



WEEK 2

ADVENT

Devotional

An invitation to pause and savor the anticipation of Advent as we wait for our Savior.

Each week, worship through a carol, reflect on a Scripture passage, and respond to God in personal prayer.



AMERICAN BIBLE SOCIETY

O COME, O COME, IMMANUEL

*12th century Latin hymn
Translated by John Mason Neale*

O come, O come, Immanuel,
and ransom captive Israel
that mourns in lonely exile here
until the Son of God appear.

O come, O Wisdom from on high,
who ordered all things mightily;
to us the path of knowledge show
and teach us in its ways to go.

O come, O come, great Lord of might,
who to your tribes on Sinai's height
in ancient times did give the law
in cloud and majesty and awe.

O come, O Branch of Jesse's stem,
unto your own and rescue them!
From depths of hell your people save,
and give them victory o'er the grave.

O come, O Key of David, come
and open wide our heavenly home.
Make safe for us the heavenward road
and bar the way to death's abode.

O come, O Bright and Morning Star,
and bring us comfort from afar!
Dispel the shadows of the night
and turn our darkness into light.

O come, O King of nations, bind
in one the hearts of all mankind.
Bid all our sad divisions cease
and be yourself our King of Peace.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel
shall come to you, O Israel.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 9

Read

It was the fifteenth year of the rule of Emperor Tiberius; Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip was ruler of the territory of Iturea and Trachonitis; Lysanias was ruler of Abilene, and Annas and Caiaphas were High Priests. At that time the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert. So John went throughout the whole territory of the Jordan River, preaching, “Turn away from your sins and be baptized, and God will forgive your sins.” As it is written in the book of the prophet Isaiah:

“Someone is shouting in the desert:
‘Get the road ready for the Lord;
make a straight path for him to travel!
Every valley must be filled up,
every hill and mountain leveled off.
The winding roads must be made straight,
and the rough paths made smooth.
The whole human race will see God’s salvation!’”

LUKE 3:1-6

Reflect

Repentance isn’t a word you see on many Christmas cards. Tetrarchs, provinces with hard-to-pronounce names, a strangely clad man dunking people into a muddy river—those images are too mysterious to represent comfortable holiday cheer.

Yet the Gospel writer connects John the Baptist’s ministry in the wilderness with the ancient prophesy of the Messiah. Immediately following Luke’s descriptions of Jesus, the child, he introduces John as the baptizer preparing the way for Jesus the man. Readers familiar with the rest of the story will recognize names of the historical rulers—several of them will be instrumental in Jesus’s death.

Luke is preparing us for the Sent One who will save. Isaiah predicted him. John announces him. But before he arrives, John calls the people to turn away from their sins. Traditionally, the church has set aside this season of Advent as a time to go out to the

wilderness with John. We want to “get the road ready for the Lord” by turning away from our selfishness, our fears, our resentments.

The word of the Lord’s salvation comes amid political and social darkness and individual sin. And nothing—not corrupt government, not individual failures, not the topography of the earth itself—can stop it.

Respond

Repentance is hard. It’s hard to look directly at our sin and our failure. But don’t be afraid. God desires to forgive, to bless, to save. You may need to repent and then repent again for the same thing. God pays no mind to the obstacles. His salvation comes, and he speaks it tenderly, in words of comfort (Isaiah 40:1). Ask God where you need to repent. Be still for a few minutes and notice where he leads your thoughts. Rejoice! The Lord’s forgiveness is here!

Pray

O God, give us grace to cast aside the weight of sin and embrace your full and free forgiveness, for the sake of Jesus. Thank you that you are mighty to save!

MONDAY, DECEMBER 10

Read

The desert will rejoice,
and flowers will bloom in the wastelands.
The desert will sing and shout for joy;
it will be as beautiful as the Lebanon Mountains
and as fertile as the fields of Carmel and Sharon.
Everyone will see the LORD's splendor,
see his greatness and power.
Give strength to hands that are tired
and to knees that tremble with weakness.
Tell everyone who is discouraged,
"Be strong and don't be afraid!
God is coming to your rescue,
coming to punish your enemies."
The blind will be able to see,
and the deaf will hear.
The lame will leap and dance,
and those who cannot speak will shout for joy.
Streams of water will flow through the desert;
the burning sand will become a lake,
and dry land will be filled with springs.
Where jackals used to live,
marsh grass and reeds will grow.
There will be a highway there,
called "The Road of Holiness."
No sinner will ever travel that road;
no fools will mislead those who follow it.
No lions will be there;
no fierce animals will pass that way.
Those whom the LORD has rescued
will travel home by that road.

They will reach Jerusalem with gladness,
singing and shouting for joy.
They will be happy forever,
forever free from sorrow and grief.

ISAIAH 35:1-10

Reflect

In the novel *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte, the lonely and impoverished Jane marries the bitter and ruined Mr. Rochester. At the end of the novel, when they finally marry, Jane is no longer isolated or poor. Mr. Rochester is free, and though his eyes were blinded by fire, they gradually heal so that he can see again. Not only is all right with the world, but all wrongs have been reversed.

The prophecy in Isaiah is a story with a happy ending. And not just a happy ending, but a turn-over of all the bad and hard things in life. Take heart! Don't be afraid! This is a picture of King Jesus's upside-down kingdom. This is the end of the story that began in a garden and reached its climax outside of an empty tomb. The desert is transformed into another garden. "Those who cannot speak will shout for joy."

Respond

Read the passage again, this time taking note of all the verbs. Write them down in your notebook. What is the mood of this passage? Ask God to help you believe in the reality of Jesus's kingdom.

Pray

O God, we praise you! You set prisoners free, open the eyes of the blind, and lift up those who are bowed down. Thank you for your love. Come back, Lord Jesus, and set everything right.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 11

Read

Jerusalem, go up on a high mountain
and proclaim the good news!
Call out with a loud voice, Zion;
announce the good news!
Speak out and do not be afraid.
Tell the towns of Judah
that their God is coming!
The Sovereign LORD is coming to rule with power,
bringing with him the people he has rescued.
He will take care of his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs together
and carry them in his arms;
he will gently lead their mothers.

ISAIAH 40:9-11

“What do you think a man does who has one hundred sheep and one of them gets lost? He will leave the other ninety-nine grazing on the hillside and go and look for the lost sheep. When he finds it, I tell you, he feels far happier over this one sheep than over the ninety-nine that did not get lost. In just the same way your Father in heaven does not want any of these little ones to be lost.

MATTHEW 18:12-14

Reflect

It's hard to believe good news, especially when the good news is unlikely, even unreasonable. That's why Isaiah repeats and urges: “Tell it, don't be ashamed, don't be quiet ... tell it!” It's *true*, the herald insists.

Perhaps for the Israelites listening to Isaiah's message, the problem wasn't believing that God was coming. Maybe what was hard to swallow was that God would be tender. He wouldn't reward the strongest, richest, most beautiful. Instead he would look for the ones who were stumbling and falling.

When Jesus came, he represented God's personality exactly. Everything he said and did was what God would say and do. So, when Jesus tells his disciples that the Father seeks

out the weak and flailing, the disciples listened. It might have seemed hard to believe. But there was Jesus, climbing mountains to sit down and teach smelly peasants. There was Jesus, touching rotted skin, changing his schedule so that he could listen to a poor woman's health complaints, inviting himself over to dinner at the home of the most despised tax collector. Jesus acted out the good news of God-as-shepherd. We watch him and see the good news: it's the ordinary, foolish, and weak people to whom God listens.

Respond

Jesus's good news is the opposite of the way we tend to value each other. The message is two-fold. During Advent, practice acknowledging your weaknesses. When we admit that we are vulnerable and needy, we are making room for Jesus. But it doesn't stop there. Jesus often ministers to us through other people's kindness. And we can act out Jesus's love to others. Take time to reach out to someone who needs help. Jesus preached good news through words and through actions. How can you act out God's tender care to someone?

Pray

Lord Jesus, you visited us in great humility. Come to our hearts and empower us to serve others the way you did. Thank you for your Spirit with us.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 12

Read

The LORD said, “Sing for joy, people of Jerusalem! I am coming to live among you!” At that time many nations will come to the LORD and become his people. He will live among you, and you will know that he has sent me to you. Once again Judah will be the special possession of the LORD in his sacred land, and Jerusalem will be the city he loves most of all.

Be silent, everyone, in the presence of the LORD, for he is coming from his holy dwelling place.

ZECHARIAH 2:10-13

Reflect

The people of Israel are discouraged. It has been twenty years since their dramatic release from captivity in Babylon. They have begun to rebuild their city walls and their temple, but progress is slow. Compared to the nations around them, Israel is a blip—insignificant. God had promised that he would live with them forever. God had said that the whole world would pay attention to Israel when they welcomed people to know their God. But would God’s promises prove true?

Zechariah was prophesying to a ragtag group of returned Israelites, the same audience reading the book of 2 Chronicles. The history recorded in 2 Chronicles was meant to remind the returned exiles of how God had worked for them in the past. Maybe they read the story of King Hezekiah, how he cleaned and restored the temple. After a period of running from God, Hezekiah called Israel back to worship the true God according to his Word. 2 Chronicles emphasizes that this worship was characterized by holiness and by rejoicing. The people of Israel cleaned up. They looked at their mess and repented. They asked God to hear them. And the writer of 2 Chronicles reports, “In his home in heaven God heard their prayers and accepted them” (2 Chronicles 30:27b).

“Be silent,” Zechariah instructs. “The LORD ... is coming from his holy dwelling place” (verse 13). Amid rejoicing, awe overcomes the prophet. The Holy God is in his dwelling place—and his dwelling place is *with* us. That’s reason for joy, but still, we quiet ourselves to hear God speak. His Word comes true.

When we consider that God—powerful, true, and good—comes to us, we fall silent. We listen to his Word. It speaks over our discouragement, our fears and doubts. We bow and cover our faces in reverence: God comes to make his home with us.

Respond

Christmas is a time for rejoicing. Songs, feasts, and laughter are the hallmarks of the season. But take some time to fall silent before God. Consider his holiness and power. Ask God to let you see the wonder of a holy God taking on the body and plight of a human.

Pray

Holy Spirit, quiet our hearts so that we may be in awe of you. We hope in your Word. We wait for you. Speak to us, Lord.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 13

Read

I will proclaim your greatness, my God and king;
I will thank you forever and ever.
Every day I will thank you;
I will praise you forever and ever.
The LORD is great and is to be highly praised;
his greatness is beyond understanding.
What you have done will be praised from one generation to the next;
they will proclaim your mighty acts.
They will speak of your glory and majesty,
and I will meditate on your wonderful deeds.
People will speak of your mighty deeds,
and I will proclaim your greatness.
They will tell about all your goodness
and sing about your kindness.
The LORD is loving and merciful,
slow to become angry and full of constant love.
He is good to everyone
and has compassion on all he made.
All your creatures, LORD, will praise you,
and all your people will give you thanks.
They will speak of the glory of your royal power
and tell of your might,
so that everyone will know your mighty deeds
and the glorious majesty of your kingdom.
Your rule is eternal,
and you are king forever.
The LORD is faithful to his promises;
he is merciful in all his acts.
He helps those who are in trouble;
he lifts those who have fallen.
All living things look hopefully to you,
and you give them food when they need it.

You give them enough
and satisfy the needs of all.
The LORD is righteous in all he does,
merciful in all his acts.
He is near to those who call to him,
who call to him with sincerity.
He supplies the needs of those who honor him;
he hears their cries and saves them.
He protects everyone who loves him,
but he will destroy the wicked.
I will always praise the LORD;
let all his creatures praise his holy name forever.

PSALM 145

Reflect

A week before he died, Jesus swung his leg over the back of a colt and rode it down a hill into the city. As the crowd walked alongside him, his disciples began shouting: “God bless the king!” (Luke 19:38). Luke writes that “they began to thank God and praise him in loud voices for all the great things that they had seen” (Luke 19:37).

The disciples knew they needed a king. They had traveled and talked with Jesus. They’d squatted over the grill with him, slumped into bed exhausted after long days, and woken up in the dark to find him already gone, slipped away for prayer. They had done normal, everyday life with him. The disciples knew him better than anyone.

When it appears that he’ll ride into Jerusalem and take over the kingdom, they’re ecstatic. They gush forth exclamations of praise. “He deserves it!” they were announcing. “He’s the right man for the job!”

The disciples didn’t understand everything, but they did see in Jesus all the characteristics listed in Psalm 145. And like the psalmist, they recognized that the only reasonable response was to overflow with praise. It’s not enough to internally note Jesus’s qualities—we are compelled to declare them to each other.

Psalm 145 declares that God made the colt that Jesus rode, and that he tenderly, intimately provided what it needed to live. The psalm shows us that we can look to Jesus's coming with the same delight expressed by the disciples. Our king is coming, and he is kind.

Respond

Write a list of the characteristics of God you see displayed in Psalm 145. For example, when we read that God gives all his creatures enough to satisfy them, we can see that God is generous.

Advent is a time to re-invite Jesus to rule in our lives. And with a King like this one, we're not only glad to have his rule, but we can't help speaking about it to others.

Pray

Our God and King, we praise your name! Thank you that you are faithful, kind, and near to us. We call on you, Lord. Come, draw near to us.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 14

Read

Soon afterward Mary got ready and hurried off to a town in the hill country of Judea. She went into Zechariah's house and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby moved within her. Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and said in a loud voice, "You are the most blessed of all women, and blessed is the child you will bear! Why should this great thing happen to me, that my Lord's mother comes to visit me? For as soon as I heard your greeting, the baby within me jumped with gladness. How happy you are to believe that the Lord's message to you will come true!"

Mary said, "My heart praises the Lord; my soul is glad because of God my Savior."

LUKE 1:39-47

Reflect

In one artist's imagination, Mary visits Elizabeth barefoot, wearing a billowing turquoise robe. The artist captures their embrace: Elizabeth clutching the sides of Mary's robe, Mary's hands resting on Elizabeth's shoulders. The two women stare intensely into each other's faces. Mary is somber, determined. Though she doesn't smile, Elizabeth's face is serenely joyous. She seems filled with light, and about to cry with happiness.

The scene has been imagined and painted many times. It's a remarkable moment, but its power isn't primarily about the two women. Each character in the scene—Elizabeth, Mary, and the unborn John—exclaim in wonder at what God is doing. The Holy Spirit is in their midst, revealing to them that Mary's child is the Savior of Israel. Elizabeth calls the baby "my Lord." In her womb, John leaps for joy. Mary responds by bubbling over into a song of praise, magnifying her Savior. The exchange of praise is sparked by their awe and wonder and gushes out in joy. They exult in God's promises.

Elizabeth and Mary embody expectant waiting. They believe that God is at work, and that his message will come true.

Respond

How can we imitate Elizabeth and Mary? Invite a friend to read Mary's song of praise with you. Talk with each other about what Mary is praising God for, and then add your own praises in prayer.

Pray

Holy and Mighty God, we rejoice in you. You have looked on our need and have blessed us. Your Word to the prophets came true in Jesus. Lord Jesus, we believe you will come back.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 15

Read

Listen to us, O Shepherd of Israel;
hear us, leader of your flock.
Seated on your throne above the winged creatures,
reveal yourself to the tribes of Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh.
Show us your strength;
come and save us!
Bring us back, O God!
Show us your mercy, and we will be saved!
How much longer, LORD God Almighty,
will you be angry with your people's prayers?
You have given us sorrow to eat,
a large cup of tears to drink.
You let the surrounding nations fight over our land;
our enemies insult us.
Bring us back, Almighty God!
Show us your mercy, and we will be saved!
You brought a grapevine out of Egypt;
you drove out other nations and planted it in their land.
You cleared a place for it to grow;
its roots went deep, and it spread out over the whole land.
It covered the hills with its shade;
its branches overshadowed the giant cedars.
It extended its branches to the Mediterranean Sea
and as far as the Euphrates River.
Why did you break down the fences around it?
Now anyone passing by can steal its grapes;
wild hogs trample it down,
and wild animals feed on it.
Turn to us, Almighty God!
Look down from heaven at us;
come and save your people!

Come and save this grapevine that you planted,
this young vine you made grow so strong!
Our enemies have set it on fire and cut it down;
look at them in anger and destroy them!
Preserve and protect the people you have chosen,
the nation you made so strong.
We will never turn away from you again;
keep us alive, and we will praise you.
Bring us back, LORD God Almighty.
Show us your mercy, and we will be saved.

PSALM 80

Reflect

Psalm 80 expresses the desperation that drives us to call out to God for help. The truth is that we are not as independent, confident, and jolly as we sometimes appear to be. We harbor unresolved sorrows and lament unmet desires. Christmas after Christmas, we wait for our longings to be fulfilled.

The psalmist begins his cry for help by addressing God as the Shepherd of Israel. It's a plea for God's compassion. The psalmist would have been familiar with the image of a shepherd carrying a weak or tired sheep. If God is the "leader of the flock" of Israel, then he will lead his wandering flock back to their safe home. When Jesus came, he embodied God the compassionate Shepherd. The Gospel of Matthew says that Jesus looked out at the crowd of people who had come to him for help. "His heart was filled with pity for them, because they were worried and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matthew 9:36).

Though we are "worried and helpless," we are not without hope. The prayer of Psalm 80 is also expectant. In the original Hebrew, the psalm closes with a specific request. In the version above (GNT), the request is to "protect" the "nation you made so strong." The psalmists asks God to keep his people safe—from enemies, from being deceived, from falling away from him. Another translation (ESV) of the verse replaces "nation" with "the son of man." In this translation, the psalmist asks for a leader whom God has appointed and blessed, one who will lead the people to call on God and so be restored. In both versions, the psalm ends by begging God to save the people. "Give us life!" (verse 18, ESV), we implore with this psalmist. And to our desperation, Jesus responds, "I have come in order that you might have life—life in all its fullness. I am the good shepherd" (John 10:10b, 11a).

Respond

Do you ever find yourself hiding your need from others or from God? Pray honestly to God about how you need him to be your Shepherd. What would you do differently today if you were confident that God has compassion on you, that Jesus wants to help you?

Pray

Lord Jesus, you are our good shepherd. We lack nothing. You guide us, and your mercy and love pursue us. We long to be closer to you. Come, Lord.

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