

First Sunday of Advent

Watch: The day is almost here

Scriptures

Isaiah 2:1–5; Psalm 122; Romans 13:11–14;
Matthew 24:36–44

Highlight

Isaiah 2:2&3



image of an Advent Wreath

Reflection

What comes to heart and mind when you reflect on the Advent and Christmas season? Take some time to pay attention to your thoughts and feelings.

The Advent and Christmas season can be a time of fond remembrance. Joy-filled memories can drift into your awareness as you recall the awe and wonder of tiny lights piercing the darkness of long-cold winter days, preparing for special programs and pageants, the anticipation of opening presents, spending time with loving extended family, gathering to sing delightful songs, celebrating the birth of a miraculous child.

The Advent and Christmas season can be a time of painful remembrance. Holidays that weren't the idyllic, love-filled occasions often depicted as expectations of how holidays *should* be celebrated, sorrowful reminders of loved ones who have passed through the veil of death and no longer hug us and offer thoughtful presents or sing with us, adding his deep reverberating bass voice to the carols, bringing that special dish to the gathering, or reminding us of her love. Painful reminders of broken relationships.

The more of life we live, the more memories may come to us. Take a deep breath and give thanks for all the goodness in your life, then let the breath out and release the pain, resentments, and disappointments that can get in the way of joy.

The theme chosen for this year's Advent season is Restoration. Our hearts long for restoration in so many ways. We don't consciously recall being in full communion with God before we were born, yet there is a longing for something more, deep within us. As Christians, we know that the earth is not our home, our citizenship is in Heaven. We will not experience full restoration until Christ comes to take us home. And so, we live in a time of unfulfilled longing. And yet, we catch glimpses of the Reign of God all around us. In the kindness of unmerited acts of favour, in the deep rich harmonies of beautiful music, in the act of reconciling a strained or broken relationship, in the strange warming in our hearts when we recall special memories of Jesus' presence.

Hymns

VT 212 Comfort, Comfort, O My People (also HWB 176)

VT 705 For the Healing of the Nations (also HWB 367)

Activity

What comes to mind when you reflect on the theme of *Restoration*? Is there a specific act you could do to bring about some restoration? Perhaps sending a kind note affirming someone who might need some encouragement, or expressing your appreciation for someone offering you care? Maybe drawing someone from the periphery into the light of love? Perhaps lighting a candle and praying for peace in your own heart, in your neighbourhood, your church, and beyond.

Blessing

May your Advent season be blessed with a growing awareness of God's reign on earth as you wait for full restoration, so that this season may be full of the love, joy and peace of the Spirit of God. May you find ways to participate in Christ's call to discipleship so that his reign may be demonstrated in your life.

Second Sunday of Advent

Prepare the way of the Lord

Scriptures

Isaiah 11:1–10; Psalm 72:1–7, 18–19;
Romans 15:4–13; Matthew 3:1–12

Highlight

Isaiah 11:1-4a

Reflection

What does house cleaning look like for you? Are there spiritual house cleaning tasks you have been putting off? Maybe now is a time for cleaning out the clutter of old resentments or grudges.



image of a full closet

I am watching a loved one in my life prepare for the next season of life. Together, we are wrestling with questions around housing accommodation, paring down possessions, and reflecting on current and future needs and wants. What will the future hold? What might be needed? Sometimes a decision is made and items are given away only to regret the hastiness of the choice. When I was in seminary, I met a family who had lost every possession in a house fire. When we offered them sympathy, they said it was one of the best things to happen to them. It was liberating to be free of the things that were tying them down. It enabled them to make the decision to move to seminary and pursue a new career path. Sometimes the things we fear most can bring unexpected gifts when they come into our lives.

I have an abundance of creative energy that I channel in many ways. This has meant that I accumulate materials to work with and not only in one area. I have wood and glass and cloth and yarn, just to name a few things. My more minimalistic relatives may be desperately hoping I outlive them, so they don't have

to clean up after me! However, if we go deeper, I can reflect on the past hurts that I stuff into my spiritual closet, the memory filled with resentment for how I was put out by someone else, an old grudge that has kept lines of communication closed. If I take time to go through this closet, I can let a memory of resentment be transformed by Christ's grace into an experience of gratitude. As I let Jesus shift my perspective from entitlement to compassion, my spirit is freed from the burden, and I feel lighter and more joyful.

Hymns

VT 716 God of Grace and God of Glory (also *HWB* 366)

VT 740 Spirit of the Living God (also *HWB* 349)

Activity

Take a moment to offer your spirit some compassion. Now take another moment to look through your spiritual closet. Is there one item you can look at with Jesus? What might he want to do with it? Is there a renewed perspective he might offer you on an old memory, or someone currently in your life?

Blessing

May you have the courage to take an honest look into your spirit and offer Jesus some room for renovations so that you can live more freely into the joy of the Holy Spirit.

Third Sunday of Advent

Tell what you hear and see

Scriptures

Isaiah 35:1–10; Psalm 146:5–10;
James 5:7–10; Matthew 11:2–11

Highlight

Isaiah 35:3-4

Reflection

Have you ever received a note or word of encouragement? How did it affect you?



image of encouragement cards

When I took a course on healing ministry, one of the strongest emphases of the course was on the power of affirmation. We learned to listen deeply to others and to pull out the good that we saw. We named courage in the face of difficulties, wisdom in the face of confusion, kindness to self and others during pain. When we did so, we saw transformation. Gentle words of encouragement can make a world of difference. This act does not require flying to some foreign country and preaching on the street corners. It can be done from your own small apartment or even a hospital bed.

We know that our health care systems have been push to the brink and beyond in these past several years. Resources are stretched over far too large a need and staff are struggling. Those of us who work and live in this context can offer small oases of peace and calm by striving to affirm the good. When I worked in a Personal Care Home in the pandemic, I opened a small room to give staff a space to come and be led in a guided meditation I wrote for them. I invited them to imagine sitting by a warm fire, a beautiful ocean, or walking through an inviting forest. They returned to their work feeling refreshed for the work ahead, encouraged that they were

offering goodness in the face of hardship. Affirming words can also have the effect of lightening someone's load, helping them continue in a difficult job.

Hymns

VT 419 Great Is Thy Faithfulness (also *HWB* 327)

VT 537 Lord, You Sometimes Speak (also *HWB* 594)

Activity

Look around you and consider who might need a word of encouragement and kindness? Take some time to affirm people in your life for what you see in them.

Blessing

May your eyes be opened to see the light of Christ in everyone you meet and your lips be opened to affirm the good in the world so that encouragement might flow freely in the world.

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Do not be afraid

Scriptures

Isaiah 7:10–16; Psalm 80:1–7, 17–19;

Romans 1:1–7; Matthew 1:18–25

Highlight

Matthew 20 & 21



image of hearts

Reflection

Recall a time in your life when you have experienced fear.

“Do not be afraid!” “Fear Not!” This phrase occurs often in the Bible. The first letter of John also tells us that “perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment...” (1 John 4:8) When we allow ourselves to be loved completely, this love pushes out room for fear. Now, there are certainly things to be wary of in this world. I am not advocating purposely leaving the stove on or letting snakes loose anywhere. But when we take time to lean into love, it changes our hearts.

Julian of Norwich, in her wonderful book, *Revelations of Divine Love*, wrote a parable about a master and a servant. These two dearly loved each other. One day, the master sent the servant on an errand and the servant promptly fell into a ditch on the way to doing the master’s bidding. The servant bemoaned the situation and was embarrassed about being clumsy. However, the master saw it all and was grieved for the servant’s situation and longed to offer help. Julian tells this story to illustrate how dearly God loves us and patiently waits for us to ask God for help. God sees our situation differently than we do. God sees with perfect love, without judgementalism. When we offer our hearts to God’s loving care, God can help heal our hearts of our own bruises and pain.

Hymns

VT 241 O Come, All Ye Faithful (also *HWB* 212)

VT 421 A Mighty Fortress Is Our God (also *HWB* 165)

Activity

Spend some time with Jesus looking over a memory when you have been afraid.

What might he want you to know about it?

Blessing

May you live in joy, courageously trusting in God's promise of restoration.

Christmas Day

Sing for joy: Your God reigns

Scriptures

Isaiah 52:7–10; Psalm 98; Hebrews 1:14, (5–12);
John 1:1–14

Highlight

Psalm 98:1 & 4



image of a party

Reflection

What fills your heart with joy?

I was recently surprised with a party, thrown for me by people who love me and wanted to celebrate a milestone in my life. I was absolutely thrilled to see so many people from different areas of my life, gathered together. After so long in lockdowns because of Covid, it was glorious to gather with people again. We ate good food, we shared happy memories, we celebrated our connections and relationships. We sang, we laughed, we enjoyed each other. Love was there during it all. One of my friends who attended the party was struggling with something very difficult, but she made time to come anyway. Later she told me what a balm the party had been to her soul. There was so much love! This love spilled over into her heart as well and help salve her wounds.

This is the kind of love that God yearned to bring to earth in Jesus. By becoming one of us, a human with all its risks and commitments, God was able to communicate love to humans in a very special way. We celebrate this love, embodied by Jesus, at Christmastime. This celebration continues all year-round when we share that love with others. We offer the best gifts when we create relationships of love, where each person is safe and free to grow into the person God dreamed for each to be.

Hymns

VT 103 Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee (also *HWB* 71)

VT 240 Joy to the World (also *HWB* 318)

Activity

Reflect on a time in your life when you were surrounded by God's love and joy.

Take some time to consider on how you can create an atmosphere of love for those around you. Can you share a story of your experience of God's love with someone today?

Blessing

May your heart be filled with joy! May you experience celebration, sharing the good news that God has come.

Sunday after Christmas

He comes to us in all our distress

Scriptures

Isaiah 63:7–9; Psalm 148; Hebrews 2:10–18;
Matthew 2:13–23

Highlight

Matthew 2:18

Reflection

Have you experienced a loss that still feels fresh in your heart? Can you let God's healing grace surround this wound in your heart and comfort you?



image of orange dot on tree

No sooner have we celebrated God's Messiah come to earth, than we are mourning the loss of a whole generation of babies born in Jerusalem. Life is filled with joy and pain. Sorrow is a price of love. When I moved into my current neighbourhood over 20 years ago, it was filled with beautiful elm trees, arching over each street, creating an incredible green canopy of shade and fresh oxygen; the world's largest urban elm forest. Over time, many of these trees have been lost. Every year more trees are marked by an orange dot: this one is coming down soon. A few years ago, we experienced a winter storm before the trees shed their leaves. The trees couldn't handle the weight of the wet snow. It meant a loss of up to one third of the forest. Our hearts ache to lose these gentle giants who have witnessed life on our streets for over a century.

Jesus was born into a time of great political upheaval. Moments after the prophet Anna danced with the babe in her arms, declaring to all who would listen that he was their Messiah, Herod was on a murderous rampage of slaughter. Many of those in older generation have lived through this kind of horror through wars, displacement, refugee experiences. You know suffering and loss. And yet, the

stories that many elders have offered me are ones of faith and hope: God came to us in our distress, comforted us in our losses, brought us through to a new land, and new season of comfort and joy. The Mennonites coming out of Russia sang the hymn, *Nun Danket alle Gott*: Now thank we all our God. God is faithful to comfort and guide us always.

Hymns

VT 158 Gott ist die Liebe (I Know God Loves Me; also *HWB* 167)

VT 617 When Peace like a River (also *HWB* 336)

Activity

As we begin a new calendar year, take some time to reflect on God's faithfulness in your life. Is there a story you can share with someone from another generation?

Blessing

May you begin this New Year with joy and love in your heart. May you have the courage to bring the pain of the past to the Wonderful Counsellor and receive peace that passes all understanding from the Prince of Peace.

Laura Funk is a Spiritual Director with Butterfly Journeys and currently (2022) pastors at Bethel Mennonite Church in Winnipeg. She originally wrote this resource for a gift packet for seniors in her congregation. If you would like to send her feedback, you can email her at Laura@ButterflyJourneys.ca.

Laura Funk (Canada), 2022. Bethel Mennonite Church

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