

ADVENT

AT GRACE

WHAT IS ADVENT?

There is something beautiful about a light shining in the darkness. Even a small flame draws our attention, helps us see, and reminds us that darkness does not have the final word. As we begin Advent together, we turn our attention toward Jesus, the Light of the World, and prepare our hearts to celebrate His coming.

The word Advent comes from the Latin word adventus, meaning "coming" or "arrival." Its roots reach back to the early centuries of Christianity, when believers set aside a season for prayer and spiritual preparation. Over time, Advent developed into the four weeks leading up to Christmas. Today, Christians around the world share in this season of waiting, remembering, and hope.

During Advent, we remember the generations who waited for God's promised Savior. We celebrate the wonder of the incarnation: the eternal Son of God became human and made His dwelling among us. Jesus entered our world in humility, sharing our ordinary life, knowing our sorrow, and revealing the Father's love. We also look forward to His coming again, when He will make all things new. Advent invites us to live with expectation, trusting that God is faithful to His promises.

This year at Grace, we will participate in the tradition of lighting Advent candles during each worship service leading up to Christmas. Four candles represent the four weeks of Advent and are commonly associated with hope, peace, joy, and love. Hope reminds us to trust God's promises. Peace points us toward the reconciliation Jesus brings. Joy welcomes the good news of His arrival. Love draws our attention to the God who came near to us.

Each week, we light another candle alongside those from the previous weeks. As Christmas approaches, the growing light gives us a visible reminder of our anticipation. On Christmas Eve, we light the center Christ candle, celebrating Jesus' birth. These

flames help us pause, pay attention, and participate together in the story we are remembering.

As we put this guide together, we are grateful for Jessica Maxwell from our South Overland Park campus, who wrote the devotionals you'll find throughout these pages. Jessica has a deep passion for the Advent season, and we are thankful for the time, thought, and heart she poured into helping our church family prepare for and experience this meaningful season.

This guide offers weekly devotionals and practices to help you make room for Jesus throughout the season. Read slowly, pray honestly, and engage with the invitations you find here. Our sermons will draw us deeper into the beautiful story of the incarnation, helping us recognize the wonder of God's presence among us and respond with our lives.

We also recognize that Christmas can bring grief close to the surface. Memories, loss, and unmet hopes can make this season especially tender. On December 13, our Blue Christmas service will offer a safe place for those who are grieving to worship Jesus in their season of sorrow. There is room here for tears, silence, and the comfort of being together. The Savior whose birth we celebrate meets us with compassion in our pain.

Wherever this season finds you, we invite you to come as you are. Bring your gratitude, your questions, your weariness, and your longing. May these weeks help us become attentive to Jesus, receive His love, and share His light with those around us as we await His coming.

ADVENT | WEEK 1

HOPE

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined.
Isaiah 9:2

WEEK OF NOVEMBER 29

SUNDAY. NOVEMBER 29

Jesus says to watch for His Return
Luke 21:5-38

DEVOTIONAL

The Old Testament ends with the Prophets. These are the 17 books where you have stories like Jonah and the Whale, Hosea told to marry the prostitute Gomer, and Daniel in the Lions' den. They tell stories of the prophets that were sent by God to remind the Jews of their covenant, the promises they as a people had made with God. The other theme that runs through the prophet books is that they, the prophets, are only the messengers, the precursors, the forerunners, of something bigger that is coming. The Messiah.

He would come from the line of King David and would bring a time of deliverance (remember how the Jews had been captives—of Egypt, and of Babylon). In fact, that's how the Old Testament ends. The Jews are captives of the Babylonian empire. They've been taken from their homes, forced to live in another country, and forced to serve another people. So you can imagine how a message of a deliverer, someone who would come to SAVE these people from their captors, their captivity, would resonate so much. This Messiah was also to bring about a time of peace. He would not only be a ruler, but a good one. A just one. Fair, caring, and would love His people.

When I think of the plight of the Jews, I recognize that I myself have never been held captive by another land or people group. I have never been exiled from my home. But there are certainly days when I feel held captive by the expectations of this world. There are times when I wish someone would come and save me or rescue me from something difficult, something hard, or something that feels like it has no end. I look at the things that happen in our world and I desire peace for all of us.

What the exiled and captive Jews wanted at the end of the Old Testament is the same as what we want in our lives too. Hope.

They wanted the promises of the prophets to be true. They wanted to hope in the deliverer. They wanted to hope for peace.

We watch the Old Testament close, with the final book of the Prophets—Malachi. The prophets, the messengers, go silent. And the people of Israel, the Jews, wait in that silence. For 400 years. Until God sends Himself in human form. He fulfills the prophecies. He is from the line of David, He is mortal, but most of all He brings deliverance.

We wait in our own season too, don't we? We desire deliverance, peace, the fulfillment of the prophecies of the New Testament. We desire the return of the King. Jesus. We await His second and final coming, when He will remove us from this world and bring us into His Kingdom.

Malachi, that last book of the Prophets, is poetic in the way that it ends. Malachi gives us the word of God, telling us that He is sending a prophet unlike any they have seen before, whose "preaching will turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the hearts of children to their fathers." He will bring us all together. He will give us hope. The Messiah is coming.

PRACTICE

Practice hope this week. Spend time reflecting with God about all that He has blessed you with over the past year, and the things you hope for and wish to do in the coming year. Allow God to speak into your schedule and the things you would like to accomplish. Speak the hope of the promises we are given in the Word over your current troubles. Read 1 Peter 1:3-12.

ADVENT | WEEK 2

PEACE

Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased.
Luke 2:14

WEEK OF DECEMBER 6

SUNDAY. DECEMBER 6

An Angel visits Zacharias
Luke 1:5-25

DEVOTIONAL

The Israelites went to war a lot. The country of Israel today is still a country burdened by significant conflict and international tensions. These were supposed to be God's chosen people. Did that make them complacent or make them a target? Either way, imagine what the Israelites would have thought about the promise of a Prince of Peace. A ruler who was fair? A ruler committed to peace and no more war?

Think of your own life and the battles you fight every day. The things you struggle with push peace far from your heart and mind. They drain and exhaust you. Even beyond yourself, look at the world around us. We are a divided country, and sometimes it seems like the other peoples of the world are closing themselves off from us.

Hear what Isaiah prophesied about the Messiah. "For a child is born to us, a son is given to us. The government will rest on his shoulders. And he will be called: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His government and its peace will never end. He will rule with fairness and justice from the throne of his ancestor David for all eternity. The passionate commitment of the LORD of Heaven's Armies will make this happen!" Isaiah 9:6-7 (NLT)

Read those four titles given to the Messiah again. Counselor, God, Father, and Prince. That sounds like the Trinity, doesn't it? The Holy Spirit was sent to be a comforter to us after Jesus ascended to Heaven. God Almighty reigns in Heaven as the Father, and Jesus Christ was the Prince of Peace who became the King of Kings.

I love that I am alive in this time and in this place. The Israelites would not have understood this prophecy. They understood the hope of promises unforeseen, but they couldn't understand the Triune God. We have the privilege of not just understanding this

prophecy, but knowing the Trinity personally.

But let's get back to the part about peace. I love that part about the "government will rest on his shoulders." Jesus will not be elected. He will rule. With fairness and justice. For eternity. Peace is on the way. Jesus will return and set the world right.

PRACTICE

How do we practice peace? Sometimes the answer is obvious—we strive to bring peace to strained or difficult relationships, or reduce the conflict in our lives by bringing solutions. Peace with God means we stop turning to sin which only gives us momentary peace, and we find peace and true rest in repentance. Tish Harrison Warren writes, "To repent is to quit our own efforts to save ourselves and to slow down enough to allow God to transform who we are." Read Isaiah 9:1-7 and Ephesians 2:14-18.

JOY

You love him even though you have never seen him. Though you do not see him now, you trust him; and you rejoice with a glorious, inexpressible joy. The reward for trusting him will be the salvation of your souls.
1 Peter 1:8-9

SUNDAY. DECEMBER 13

An Angel visits Mary
Luke 1:26-56



Christmas brings songs of joy, familiar traditions, and opportunities to celebrate. It can also remind us of an empty chair, a relationship that has changed, a diagnosis, or a hope that remains unfulfilled. For many, the celebration of the season sits alongside a sorrow that is difficult to name.

The story of Christmas gives us room to bring all of this to God. In Jesus, God entered the vulnerability of human life. He came close enough to know our pain, share our tears, and carry our burdens. The One we celebrate at Christmas is Emmanuel, God with us. His presence is a promise we can hold onto, even when joy feels far away.

This year, we invite our church family to take a new step together through Blue Christmas, a service that makes space for grief, loneliness, and suffering in the presence of Jesus. We will gather to worship, find comfort in God's compassionate love, and offer one another the gift of our presence.

If you are hurting, there is a place for you here. You may be grieving someone you love, facing uncertainty, carrying a private struggle, or simply finding this season harder than you expected. You do not need to explain your sorrow or arrive ready to feel better. Come as you are. There is room for your tears, your questions, your silence, and your prayers.

If you are in a season of joy, there is a place for you here, too. Come alongside someone who is suffering. Invite a friend, sit

beside a neighbor, or come ready to be present with your church family. You do not need the perfect words or an answer to someone's pain. Your willingness to show up can help someone know they are loved and remembered.

Scripture calls us to "weep with those who weep" (Romans 12:15). When one part of Christ's body suffers, we share in that suffering. We make room for those who are hurting at the heart of our life together. Their grief belongs among the prayers, songs, and relationships of the church.

This is part of the beauty of God's kingdom: people carrying one another's burdens, the lonely finding family, and the weary being met with tenderness. As we gather around those who are hurting, we give one another a glimpse of the love of Jesus and the day when He will wipe away every tear.

This Christmas, let's become a people who draw close. Come with your own sorrow. Come to support someone you love. Come to worship the Savior who meets us here.

Sunday, December 13 · 6:30 PM
Grace Church - South Overland Park
8500 W 159th St, Overland Park

Everyone from all three campuses is welcome.

DEVOTIONAL

I think God laughs. Sometimes He might be laughing with us, sometimes He might be laughing at us. But the Bible says we were created in His image, and no matter which evolutionary scientist you ask, I don't think there's any good reason for humor in the human species. What is its purpose? To me, it is proof of the Great Creator that we have joy, humor, and laughter in our lives.

Think of the times you catch yourself smiling while watching your children, or delighting in time spent with a friend. These times when we experience joy are bits of Heaven cracking through our earthly realm. I can only imagine how much joy there is in Heaven.

This third week of Advent is about joy. On Sunday, we read Mary's poem of exuberance, called the Magnificat (Luke 1:26-56). She was bursting to sing praises of the God who chose her to bear the Savior of the world. I'm certain she felt many emotions, but I'm so glad that joy was the main one we see highlighted in her own words.

Later in Luke, we see the birth of Jesus and the Heavens open up with proclamations to tell of this glorious occasion. There in a stable, Mary and Joseph (and the baby Jesus) are visited by shepherds who were granted an incredible experience—to be the first of the Jews to hear of the birth of the promised Messiah. They come to the stable. They probably gush over the baby, what this all means, and so much more. And there is Mary, who has just given birth (in a barn!) and Luke makes it a point to tell us that, "Mary kept all these things in her heart and thought about them often." (Luke 2:19).

Maybe this season, you don't feel joyful. Perhaps this year has been one of the worst, and you just can't wait for it to be over. But don't miss out on the little cracks opening from Heaven this season. Find joy where you can, whether that's enjoying something

delicious, meeting with friends, or even just driving around looking at Christmas lights on your way home from work.

God wants to meet you where you are. He knows your heart and He knows your life. He knows what kind of year it's been. In this Advent season, we have the privilege of pausing to reflect and to experience the joy of the Messiah's arrival. Find your joy this week, keep it in your heart, and think about it often.

ADVENT | WEEK 4

LOVE

Three things will last forever—faith, hope, and love—and the greatest of these is love.
1 Corinthians 13:13

WEEK OF DECEMBER 20

SUNDAY. DECEMBER 20

John the Baptist is Born
Luke 1:57-80

DEVOTIONAL

What was love like in the Old Testament? We know there was marriage, family, and friendship, of course. But do we ever stop to think about how we live in "New Testament love," where we are freely given grace and mercy we don't deserve? The Israelites were given chances by God even after they blew it time and time again, but they were in a relationship with God based on the law. In fact, literally the first three commandments of the Ten Commandments are about how they were to enter into a relationship properly with Him (Exodus 20). The last six commandments are about how the people should be in relationship with each other.

The Ten Commandments were still important in the New Testament, but God had sent Jesus to create a new covenant with the people. This time the covenant wasn't just about the Israelites (Jews), but now it was about everyone. And this time, Jesus tells us that the most important commandment is still about how we enter into relationship with God. He quotes Deuteronomy 6:5, "You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind." (Matthew 22:37 NLT) And then He continues, "A second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments." (Matthew 22:39-40 NLT) He's saying the same rules still apply here. Standing on the side of Mount Sinai, Moses laid it out for the Israelites. Live in a way that you can be in relationship with God, and live in a way to be right with your neighbors.

Jesus is boiling it down to what the Israelites couldn't seem to figure out. The Law was about how to be loved and how to love God and His people. The same rules apply now, except Jesus has come to literally show us how much God loves us. God sent His Son to lay down His life so that we might be able to spend eternity in that love. He could see that even His chosen people, the Israelites,

when given the rules, still couldn't grasp the depth of His love for them. So, as you often do in matters of the heart, He had to come Himself.

Erwin Raphael McManus tells a story in his book Soul Cravings about when he proposed to his wife, asked her to spend her life with him, it wouldn't have made sense if it came from someone else. He didn't send his brother or his best friend. In this situation, a matter of showing his wife the love he felt for her, he had to go himself.

Love is personal. Love is not easy. Love is hard. Love requires sacrifice.

Love came to us. Love lived among us. Love taught, healed, and cared in a way no one had ever experienced. Love came to us in a manger, and Love will return to us on a white horse. Jesus came for us and Jesus will return for us.

PRACTICE

This season brings families and friends together, which sounds great most of the time, but perhaps that's not how it is for you. If that's your situation, pray to God to give you the words to engage with your loved ones this season. Pray for grace, because love can be hard. If you are fortunate to not struggle with loving your family and friends this season, seek out those that need to experience the love of God. Think of those around you that won't see kind faces and gifts under the tree. Think of those who might be working the holiday this year, those who don't have family or friends nearby, or even those who might act like they want to be alone, but are desperate for connection.

"Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance." 1 Corinthians 13:7 NLT

EPIPHANY

I am so glad we explored and experienced Advent together. It is such a romantic season in which we believe God can meet you in unexpected ways. We covered Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love. All of these are embodied in the story of the birth of the Messiah. God Himself was born into humanity so that we might know Him and believe.

The shepherds were the first of the Jews to learn of the birth of the Messiah. There are such incredible threads woven into the story: parallels to the Old Testament patriarchs, like Moses and David, who were shepherds themselves. These shepherds were in great company and fulfilled prophecies foretold centuries before.

But I want to talk about the Magi. Sometimes they are referred to as the "wise men", which we often put into a trio, probably because there are three gifts listed and we assume they each had to carry one and that's it. But what I think is so important in the story, and what we gloss over so easily, is that the Magi were not Jews. They were Gentiles. They might have studied the prophecies of the Old Testament, and had some understanding of Judaism, but these were star watchers, scholars of the throne, not of the temples. God chose to announce the arrival of the Messiah in a language they were familiar with—through the stars.

Epiphany is celebrated twelve days after Christmas, and is supposed to be the culmination of the season and a closing of this part of the liturgical calendar. What Epiphany celebrates is the coming of the Magi to meet the Messiah. It had probably been a

couple of years since Jesus was born, and the Magi found Him with His mother and father. They followed a star that they didn't fully understand, but they could feel the importance of the change in the sky.

The birth of Jesus is covered only in a few chapters at the beginning of Luke, and only one chapter of Matthew. But the way the story leads us into the ministry of Jesus is really important. The shepherds were told of the Messiah that they would have learned about since childhood. They knew the prophecies, they knew someone was promised to come and to bring deliverance. The Magi visiting the born Messiah is about how Jesus came to change the lives of not only the Jews, but of the Gentiles as well. It tells us that God's intention since the beginning was that Jesus is for everyone. Salvation belongs to all people.

The Bible is the God-breathed word. Matthew and Luke were inspired to include these things in the story of Jesus, so that we might understand the heart of the Gospel. Jesus is the deliverer who was promised to the Jews throughout the Old Testament. But Jesus is also a promise to us, the Gentiles, those not born of Israel, that salvation also belongs to us. Jesus is for everyone.


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