

# Advent 2024

Van City Church

# Two Faces of Advent<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rutledge, Fleming. *Advent*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 4 Sept. 2018.

The now and not yet. Darkness and light. Good and evil. Past and Future. Belief and doubt. Waiting and hastening. Advent is a season of two faces. Two faces that make us squirm in our seats. The weight of holding two completely opposed things is too much for our minds and bodies to carry. But that is exactly what we are asked to do in the season of Advent.

We look back on the joy of the womb of Mary carrying hope and light into our lives. We live in the fullness of life with Jesus. Every day we experience full access to the God of the universe. Kids longingly create Christms lists and carols are loudly sung off key. We experience the now.

But we also look around and experience the full depths of evil and pain around us. This world is not as it should be and this season is not meant to simply ignore that darkness with eggnog and elegantly wrapped gifts. We experience the not yet and we mourn the sin and darkness of it.

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “The celebration of Advent is possible only to those who... know themselves to be poor and imperfect, and who look forward to something greater to come.” Hope requires us to confront the reality of suffering, as Fleming Rutledge notes, “It is not tolerable to speak of hope unless we are willing to look squarely at the overwhelming presence of evil in our world.”

We wrap our hands tightly around the cheeks of both faces. The now and not yet. The darkness and the light. Together, we slow down. We wait and invite Jesus to show up the way of the Advent season. The watchword of the Advent season, writes Mother Mary Francis, is “Come!” Advent is a space to sit waiting for the coming Christ.

Advent is a season that mirrors the spiritual reality of a disciple of Jesus. A season that slows us down enough to experience our hope for Jesus as it is in our everyday life.

“In a very real sense, the Christian community lives in Advent all the time. It can well be called the Time Between, because the people of God live in the time between the first coming of Christ, incognito in the stable in Bethlehem, and his second coming, in glory, to judge the living and dead. In the Time Between, “our lives are hidden with Christ in God; when Christ who is our life appears, then we also will appear with him in glory” (Col. 3:3-4) Advent contains within itself the

crucial balance of the now and the not yet that our faith requires... Themes in relation to the frenzy of the “holiday” time in which the commercial Christmas music insists that “it’s the most wonderful time of the year” and Starbucks invites everyone to “feel the merry”. The disappointment, brokenness, suffering, and pain that characterize life in this present world is held in dynamic tension with the promise of future glory that is yet to come. In that Advent tension, the church lives its life.” (Rutledge)

The Advent tension that allows us to live all other seasons with true depth. During this Advent season, may we embrace both hope and waiting, acknowledging the tension of the "now" and "not yet," as we eagerly anticipate the day when Jesus will return to make all things new.

# Practice of Advent

The word "Advent" comes from the Latin *adventus*, meaning "coming" or "visit." It's the season leading up to Christmas, a time when the global Church pauses to embrace the waiting. It's a season to prepare for two things, celebrating the birth of Jesus and looking forward to the day when Christ will return to make all things new. Advent marks the beginning of the church calendar, consisting of the four Sundays before Christmas.

A common tradition during this time is the lighting of Advent candles. While there are many interpretations of the Advent candle wreath depending on what you read online, the heart of it is simple, the candles represent the light of Christ. Lighting the candles symbolizes a special recognition of Jesus during the Advent season—a time set apart just for this purpose. Whether it's a single candle or a wreath of four, the invitation is to light a candle, representing the light of Christ, as you set aside time each day to reflect.

There are countless ways to experience Advent. If you have kids, an Advent box from the church can be a great way to engage the season with them. Using a physical calendar to count down the days, lighting candles, listening to Christmas music, and reading Advent books are all common practices. None of these things are inherently holy or the "right" way to observe Advent. Instead, they are unique ways to mark four weeks of waiting and to slow down in anticipation of Christ's return and to celebrate His coming.

The encouragement for this season is to allow yourself to fully immerse in it. Set aside time for reflection, use a special mug, make time for Sabbath, knit a scarf with the fanciest yarn, buy your favorite candy that's only available in December, indulge in hot chocolate every day, watch 31 days of Christmas movies, fill your home with the smells of cookies and Christmas trees—mark the season in a way that is fully embodied. None of these things are about adding to the consumer rush, but rather serving as markers that this season is different from any other.

Zechariah  
Sunday  
Week One

Attend Sunday Gathering

# Monday

## Week One



Read: Luke 1v5-25

A quick glance at the first half of the Bible reveals a story of people desperately in need of a Savior. The Old Testament is filled with war, violence, and rebellion, not unlike the world we live in today. The difference is the path to addressing these deep needs was through sacrifice, mediated by priests. The very presence of God resided in the tabernacle, a physical space where only priests could access certain sacred areas to experience His holiness. These priests offered sacrifices on behalf of Israel, proclaimed God's blessings, and acted as intermediaries, representing God to the people and the people to God. They were essential gates to the divine.

Your sin separated you from God, and the only way to bridge that gap was through sacrifice offered by a priest. Salvation felt distant and impersonal—gates guarded the way to God, and a thick veil kept His presence inaccessible. You were left longing, desperate for redemption.

Understanding the world before Jesus helps us better understand the significance of His coming. The Christmas story starts in a place of pain: a barren womb of Zechariah's wife. Zechariah, as a priest, had staked his life on the belief that the Messiah would come and restore all things. He offered sacrifice on behalf of others, he had access to God only through the tabernacle. His anticipation for the personal Messiah mirrored a broader longing for the fulfillment of God's promises, yet it also reflected the tension he lived in. It's tempting to think Zechariah had unwavering faith in the coming Savior, but he also carried the unmet longing for a child of his own. He believed redemption was coming, but his faith in his own personal desires being fulfilled faltered.

This paradox of faith and doubt feels familiar.

Fully anticipating salvation, yet doubting your own role in the story. Professing God as Lord of your life, while questioning if chronic pain will ever fade. Worshiping passionately on Sundays, but losing hope of meeting a spouse. Following Jesus faithfully in community, yet doubting your 9-to-5 job makes any impact. Praying fervently for a neighbor to know Christ, while believing your relationship with your dad will never be restored.

This is where we find ourselves in the story of Advent. A paradigm of belief and doubt. Faith in Jesus as the Messiah, yet forgetting to wait for His return. Advent invites us to hold this tension without needing to resolve it neatly.

This is where we are today.

Listen

Messiah - Bifrost Arts

Reflect

*Where are you believing and where are you doubting?*

*What areas of your life do you not believe in God's plan of redemption?*

*If God came to you and promised redemption, what would your response be?*

# Tuesday

## Week One

Read: Luke 1v5-25

From the moment Adam and Eve ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, God had a plan. He crafted a story of redemption and restoration that would span generations. From the very beginning, God gave humanity a promise of hope—a Messiah who would save us from sin and suffering. This promise, first spoken in Eden, pointed toward the unfolding of God's redemptive plan:

"And I will put enmity between you and the woman,  
and between your offspring and hers;  
he will crush your head,  
and you will strike his heel."  
— Genesis 3:15

This promise of redemption was carried down through the generations, woven into the story of Israel, God's chosen people. It came into greater focus in God's covenant with King David:

"I will raise up your offspring to succeed you,  
and I will establish his kingdom forever."  
— 2 Samuel 7:12-13

For centuries, the Israelites clung to these promises, holding onto the hope of a coming King who would restore justice, peace, and fellowship with God. Yet the waiting was long and often painful. They endured oppression, exile, and hardship, and many began to wonder if the Redeemer would ever come.

Zechariah, a priest, knew this waiting all too well. He had devoted his life to serving God and to the hope of the Messiah. But like many others, he felt the weight of doubt as the years dragged on. Still, the people held fast to the conviction that God would not abandon His promises.

Then, in the fullness of time, an angel appeared to Zechariah, a descendant of Aaron. Struck with fear, Zechariah listened as the angel declared:

"Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the

disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

But Zechariah's response was not one of joyful faith. Instead, he asked, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man, and my wife is well along in years."

Imagine: God tells you that the thing you've prayed for most—the thing you've longed for deeply and tirelessly—is finally going to happen. And your response is, "Prove it."

It's not a new reaction. When God told Abraham that Sarah would bear a son, Sarah laughed at the absurdity of it (Genesis 18:11–15). Similarly, when the angel told Zechariah that his wife would conceive in her old age, his first instinct was disbelief. How could such an outlandish promise come to pass?

How often do we find ourselves in this story? How quick are we to dismiss God's promises? We hear Him speak, yet our hearts whisper back, "Prove it." Caught up in our doubts and distractions, we move on to the next fleeting thing that grabs our attention, forgetting the faithful God who never breaks His word.

### Listen

The Space Between - Sandra McCracken

### Reflect

*Where are you experiencing doubt right now?  
In what ways are you asking God to "prove it"?*

# Wednesday Week One

Listen to Midweek Podcast

# Thursday

## Week One

What a gift it is that our God doesn't stop at our doubt and disbelief. When Zechariah responded, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man, and my wife is well along in years," the angel didn't walk away, saying, "Okay, you're right. God's wrong. You're too old to have a baby. Sorry." No, God continued with His plan of redemption while still addressing Zechariah's unbelief.

The angel replied, "And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time."

In losing his voice, Zechariah's encounter with God became unmistakably evident to those around him. Even though he couldn't speak, people knew he had experienced the divine. There's something profound about that. His silence spoke volumes—it was clear to those waiting outside that he had seen a vision from God.

What a beautiful reflection of the Church, especially in moments of deep worship or a powerful move of God. In those sacred moments, words often fall short. Looking around, you can see it on the faces of your community—the love of God experienced so deeply it needs no explanation.

But Zechariah's muteness was surely a complicated experience. On one hand, he knew the angel was right: his child was coming. His wife's body began to change as she carried the baby they had longed for. The joy must have been overwhelming—finally, the child they had prayed for, the forerunner of the Messiah, was on his way. This was the moment Zechariah had spent his life waiting for.

Yet, he was now bound to utter silence. The waiting must have been a rollercoaster of emotions—fear for the baby's health, questions about the angel's words, and wonder at who this child would grow to be. His silence gave him space to reflect, but it also stripped away the comfort of expression. Was he able to work during this time, given that his role as a priest required his voice? Likely not. It was as though he was placed on an enforced spiritual bed rest, except it wasn't his body expanding with new life—it was Elizabeth's.

Again, we see the two faces of the waiting: fear and joy, curiosity and uncertainty, anticipation and hesitation. Zechariah lived in the tension of longing fulfilled and promises yet to be fully realized—a place many of us know well.



## Listen

Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence - OCP Session Choir

## Reflect

Today, may we challenge ourselves to experience the silence. Sitting in the waiting without noise or words, just silence. Looking at the two faces eye to eye- fear and excitement, curiosity and unknown, waiting and hastening.

Today, instead of simply reading and moving on with your day, take intentional time to create space for silence. Set aside a moment to bring the things you're longing for and place them before the altar of Jesus. Sit with them in silence.

If a tangible reminder helps, take a piece of paper and write down what you're waiting for. Place it in front of you as a physical act of surrender and reflection. Let this be a sacred moment to acknowledge your waiting and trust the One who holds it all.

## Reflect in Silence

Find a place where you can experience complete silence. If needed, use earplugs to block out background noises. Avoid music, ambient sounds, or other distractions.

Put your phone away—turn it off or place it out of reach. Use a watch or another timer to keep track of time.

Posture your body in a comfortable, still position. Sitting upright with your feet on the ground often works best, but lying on your back or stomach is fine too—just be mindful of the temptation to fall asleep. The goal is to remain as still as possible, so take a moment to settle into a position that allows you to be both relaxed and attentive.

As a reach practice, turn the lights off and light just a candle or two. If you normally do your devo in the morning consider coming back to this when it's dark outside. If you

have the ability, spend the rest of the evening in darkness, lighting the way with a few candles.

Now, sit in silence.

Your mind may seize this opportunity to fill with thoughts, feelings, to-do lists, or distractions—and that's okay. Don't judge yourself, feel discouraged, or give up. Instead, when you notice your mind wandering, gently recenter with a simple prayer, like "Father..." Then return to the stillness.

End the time by thanking God for meeting you in it. Ask God to help you carry the spirit of making space for silence throughout your day.

# Friday

## Week One

There is hope in the coming Messiah. Today, reflect on the week, slow down and read this scripture several times throughout your day.

*For to us a child is born,  
to us a son is given,  
and the government will be on his shoulders.  
And he will be called  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.  
Of the greatness of his government and peace  
there will be no end.  
He will reign on David's throne  
and over his kingdom,  
establishing and upholding it  
with justice and righteousness  
from that time on and forever.  
The zeal of the Lord Almighty  
will accomplish this.*

Isaiah 9v6-7

# Saturday

## Week One

## Experience

If you have them, light incense as you read this story. Imagine yourself as Zechariah, fully immersing yourself in the story.

*You're Zechariah, a priest, a man who has spent his entire life serving God. Day after day, year after year, you've lived in devotion, fulfilling your role in the temple, trusting in God's promises, even when life felt heavy. You and your wife, Elizabeth, have walked a righteous path, but one ache has remained constant—your prayers for a child have gone unanswered. You're old now. So is she. That dream feels so far gone that you've almost stopped thinking about it.*

*Today, though, is different. You've been chosen by lot to burn incense in the temple. It's a once-in-a-lifetime moment, and you step into the sanctuary with a sense of awe. This is holy ground. The weight of this moment presses on you as the incense curls upward, mingling with your prayers.*

*And then, suddenly, everything changes.*

*You're not alone.*

*A figure stands beside the altar, radiant and unmistakably otherworldly. Fear grips you, a chill racing down your spine. This is an angel. You've read about encounters like this, but nothing could prepare you for the reality of it.*

*"Do not be afraid, Zechariah," the angel says. His words hit you like a wave, both calming and overwhelming. "Your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth. He will be great in the sight of the Lord."*

*A son? You hear the words, but they don't land. Not really. You've waited too long for this. The thought of having a child at your age feels impossible, like a cruel joke. Before you can stop yourself, the words come out: "How can I be sure of this? I'm an old man, and my wife is well along in years."*

*The room grows heavier as the angel straightens, his tone sharper now. "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good*

*news. And now, you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.”*

*And just like that, your voice is gone.*

*You stumble out of the sanctuary, your head spinning, your heart pounding. Outside, the worshipers waiting for you to speak are filled with questions. Why did it take so long? What happened? But you can't answer them. You try to speak, to explain, to give them something, but nothing comes out.*

*They look at you—your gestures, your expression—and they just know. They know you've encountered God.*

*Days pass, then weeks. Elizabeth becomes pregnant. You watch her body change, proof that Gabriel's words were true. Your prayers have been heard. Your son is coming. But this isn't just any child—he will prepare the way for the Messiah. That realization alone leaves you stunned.*

*And yet, here you are, silent. Unable to put words to what's happening. Unable to explain the joy, the fear, the questions. You've waited a lifetime for this, and now, in the waiting, you find yourself grappling with so many emotions. Excitement, yes. But also fear. What will this child become? What will God do next?*

*So you wait.*

*And as you wait, the silence teaches you. God is doing something bigger than you, bigger than your doubts. His promises are unfolding in His time, not yours.*

*And somehow, in the silence, you know.*

*You're part of the story.*

## Listen

Zechariah's Song - Ordinary Time

## Reflect

*What similarities do you see between Zechariah and yourself?*

*What is God revealing to you through the story of Zechariah?*

*How does it feel to hold the two faces of Advent?*