



A sacred season

Advent disciplines
prepare us for Christ's
coming

BY LINDA POST BUSHKOFKY

LONG AGO, I MADE PEACE with the notion that for most Americans, Christmas passes as a secular holiday, not a sacred holy day. That's why decorated trees and holiday music appear in October, Santa brings up the rear of many Thanksgiving Day parades, and people count the 12 days of Christmas as leading up to, not following, December 25. If that's

what others want, who am I to disagree?

I still observe the four weeks of Advent, preparing for Jesus' second coming as well as remembering Jesus' birth. The quiet, contemplative focus on Advent appeals far more to me than the consumer frenzy that marks a secular Christmas.

Observing Advent is what Christians do.

If you're like me, you might mark the days of Advent with greater intentionality, focusing your prayers, lighting candles on an Advent wreath, reading special devotions. Perhaps you have an Advent calendar, too, that offers up a Bible verse, a daily sweet or a small ornament.

Little is demanded of us if our primary Advent focus is on remembering Jesus' birth. Advent does not call for idle waiting, watching and wondering. No, Advent is a time for active preparation for the coming of the reign of God.

We make efforts to realign ourselves with God. We focus more intently on prayer, devotion and service. Each Sunday, we gather around Word and Sacrament, experiencing anew the breaking in of the reign of God. Advent makes us look for God – in our communities, in people around us, in all creation. We are to see and acknowledge the image of God in all we encounter. We are learning our lines, rehearsing our moves, practicing the interactions, so

that when Christ comes again, we will be ready to live fully into the reign of God.

ADVENT LECTONARY

We play a role in birthing that new creation. Throughout the Advent lectionary, we are reminded of this.

This year, on the first Sunday in Advent, we encounter Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, calling Jesus' followers to "increase and abound in love for one another and for all..." (1 Thessalonians 3:12). By identifying and meeting needs in our communities, we are doing just that: increasing and abounding in love for one another and for all.

On the second Sunday in Advent, we hear Paul's words to the Philippians: "And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best..." (Philippians 1: 9-10) Because we know what God calls us to do for our neighbors and all creation, we live out that just love, allowing it to overflow in our lives.

If we're still not sure of what we're being called to do, on the third Sunday in Advent this year, John makes it clear. "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise" (Luke 3:11).

Mary caps it all off on the fourth Sunday in Advent when, in her song of praise, she describes the reign of God to which we all

aspire. The proud and the powerful are not in charge, and the rich are sent away empty. The lowly are lifted up, understood as equal citizens in the new creation. The hungry are filled with good things (Luke 1:46-55).

ADVENT DISCIPLINES

What will you do this Advent to bring about the reign of God? Here are some suggestions. Adapt them for your own context. Be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit, which may take you in new directions. Reflect each evening on how you served God that day. Perhaps you'll want to keep a journal during this holy season. While we practice these disciplines, may we realize our work is not limited to Advent. We can continue the sacred work of bringing about the reign of God long after the season ends.

DECEMBER 1: Fast from social media (or anything else that distracts you from God) for the season of Advent.

DECEMBER 2: It's Cyber Monday. Locate a wish list for a local non-profit agency and purchase items on that list.

DECEMBER 3: It's Giving Tuesday. Give to Women of the ELCA's Katie's Fund (welca.org/donate), so that future generations will have their ministries supported.

December 4: Prepare care packages for college students and

those in the military. Hold them in prayer, especially those who will be separated from family during the holidays.

December 5: Contact the chaplain of your local prison, asking for ways to share the Christmas message with those who are incarcerated. Enlist others to help make Christmas cards for those involved in the criminal justice system.

DECEMBER 6: It's St. Nicholas Day. Research your own community to learn why and where poverty exists. Follow Nicholas's lead and donate to an agency supporting those living in poverty.

DECEMBER 7: Provide seeds, suet and fruits for your local birds. Invite a young person to join you, introducing them to caring for creation in this way.

DECEMBER 8: Shop ELCA Good Gifts (goodgifts.elca.org) for those on your Christmas list.

DECEMBER 9: Focus on eating simpler, lighter meals. Explore vegan options, minimizing your impact on the environment.

DECEMBER 10: After each encounter today, pause to pray for the person you've met or spent time with. Or jot their names down and include them in your bedtime prayers.

DECEMBER 10: Join the Hope for

the Holidays program of Global Refuge (formerly Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service). Go to globalrefuge.com/hope to learn how you can share holiday hope and joy with immigrant families through greeting cards.

DECEMBER 12: Collect non-perishable food items and donate them to your congregation's or community's food pantry. Commit to doing this weekly.

DECEMBER 13: It's St. Lucia's Day. Get creative and think of ways you can bring the light of Christ to those in your community.

DECEMBER 14: Reach out to those who are homebound in your congregation. When visiting, spend time listening to them and sharing a snack that you bring. Explore this ministry of presence.

DECEMBER 15: Volunteer with a local conservation or nature group, learning how to care for God's creation in your community.

DECEMBER 16: Dig into your closet, giving away anything you haven't worn yet in 2024.

DECEMBER 17: Knit or crochet hats, scarves and mittens for a local agency helping those who are experiencing housing insecurity.

DECEMBER 18: Contact your local animal shelter to learn about its needs. Provide food, volunteer to

walk the dogs or fundraise for the shelter.

DECEMBER 19: Reach out to one or two people you know who are grieving. Visit with them, bringing tea and cookies. Listen to their stories. Pray with them.

DECEMBER 20: It's the Winter Solstice and the anniversary of the death of Katharina von Bora Luther. Make a gift to Women of the ELCA's Katie's Fund (welca.org/donate), an endowment that supports leadership development, among other things.

DECEMBER 21: Begin planning to assemble care kits for Lutheran World Relief (lwr.org/kits) during Lent 2025.

DECEMBER 22: What are the signs of women's oppression in your community? Who can you partner with to bring about freedom for all?

DECEMBER 23: Work with a local feeding group to provide meals on Christmas Day. 🌿