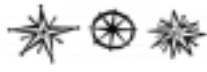
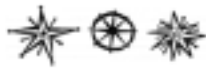


The Coming of Christ



Advent

Time to Hope

How desperately we need Advent! Not only do we long for light in the darkness of mid-winter, but the lifeless landscapes of winter are also reflected in the lifeless landscapes of our own lives: rumblings of war, daily news reports of death and violence, images of burning buildings, our own self-absorption and desire to disengage from it all.

Into this cacophony of brokenness comes Advent's grace, the hope that God will come and the promise that God is with us now and always. Advent time reminds us of our human yearnings for "God time," for knowing God's presence, for knowing God's coming in human form to offer our wounded lives the healing power of resurrection. In this season of hope, there is the quiet reminder that everything—from Christmas decorating to the prophetic words that echo across the centuries—contains the power to awaken us to the true work of this sacred season—the transformation of the world, the reformation of our hearts.

These resources can help us know Advent as a time to hope:

Advent Blessings, a beautiful little collection of Advent reflections and prayers by Edward Hayes, can be used at mealtimes. (Forest of Peace Publishing)

The lighted Advent wreath on our tables is a visual reminder of holy time. It brings light in the darkness, marks the passing of the days, and reminds us that the whole world waits with longing for the coming of God.

The Advent wreath dates back to ancient celebrations of the winter solstice – that time in the year when the sun reaches its southern most point in the heavens and the days are the darkest and most gloomy.

Because they longed for the return of the sun's light and life, the ancients stopped all usual activity, sacrificed the use of their wagon wheels and hung them up, festooned with lights and greens, in their celebration halls.



There they awaited the return of their sun-god, thinking of the warmth and life he brought. Celebrations culminated in the "nativity" of the sun – the turning point of the year.

As Christians, we use the same meaningful custom to anticipate the feast of light and life: the nativity of the Savior. We add one light on the wreath for each Sunday in Advent. We think of the darkness after Adam's sin and watch the growing hope and light as the prophets and the Virgin help us prepare for His saving birth.



Hasten the Kingdom, Praying the O Antiphons of Advent by Mary Winifred is a compilation of prayers, images, and time for silence to reflect on the meaning of Advent. (Liturgical Press)

Listen to two talks called **Preparing for Christmas with Richard Rohr**. Rohr invites us to focus our expectation and anticipation on “the adult Christ, the cosmic Christ” who challenges us to conversion and new life. (St. Anthony Messenger Press)

The video, **Advent: A Time to Hope**, invites us to see and experience the rhythms of this season liturgically—in actions like Christmas shopping and card writing, and the hoping that is part of family life. (Twenty-Third Publications)

Christmas

Grace Upon Grace



More than anything else, Christmas is the revelation of God’s excessive, extravagant love. The incarnation of God in human flesh is the great exchange—God taking on our humanity in Christ even as we, in our human-ness, are made “bearers of God.” God with us. The Word become flesh. The Kingdom of God here and now. The servant Christ who will embrace death and suffering on our behalf, pouring himself out for the life of the world. This God who comes to us is Jesus the Christ, peace-maker, pain-bearer, life-giver, the one who establishes justice and loves righteousness. In the grace that is God in Jesus Christ, WE are graced with the overwhelming love of God and invited to bear Christ to the world, to be little Christs—food and drink, hope and healing, for one another.

The following resources can help reveal the extravagant love of God in Christ—grace upon grace:



The Overwhelming Love of God, a video by Brennan Manning, illustrates the outrageous love of God, a love that leads to action. Manning’s compelling and passionate witness to God’s love is a word of grace to all who view it. (Seraphim Communications)

One Christmas Day several years ago, our family took a turn serving the meal at the local homeless shelter. It wasn’t our typical Christmas dinner but for each of us, it was a powerful reminder of what it means to be food and drink for one another. Christmas always provides opportunities for giving, for being with one another, for truly “bearing Christ to the world.”

Listen to John Shea's Christmas tapes, **Behold the Vulnerable God and the Spiritual Center of Christmas**, both of which explore themes in Matthew and Luke through contemporary and ancient stories. (ACTA Publications)



For Advent, Christmas and Epiphany, Gertrud Mueller Nelson's **To Dance with God** is a book worthy of our time. Nelson helps us see the rituals, symbols, and ceremony of the Christmas season so that our celebrating can be authentic and revelatory of God's presence in the coming of Jesus. (Paulist Press)



Epiphany

Transformation of the World

If we can prevail against the customs of our time—taking the calendar of the church year as the lens it's meant to be—we will celebrate all twelve days of Christmas. Our cultural bent for “jumping the gun”—decorating trees and homes, hosting Christmas parties and holding concerts and pageants in November and early December—has left us so exhausted that by December 26th or 27th, Christmas literally is “over.” We need look no further than our own neighborhoods where Christmas trees lie brown and broken at curb sides and trash cans overflow with empty boxes and torn paper.



But on January 5, we come to Twelfth Night and the Feast of the Epiphany. It's our final great day for celebrating the mystery of God's presence in human history. Epiphany is about light, the light of the world, Jesus the Christ who brings light into darkness, hope and healing to a suffering world. It's a time for shouting to all the world that the Messiah has come among us, that God is in our midst. It's a time for proclaiming the Son of Righteousness, the one who calls us to the transforming work of justice and mercy, peacemaking, “Christ-making” so that—again—we ourselves become little Christs in order that a wounded world may know Christ in and through us.

These resources can help us live the meaning of Epiphany:

O Marvelous Exchange: Daily Reflections for Christmas and Epiphany by John McIlhon is a small book of reflections on the mystery of Christ's incarnation—not for answers to the question “what are we to do” but with light for the question “what are we to be?” (Liturgical Press)

In many European countries, Epiphany was marked by a ritual or custom of blessing a family's home. A prayer like Gertrud Mueller Nelson's might be used:



Bless, O Lord, this household and family and allow all of us who live here to find in it a shelter of peace and health. Inspire each of us in this family to develop our individual talents and to contribute wisdom and good works for the benefit of the whole. Make our house a haven for us all and a place of warmth and caring for all our friends who come to visit us. Enlighten us with the brilliance of your Epiphany star so that, as we leave house and family to go out into the world, we might clearly see our way to you and discover you in our work and play.

– Used with permission from *To Dance With God* by Gertrud Mueller Nelson

For a treasury of prayers, reflections, and celebrations, ***Christ is Coming: Celebrating Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany*** by Theresa Cotter can give shape and meaning to this season. (St. Anthony Messenger Press)

The following quote by Jeffrey VanderWilt from ***Liturgy: Epiphany–Journal of the Liturgical Conference*** is enough for us: “The Epiphany of Jesus in our lives . . . suggests that we have seen not just a baby boy, not just a mystical prophet, not a king and certainly not a ‘superstar.’ The Epiphany of our lives is like some sudden ‘de-cloaking’ of the Spirit of the Risen Christ who lurks behind and beneath, over and beside, in and through everything we see and experience—without exception.”

A “cookbook for the wonderful feast of winter” can be found in ***Winter: Celebrating the Season in a Christian Home*** by Peter Mazar. This beautiful book takes the ordinary things of this season and transforms them into extraordinary signs of God's presence. (Liturgy Training Publications)



Finally, as we celebrate again the Christmas Season—Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany—let the rituals and customs of our celebrating be rooted in the deeper meanings of “God with us” so that all our days will be hallowed and holy.

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