



# The Four Weeks of Advent

Watching and waiting for our Savior

BY AMY EKEH, MA

## DECEMBER 3

1st Sunday of Advent

Mark 13:33-37

**REFLECT:** The first Sunday of Advent begins a new liturgical year. Year B will run from this Sunday through the Sunday of Christ the King in 2018. In Year B our Gospel readings primarily draw from the Gospel of Mark. Because Mark's Gospel is the shortest of all the Gospels, it will be supplemented by the Gospel of John at some points during the year. As always, during special seasons like Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter, the Gospel reading will at times be taken from other Gospels.

During Advent the liturgy urges us to watch and wait for the coming of our Savior. Of course, this waiting has a twofold purpose. On one hand, we anticipate the Incarnation of Christ, the coming of God into the world as a human being (*advent* means "to come" or "to arrive"). At Christmas we will celebrate this Incarnation as we recall and make present the birth of Jesus. But during Advent we are also



waiting and hoping for the return of Christ at the end of the age. As our readings these last several weeks have already proclaimed, our faith in the Incarnate Christ has an *eschatological dimension*: We wait and hope for his final coming, a time when Christ will come to be with his people, a time when he will not depart again.

Today's Gospel reading takes up this idea of waiting and watching. Jesus tells his disciples to "Be watchful!" and "Be alert!" He tells the story of a man who leaves his servants in charge of his home and a gatekeeper on watch while he travels. Jesus says that these servants must be ready at any time for the master of the house to return.

What will these servants be doing while the master is away? They will be doing their work. They will be taking care of the house. What is our work while Christ is away? The answer is simple: to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and mind, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. This is the work Christ has given us to do; this is how we care for his house, his people, his

Church. This is how we watch and wait for his return.

**ASK YOURSELF:** Am I watchful and alert? Do I believe Jesus will return? What should I be doing differently if I truly believe this?

**ASK YOUR STUDENTS:** Jesus offered many warnings to his disciples to be ready for him to return. But Jesus has not returned yet, and it has been 2,000 years! What do you think about the *advent* (or coming) of Jesus?

**PRAY:** Lord Jesus, may I live in a state of watchfulness and readiness as I await your *advent*, your coming, into the world and into my life.

**LIVE THE GOSPEL:** We know that we should live in such a way that we are doing Christ's work, so that he will find us ready when he returns. How can you do Christ's work this week? How can you live in such a way that if Jesus returned, you would not be startled by his coming?

## DECEMBER 10

2nd Sunday of Advent

Mark 1:1-8

**REFLECT:** John the Baptist is a "major player" during the Advent season. He always makes an appearance in the Gospel reading for the second Sunday of Advent, proclaiming the imminent arrival of Christ and telling the people how to prepare. His message offers a most appropriate hinge connecting our twofold dynamic of Advent anticipation: awaiting the coming of Jesus as the Messiah who walked the dusty roads of Israel

two thousand years ago, and awaiting his triumphant return as Lord of all at the end of time. John the Baptist tells us how to prepare for both arrivals!

We are told that John the Baptist proclaimed “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4). This baptism of John was not the same type of baptism that we participate in as Christians. (For Christians, baptism is also a participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus). But it was deeply meaningful and appropriate preparation for the coming of a Savior. To repent was not just to feel bad about oneself or one’s sins. To repent was to have a change of heart, to change

one’s ways. Certainly repentance includes sorrow for sin, and the Gospels tell us that John’s baptism forgave the sins of the people, who came out in droves to acknowledge their sins and be baptized by John.

Why was this baptism of repentance a fitting preparation for the coming of a Savior? Because when we repent, we declare our need for a Savior. We acknowledge a need within ourselves. We open a door for him. We make straight his path — straight to our hearts.

“One mightier than I is coming,” declares the great John the Baptist. “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (Mark 1:7, 8). Let



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## MONTH SUMMARY

### DECEMBER 3

#### 1st Sunday of Advent

*Mark 13:33-37*

Jesus tells a story about a man leaving his house in the care of his servants in order to encourage his disciples to be watchful and alert as they await his return.

### DECEMBER 10

#### 2nd Sunday of Advent

*Mark 1:1-8*

John the Baptist baptizes the people with a baptism of repentance as he prepares the way for Jesus’ coming.

### DECEMBER 17

#### 3rd Sunday of Advent

*John 1:6-8, 19-28*

John the Baptist testifies to the coming of the Messiah.

### DECEMBER 24

#### 4th Sunday of Advent

*Luke 1:26-38*

Gabriel announces to Mary that she will bear a son named Jesus who will be called holy, the Son of God.

### DECEMBER 31

#### The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph

*Luke 2:22-40*

Mary and Joseph take the infant Jesus to the Temple, where two prophets speak about Jesus as the savior and the Christ.

us also repent, so Jesus' path may be straight. Let us make room for the Savior, who will be born in Bethlehem, and who will be born in our hearts, and who will return for us at the end of the age.

**ASK YOURSELF:** What does *repentance* mean to me? What does it mean to have a change of heart? How can I nurture a spirit of repentance in my life and ready my heart for the coming of Christ?

**ASK YOUR STUDENTS:** Why do you think so many people went out into the desert to hear John the Baptist and to acknowledge their sins to him and be baptized by him? What do you think they liked about his message?

**PRAY:** John the Baptist, pray for me, that I may prepare the way of the Lord in my life, my relationships, my work, and my world.

**LIVE THE GOSPEL:** This week, every morning, repeat the words of the prophet Isaiah, describing the ministry of John the Baptist: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths." How can you prepare the way for the coming of Jesus into our world? Can your love for others make his path straighter?

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## DECEMBER 17

3rd Sunday of Advent

*John 1:6-8, 19-28*

**REFLECT:** The third Sunday in Advent is traditionally known as Gaudete Sunday (or "Rejoice Sunday"). As we light the rose-colored candle on our Advent wreaths, we notice how close we are to Christmas, how close we are to celebrating the birth of Jesus. This observation brings us joy and renews

our desire to be prepared for his coming.

Turning to John's Gospel this Sunday, we once again visit the person and ministry of John the Baptist. At the heart of his identity are these words written by John the evangelist: "He [John] was not the light, but came to testify to the light." Of course, Jesus is the light that is coming into the world (see John 1:9).

Last week's Gospel and this week's Gospel both emphasize the role of John the Baptist as the *forerunner* of Jesus — the one who prepared the way for his coming and testified to his true identity. This emphasis on "preparing the way" and properly identifying Jesus are at the heart of our Advent experience, and indeed, at the heart of our Christian experience. As we prepare for his coming — at his Incarnation that we celebrate at Christmas, but also at the end of the age when he returns — we join John the Baptist in his work. We, too, cry out into the desert, bearing witness to the coming of the light. We, too, must do our part to prepare the way for his coming.

John the Baptist recognized something fundamental to faith. *He was always oriented toward another.* John did not look to himself for the answers. He did not look to himself to secure his own future. He did not look to himself for salvation. John was a great prophet — in fact Jesus called him the greatest human being who had ever lived (in Matthew 11:11)! And yet even a great prophet like John found his identity in his relationship with Jesus, the

Christ.

As we journey into our final weeks of Advent preparation, may we also orient ourselves entirely toward Jesus Christ.

**ASK YOURSELF:** How do I testify to the presence and identity of Jesus? How do I do this in my catechetical ministry?

**ASK YOUR STUDENTS:** John's Gospel describes Jesus as light: "The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world" (John 1:9). Why do you think Jesus is called light? What does light look like? How do we experience it? What does light do for us?

**PRAY:** Jesus, you are the light that has come into the world. Help me to testify to your presence.

**LIVE THE GOSPEL:** There are many ways to testify or witness to the presence and true identity of Jesus. John the Baptist had his own unique way. How can you testify to the light this week: at home, in your classroom, in a relationship, in the world?



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## DECEMBER 24

4th Sunday of Advent

*Luke 1:26-38*

**REFLECT:** On the final Sunday of Advent, we turn our full attention to the birth of Jesus. This year, we have the latest possible date for the Fourth Sunday of Advent — December 24!

In this Sunday's Gospel, we hear the familiar story of the Annunciation, or "the announcement," of the angel Gabriel to Mary. Gabriel tells Mary that

*As we light the rose-colored candle on our Advent wreaths, we notice how close we are to Christmas, how close we are to celebrating the birth of Jesus.*

she will bear a Son who will be great. He will sit on the throne of David. He will be called the Son of God, and he will be named Jesus, which means “he saves.”

Since we have focused so much on John the Baptist on previous Sundays, it may be worthwhile to note the clear contrast drawn here between Jesus and John the Baptist. We know that John the Baptist is the forerunner of Jesus, the one who announced his coming. But Luke makes this clear in brilliant fashion.

The passage we read today, announcing the birth of Christ, immediately follows another annunciation. It follows the annunciation of the angel Gabriel to Zechariah, who will be the father of John the Baptist (see Luke 1:5-25). In this annunciation, we have a similar pattern including an angelic visitor, a miraculous pregnancy (Elizabeth is elderly and barren; Mary is young and a virgin), a response of surprise and confusion, and predictions about the child to be born.

Biblical scholar Luke Timothy Johnson helps us understand the contrasts Luke then draws between John the Baptist and Jesus, contrasts that help us understand the role and identity of both men:

John will be great before the Lord (1:15), but Jesus will be great and Son of the Most High (1:32). John will prepare a people

(1:17), but Jesus will rule the people (1:33). John’s role is temporary (1:17), Jesus’ kingdom will never end (1:33). John is to be a prophet (1:15), but Jesus is more than another prophet: he is Son of God (1:35). John will be “filled with the Holy Spirit” as a prophet (1:15), but the overshadowing of the Spirit and Power will make Jesus “the Holy One” (1:35). (Luke Timothy Johnson, *Sacra Pagina: The Gospel of Luke*, Liturgical Press, 1991, p. 38)

This contrast helps us understand even more clearly why Jesus needed a predecessor, and why John the Baptist took his role so seriously. He was preparing the people for an eternal kingdom, and he was preparing their hearts to encounter the one who would reign over it forever.

**ASK YOURSELF:**

The angel Gabriel describes Jesus in many ways in this passage. Which phrase means the most to me? Why?

**ASK YOUR STUDENTS:**

Mary was surprised by the angel’s announcement to her, but she agreed to be part of God’s plan and to do his will. Do you think this was easy or hard? Why?

**PRAY:** St. Gabriel, when you encountered Mary, you encountered the fertile ground of her heart. Pray for me, that I may also be ready to say yes no matter what God asks of me.

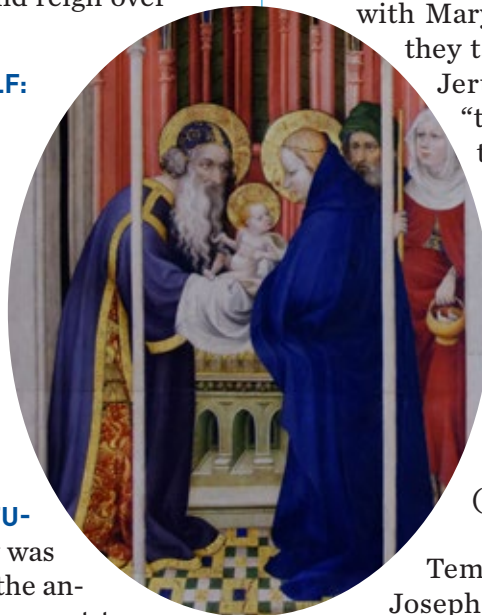
**LIVE THE GOSPEL:** Is it possible that God has tried to speak “annunciations” or “announcements” in our lives, but we were not listening? What is God asking us to do, but we have not given ourselves the time and space to say yes? This week make time to listen. Ask God to speak in the quiet of your heart.

**DECEMBER 31**

*The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph*

*Luke 2:22-40*

**REFLECT:** On the Sunday immediately following Christmas, we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Family. In our Gospel reading from Luke, we enjoy journeying with Mary and Joseph as



they take Jesus to the Jerusalem Temple “to present him to the Lord” and have him circumcised. Luke portrays Mary and Joseph as carefully following the Jewish law concerning the birth of a child (see Leviticus 12).

While inside the Temple, Mary and Joseph encounter two people who make prophetic statements about Jesus. We can only imagine both the pride and the pain Mary and Joseph felt upon hearing these prophecies. Certainly this mixture of emotions would become a familiar experience for Jesus’ parents.

Simeon, an old man who has been waiting for the Messiah, continues Luke’s theme of

salvation (the angel has declared Jesus' name, which means "he saves") as he takes the newborn in his arms and says to God, "My eyes have seen your salvation." He is clear that this salvation is not only for Jews but also for Gentiles (non-Jews). Simeon blesses Mary and Joseph, and then offers foreboding words to Mary: "Behold, this child is destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be contradicted — and you yourself a sword will pierce — so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed" (Luke 2:34). This warning will play itself out across the pages of Luke's Gospel as Jesus' ministry faces opposition,

and as he ultimately finds himself a victim of jealous, corrupt, and powerful forces. Yet Simeon's words are clear: This man will be a savior.

Next, the prophetess Anna, also elderly, comes forward and speaks "about the child to all who were awaiting the redemption of Jerusalem" (Luke 2:38). Again we are told of Jesus' redemptive, saving role. We might imagine all of these grand things being said in the presence of a tiny, powerless infant. Held in his mother's arms, perhaps crying or sleeping, Jesus did not look like a savior. But the prophets knew him.

The final line of our Gospel reading prepares us for the new

liturgical year ahead. We can't wait to get to know this Jesus of Nazareth, our Savior: "The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him" (Luke 2:40).

**ASK YOURSELF:** Simeon predicted that this baby would be a "sign of contradiction," or a "sign of opposition." In what areas of my life has Jesus created tension or even division? Why is the message of this loving Messiah at times so difficult to live and accept?

**ASK YOUR STUDENTS:** How do you think Mary felt when Simeon warned her that a sword would pierce her soul? Why do you think she was able to remain faithful and accept God's will even though she knew it would be painful at times?

**PRAY:** Lord Jesus, prophets and friends of God immediately recognized you as the Christ, the Savior. Help me recognize your saving role in my life.

**LIVE THE GOSPEL:** Both prophets in the Temple — Simeon and Anna — are described as elderly. Luke honors their years, their wisdom, and their harmony with God by highlighting this Temple scene. Is there an elderly person in your life that you can honor this week? What wisdom do they have to share with you?



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