

The Wired Word
Student Handout
Sunday, November 29, 2020
At Home Learning ONLY Today

Dear Class Member,

In churches that follow the liturgical calendar, this Sunday is the first day of the Christian year and the beginning of Advent. While not all denominations observe Advent per se, most Christians share a belief in what Advent symbolizes -- both the coming of Jesus 2,000 years ago and his coming again in the future.

The news stories for this week are about new twists on two long-standing Advent practices. While it's unclear that either of these innovations does anything to deepen our spiritual lives, they do give us grounds to look at what the coming of Jesus meant and what his coming again will mean. So those will be the topics of our next class.

How To Participate:

For most Sundays, we are offering The Wired Word as a hybrid class. You can participate in person or via Zoom. The Wired Word will be from 9:00am-9:45am on Sunday mornings. For those meeting in person, we will be in the old social hall of the church building (located on the first floor). If participating in person, please come with a mask and follow the COVID-19 Safety Guidelines for Sunday School: <http://www.sprucc.org/news-a-events/news.html#COVID19Precautions>.

You can also participate in the Wired Word virtually by Zoom on your computer or smart device at:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/86089807220?pwd=eStWa0ZZK0hOTVdwU0pjZlMrdk5ydz09>

or by telephone (land line or cell phone) by calling: 1-301-715-8592

Meeting ID: 860 8980 7220

Passcode: 195152

Wired Word Class is CANCELLED for Sunday, November 29

Classes will resume on Sunday, December 6

All Sunday School Classes, including the Wired Word, are cancelled for Dec 27, & Jan 3

To subscribe or unsubscribe for the free weekly mailing of *The Wired Word* student handout, please contact the church office at Office@sprucc.org.



2020 Brings Boozy Twists on Advent Calendars and Wreaths

The Wired Word for the Week of November 29, 2020

In the News

If you typed "Advent news" into Google or Bing this past week, the links those search engines presented at the top of their results lists had to do with alcohol.

Given that Advent is a pre-Christmas liturgical season observed by several Christian denominations, and that some denominations, such as The Salvation Army and the Nazarene Church, ask their clergy and members to abstain from all alcohol, the pairing of "Advent" with "alcohol" seems a bit surprising to some Christians.

In churches that follow a liturgical calendar, Advent, which begins four Sundays before Christmas and continues until Christmas Eve, marks the start of the church year. Although it runs concurrent with a period our culture thinks of as "the holiday season," Advent's focus is not on Jesus' birth but on expectant waiting.

Advent takes its name from the Latin *Adventus Domini*, which means, "the coming of the Lord," and it looks at the Lord's coming in two time frames: First, the season commemorates the time before Jesus' birth when people were waiting for a messiah. Second, it highlights that at the present time, the church is waiting expectantly for the return of Jesus. Thus, in Advent-speak, we are currently living "between the advents," and Christians are encouraged to use Advent as a time to prepare their hearts for the coming of the Lord.

The boozy part of the news has nothing to do with either of those advents, but is an outgrowth of two common auxiliary practices during the Advent season.

One of those is the Advent calendar. Originally conceived of in the 19th century as a way for individuals and families to observe the days of Advent in their homes, these countdown devices typically take the form of a large rectangular card or board with shuttered "windows," one for each day of Advent (this year, November 29 through December 24), and often Christmas Day as well.

In consecutive order, users open one shutter each day. The opened shutters reveal an image, a portion of the Nativity story, a small toy or piece of chocolate. Often, each window has a Bible verse and prayer printed on it, that users can incorporate as part of their daily Advent devotions.

This year, however, some beverage makers and retailers have come up with a new wrinkle: windows containing small bottles of beer, wine, hard seltzers or liquor. The idea for these may have been to disperse, at least momentarily, the gloom caused by the pandemic and the restrictions on the usual seasonal gatherings.

The other auxiliary practice is the Advent wreath, an object used in many worship services during Advent. They are circular frames, often covered with greenery, typically with four candles in the circular part of the wreath and sometimes one in the center. During worship services, one candle is lit on the first Sunday of Advent, two on the second Sunday, three on the third, four on the fourth and all four plus the center one -- the "Christ candle" -- on Christmas Eve. Usually there is a short liturgy or reading to accompany the candle lightings.

Generally, three of the wreath candles are purple and one is rose or pink, with the Christ candle being white. The four candles in the circular part are often thought of as representing the virtues of hope (purple), love (purple), joy (rose, usually on the third Sunday) and peace (purple).

Now, one congregation in Chicago, Gilead Church, has bottled its own brew -- Gilead Beer -- placed them in cardboard four-packs containing three purple-labeled bottles and one pink-labeled one. The cartons are topped with a green ribbon and white candle to light on Christmas Eve.

Although members paid for the "wreaths" they ordered, the distribution on a cold November evening outside the church was not for fundraising, but to provide a way for members, prevented by Covid-19 restrictions from gathering for worship, to see one another as they came to pick up their orders.

Playing off the pandemic-fueled mood, the church pitched the event as The Beer Release at the End of the World.

The Rev. Vince Amlin, a co-pastor at Gilead Church, pointed out that it's hard not to be joyful seeing friends face to face, however briefly, during this time of pandemic.

"People keep showing up, and it doesn't matter how cold it is and how apocalyptic. People are hungry for togetherness, for meaning, for witnesses to their lives, and that's what we're trying to provide." That's not a stated goal for most Advent seasons, but maybe a needed one for this particular Advent.

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Forget Chocolate: 2020 Is the Year of Boozy Advent Calendars. *CNN Business*](#)

[Chicago Church Releases a Beer for Advent -- and the End of the World. *Religion News Service*](#)

[The 'Splainer: Advent, Not Just Another Christmas Countdown. *Religion News Service*](#)

Applying the News Story

Not every Christian denomination observes all the seasons of the liturgical year, and it's no reflection on denominations or congregations that don't, for the liturgical year is primarily an aid to reinforce the Christian story itself, and churches that don't observe it promote the Christian story using other methods.

But for those churches that do use it, the liturgical year moves from the time before Christ (Advent) through his birth (Christmas), his life and ministry (Epiphany), his passion and death (Lent and Holy Week), his resurrection (Easter), the birth of his church (Pentecost), and his ultimate return (The Reign of Christ Sunday).

As mentioned in the "In the News" section above, Advent begins four Sundays before Christmas and it focuses attention on two periods where waiting expectantly is the predominant theme.

The first period was the time beginning with the Hebrew prophets who announced the "someday" restoration of Israel to take place with the arrival of a Messiah. Christians consider the coming of Jesus to be the fulfillment of that waiting period. (That's why, in some traditions, the gospel reading for the First Sunday in Advent is often Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem.)

The second period began with the ascension of the resurrected Jesus into heaven and the promise of his return. As that return has not yet happened, Christians can be said to be living in a time between the two advents of Jesus: Christmas and the Second Coming.

But there's a certain oddity about Advent. It marks the beginning of the church year, and so logically, we would expect the story to begin with the time before Christ, the Old Testament period when the faithful anticipated the arrival of the Messiah, the One whose coming we celebrate in the liturgical season that follows -- Christmas.

However, because of the second focus of Advent -- Christ's second coming -- it's as if the church comes to the world saying, "We have a wonderful story for you, but before we tell you how it starts, we're going to tell you how it ends."

That way of recounting a story breaks the rules of narrative tension, but from the perspective of the Christian faith, it is exactly right. For the Christian faith only makes sense when you know how the story comes out. Confidence and hope, both hallmarks of Christianity, are pointless if the end of the story is tragedy. But they are fully justified if at the end *God wins*.

And that's precisely what Advent proclaims. Whatever agonies and hard times our world may go through, however much life may be viewed as a struggle between good and evil, in the end, God wins. In addition -- and this is vitally important -- those who are faithful to God in this life stand with the Victor. Whatever pains and losses we may experience in our lives, they never have the final word. God does, and to those who cling to him, that word is gracious.

The Big Questions

1. Through what means does your church retell the full story of Christ Jesus? If you don't observe Advent in your congregation, what do you think is the reason?
2. Why might the Advent message be especially important this year?
3. What does the Bible say is the fate of the selfish and aggressive instincts that are part of our human makeup?
4. What reasons might there be to have a time of penitence prior to Christmas?
5. What bearing, if any, does alcohol use have on your Christian witness?
6. If your church is meeting remotely at this time, what are you doing to "get together"?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Jeremiah 33:15

In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. (For context, read 33:14-16.)

This verse is typical of the kinds of prophetic statements that created the expectation in Israel that a messiah would come through the line of David. Israel was still waiting for that messiah at the time Jesus was born. Thus, one feature of Advent is that it connects with the Old Testament and the time between the Testaments when oppressed Israel was anticipating the coming of a Davidic king to save them.

The prophetic witness is an important part of Advent, not only through Bible readings, but also through music. We incorporate some of the words of the prophets into our Christmas hymns, and certainly "The Messiah" is awash with Old Testament readings. TWW team member Frank Ramirez said that before the coronavirus surge came, he'd been planning to augment his church's Nativity scene with prophets. "A large Nativity scene

was donated this year and I was thinking of putting it in the chancel and re-outfitting some of the kings so they became prophets who foretell," Ramirez said. "I would add Simeon and Anna, and Elizabeth as well. Since we crowd the Magi in there (and in the biblical account, they don't show up till a couple of years later), I think we have dramatic license."

Questions: In what ways, if any, does imagining yourself in company with the Israelites waiting for a messiah help you to appreciate Christmas more? In what ways does it help you understand yourself as still waiting for God's final action? How can we experience the expectation of waiting while simultaneously knowing that Jesus has already arrived in our hearts?

Luke 1:76-77

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. (For context, read 1:57-80.)

These words are part of the prophecy Zechariah the priest uttered when his son, John the Baptist, was born. While Jesus is the primary biblical and faith focus of the church, Advent is the one season when John the Baptist plays a strong role as the one who "prepares the way" for Jesus.

John had to fulfill his role carefully, for on at least one occasion, the messianic expectations of the crowds caused them to speculate whether John himself might be the Messiah (Luke 3:15).

Questions: Do you know of any expectations about you before you were born? What expectations did you have for your children, if you have any?

Who, if anyone, are you expecting to save you from the current muddle of life? How does your answer to that question affect your outlook in the present times?

Is forgiveness of sins something that seems important to you right now? If not, what other concerns have a high priority in your life?

In what ways might we identify with those to whom John preached? (See Matthew 3:1-6; Luke 3:7-17.)

Acts 1:11

... Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven. (For context, read 1:6-11.)

Immediately after the ascension of Jesus into heaven, two "men" (angels) spoke the words above to the disciples who had witnessed the event. Their statement is one of the scriptural foundations for the second coming of Christ.

Not all Christians understand the Second Coming in the same way. Many take it literally and look for a specific event where Christ returns to earth. Some see the Second Coming as a way of conceptualizing the life-changing hope found when receiving Christ individually. Still other Christians view the Second Coming as too mysterious to comprehend fully. Some perhaps don't give it much thought.

Questions: How do you understand the Second Coming? Why? Regardless of how you view the Second Coming, what is the imperative that the angels are communicating when they chide the apostles for looking up into the sky?

1 Corinthians 15:22-24

... for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. (For context, read 15:19-28.)

Luke 21:28

Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near. (For context, read 21:25-28.)

Earlier in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul has been discussing the resurrection of the dead, and concludes that section saying, "If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied" (v. 19). He immediately adds, "But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead" (v. 20) and goes on to talk about Christ's subsequent work where God puts "all things in subjection under his [Christ's] feet" (v. 27) and then, in the words above, Christ "hands over the kingdom to God the Father."

That's the time toward which Advent looks.

The Luke 21 verse is from Jesus, where he speaks of cosmic disruptions preceding his return, but note the message of that verse: Whatever else we make of the descriptions of the strange phenomenon in the Second Coming language, the news for followers of Jesus is good: Our redemption is drawing near. We should raise our heads with expectation. (For a model of this, think of your reaction when you first heard that vaccines against Covid -19 were nearly ready.)

Question: What and where do you envision this kingdom to be? Should we anticipate that end-of-time time? What is your mood this time of year? In what ways can Advent help you prepare for the story of Jesus from his birth through his resurrection? Is this preparation necessary for those who believe they have been saved through their faith?

For Further Discussion

1. Respond to this, heard in a sermon: "Most of us don't spend much time thinking about the second advent. The way this plays out for most of us is as a kind of common-sense Christianity that stays fairly close to the ground. We may not outright deny the possibility of some kind of Second Coming, but we don't spend much time thinking about it either.

"In terms of our daily faith, we may wonder if we even need it at all. We already have plenty of resources for our faith. We've got the church and scripture and prayer. We've got the Golden Rule and the Ten Commandments. We've got Christian music and mission projects and congregational fellowship. That's ground-level Christianity, and we've got enough of it to keep us going.

"But Advent comes around every year in the weeks before Christmas, and if we are alert to its meaning, we are forced to consider whether it is better to live with a low spiritual ceiling over our heads or instead to in some way make room for an incoming Lord."

2. Discuss this, also heard in a sermon: "Our faith says that the full coming of God's kingdom is not pie-in-the-sky talk. It is our hope for the future. Gregory Fisher, a missionary who teaches at a Bible college in West Africa, tells of talking to his students about the second advent of Christ. After Fisher read to them from 1 Thessalonians 4:16, where it says that Jesus will descend from heaven with 'a cry of command,' one of his students wanted to know what Christ would say in that shout.

"The Bible doesn't tell us, so Fisher couldn't know exactly what Jesus might say. But the missionary thought about the question, recalling all the pain and suffering he witnessed every day in Africa -- including the starvation, disease, filth, lack of adequate medical care, tribal warfare, orphans, economic exploitation and all the problems that accompany those things. And then an answer occurred to him.

"'When Jesus returns,' Fisher told his students, 'he will shout "Enough!'" He went on to explain, 'Enough! Enough suffering. Enough starvation. Enough terror. Enough death. Enough indignity. Enough lives trapped in hopelessness. Enough sickness and disease ... Enough!'"

3. Regarding the Luke 1 text above, Zechariah was not ready for the angel's good news about John's upcoming birth, as evidenced by him raising objections to the angel regarding Gabriel's prophecy. Births don't usually come perfectly planned or at convenient times. For many people, there never was a "right" time for kids, but they arrived anyway. Nowadays more couples have their children later, much later, and we don't feel the need to marry people off before the "10-pound preemies" arrive. Kids are often a part of their parents' wedding party nowadays. If you are a parent, discuss how the arrival a child or children impacted your life.

Responding to the News

Whether or not you officially observe Advent, now is a good time to renew your relationship with Christ.

You might like to try a different kind of Advent calendar this year, such as [this](#) or [this](#). Or you could create one of your own with a list of daily actions you could take each day of Advent that would take into account the unique circumstances caused by the pandemic. For example, visits to nursing homes are not likely an option right now. What could be substituted for that type of act? An Advent calendar of this type could have a theme, such as "Drawing near to Jesus" or "Welcoming the Child" or something similar, so that it is not simply an exercise in doing good works, but connects spirituality to our relationship with God as well as to our behavior toward others.

Prayer

O God, thank you for sending Jesus to our world the first time, and for the promise of his return. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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