



**WAITING
IN HOPE**

Praying and Living Advent

saint mary's press

T O N Y A L O N S O

WAITING
IN HOPE

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PRAYING AND LIVING ADVENT

TONY
ALONSO

SAINT MARY'S PRESS®

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With love and gratitude to
Ronda, Steve, Christina, and Alyssa Michels



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INTRODUCTION

When you think of the weeks leading up to Christmas, what images come to mind? If yours is the experience of most people during the month of December, images of Christmas trees, candy canes, shopping malls, carolers, and holiday parties probably jump to the front of your mind. This is a time for making wish lists, sending cards, purchasing gifts, putting up decorations, planning parties, baking, and attending concerts.

The Church gives us four weeks before Christmas that seem to run against the grain of excitement that surrounds us at this busy time of year: the season of Advent. Advent is a time of waiting and watching. The word *Advent* literally means “coming.” We wait for God’s coming into our midst now, just as the world waited so many years ago. Advent is a time to prepare for Jesus’s birth through prayer, reflection, and action.

How can we live the season of Advent when everything around us speaks of Christmas? Unless we’re not planning to leave our homes during the four weeks before Christmas, we’re likely going to be surrounded by Christmas decorations, songs, and parties at every corner. The solution to truly celebrating Advent isn’t to simply ignore everything around us. (We’d probably lose a lot of friends if we did!) Instead, we need to try to find ways to pray and reflect each day amid all this activity. We need to reflect on what God is asking of us during this time of year and find ways live out the message of the Gospel each day.

COURSE SETTING THE COURSE

This book can help you set the course for your Advent journey. The prayers, reflections, and other information provided are tools to help you enter more deeply into the richness of this season. This book is designed to be as flexible as possible so you can pray and reflect at your own pace and in a way that fits your schedule. Each year you can return to this book and use it differently, depending on how you want to focus your time. Each of the chapter sections is described in this introduction so you can think about how you might want to use the book this year.

HEARING USING THIS BOOK

FOCUS THIS WEEK'S FOCUS

This section offers a word, an image, or a phrase for your reflection during the week. All the other sections of the chapter tie back to the focus for the week in some way. Questions are included to spark your thoughts and to encourage reflection, and space is provided for you to journal and respond to the questions. You might return to this section each day and notice how your answers to the questions change throughout the course of the week.

PRAYER A PRAYER TO START THE DAY

This prayer, based on imagery from the Advent Scriptures and the week's focus (see the section entitled "This Week's Focus") is one you might say each morning when you first wake up, when you're sitting at the breakfast table, or just before your first class at school.

SIGNS SIGNS AND SYMBOLS

Signs and symbols give visual representations to our faith. This section gives background on a sign or symbol of Advent and explains its relevance to today's world. Signs and symbols can have many layers of meaning depending on where they are and when we encounter them, so knowing the background of Advent's signs and symbols can help us enter more deeply into the season.

CELEBRATIONS ADVENT CELEBRATIONS

In addition to the Sunday Eucharist, other liturgies and celebrations will enrich your experience of the Advent season. This section offers background on holy days, cultural celebrations, and other forms of prayer during the season, and connects them to your daily life. Many of these celebrations connect the Advent season to the rich heritage of a culture. Celebrating these special days in our communities helps us remember that we are a world Church made up of people of hundreds of cultures, languages, and ways of relating to God and to one another.

SCRIPTURES ADVENT SCRIPTURES

Especially striking during Advent is the rich imagery of the Scriptures. This section of each chapter offers you the opportunity to read and reflect on the Scripture readings for each of Advent's Sunday liturgies. Spending time with the Scriptures is probably the best way to deepen your understanding of Advent. Space is provided for you to journal after the listing of the Scripture readings.

You will notice that there are three sets of Scripture readings for each week: Year A, Year B, and Year C. This is because the readings for each Sunday are on a three-year cycle. The readings you hear this Sunday at Mass won't be heard again for another three years. The new liturgical year begins with the First Sunday of Advent each year. You may be wondering how to figure out which year you're in right now. . . . One way would be to ask a priest or someone else who works at your church. You could also check online or check a missalette (a book with the readings, found in the pews of many churches).

Depending on how much time you have, read as many of the Scriptures as you'd like. Take your time with them; you have the entire week to spend on four passages (first reading, psalm, second reading, and Gospel). You might spend the first two days of the week reading and reflecting on the first reading, the second two days of the week on the second, and so on. Whatever you decide, just remember that this isn't homework! There's no quiz at the end of this book. Reflecting on the Scriptures is for you. It's a way to put you in touch with God and what God's word might be saying to you in your life. Think of reading the Scriptures as prayer, not as work.

LIVING LIVING ADVENT

As our prayer and reflection leads us closer to God, God leads us to action. This section suggests some practical things you might do each week to live out the Gospel in your daily life. These suggestions are meant to spark your imagination. Use them as a guide, but be creative in ways you might live out the Gospel each day of the week.

PRAYER A PRAYER TO CONCLUDE THE DAY

Like the prayer to begin the day, this is a prayer based on the imagery of the week's focus as well as the Advent Scriptures. This is a prayer to pray before going to sleep. It might be in addition to other prayers you say on your own or with your family.

APPENDIX

The appendix of this book offers several additional prayers and blessings for use throughout the season. Consider praying these prayers, as well as the prayers to begin and end the day, with your family. You might pray them together before meals or at other times throughout the day.

SHARING SHARING THE JOURNEY

In addition to walking the Advent journey with your parish family, you may also want to spend some time each week reflecting with a friend or a family member. Consider discussing some of the Scriptures or discussing the reflection questions with someone who might be interested. Sharing the journey with someone close to you will help strengthen your relationship with each other and with God.

THE EUCHARIST: THE HEART OF THE ADVENT SEASON

However you decide to use this book, remember that the heart of the Advent season, like the heart of our whole prayer lives, is the celebration of the Sunday Eucharist. Each Sunday at Mass, we light the Advent wreath in anticipation of Christ, the One True Light. We listen closely to the words of the prophets' passionate visions and warnings that help prepare us for Christ's coming. We hear Scripture readings that encourage us to look closely at our lives and reflect on how we might change our ways of thinking and being. Most important, we join our community in giving thanks to God for our many blessings. In our sharing in the Eucharist, we are nourished to go back into the world and truly live the Gospel. The Eucharist is the food that strengthens us for our Advent journey.

THE ADVENT JOURNEY

Advent is a journey, and the destination is Christmas. So much of this journey, like your whole life's journey, is about letting yourself be open to what God is trying to say to you through the rituals, images, and stories of the season. The wonderful thing is that your experience of Advent will change from year to year. Again and again, you can come to this book to spark your thoughts and deepen your reflection on this sacred season. But the best part of this journey is that you bring the unique gift of your own life experience to it.

THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT: WAITING

PRAYER A PRAYER TO START THE DAY

God of all creation,
thank you for holding me close through the night
and waking me up to the beauty of a new day.
During these days of waiting and watching,
help me prepare the way of your Son,
who brings both comfort and challenge to the world.
Show me the places in my life where I can
be comfort to those who are lonely
and challenge to those who
choose darkness over light.
Open my ears to your holy Word,
open my eyes to the face of Christ in each of my sisters and brothers,
and open my heart to your love,
poured out in your beloved Son, Jesus.
Amen.

THIS WEEK'S FOCUS

Have you ever been on a long car ride, maybe on your way to a family vacation or summer camp? How many times on the way does someone in the car ask, "Are we there yet?" Even though it sometimes seems like time is standing still, the car and everyone in it are moving slowly toward a destination. And along the way, despite some periods of anxiety and frustration, it's not all bad! Perhaps on the long ride, you get a chance to do things you might not have had a chance to do otherwise. Maybe you read a book, chat with family or friends, listen to some music, or play games. Whatever the case, there is activity on the journey.

Like a long car ride, Advent is a journey toward a destination. It is a time of waiting. But also like a car ride, it is a journey of activity along the way. What is it that we are waiting for during Advent? The obvious answer is "Christmas!" But Advent is about more than just waiting for a holiday, and it's even about more than just waiting for the birth of Christ. What we do during the journey itself is just as important as the destination. How will you spend your time of waiting this year?

Consider these questions as you journey through this first week of Advent:



What are the places in my life where I am waiting for God to do something for me?



How can I focus on the journey of Advent more than the destination, to make the most out of my waiting?



What can I do to prepare the way of the Lord in my home? in my school? in my community?

SIGNS AND SYMBOLS: THE ADVENT WREATH

The Advent wreath is the most universally recognized symbol of the Advent season. Each Sunday at Mass, we light one of the four candles on it. Have you ever thought about what the Advent wreath represents?

The circular shape of the Advent wreath represents God. Like a circle, God has no beginning and no end. The wreath is usually made out of evergreen branches to remind us of the everlasting love God has for us. The four candles of the wreath represent Christ, the light of the world. Traditionally, there are three blue or purple candles and a single rose-colored candle. The rose-colored candle represents joy, to remind us of that there is great joy in the coming of the Savior. It is lit on the third Sunday of Advent. With each new week and each new candle lit, the light gets brighter as the birth of Christ draws nearer.

Consider making an Advent wreath at home to light before dinner or at other times when your family might pray together. In the appendix of this book, you will find a blessing you or your family might pray over your family's Advent wreath.

Whether you're at home or at church, whenever the candles of the wreath are lit, remember the everlasting love God has for you, and remember the light of Christ that leads all people to true joy.

ADVENT CELEBRATIONS: THE FEAST OF SAINT NICHOLAS

Saint Nicholas is one of the best known and beloved of all the saints. He is so well known that he is portrayed by artists more than any other saint, with the exception of Mary. Each year during Advent, on December 6, we celebrate the Feast of Saint Nicholas, the generous bishop who lived in the area now known as Turkey. As a young person, Nicholas was known in his community for his care for the poor and the oppressed. As an adult, he became a bishop and continued to live a life of generous service to others.

There are many legends about Nicholas's generosity. The most well-known legend is about a poor family who lived in his native city. The parents of three young daughters were so poor that they didn't have enough money to pay the dowry for them to get married. (A dowry was a required gift of money or valuables given by the bride's family to the groom to give the couple a financial start in life, as well as to secure the bride's future. If the parents did not pay the dowry, they would have to sell their daughters into slavery so that the daughters would be able to eat.)

When Nicholas got word of this, he threw gold coins down the family's chimney late one night. With the money, the eldest daughter was able to get married. After she was married, on another evening, Nicholas once again

threw coins down the chimney. The second daughter was able to marry. After the second daughter married, the father anticipated that the generous person might return a third time to throw gold coins down the chimney for the youngest daughter's marriage. The father was so determined to find out who was throwing money into the chimney that one night he hid behind the chimney. He soon discovered Nicholas to be the generous man helping his family. When Nicholas realized the father had recognized him, he asked him not to tell anyone else. But because the father wanted everyone to know of Nicholas's generosity, he told everyone he knew.

The image of Santa Claus (which sounds very similar to "Saint Nicholas" in Dutch) is rooted in this legend and in the generous life of Saint Nicholas. The true message of Santa Claus is found in the lessons of Saint Nicholas: There is more joy in giving a gift to another than in receiving one. Think about the life of Saint Nicholas as you do your Christmas shopping this year.

SCRIPTURES THE ADVENT SCRIPTURES

The Scriptures we hear each Sunday during Advent are filled with rich imagery. Every third year, we hear a different set of Scriptures. The Scriptures for each of the three years (A, B, and C) are listed here.

YEAR A

FIRST READING: Isaiah 2:1–5

RESPONSE: Psalm 122:1–2,3–4,4–5,6–7,8–9

SECOND READING: Romans 13:11–14

GOSPEL: Matthew 24:37–44

YEAR B

FIRST READING: Isaiah 63:16b–17,19b; 64:2–7

RESPONSE: Psalm 80:2–3,15–16,18–19

SECOND READING: 1 Corinthians 1:3–9

GOSPEL: Mark 13:33–37

YEAR C

FIRST READING: Jeremiah 33:14–16

RESPONSE: Psalm 25:4–5, 8–9, 10, 14

SECOND READING: 1 Thessalonians 3:12–4:2

GOSPEL: Luke 21:25–28, 34–36

Take time to figure out what Scripture year the Church is in by asking someone on the parish staff, by checking the parish bulletin or Web site, by checking a missalette, or by conducting a search on the Internet using the key term liturgical calendar. Then read some or all of the Scripture passages listed for that year. When you have finished reading a passage, take a brief moment to sit in silence. Write down some of the key words, phrases, or images that stay with you.

Now read the passages again with these questions in mind for each:



What insights can you take from this reading?



What does this passage call you to pray for?



How are you being challenged to live out this passage?

LIVING ADVENT

When we are waiting for something, we are often anxious about it. During the month of December, there is a lot of excitement for Christmas. You may be looking forward to a special gift that you've been waiting to receive for a long time. Sometimes we get so caught up in what we want and what we're waiting for that we forget about all those around us who might be waiting for something as simple as a meal or a warm place to sleep.

This week, to be in touch with all those whose waiting is for the most basic needs of life, make a donation to a charity or give a gift to someone in need. It doesn't need to be a huge donation or gift to make a difference. For many who are hungry, the smallest gift can make all the difference. For Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, a dirty barn was a great gift! Remember, though, to learn from the generosity of Saint Nicholas: find a way to give without being seen. You might choose one of the following practical suggestions for saving money this week, and then give the money you save to a charity:

- **Drink water (no, not bottled water!) instead of soda or juice.**
- **Give up the morning trip to the coffee shop.**
- **Don't buy any extra things (CDs, books, clothes, and so on) this week.**
- **Ride the bus, walk, or ride your bike to school instead of driving.**
- **When you go out with friends on the weekend, do something that's free instead of paying for a movie or some other activity.**

A PRAYER TO CONCLUDE THE DAY

To you, O God, I lift my soul in prayer and praise.

Watch over me this night as I place my
dreams and fears into your hands.

Remember all those
who have no choice but to wait
for food,
for joy,
for health,
for rest,
for comfort,
for friendship,
for relief.

Help me be open to the places
where you are waiting
to bring comfort and peace in my life.

Give me rest this night that
I may wake up refreshed to
be your hands and feet in the world.
Amen.