

# Advent

A Season for All Generations



This two-part Advent program is for use by small or large groups during the four weeks of Advent. You might use this with your regular study group, or as something completely new, a special Advent Bible study group in your home or congregation.

Each part includes prayer, hymns, Scripture, narration, and discussion. Depending on how much time you want to take for discussion, each part could take from 20 to 45 minutes.

## **PART I** **Advent, the Season**

### **Hymn**

“Each Winter As the Year Grows Older,” *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* #252

**Reader One:** *For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.* (Ecclesiastes 3:1)

**Narrator:** As Lutheran Christians, we have an ancient, multifaceted, precious, often half-buried gem in our churches—our practice of the seasons of the liturgical calendar. Every new year on this calendar begins with Advent, which means “beginning,” “start,” or “approach.” Advent is, wisely enough, not a single day, but a whole season that takes in the space of four Sundays before Christmas. Preparations take time. We moderns, young and old alike, need time to practice the ancient arts of watching and waiting.

In the northern hemisphere, Advent begins counter-intuitively—exactly when the days are getting shorter, the weather is getting colder, and the last bits of autumn’s gardens and flowers are withering on the vine. At night, light streams out of church windows into skies darkened by the early nightfall of daylight saving time, as midweek choir rehearsals and youth and children’s programs take on an extra vibrancy. “We’re getting ready for the Christmas program!” “We’re playing bells on Christmas Eve!”

## Ways to Use This Resource

### Two Meetings

*Two friends might co-host four to 12 neighbors, friends, or relatives. Plan to meet twice, just before or during Advent. Each gathering could combine one part of this program with an activity: Christmas crafts, cookies, or perhaps a simple service project.*

### One-Day Retreat

*A small or large group might choose to arrange this program as a one-day retreat. The group might work through the first part in the morning, enjoy a light luncheon, come back to read the second part, and close with a cookie exchange or service project.*

### Advent Tea or Luncheon

*This program could also be used with an Advent tea or luncheon with the whole congregation.*

The four weeks of Advent are a time of preparation with a dual purpose. We prepare to celebrate Jesus' birth, yes. We look forward to Christmas so much that we are sometimes surprised when our musicians and pastors keep us from singing our favorite carols in church. "Not yet," they say, although we may sneak in a Christmas song as a prelude or an anthem. But it's not time yet for all the Christmas hymns sung by the whole congregation and choir with full gusto. We are waiting, as if for the first time, for the birth of the King.

We are also waiting for the end time. This is why, often also to our surprise and consternation, we liturgical Lutherans find ourselves listening to Old Testament prophecies, John the Baptist's thunderings, and Jesus' own words of warning on these Sundays of Advent. Our church is preparing for the coming of our Lord as a baby in the manger, but also for that day when he will come again "in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end."

**Reader One:** Read Acts 2:17–18.

**Reader Two:** Read Acts 2:19–21.

**Narrator:** Even though this passage of Scripture is usually proclaimed on the liturgical feast of Pentecost in May or June each year, it fits both themes of Advent: the events surrounding the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem as well as the wait and the watch for Christ to come again.

When we go back to read about the "advent" of Jesus' birth in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew, it is striking how intergenerational the stories are. We find daughters who prophesy, young men and old men seeing visions, and very old men and women discovering the realization of their dreams. We will hear more about them in the second part of this program.

## Discussion questions

Read the boxed list on page 3 and then ask these questions to start a discussion. (If your group is large, you may want to break into smaller groups.)

- **Which of these activities would you consider a specifically Christian practice of preparation for the birth of Christ at Christmas?**
- **Do any of these activities correspond to the second theme of Advent, waiting for Christ to come in glory? Which ones? How?**
- **Share one Advent activity or practice that is especially meaningful for you.**



### Activity List for Discussion Questions

Advent wreath	St. Nicholas Day
Advent hymns	Christmas concert
Christmas pageant	Christmas caroling
Service projects	Decorations
Crafts	Advent calendars
Family devotions	Christmas shopping
Clothes shopping	Food and menu planning
Baking	Worship services
Candlelight	Bible study
Advent devotions	Advent retreat
Writing Christmas letters	Giving to church or charity
Sending and receiving Christmas cards	

### Prayer

All-Creating God, we thank you for the gift of traditions and festivities that help us remember the deeper meanings of the holy season of Advent. We pray that you replace our anxieties with the calm and the strength of your Holy Spirit. Fill us with energy, O Spirit, to do those things which you would have us do, and teach us to watch well, O Father God, for the One whose second coming we await, Jesus Christ our Lord, in whose name we pray. Amen.

### Hymn

“O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* #257

## PART II

### Advent for All Generations

#### Hymn

“Savior of the Nations, Come,” *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* #263

**Narrator:** This Advent hymn is one of the oldest hymns we still sing today. It’s believed to have been written by St. Ambrose in the fourth century. Martin Luther translated and wrote a new arrangement of it in the 16th century, during the Reformation.

#### Hymn

“All Earth is Hopeful,” *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* #266

**Narrator:** This Advent hymn is one of the newest songs in our worship book, written in the 1970s (very recent by hymnbook standards!) and taking its place among other hymns that are decades and even centuries older.

The biblical stories surrounding the birth of Jesus have a similar way of enfolding ancient and new voices.

### Zechariah and Elizabeth: A Couple of a Certain Age

**Narrator:** In the Gospel of Luke, the Advent story starts with Zechariah and Elizabeth. We don’t know their age exactly, but in Luke 1:7 we read that “both were getting on in years.” Both were probably middle-aged, maybe older. God gives Zechariah an amazing and terrifying vision: an angel meets him right at the altar. Then God gives Elizabeth something that many would say is more amazing and terrifying yet: the power to conceive.

**Reader One:** Read Luke 1:10–14, 23–25.

### Simeon and Anna: Senior Citizens

**Narrator:** Even older than Zechariah and Elizabeth are Simeon and Anna, mentioned only in the Gospel of Luke near the end of the second chapter. Simeon is old enough to be looking forward to seeing the Messiah “before he dies.” Some Bible scholars note that it is unclear whether the prophet Anna is 84,



91, or even 104 years old, depending on whether she lived as a widow *until* 84 years or *for* 84 years! In any case, this woman still has important work to do for God's Kingdom. She is a prophet who will recognize the newborn King.

**Reader Two:** Read Luke 2:36–38.

## Joseph and Mary: The Groom and the Teenage Bride

**Narrator:** There is no mention of Joseph's age in the Bible. Some traditions have it that he was a widower when he married Mary, but we can also think of Joseph as a young husband, and that he and Mary had children together in the years after Jesus' birth.

Mary herself was almost certainly a young teenager when she and Joseph were engaged. She belongs to the generation of "daughters who shall prophesy" (from Acts 2:17) and is a preview of those upon whom, according to Acts 2:18, "even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy."

## Baby John

**Narrator:** Meanwhile, the youngest generation must have been making its presence known in the background of the biblical story in these few weeks before Christmas. Elizabeth was in her sixth month of pregnancy when Mary conceived Jesus, which means that Jesus' "cousin" John is starting to do six-month-old things about now. He would have been sitting up, reaching out to crawl, and getting his voice in shape for his life's vocation. Was there something interesting already about the way this baby took his baths? Did he reach out to scoop up the water and did he laugh to see it pour through his fingers?

**Reader One:** Read Luke 1:57–58, 67–68, 76–80.

## Pregnant Mary

Of course, central to the Advent story is the baby who is making Mary huge with life in these four weeks before Christmas. Many Christian families throughout the centuries have experienced a special joy in pregnancies, adoption, and caring for babies during the Advent and Christmas seasons. A mom

## How to Use This Resource

*This program can be simple, with all participants sharing in reading the narration and Scripture passages, or it can be more elaborate, with several narrators, readers, and musicians.*

*In either case, Scripture texts should be read from a large, clearly visible Bible, to help visually distinguish the commentary from the Scripture.*

*Make sure to have enough hymnbooks for everyone, and musicians or singers to lead the singing. Not all the Advent hymns called for here will be familiar to everyone, but they are well worth learning. They are all taken from Evangelical Lutheran Worship.*

*The discussion questions are optional—you may choose one or two to discuss, depending on your time constraints. If your group is large, you may want to break into smaller groups for conversation.*

*An idea for larger groups: Part II of this program focuses on people of different generations. You might prepare a slide show of people of different ages from your congregation to be shown during the narration. Or better yet, you might ask people of different generations to stand up or walk across the room as their age group is highlighted. Enlisting help in advance is a great way to make sure that the program is intergenerational!*

*For example, someone might carry a baby across the room during the story of the young John the Baptist. You might feature some of the oldest members of the congregation when talking about Simeon and Anna. Ask a teenage girl or expectant parents to stand up when the narration turns to Mary and Joseph.*

*Simple costuming—shawls or headcoverings—can help people feel less self-conscious about standing up before the group. Complete detailed costumes aren't necessary—just a suggestion of biblical times will be enough.*



or dad might be holding a squirming baby during the candlelight Advent service, or a couple might be hoping that *next* Christmas will be the one when they hang up baby's first Christmas ornament for their adopted child.

**Reader Two:** Read Luke 1:34–37.

## Ancient Angels

**Narrator:** The Advent and Christmas stories are punctuated by angels. An angel struck awe into Zechariah at the altar and he stayed quiet for nine months—and then started a new life chapter, learning how to be a father to the child who would be known one day as John the Baptist.

An angel appeared to a confused Joseph and helped him throw out his cautious plans for the best way to deal with the situation of his pregnant fiancée, Mary.

**Reader One:** Read Matthew 1:18–20.

**Narrator:** And then, a multitude of angels brightened the night sky to announce the news of the birth of the Messiah, leading shepherds to do something shepherds would never normally do: leave all their sheep behind to go and find one little lamb, the baby of Bethlehem.

**Reader Two:** Read Luke 2:9–14.

**Narrator:** Angels are among the oldest of all God's handiwork. Even though we usually see them painted as cherub babies or as graceful young men or women with wings, angels serve the One who is the Ancient of Days, and they've been doing so throughout the billions of years since their creation. Maybe someday a human artist will find a way of painting or sculpting an angel who is thousands and thousands of years old.

Advent means something new is coming. Advent means believing that with God, all things are possible. The Advent story leads into the Christmas story, which leads to the hope of Christ coming again in power to set all things right. This is a story for all ages and all generations.

## Discussion questions

- **Who will be the oldest and who will be the youngest person at your Christmas gathering?**
- **If you are under 50: Do you have (or have you had) older people like Simeon and Anna in your life who have blessed you?**
- **If you are over 50: What new thing have you felt led by God to do when you were well into middle age?**
- **At what age do people start talking about doing or seeing something “before I die”? Simeon gives us permission to talk openly and freely about that question. What one or two things would you like to do or see “before you die”?**
- **What one or two things do you think God most wants you to do or see before you meet Christ in person at the end of time?**

### Prayer

O God who is Ancient of Days, we thank you that you have put us into a world where several generations can live together in community. We thank you for babies, in whom we can see our Lord Jesus. We thank you for young people, who have so many hopes and dreams. We thank you for middle-aged people, who work so hard. We thank you for old people, who bless us with familiar stories and new insights. We thank you for angels, who still startle people with your messages to us today. May this Advent season be filled with hope and joy, peace and new energy for all of us. Help us to trust in your gracious will, to serve your kingdom here on earth, to depend on your ultimate power. Through our Lord Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

### Hymn

“The King Shall Come,” *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* #260

*Did you know?*

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