

Advent—Christmas—Epiphany  
Devotional Booklet  
2010





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## ADVENT – CHRISTMAS – EPIPHANY

*Rev. Emily Berman D'Andrea*

Come, hope, expect, wait—these are all words that help to describe the season of Advent. The word Advent when translated from the Latin, means *coming* or *arrival* and it describes the season that immediately precedes Christmas. There are four Sundays in Advent which all fall before Christmas Day. The season of Christmas lasts for twelve days. The twelve days of Christmas begin on December 26 and end on January 6, Epiphany. Epiphany is a transliteration of a Greek verb and means manifestation or appearance. On Epiphany the church proclaims Christ Epiphanes. This day marks the first manifestation or appearance of Jesus to the Gentiles (the magi).

During the Advent season when we light our Advent candles and open up the doors on our Advent calendars, we are preparing for something wonderful that is to come. We are preparing not only for Christmas and the birth of Jesus and the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles but we are also preparing for the second coming—the coming of Christ as Judge at the last day. Advent is the celebration of the promise that Christ will bring an end to all that is contrary to the ways of God.

That is indeed something for which we need to get ready! We prepare and we wait and hope with great expectation for the One who is to come—and that One is not just anyone, that One is the Christ who will bring an end to all that is contrary to the ways of God!

This book is a tool to help us prepare, wait and hope with great expectation. The readings listed are the readings from the lectionary. Our prayer is that this book will help all of us to experience the hope, delight and wonder of Advent, Christmas and Epiphany. Share it with your family or with a friend or use it for your personal devotional time as you prepare and as you wait.

*Wait for the Lord whose day is near.*

*Wait for the Lord keep watch take heart.*

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SbchHpbJxV4>

## FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Rachel Jones

*Light one candle of the Advent wreath*

*Read Isaiah 2:1-5*

In the last days, there will be no more of *this*. Our fighting weapons—our words, our money, our swords-- will be transformed for the purpose of new creation. The word will be clear and we will rest while the Lord settles all the disputes we tangle our minds into.

Can you believe it?

God will be exalted. We will need no proof or apology. All the nations will be drawn to the glory. No time to think up new wars. No time to build our own mountains of things.

Can you believe it?

Today, there is only this: injustices hidden underneath fancy new sheens, and grace, hidden, peeking from under shadows. Today, there is darkness. Yet, it is *today* that we walk in the light of faith.

Come, let us walk. Come, let us believe.

The light is not yet full-- the single candle, the light of a promise. It is a promise of more light, a promise of mercy and justice. It is a reminder that the kingdom is

not just to be waited on but to be brought, that when we light our candles we are manifesting now the hope to come.

Walk in the light.

We know the ending already. People will come and pursue God. As we wait in anticipation for new birth, let us make an effort to be light. Where will you be illumination this season?

As the days grow shorter, think of the Israelites. Think of their struggles of holding onto a God who is unpredictable. Think of Mary, knowing that her role was to prepare and make way for the Lord to become human. Think of the shepherds, who will find miracles very soon. Hear Isaiah, who never saw the promise come to fullness but believed. Prepare yourself for earth-shattering grace.

*Prayer*

Awesome God, bringer of hope,  
lead us on your path  
that we may be light in this time of darkness.  
Let this candle remind us  
of your coming presence  
and of the vision  
which we live into each day as your people.  
Free us from our swords and spears  
and teach us to exist in your peace alone.  
Amen.

## SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT

Roland McElroy

*Light two candles of the Advent Wreath.*

*Read Isaiah 11: 1-10*

Waiting.

Anticipating.

It's hard to do sometimes, especially when we're told the something we're waiting for will be wonderful. The Israelites were anticipating something *more* than wonderful. They could recite from memory the prophesy of Isaiah and spoke of it often: There is one coming on whom "the Spirit of the Lord will rest, the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord." *Isaiah 11:2*

Is it any wonder they could not wait to meet and hear the Messiah in the flesh?

The scriptures also promised the Coming One will "rule from sea to sea and will endure as long as the sun." *Psalms 72:5*

Anticipation was in the air – and that is an understatement!

In a popular song from the 1980s, the impatient artist sings, "*Anticipation – is keepin' me waitin'.*" The people of Israel anticipated the arrival of Emmanuel for a very long time and, no doubt, were tired of "waitin'."

Today, we are reminded of their impatience when we sing, *O Come, O Come Emmanuel*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0nEs0eUZNbg&feature=related>, “*Bind all peoples in one heart and mind; bid envy, strife and discord cease; fill the whole world with heaven’s peace.*” Those words, of course, were written long after that first Christmas but one can imagine the people of Israel expressing similar sentiments to each other as they waited impatiently – but excitedly.

Many were so ready to greet the Savior that they thought John the Baptist might be the Messiah. “No,” John told them, “but He *is* coming – and soon. The one coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not worthy to carry His sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.” *Matthew: 3:11*

At this point, the anticipation must have been palpable.

John knew their waiting would soon be over and he urged them to prepare their lives to receive their Savior. In this season of advent, we celebrate the First Coming of Jesus Christ while reminding ourselves to prepare our lives for a Second Coming – a Second Advent!

*Prayer*

Our Father,  
As we light these candles  
on this second Sunday in Advent,  
let John’s message strike a healing chord  
in our hearts,

reminding us  
there is none so lost they cannot be found,  
none so sinful they cannot be saved,  
none so hopeless their life cannot be changed.  
And may John's message remind us  
that this day is the best day  
to prepare our lives for the Second Advent;  
for truly,  
the anticipation of *that* event has already begun.  
Amen.



## THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT

Rachel Russell

*Light three candles of the Advent Wreath*

*Read Matthew 11:2-11*

I can imagine the crowd around Jesus, and his disciples, being very quiet at the first part of this story. Disciples of John the Baptist have come to Jesus and asked him outright, “Are you the one?” The one who will deliver them from the Romans, who will make Israel rich, who will bring justice—or some other “one”. I imagine that all the listeners around Jesus went very still. Was it time to arise with cheers? Was it time to hide from trouble?

So Jesus tells them to describe what they see and hear. The blind can see. Those “with feeble knees” can walk. The poor have good news. Don’t be horrified or shocked—offended—says Jesus. Be blessed.

I can imagine John’s disciples sighing because this wasn’t a yes or no answer. Except that to the listening Jews who knew the scriptures, it was a pretty clear answer if you had ears to hear and eyes to see. God brings healing, like making a desert bloom.

So John’s disciples go away and Jesus sees the still crowd around him. This is a big moment. These are his people now, confused and hopeful. They are wondering, “Who is John the Baptist that Jesus answers his question?” Perceiving in his heart all their

questions and uncertainties, Jesus pulls the answers from them. He knows that nearly all his followers went to the desert to see John and to be baptized. "What did you see?" he asks them.

Probably the crowd is still quiet. Maybe they remember the strange desert man, half-dressed, with such a burning passion for change, for transformation. Okay, says Jesus to their scared silence, Did you see someone who would change his mind if threatened with death? Now no doubt there were a few chuckles from the crowd, maybe a few shouts of no. Heads shook. Okay, says Jesus, so you saw someone dressed in soft clothes, someone rich. Now the laughter is louder. That's not what they saw. Jesus asks a third time, "So what did you see?"

To which no doubt the crowd shouted back, "A prophet!"

Yes, says Jesus. A prophet and more, one who prepares the Holy Way for God's people, a man to honor and respect. John deserves all the praise they want to give him, and deserves Jesus answering his questions; yet if anyone else had asked, Jesus would have answered the same. He didn't answer for John's sake. He answered for our sake.

Who is the one with the power to heal the blind, the deaf, the lame, and the mute?

*Prayer*

O joyful people of God  
prepare to dance with upraised arms,  
strong legs,  
loud and joyful shouts of praise!

O joyful people of God  
prepare to sing and share  
what Jesus did,  
what was  
seen and heard!



## FOURTH WEEK OF ADVENT

Rob Hunter

*Light four candles of the Advent Wreath.*

*Read Matthew 1:18-25*

“I see you shiver with antici.....pation”, as the Rocky Horror Picture Show song says. We all know that feeling of restless waiting for something great, something longed-for, and something awesome—whether it’s a new movie, a visit to a famous place, or...Immanuel? But how often, when the big day arrives, does it turn out to be a disappointment? Not so great after all, or at least not what we expected. Isaiah wrote in Chapter 7, verse 14: “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.” The Jewish people waited, prayed for, anticipated Immanuel. As Christians, we see this verse as a prophecy of the birth of Jesus, but Jews--then and now--would not. Many Jews were looking for a king to come in glory and smite their enemies. But there’s another way Jewish tradition has looked at this passage: the birth of any child is a miracle, and should be to us a sign that God is with us, even in times of trouble such as faced Israel when that prophecy was uttered. To people looking for a divine hero like David, the prophet talks about women and children. Listen to this version of the familiar “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DPHh3nMMu-I&feature=related>, which strikingly captures that

feeling of anticipation.

Hundreds of years later, a simple working man was, we can assume, looking forward to marriage to a respectable Jewish girl, and raising sons to follow in his business. Instead, he gets a pregnant bride, a son not his, and he doesn't even get to choose the name. This flies in the face of more Jewish law and tradition than we can easily imagine today. For example, strict Jewish law forbade illegitimate sons to marry or learn Torah. As Matthew tells us, Joseph could have denounced Mary, but decided just to send her away quietly, an act of mercy. But God said no—take her as your wife, and raise the boy. Oh, and here is his name—Jesus. And Joseph does it. Joseph never speaks in this passage; he is silent, and he obeys. In all the Christmas focus on the birth of the boy Jesus, let alone the cultural excitement and anticipation of the big day, it's too easy to miss what has happened here. Matthew gives us the core of his gospel in these few verses: God acts as He will, Immanuel is here, it's not what you expected—when God acts, it's almost never what we expect—obey the heart of the Law, not its letter.

*Prayer*

O God,  
may we, like Joseph,  
hear when you speak to us,  
listen when you surprise us,  
and obey your will when you call us, not our own.  
Through Jesus Christ, Amen.

## CHRISTMAS EVE

Nancy Mitchell

*Light all the candles on the Advent Wreath.*

*Read Luke 2:1-20*

The story begins simply. The Emperor ordered that a census be taken, which required everyone within the Roman Empire to go back to their hometowns to be registered. Joseph traveled the approximately 80 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem, accompanied by Mary, his fiancée. When they arrived, the town of Bethlehem was full to bursting with others there for the census, so there wasn't a spare room in town. Fortunately someone offered them the use of a stable where they could stay temporarily, and there Mary had her baby, Jesus.

It's just a simple story about two ordinary people.

There's Mary, a young woman in the later stages of pregnancy, traveling with a man to whom she's engaged but hardly knows. She's separated from her family for the first time, undoubtedly lonely and homesick. She knows she's going to be having this baby by herself, no mother, no friends, no one to help with the birth, to comfort her, to look after the child so Mary could rest. Understandably, she's anxious about what is to come, frightened even.

And with her there's Joseph, a carpenter, unsure of whether he's doing the right thing in accepting Mary as his wife, forced to endure the disapproval of family

and friends for not putting her aside once she told him she was pregnant. After all, they're not married yet. Was it really God's will that he marry her?

Then something astonishing happens. An angel appears to the shepherds in the hills outside of Bethlehem, proclaiming the birth of the Messiah and telling them where to find Him. Frightened though they are, the shepherds do as the angel commands them and descend into town, where they do indeed find the newborn baby. The shepherds are thrilled at the sight, and immediately start telling everyone they see about this amazing event.

Here's where the simple story about two ordinary people ends and the unbelievable, the miraculous begins! God in the person of a baby, a baby born just like one of ours, bursts upon the scene, and nothing has ever been the same since! Every day, every night, God comes to us, ordinary people like Mary and Joseph, like the shepherds, and asks us to welcome the unbelievable, the miraculous into our lives – and when we do, we will never be the same again.

*Prayer*

Infant King,  
you burst into our lives when we least expect it.  
You turn them into something unbelievable,  
something miraculous.

As Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds  
did that holy night so long ago,  
we ask that you open our hearts to you  
that we may welcome your extraordinary love  
into our ordinary lives. Amen.

## CHRISTMAS DAY

Bruce Douglass

*Light all the candles of the Advent Wreath.*

*Read: Isaiah 52: 7-10*

*Psalm 98*

*Hebrews 1: 1-4*

*John 1: 1-14*

All but one of the passages in the readings for this day have a triumphal tone. They all celebrate, in slightly different ways, the "marvelous things" (Psalm 98) God has done, and they exult in God's glory. In that respect they are very much in keeping with the spirit of Advent as most of us know it--especially Christmas Day itself. Reflecting on these passages, one can almost hear the sound of Handel's Hallelujah Chorus in the background.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=76RrdwElnTU>

The most familiar of these passages--and the one most commonly associated with the birth of Christ--has a rather different tone, however. Even though the famous prologue to the Gospel of John obviously conveys a message that is intended to warm our hearts and lift our spirits, it approaches the subject in a significantly different way. Appearing in a Gospel that itself contains no story of the birth of the Christ-child, it offers what amounts to a meditation on the meaning and significance of the whole life and death of Jesus in the space of a few remarkable lines.

Those lines evoke a powerful image: light coming into darkness. Light coming into darkness and dispelling it. What comes to mind is the candles that often illuminate our churches at evening services, especially on Christmas eve. But the light of which this passage speaks is not just any light; it is the "true" light that "enlightens everyone." And the darkness of which it speaks is not just the absence of light; it is a force that has the capacity to resist and even "overcome" the light. The author assures us that this force has not succeeded in extinguishing the light (a reference to the Cross, presumably), to be sure. But the passage also suggests that even though the light has effectively entered and changed the world, it has not done so to such extent that it has eliminated the darkness, which continues to have power over people's lives. So even as we celebrate the extraordinary event that the coming of the "true light" in our midst represents, we are reminded of the troubling fact that this event set in motion a seeming never-ending struggle.

*Prayer*

Good and gracious God,  
source of all that is truly good in our lives,  
we give thanks on this day  
in particular for the greatest of all your gifts to us—  
the gift of your Son.  
We praise you for that gift,  
which has indeed brought light into our lives  
and dispelled the darkness  
in which we otherwise would find ourselves,  
and we pray

that we may always conduct our lives  
in ways that reflect our gratitude  
for this most precious gift.

These things we pray in His name.



## FIRST SUNDAY OF CHRISTMAS

Jim Scopeletis

*Light all the candles of the Advent Wreath.*

*Read: Isaiah 63:7-9*

*Psalm 148*

*Hebrews 2:10-18*

*Matthew 2:13-23*

“’Twas the day after Christmas and all through the house, from nooks far and near, reminders of plenty and holiday cheer!” True—for those of us who are able to bask in the afterglow of family ties renewed and the joy of watching our children as they open their treasures on Christmas morning. And yet there are many others who, in a cruel twist of fate, find this most joyful of “holy-days” one of the most painful days of the year. How can such a dichotomy exist, we wonder—when we take a moment to ponder this troublesome reality? It’s a fair question, I think, but one I won’t try to answer. I raise it merely as a reminder of our own blessedness and the responsibilities such a gift entails.

Today also happens to be the first Sunday of Christmas. What exactly does that (or should that) mean to us? The Lectionary suggests four Scripture readings to enlighten us. In the first, Psalm 148, we find a Psalm devoted almost entirely to praise. It’s an exhortation—a command, really—for everything and everybody on the face of the earth to sing praises to God whose name alone is to be exalted. The second

reading, from Isaiah, reminds the children of Israel of God's enduring loving-kindness, and establishes His oneness with them. They are made to understand that God not only shares in their afflictions, but also is the Savior who will carry and support them all their days.

The third and fourth passages from the New Testament (Matthew 2: 13-23, Hebrews 2: 10-18) zero in on the person of Jesus—the historical Jesus—personally known by both writers: Matthew directly and the writer to the Hebrews indirectly. Matthew tracks Jesus' birth and subsequent escape from Herod who is intent on killing Him, and views these events through the prism of Old Testament prophecies fulfilled. In contrast, the writer to the Hebrews builds an unassailable case establishing Jesus' humanity, His brotherhood with humankind, and His ultimate victory over death that gives us victory with Him.

Disparate as these passages may appear on first reading, there is a unifying thread that connects them all. I believe that thread is love. Throughout the Old and New Testaments, we are shown examples of God's unconditional love: Manna from heaven? Parting of the Red Sea? The birth of Jesus? The miracles? What are these but gifts from God, freely given, that demonstrate His abiding love. **God's love is the heart of everything.** A love that surrounds us, protects us, upholds us, comforts and heals us. Quoting a favorite hymn, His is the love "*that wilt not let me go.*" And because of that love, we can, by example, love one another.

As Christians, what are we to do we do with God's love? As I see it, we have three choices: We can reject it. We can acknowledge its existence but ignore its presence. Or we can embrace it in gratitude, and live our lives to the fullest in the fullness of its power. With this in mind, let us so live that every new day becomes the First Sunday of Christmas!

*Prayer*

Almighty God,  
you have shed upon us  
the new light of your incarnate Word.  
May this light, enkindled in our hearts,  
shine forth as love  
as we live in the fullness of your love.  
Through Jesus Christ. Amen.



## SECOND SUNDAY OF CHRISTMAS

Jerry Hopkins

*Light all the candles of the Advent Wreath.*

*Read John 1:10-18*

The shepherds have gone. The angels are back in the heavens. In one short week, the lectionary introduces to broader context of what we have experienced as Christmas. John brings us face to face with cold hard truth of the Christ event—the world goes on as if nothing special happened.

The creative Word of God was in the world, had always been in the world. In fact, the world came into being through this Word. In the beginning, God brooded over the chaos and called forth through his Word, saying “Let there be...” heavens, earth, life-- and it happened. John identifies this creative Word as Jesus Christ. John, had witnessed this creative love of God as the person Jesus Christ in Jesus’ ministry of preaching, healing, and gathering the little ones to receive his creative power.

John brings us face to face with the reality that God and his Word, Jesus Christ, confront the world, but God’s very creation does not know him. More than this, Jesus Christ, came to God’s covenant people, and Yahweh’s own people would have nothing to do with him. Jesus Christ, the Word, was born as a human. He lived among God’s covenant people Israel. As Moses had delivered the law to Israel, Jesus delivered

grace and truth. He revealed in his life and actions the glory of God's love and a glimpse at the very face of God. He made God known wherever he found himself. He was not recognized but by few as the Son of God.

A week after Christmas we are faced with the reality that for most of the world, the echo's of *Hark the Herald Angel's Sing*, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wA\\_YmII8MYw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wA_YmII8MYw), is not resounding in their ears, nor is the miracle of God's love appearing in the person of a small baby stirring their souls, nor is the experience of Immanuel (God with us), felt in the fellowship of our congregation at this joyous season, motivating their actions. As John says, "No one has ever seen God." Most of the world has not recognized Jesus Christ, the Word, in its midst. On this second day of this New Year, we are faced with the reality that God has for so long faced—most of the world knows him not.

Confronted with this reality, we who have experienced the glory of Jesus Christ, who have received grace upon grace, who have felt the love of God creating now possibilities in our lives, who have experienced new life in him, are called to show each person we meet this Jesus Christ. We who have had God made known to us are to witness to this Jesus Christ so that others may know grace and love, so that all may see the face of God. Likewise, we as a church, the Body of Christ, are called to make God's grace and love known in our community, our nation, and our world. We are now to be God's Word.

*Prayer*

God the creator,  
breathe into us your creative Word,  
that we may love in such a way  
that new possibilities are created  
for those who have no hope.  
Give us your power to be graceful  
so that our kindness and attentiveness  
may cause the presence of Jesus Christ to be known  
in our meetings with family, friends,  
co-workers, neighbors,  
during this coming year.  
In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.



## EPIPHANY OF THE LORD

Bob and Cathy Gaugler

*Light all the candles of the Advent Wreath*

*Read Isaiah 60:1-6*

*Psalm 147:12-20*

*Ephesians 1:3-14*

*Matthew 2:1-12*

Epiphany celebrates the revelation to the Gentiles, personified by the Wise Men, that Jesus is the Christ, the Savior of the World. Through this Jesus, all are now to be included in the great Covenant God first made with Abraham and his descendants, promising that He will be their God, and they will be His people. This remains the central promise of our faith. In Genesis, God told Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in heaven, and that through them all the world shall be blessed. Our Epiphany readings give us a path to follow as God extends this blessing to the entire world.

The opening verses of Psalm 72 ask God to grant the King all of the righteousness, intention, perseverance and judgment needed to support and care for the people. As a result, in verses 10 to 14, the rulers of the world will then render the King gifts, tribute, and service in recognition of these extraordinary capabilities he has received from the Lord, the God of Israel. As a chosen people, Israel and its leaders are called upon to act differently and show the world the way that God wants us to live.

In Isaiah, Chapter 60, the people of Israel, lost in exile, are told by the prophet that their time has come. They are told that a world in darkness will look to them for the light of salvation because of what God has visibly given to them: their knowledge and relationship with Him. The prophet foretells of the coming of all nations to Israel, bearing gifts of frankincense and gold, because through them the Redeemer will come.

The second chapter of Matthew tells the well-known story of the visit of the Wise Men, fulfilling Isaiah's prophesy and showing, by the recognition of the kings of the world, that this child has a special role to play in the world – one far beyond the place and nature of his humble birth.

Finally, in Ephesians, Paul describes how he has been given a special revelation, a commission of God's grace to extend the covenant relationship of God and the Israelites to the Gentiles, that is, to the whole world. Paul says that through the gospel, the eternal purpose of God has been carried out and Gentiles have become "fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise."

*Prayer*

Dear God,  
we give thanks for the Christmas gift of your Son ...  
and for the Wise Men.  
In following their star,  
they not only fulfilled the ancient prophecies,

they revealed the magnitude of your gift  
to all the peoples of the world.  
Give us their vision and guide us  
as we continue to follow the Christmas star. Amen

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