFasting.asp.

Study Questions

1. Thomas Turner mentions several important reasons for the Advent fast. He agrees with Scott McKnight that fasting in general is "a person's whole-body, natural response to life's sacred moments." Specifically, the Advent fast is a way to sacrificially "get ready for the great feasts to come—the Christmas celebration of Jesus' birth that follows it in the church year, and the heavenly banquet that Christ promised." Second, in the context of the perpetual feasting that dominates cultural celebrations, the Advent fast is a counter-cultural way to present the gospel—pushing back against the personal instant gratification, materialism, and gluttony. Third, when we share with the poor the food or other resources that we save, the Advent fast becomes "a communal and missional act." Finally, fasting orients "our bodies and souls toward dependency on God."
2. The fourth reason above—that fasting makes us fully attuned to our dependence on God—suggests the Advent fast should be extended to "fasting from other good things [like our material possessions] that, when we improperly desire or carelessly use them, can distort our relationship to God" Turner writes. "Fasting from possessions during Advent would allow us to step back from what most threatens to control us—the deluge of advertising, hype of the latest technological gadgetry, and incessant hustle and bustle of shopping—in order to reclaim the season as a time of spiritual attunement and discipleship."
3. Thomas Turner and Larry Parsley commend the Advent Conspiracy for providing concrete ways for congregations to practice an Advent fast from material possessions. Turner describes his church's experience: "When Cornerstone Christian Church in Wyckoff, NJ—located in an affluent part of the New York City metro area—joined the 'conspiracy' in 2009, each member purchased one less gift and donated the money they saved toward building a well, medical center, and community center in Gulu, Uganda. The success of Advent Conspiracy has helped the church build a year-round partnership with a ministry in Uganda." Larry Parsley says, "We have asked permission from family members and friends to not buy them gadgets they will never use, instead making gifts of money in their names to drill water wells in Kenya. We have also emphasized giving handmade and relational gifts. A couple years ago, in addition to modest gifts under the tree, I gave each of my children an index card. On one side of the card I wrote what I admired most about them; on the other side I wrote about an activity I hoped to do with them in the coming weeks."

Encourage group members to discuss the value of the "conspiracy" and brainstorm how they might join it.

4. The sixth antiphon praises Christ for unifying his disciples; making his Body "from many, one," Christ refashions the humanity ("earthen vessels") that was marred and shattered by the Fall. The final antiphon repeats the theme of the nations coming to their true King.

Pope Leo the Great (d. 461) said the Advent fast was instituted so that "when all the ingathering of the crops was complete, we might dedicate to God our reasonable service of abstinence, and each might remember so to use his abundance as to be more abstinent in himself and more open-handed towards the poor." Turner notes, "The point is not to flaunt the abundance of our own lives, but to become more fully engaged in the continuing story of God's redemption of the world through Christ by working to correct the imbalance of hunger and poverty. The Advent fast calls us to join with all God's people in hopeful waiting for the Lord and to stand in solidarity with them by resisting the unjust patterns of this world."

Departing Hymn

The piano accompaniment for "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.

Distinctive Traditions of Advent

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To commend the recovery of three distinctive Advent traditions – lighting candles on an Advent wreath, celebrating St. Lucia’s Day, and decorating a Jesse Tree.
2. To identify central themes of these traditions – the growing revelation of God’s redemptive activity, the importance of narrative, and our formation as disciples in storytelling.
3. To consider how the theme of Christ as the light of the world is expressed in art and song.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 12-13 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 Story

“While the Advent wreath is a liturgical staple for many congregations, celebrating and marking Advent time with a wreath can also be a meaningful familial practice,” Amber and John Inscore Essick write. “Our family constructs an Advent wreath each year out of fresh greenery from a local greenhouse and places it in our living room. We light the appropriate number of candles for meals, gatherings, and times of prayer. The presence of the wreath in our living space is a helpful reminder that we are in the season of Advent. The flickering flames are a serene backdrop for the lections and silence Advent invites. During a time when congregations and families are tempted by rush and hurry, the wreathing of Advent is a worthy tradition that encourages patience and stillness” (*Advent Ethics*, 49).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God for discernment to winsomely proclaim God’s narrative of love through distinctive Advent traditions.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Isaiah 9:1-2 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

This study highlights the central themes of three distinctive Advent traditions – lighting candles on an Advent wreath, celebrating St. Lucia’s Day, and decorating a Jesse Tree – and presents some concrete ways of practicing them in congregations and homes. If group members are unfamiliar with the traditions, discuss their history and value. If they are familiar with the traditions, consider practical ways of implementing them in your church or homes.

Amber and John Inscore Essick commend several online resources for further information about these traditions. The Voice (www.criovoice.org) has helpful overviews of the Advent wreath and the Jesse Tree. The

website www.jesse-trees.com offers sets of Jesse Tree ornaments and family devotionals for each day of Advent. YouTube videos show how a St. Lucia's Day celebration might unfold in a congregational worship service (www.youtube.com/watch?v=948h_gHSzW0) and in a home (www.youtube.com/watch?v=E5tXLC1Fub8&feature=related).

Study Questions

1. Amber and John Inscore Essick describe a range of practices in each tradition. They summarize the essential elements of the traditions this way: "In lighting the Advent wreath, we attend to the growing light and keep vigil for the coming savior. Celebrating St. Lucia's Day invites us to embrace and embody what she symbolizes: purity, generosity, and light. Using the Jesse Tree to tell the story of God's redemption encourages children and adults to develop the art of telling the gospel as narrative."

2. Based upon members' interests, you might divide them into groups to brainstorm on how one of the traditions could be shared within their congregation, or practiced in their homes.

The Inscore Essicks mention several times how children as well as adults can be formed by these traditions, developing scriptural memory and spiritual habits. This suggests that the traditions are excellent ways for parents to share the faith with their children. While these three traditions should not be *relegated* to the home, they can be *taken* home.

Often parents need encouragement and support to practice these traditions. For example, a congregation might light an Advent wreath together during worship, but also hold a family wreath-making event where members can make wreaths to use in their homes, to share with elderly members who cannot participate in corporate worship, or to give to friends.

3. These traditions remind us that God's redemptive actions gradually unfold in history. Since this is the case, Lawrence Stookey says we better understand the earlier actions in light of later ones. Advent calls our attention, through prophecy and promise, to the return of Christ in glory to unite the redeemed creation, which is the end or goal of God's story of love.
4. Both the Advent wreath and Jesse Tree provide a kind of road map through Scripture: they visually represent the gradual unfolding of God's mysterious plan through events of creation and the history of Israel, help us organize and understand the biblical stories, and inculcate patience as we wait for the completion of the story of God's love to be revealed. The Advent wreath and St. Lucia's Day share the central biblical metaphor of God as the light and source of all life of the world. Lucia represents the faithful continuation of God story through the lives of faithful disciples; as we enact her procession, we are drawn into that story. All three traditions inculcate skills of faithful witness, or storytelling, about God's love. "Thus, in reclaiming Advent we rehearse our witness to the world as we prepare the way of the Lord," the Inscore Essicks conclude.
5. Georges de La Tour depicts the moment when the angel delivers the divine message to Joseph that Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us. "The presence of the candle, partially blocked by the angel's arm, is a sign of Jesus as the coming light of the world," Heidi Hornik writes. "This single light source—a painting technique known as tenebrist light—reflects strongly off the face of the angel and illuminates Joseph, creating a sense of meditation and mystery."

Departing Hymn

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