



Devotions for Advent 2025



Good Shepherd
Anglican Church

SHARING THE GOOD NEWS + LOVING OUR NEIGHBOURS

Dear Siblings in Christ,

Welcome! This devotional consists of twenty small reflections and activities, five for each week of Advent, based on the Revised Common Lectionary readings for year A. The activities within each week do not need to be done in order, so you may complete them in whatever order you wish. I have included instructions for some activity styles which may be unfamiliar (Lectio and Visio Divina) in week 1. You may refer back to them in other weeks for guidance. For activities which require listening to music, a link is included in the song title.

I encourage you to use your favourite Bible translation for any of the Bible readings. If you keep a prayer journal (or would like to start), I commend that practice to you as well.

I pray that these devotions would be a blessing to you during this season of preparation for the coming of Jesus.

Yours in Christ,

Helen Craigen

Week 1: The Coming Salvation (Hope)

Hope:

The first candle on the Advent Wreath traditionally represents hope. One doesn't need to look very far in our world to grasp the desperate need we all have for hope. Without hope, we would be forever slaves to the drudgery of everyday life. Even for those of us who thrive on routine and predictability, knowing that there's something novel and refreshing to look forward to and "shake things up" is nice. So what does hope mean to us in the context of Advent, when we are preparing for the coming of Jesus Christ? This question will centre our focus for this week.

1) Read Psalm 122

This Psalm falls into a category known as the "Psalms of Ascent". These Psalms of Ascent were traditionally sung by the Hebrews as they made pilgrimage up (literally) to Jerusalem for Jewish festivals. As we set out on our own pilgrimage through Advent and towards Christmas, we can be assured that we're in good company, with the saints who have gone before us. The Psalm concludes with a prayer for peace within Jerusalem.

As pilgrims on a journey to the Kingdom of Heaven, how ought we to pray?

What are we hoping God will accomplish within us as individuals and as a community, which will prepare us for our final destination?

2) Read Romans 13:11-14

What does it mean to "put on Christ" or "clothe ourselves with Christ"? Paul mentions abstaining from certain sinful practices, which is good advice, but the Christian life does not consist of merely avoiding bad behaviours. Furthermore, if we're honest, we'll be able to admit that we are incapable of abstaining from sin by our own strength. The previous chapter of Romans begins with Paul appealing to his audience to, *by the mercies of God*, present their bodies as a living sacrifice. We are commanded to be subject to God's mercy. God's mercy is good. When we think about the human authorities we're subjected to, we can't exactly say that they're all good all the time, so the idea of being subjected gets a bit bristly. Yet, when we allow ourselves to be subjected to God's mercy, and present our bodies as a living sacrifice, we can be assured that God will work his ways in and through us, for the good of all humanity and the furtherance of his Kingdom. God will allow us to be clothed with Christ, so that all who see, hear, and interact with us will see, hear, and interact with Christ.

St. Patrick's famous Prayer, the *Lorica*, puts it very concisely:

Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ on my right, Christ on my left, Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down, Christ when I arise, Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me, Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me, Christ in every eye that sees me, Christ in every ear that hears me.

3) Read Matthew 24: 36-44

Throughout history, many have predicted (and been wrong about) the second coming of Jesus. In this passage, Jesus reminds us that we cannot calculate what is only known to the Father, and we are instead to focus on the task at hand: watching, waiting, and (as Jesus will command his disciples after the resurrection) making disciples. Think of a small child anticipating Christmas from the outset of Advent—they know it's coming: Christmas music has been playing in stores for ages, they've been told that they ought to be good so that Santa will come, they know that plans are being made for family and friends to gather and celebrate... Yet, they have little concept of how far away Christmas Day actually is, and until that day arrives, they will incessantly pester to remind you that "it's coming!!!" When you roll your eyes for the 78th time and remind them that Christmas is still 24 days away, they're a bit disappointed at first, but soon go back to buzzing with excitement and anticipation of what is to come.

So, what is Advent, if not a season of waiting, watching, and reminding ourselves and others that Jesus is coming? If we've been doing this Advent thing for many years and have become very familiar with the routine, how can we recover the wonder of an excited small child?

4) Lectio Divina: Isaiah 2:1-5

This is an ancient practice of interacting with the Scripture, led by the Holy Spirit. There are a few steps, but the more you practice, the more comfortable it will become

- 1) Pray before you begin, asking that God will speak to you through the text
- 2) Read through the passage silently or aloud, listening for a word or phrase which stands out to you. Repeat this word or phrase silently a few times.
- 3) Read through the passage again, asking the Holy Spirit to reveal why this word or phrase has stuck out to you, at this time.
- 4) Reflect upon what you have heard. Read the passage again, asking how Christ is calling you to act in light of what has been revealed.
- 5) Journal and/or pray to conclude, thanking God for his presence and revelation.

5) Visio Divina

Literally, “divine seeing”, Visio Divina allows us to encounter the divine through images and icons. As with Lectio Divina, there are a few steps, yet the process will become more familiar as you practice.

- 1) After selecting an image (there is one included on the next page pertaining to this passage), look at it and allow your eyes to remain with the first thing that catches your attention. Focus on this aspect of the image for a few moments, and breathe deeply.
- 2) Now, gaze at the whole image. Take your time, and consider every aspect of the picture.
- 3) Prayerfully consider some or all of the following questions:
 - 1) What thoughts or feelings does this image evoke in you?
 - 2) What aspect of this image first caught your attention? Why? Is there anything that God may want you to notice or pay attention to?
 - 3) Do you imagine yourself somewhere in this image? Where, and why?
- 4) Conclude with prayer, thanking God for his presence and guidance.

Week 2: Foreshadowing: Unexpected Traits of the Messiah and Kingdom (Peace)

Peace: The idea that Christians have to be a certain type of people who look or act a certain way has been the source of much anxiety and discrimination over the centuries. You don't have to BE a certain type of person to be used by God or proclaim the coming of Jesus. In fact, God often uses people and circumstances that conventional wisdom would dismiss as irrelevant. We're going to look into this idea this week.

1) Read Matthew 3:1-12 (Part 1)

John the Baptist is a strange character, by all accounts. Hiking through the wilderness eating locusts and honey (by modern wisdom, maybe quite a good balance of carbs and protein to fuel a long walk), proclaiming repentance, he and his mannerisms, as well as his message would probably just be dismissed by any of us if we were to encounter him today.

Have you ever dismissed someone's message because of their reputation, only to later discover that they were right? How did that change your perception or opinion of that person? What might John the Baptist have to teach us about how we approach and receive people who are different than us?

2) Read Matthew 3:1-12 (Part 2)

John the Baptist has some strong words for the Pharisees and Sadducees, warning them against relying on their ancestry for spiritual inheritance. Just like in the workplace, while nepotism can be handy for getting one's foot in a door, that initial opportunity ought to be followed with establishing one's own merit, separate from the person who got them that break. The Pharisees and Sadducees were very fortunate to belong to a tradition where they were highly educated and zealous for the Lord. Yet, John the Baptist calls them out, suggesting that their position in society isn't going to benefit them in the coming Kingdom—they need to bear fruit.

Have you been relying on others, vocationally or spiritually, to secure a position for you that you might not have been in otherwise?

What would it look like to bear fruit worthy of this position?

3) Lectio Divina - Isaiah 11:1-10 (See instructions in week 1)

4) Song: Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming

When we were first married, living in a dingy basement apartment in Toronto at the height of the pandemic, someone from our church brought us a potted rosebush. It was late fall, and we were renting so we weren't too sure what to do with it, but figured we'd try to keep it alive indoors over the winter while we figured that out. Like most plants that find their way into my possession, it promptly died, and was left to fossilize on the kitchen windowsill until such a time as I grew so tired of looking at this reminder of my failure to adequately nurture that I'd throw it in the compost... Some weeks later, during a particularly challenging and hopeless-feeling period, I was midway through the drudgery of washing dishes when I noticed a green bud on our 'dead' rosebush. I was instantly reminded of this carol.

The story goes, that a monk, centuries ago, noticed a rose beginning to bloom on an otherwise dormant plant in his cell, in the dead of winter, which reminded him of the words of Isaiah: "a shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of its roots." The monk's original words have been translated into many languages and set to many tunes, but the most well-known setting by Michael Praetorius nearly always moves me to tears. *(As an aside, I usually prefer to listen to this carol in German, and had to hunt around for an English version to include here. This one was recorded in Montreal during the pandemic. Choral singing during the pandemic—what a microcosm for the hope in the midst of yuck that Isaiah was talking about!)*

Bonus Activity: If you are able, take a walk outside, and look for signs of life in the midst of the cold, dreary December weather. Pray, thanking God for bringing forth and sustaining life in highly unlikely circumstances.

5) Read Romans 15:4-13

Think back to the time when you first realized that you belong to Christ. Did you "have your house in order," or were you painfully aware of your sins and shortcomings? Most of us, if we're honest, likely leaned more towards the latter. We may have grown up hearing that Jesus died to save sinners, and God's grace is for everyone, and yet, we often still think of ourselves as the exception—how could, why would Jesus love *me*? At some point along the way, we come to the understanding that he does, and not because of anything we've done to deserve his love. How, then, has that impacted how we interact with others?

Week 3: Joy, Restoration, Redemption (Joy)

The third Sunday of Advent, Gaudete, is the “pink candle” Sunday. I read recently that this is supposed to represent a “brightening” of the ordinary penitential violet—a reminder to rejoice in the Lord’s imminent coming in the midst of our repentance and preparation and anticipatory things. We made an Advent wreath at our house a few years ago with a set of battery-operated candles which can individually change colour via a remote. The purple ones seemed to fade a bit over the first two weeks, as their batteries slowly died. We didn’t realize how much they had faded, however, until Gaudete, when it was time to light that pink candle. The pink was indistinguishable from the faded purple. We put new batteries in the purple candles and our colours were liturgically accurate again. But these purple candles that faded into pink got me wondering about how our penitence makes room for joy...

1) Read Luke 1:46b-55

Joy is risky. For much of history, in much of the world, reciting the Magnificat has been banned by various governing authorities. Widespread sentiments of taking the powerful down from their thrones, lifting up the lowly, and sending the rich away empty could surely lead to an insurrection of some kind, right? People holding power generally want to be ruling over a subdued and compliant populace, so you can see why they’d want to nip all these ideas of rebellion in the bud. Mary, however, (as well as the psalmist she is quoting, see Psalm 146) displays a profound degree of courage here. She boldly proclaims to herself, Elizabeth, and anyone else within earshot, that her God is merciful to those who fear him, and will not stand idly by while humans engage in the abuse of power. She remembers aloud how God has been near to and provided for his people throughout their history.

How have you experienced God being near to and providing for you in your history?

What would it look like for you to share that story to encourage someone else?

2) Lectio Divina: Isaiah 35:1-10 (See instructions in week 1)

3) Read James 5:7-10

I’ve often heard it said that we ought to never pray asking God for more patience—because then God will certainly provide us with ample opportunity to test, stretch, and grow our patience, which can be quite frustrating... So, it seems fitting that we explore this theme of patience during Advent, a time of waiting and preparation. In this part of the world, at this time of year, we’re a bit removed from the crop metaphor that James is using here. Yet, we can appreciate going out into a garden, seeing a nearly ripe tomato that we’ve been diligently

watering for weeks, and knowing that soon and very soon, it will be ripe and ready for a delicious sandwich or salad—but not yet. The person growing the tomato has the advantage of seeing the progress and growth over time, and having an approximation of when it will be ready to eat. They have time to plan a menu to showcase their fruit's flavours, and gather the other ingredients required to let it shine, all while continuing to care for the plant so that it continues to thrive until that fruit is ready for harvest.

As we wait patiently (or not so patiently) for Jesus, how are we caring for ourselves and our neighbours, to ensure that we are all prepared for his coming? We don't have quite the same advantage of the tomato farmer, in that we can't make an approximation on a timeline of Jesus' return. How does not having an end-date, so to speak, affect our ability to be patient, and how we conduct ourselves while we wait?

4) Song: In the Bleak Midwinter

The daylight hours are short, the weather is cold and damp, nature seems to have adopted a monochromatic colour scheme... It can be very easy to fall into a state of hopelessness when we feel bombarded by darkness. The first stanza of this carol sets a familiar stage: all is, well, bleak. Then, we are reminded that that doesn't matter—our God is not bound by our concepts or visions of heaven and earth, and they shall indeed “flee away when he comes to reign”. I've always enjoyed how this particular recording encapsulates the essence of this idea, musically speaking. The first verse begins softly and unassuming, then abruptly changes to a very majestic and triumphant tone at the onset of the second verse. God is too big to be held by heaven and earth, and certainly our ideas about how they ought to function. We can find enormous joy in this, even in the midst of literal and metaphorical darkness.

5) Activity: Sharing Joy

This is a bit of a choose-your-own-adventure activity, meant to engage us in sharing the joy of Jesus' coming with those around us. This is a really difficult time of year for many people, and little gestures of kindness and reminders of community can make a big impact to someone who may be silently struggling. Here are some ideas: share some of your holiday baking with a neighbour, invite a friend over to share a meal, meet a family member for coffee—whatever is suited to your lifestyle and budget. As you prepare to meet your person, pray that God would allow you to be a gentle bearer of Jesus' hospitality and joy. Approach your meeting with an openness to listen, and a willingness for your conversation to be led by the Spirit.

Week 4: Fulfillment of Promise (Love)

Love. A priest once invited the children of her parish to the front of the church one Sunday morning, as she did every week, for a brief moment with them before their dismissal to Sunday School. It was the fourth Sunday of Advent, and the candle of love was about to be lit. She asked the children if they knew what this week's candle was supposed to represent, and was met with silence. She gave them a hint: "it starts with L". "Lions!" Said a five-year-old girl, rather quickly, as the congregation laughed and her parents went red in the face. "Not lions..." continued the priest, reining in the conversation. Yet she silently pondered the girl's answer. Unbeknownst to the priest, the girl's parents had been reading her the Chronicles of Narnia, fuelling her current lion fascination. These were favourite stories of the priest, however, and she immediately recalled a famous and profound description of Aslan from *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*: "Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you..."

Love, in the Christian sense, is far from safe. It requires vulnerability, risk, and sacrifice which we don't often like to focus on. This week, we're going to explore some of these dimensions of love, as well as others, while we reflect on the act of love that was God coming to earth in human likeness.

1) Reflections on Biblical ideas of love

As Christians, sometimes we tend to think of love in extremes. God becoming incarnate in the person of Jesus, to fully know and embody the extent of human suffering and death for us, was an incredible act of love. Scripture tells us that laying down one's life for one's friends is the greatest form of love (John 15:13). Most of us, however, will likely not be called to literally die for our friends, as Jesus did. Laying down our lives as an act of love can be a more subtle, ordinary action. It can look like putting down your phone to play with a child, going slightly out of your way to offer someone a ride, or visiting someone in the hospital. Each of these actions states "I value you and your personhood above my own comfort, convenience and routine." 1 Corinthians 13 is known as the "love chapter" of the Bible, and gives us a number of examples of things that love 'is' and 'is not'. Read through it, and note anything that strikes or surprises you.

Bearing these things in mind, how will you demonstrate God's love to others this season?

2) Visio Divina - Isaiah 7:10-16 (See instructions in week 1, image on last page)

3) Read Matthew 1:18-25

Matthew sets the stage for Jesus' birth with Joseph as the main actor, rather than Mary. Joseph, upon hearing of Mary's pregnancy, plans to dismiss her quietly in order to demonstrate that his love and devotion to God is greater than his love and devotion to Mary, as well as to not expose her to public disgrace. Win-win, he figured he was doing the best thing in a really difficult situation and there would be none the wiser...until his purpose is thwarted by an angel of the LORD who commands him to stay with Mary, for they are both part of God's plan to save humanity from their sins, as the prophets had foretold.

Have you ever experienced God changing your meticulously-made plans?

What was that experience like for you—did you willingly accept the changes and go on the newly-charted course, or were you more skeptical or resistant toward change?

How did it impact the way that you plan, or feel about your plans?

4) Read Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

“Restore us, O God, let your face shine, that we may be saved.”

Some variation of this refrain occurs three times in this psalm. Generally, especially in poetry, this means that it ought to be something we should pay attention to. The psalmist's bold command to God, “Restore us”, has two primary functions: Restore us, as a group, to You, and restore us to one another.

Are there aspects of your life that need to be restored to God?

Are there people in your life to whom you need to be restored?

Pray, asking God to show you what that restoration would look like, and what actions you should take.

5) Song: O Come O Come, Emmanuel

This week is about diving in and pondering Isaiah's prophecy of the coming of Emmanuel, as well as Joseph's encounter with the angel who announced this promise coming to fruition. Listen, now, to the words of this familiar carol. Assuming this is your final activity for the week, how has your understanding of them been enriched or changed? If not, I encourage you to come back to this carol and continue to reflect as the week progresses.



Ecce Virgo Conciplies, Joseph Nuttgens,
St. Etheldreda's Church, London

<https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=56271>