

To you, O Lord, I lift my soul!

Psalm 25

With the First Sunday of Advent, we begin a new liturgical year. During the weeks and months to come, the story of salvation will unfold before us once again in all its mystery and beauty, "ever ancient, ever new." Happy New Year!

Advent (the word means "coming") grew out of Christmas in much the same way that Lent grew out of Easter. Beginning about the 5th century, Christians set aside a time to prepare for Christmas, though this preparation took a wide variety of forms. In Ireland it was a penitential season, a time for repentance and readiness for the last judgment and the second coming of the Lord (the *Dies Irae* was sung on the First Sunday of Advent!). In southern France, Advent was, like Lent, a time of preparation for baptism, which at that time was celebrated on the Epiphany of the Lord. In Rome, Advent focused on Mary and the incarnation of the Lord.

Only in the eleventh century did the Roman liturgy for Advent—influenced by all these different traditions—take a shape we would recognize today. It has aspects of a penitential season, like the use of violet vestments, but it is primarily a time of joyful expectation. We look to the second coming of the Lord, but we also prepare to celebrate his first coming at Christmas. We will see a gradual shift in the liturgy. At the beginning of the season we focus on the second coming, but the closer we get to December 25 the more our readings and prayers will focus on the incarnation of the Lord.

It is easy to look forward to Christmas. But are we really "watching," "hoping," "waiting," "rejoicing," in the second coming of the Lord, as the Church's prayers for today suggest? It's a challenge, because we know the Lord's second coming will not be like the first. But perhaps we need to look for another kind of Advent, an Advent that is much closer to home. Christ "is prepared to come again," St. Charles Borromeo said in a homily on this day nearly 500 years ago. "When we remove all



obstacles to his presence he will come, at any hour and moment, to dwell spiritually in our hearts, bringing with him the riches of his grace. In her concern for our salvation, our loving mother the Church uses this holy season to teach us through hymns, canticles, and other forms of expression, of voice or ritual.... our hearts should be as much prepared for the coming of Christ as if he were still to come into this world."

The Advent Wreath

Advent has an abundance of traditions that help us to "countdown" spiritually to Christmas: Advent calendars,

Advent wreaths, special novenas, services of readings and carols, and many more!

The Advent wreath comes to us from the Lutheran tradition. The wreath, blessed on the First Sunday of Advent, consists of four candles, representing the four weeks of the Advent season. Each Sunday, another candle is lit, so that by the end of Advent all four candles are burning. The wreath, with its ever-increasing light, is a powerful visible symbol of what we celebrate at Christmas: that "the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1: 5). If you have a wreath at home, you might use this prayer from the Book of Blessings as you light it each evening.

**Lord God, let your blessing come upon us
as we light the candles of this wreath.**

**May the wreath and its light
be a sign of Christ's promise
to bring us salvation.**

May he come quickly, and not delay.

Did you know that we have our very own St. James Cathedral Advent Calendar? Families can get one free at the Advent Bazaar today, in Cathedral Place Hall following the morning Masses. It comes with a guide that will help you to pray your way to Christmas!

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