

# What is Advent?

A Sermon for the First Sunday of Advent, December 2, 2018

St. Dunstan's Anglican Church, Largo, FL 33770

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*Jeremiah 33:14-16; Psalm 25:1-9; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-26*

What is Advent? That's what I'd like us to consider this morning. On the most basic, descriptive level, Advent is the first season on the Church calendar, and it is marked primarily by the first four Sundays of the year. No special feast or festival introduces the season, like the way Easter Sunday begins the season of Easter or Ash Wednesday begins the season of Lent, and the season ends just before the celebration of the incarnation on Christmas Eve.

The color of the season is traditionally purple, which is also the color of Lent, but this had led to a certain amount of confusion with some describing Advent as a "mini-Lent," that is a lesser penitential season. As you can see, we wear blue to distinguish this season from Lent. Advent is not a mini-Lent. It may be a more penitential season than some of the other seasons, but its themes are very different from the themes of Lent. Whereas Lent is a season of penitence, Advent is a season of waiting and preparation. And this is where things get a little tricky.

Liturgically, Advent is one of the more difficult seasons of the church to define because it is trying to do two things simultaneously. First, it's trying to prepare us for Christmas. Advent is intended to prepare us to celebrate the coming of Christ in his incarnation, but Advent also looks forward to Christ's second and final advent as judge at the end of time. And there's something worth considering here. Except for a few years when God himself took on our flesh and dwelt among us, the people of God are almost by

definition people who wait. To be the people of God means to be people who are waiting for God to act and people who are preparing themselves and the world around them for that moment when he does.

The church I came from in Wheaton was sometimes jokingly referred to by those inside and outside the church as “the church of perpetual Lent.” But I always heard that and thought, “I don’t want to be the church of perpetual Lent, I want to be the church of perpetual Advent because that’s what it means to be the people of God. Let me repeat what I said a moment ago. To be the people of God means to be people who are waiting for God to act and people who are preparing themselves and the world around them for that moment when he does. That’s what the Patriarchs like Abraham and David did, that’s what the Prophets did, that’s what John the Baptist did, and that’s what Mary did. And that brings us to the Advent Wreath.

There are four Sundays in Advent, so we have four candles on our Advent wreath, one for each Sunday, with the Christ candle in the middle. The four outer candles, while there are several traditions about them, generally tell the story of the Old Covenant focusing primarily upon those who prepared for the coming of Christ. So there is one candle for the Patriarchs, particularly Abraham and David, one candle for the Prophets, another for John the Baptist, who is the Advent prophet, and one for Mary through whom the Messiah is born. These four, considered together, create the light from which the Light of Christ is taken, so while we light one candle each Sunday, at Christmas, with all four candles lit, we will light the center candle in celebration of the incarnation of our Lord.

Now, you may have noticed that one of the four outer candles is not like the others. One candle is pink. It’s often assumed that the pink candle, because it’s pink, must be the candle for Mary. It’s not. This custom is not a tradition that we practice anymore in any formal sense, but the pink candle is for the third Sunday of Advent which was observed in medieval times as Rose Sunday, and pink vestments were sometimes worn to give a splash of color in the otherwise subdued atmosphere of Lent. So, the pink

candle's not for Mary. It's technically John the Baptist's candle, but the pink doesn't have any connection to him. It's mostly just a medieval tradition that we don't practice today.

Now because Advent is a season of expectation, and you can hear that in our readings this morning. Jeremiah speaks expectantly about that a righteous Branch would spring up for David. The Psalmist lives in expectation that the Lord will forget his sins and transgressions and instead look on him with steadfast love. Paul prays with eager expectation that God would so strengthen the hearts of the Thessalonians that they would live in such a way that they would be blameless before their God and Father at the coming of our Lord with all his saints. Our Lord himself exhorts his disciples to "be on guard" so that the coming day would not catch them unexpectedly like a trap.

And that's where I want to linger as I end this morning. I asked, "What is Advent?", and I gave an all too brief but hopefully helpful answer. Now I want to ask a different question. What does it mean to be people who live in expectation? Or, to use Jesus' terms, what does it mean to be on guard so that the coming day doesn't catch us unexpectedly like a trap? To again quote my favorite singer/songwriter, "We're the kind of folks who will always live right around the corner from something big," and this ought to affect how we think and how we act, and if it doesn't, the world has the right to ask us if we truly believe what we say we believe.

So, what I'm going to suggest this Advent, in answer to my own question, is that we focus on each of the four candles of the Advent Wreath and let their light illuminate our path in this season and every day of our lives until Christ returns. Meditate on Abraham and the promises made to him, especially the promise that through him God was going to bless every family of every nation in creation, and ask what you can do to be a blessing to those around you. Meditate on the prophets who believed that the child who was to come was none other than Immanuel, God with us, and ask what you can do to bring Christ to other people.

Meditate on John the Baptist who was so transformed by the belief that God's arrival was imminent that he went out to the Jordan River and began to prepare not just himself but the world around him for God's arrival. If you believe that Jesus Christ could return at any moment, ask yourself if you're like John. Ask yourself what you're doing to prepare the world around you for the arrival of the King.

Lastly, meditate on Mary and think on Mary's faith. When God came into this world, he had a role for Mary to play. As we look forward to the second coming of Christ, he has a role for all of you to play as well. Most of you probably already know what that is. Maybe you're doing it. Perhaps you've tried to ignore it. Yes, Advent is a season of waiting, but it is also a season of preparation, so take these four weeks and prepare yourself for his coming. Prepare yourself to his God's voice again when he tells you what role has for you to play in preparing the world for his arrival, and when you hear it, respond like Mary: "Behold, I am the servant<sup>6</sup> of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." If you can say that, then you are living in expectation not only of what God is going to do, but of what God is going to do through you.

Maranatha. Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.