



Chaplain's Newsletter

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Issue 2

A Few Thoughts When Teaching and Preaching About Advent and the Christmas Season

It is so easy to fall to the temptation of having one celebration of Advent, Christmas and Epiphany in our schools. If this has been your practice and having three or even two separate gatherings is impossible, try having one celebration before Christmas focused on Advent.

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- Historians and theologians are uncertain as to the origins of Advent.
- We are certain that it has always been understood as a season of joy-filled preparation: preparation for the Nativity of the Lord and a preparation for the Lord's return at the end of time. Advent does not have the same penitential tone as Lent. The first seventeen days of Advent give us readings and prayers for mass focusing on the end times. The last eight days focus our attention on Christmas.
- Through all these is a focus on justice and peace. Consider using one of the readings from the daily missal as a means of sparking conversation and dialogue in your classrooms.
- Sacred Scripture records no date for the Birth of Jesus and by cross referencing other events that are described in the synoptic gospels, it is really unlikely that Jesus was born at the end of December.
- One theory posits that the church chose 25 December as a means of supplanting a pagan holiday connected to the Winter Solstice around the era of Emperor Constantine. Modern scholarship leans away from this theory.
- In the ancient world, many believed that heroes and heroines were born on the same day they died. Therefore, if the crucifixion occurred on the 25 March (14 Nisan in the Jewish Calendar) Jesus was born on 25 December. As we believe that life begins with conception, Jesus would have been conceived on the same day as his death.
- In the Western portion of the Roman Empire, Christmas was celebrated 25 December. In the Eastern portion of the Roman Empire celebrated Christmas on 6 January. The emphasis in the West was on the Nativity. The emphasis in the East was on the various Epiphanies, including the Nativity, the Epiphany to the Magi and the Baptism of the Lord.
- The word epiphany comes from the Greek meaning "manifestation". Where do you see God revealing himself in the midst of your work and ministry?
- You may want to consider with your students how we can celebrate Jesus' Birthday outside of the Christmas season. Maybe Christmas can be a period of launching some new initiative or drive, culminating at Easter.
- When we look at giving in the Church, consider talking to your students about giving in terms of "time, talent and treasure." We so often focus on the last item that we fail to look at how we might give of ourselves.
- Try re-reading Matthew's Infancy Narrative. While there is a portrayal of magi coming to present gifts, no number or gender is given to these seers. Three has been the traditional number because of the number of gifts that are brought to Bethlehem.
- One tradition shared by Eastern Christians in the practice of writing over the doors of one's home at Epiphany. It is a practice that we may consider adopting, at home and in our classrooms and schools.



The inscription over the door would look like this: 20 + C + M + B + 09 and could be described using words similar to these, depending on the age of those in your class and what sort of formation they have already had.

The letters have two meanings. They are the initials of the traditional names of the Three Magi: Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar. They also abbreviate the Latin words "Christus mansionem benedicat." "May Christ bless the house." The letters recall the day on which the inscription is made, as well as the purpose of blessing. The crosses represent the protection of the Blood of Christ, whom we invoke, and the holiness of the Three Magi sanctified by their adoration of the Infant Christ. The inscription is made above the front door, so that all who enter and depart this year may enjoy God's blessing. The month of January still bears the name of the Roman god Janus, the doorkeeper of heaven and protector of the beginning and end of things. This blessing "christens" the ancient Roman observance of the first month. The inscription is made of chalk, a product of clay, which recalls the human nature taken by the Eternal Word in the womb of the Virgin Mary, by the power of the Holy Spirit. To bless your home this Epiphany read the Prologue of John's Gospel (Chapter One), followed by the Our Father, and the Collect of the Epiphany; then write the inscription for this year above your front door with blessed chalk.

Yours in His Service,
Father Michael Bechard

The above musings were assembled by (Rev.) Michael Bechard, Chaplain at King's University College and Lecturer in Liturgical and Sacramental Theology. Michael was granted an MA in Liturgical Studies from the University of Notre Dame in 2000 and is currently enrolled in the Doctor of Ministry program of Drew University.

Prayers for the Lighting of the Advent Wreath

Week One:

Almighty God, we begin this advent season as an advent people – ready to do your will. Let your blessing come upon us as we light this wreath. May it turn our hearts to you in the days ahead. Grant us the peace and joy we long for, as we await the coming of your Son with patient hearts. We ask this through Christ our Lord.

Week Two:

Lord God, may the light of this wreath be a sign of hope to all people who prepare for your coming. Let the truth of your Word lead us all toward your kingdom for which we long. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Week Three:

Almighty God, your promise of salvation fills us with joy and hope. We long for its fulfillment in our own time. Hear the cries of your people and let your justice be evident in our world that we and all people may have ever new reasons to rejoice in your love. Through Christ our Lord.

Week Four:

Lord God, the brightness of our wreath reflects the glory of your Son, whose coming we soon will celebrate. Let your blessing come upon us as it has come upon our ancestors in faith from age to age. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.



Light Our Way

Welcome to this Advent ritual. In this sacred season, we remember and celebrate the gift of our Saviour who leapt from the holy Womb into the heart of humanity. This Loving Presence became for us source of hope, com-*passion*, and courage. This Love Incarnate came as a light radiating compassion, a Torch bearing truth, a Beacon offering guidance.

As we begin let us be attentive to the darkness that is within each of us. Recognize that some darkness is good and nurturing. The Christ was nurtured in a womb of darkness and came forth from this blessed darkness to be a Light for us. Other darkness is destructive and bleeds love from the world. It is the darkness of war, racism, hatred, greed, and all non-loving in whatever form it takes. The Christ came to stand up to this destructive darkness and to light our path with goodness.

Let us pause now for some personal reflection on the darkness.

Lighting of the Candles

One candle is lit.

The people who walked in darkness
Have seen a great light:
Those who lived in a land of deep darkness
On them light has shined.

Each participant holds his/her small candle and lights it from the central candle. The leader then blesses the candles:

May the light of these candles we carry be a reminder of the divine radiance within us. As we hold these candles may we walk with hope and confidence in the power of our God to dispel all destructive darkness.

Sending Hope to the four Corners of the Earth

All hold their lit candles and face east.

Leader

We face the direction of the rising sun. May each dawn offer us hope and remind us of the coming of the Christ to our world. We open our hearts to receive this Divine Light ... Let us now offer this birthing Light to all in the east who need hope.

All Respond

Light our way, Light our way,
As we journey in the darkness.
Light our way, Light our way,
Gift us with hope for our world.

All turn and face the south.

Leader

We face the south with its energy of growth, vitality, and abundant fruitfulness. We open our hearts to embrace the Divine Light, source of all spiritual transformation. Let us offer this Radiant Love to any one dwelling in the south who is experiencing darkness.

All candles are raised high, a pause of silence. The response is proclaimed by all. All turn and face the west.

Leader

We face the place of the setting sun, the ending of the day. We open our hearts to receive the Divine Light that guides us in our times of farewell. Let us offer this Divine Wisdom to all who need guidance in their darkness.

All candles are raised high, a pause of silence. The response is proclaimed by all. All turn and face the north.

Leader

We face the north with its strength and its challenge, with its natural beauty, and with its long months of wintered barrenness. We open our hearts to receive the strength of the Divine Light. Let us offer this Divine Courage of the Divine Light to all in the north who yearn for new life to sprout from their darkness.

All candles are raised high, a pause of silence. The response is proclaimed by all.

Proclamation of Hope

I now invite those who wish to make a one sentence statement of hope or longing such as "I hope..." OR "I long for ..."

Conclude with the Sign of Peace



Praying with Scripture through Advent

Advent is a rich time for prayer. It invites us to pause, to wait, to be still.

Praying with Scripture

Reading and praying with the scriptures invites us into an exploration of the Word of God. As we listen attentively to God's Word, we find ourselves spending time with the sacred stories of our faith tradition. When we listen with our hearts as well as our minds, God's word is able to touch us and nurture the paths of our lives.

To begin:

Sit in a quiet comfortable place where you will not be disturbed for 5 – 10 minutes.

Take some deep breathes and acknowledge the presence of God within you.

Read the scripture passage aloud, slowly.

The angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."

But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her. "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.

Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"

The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God."

Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord: let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her. Luke 1:26-38

1. What words, phrases or feelings attract you in this reading? Spend a few moments paying attention to them.
2. Read the passage a second time, this time, putting yourself in the position of Mary. Notice how it feels to be in her shoes. What questions arise in you?
3. Read the passage a third time. This time, in your imagination, stand before the angel Gabriel. What does he say to you? Listen. What do you say in response?
4. As you bring your prayer time to a close say a prayer of thanksgiving before you leave your prayer space.



Scripture Passages on the Theme of Hope

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
Like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice
with joy and singing.

Say to those who are fearful of heart,
be strong, do not fear!

Here is your God.

who will come and save you. Isaiah, 35: 1-4

I know the plans I have in mind for you,
It is Yahweh, who speaks,
Plans for peace and not disaster,
Reserving a future full of hope for you.
Then when you call to me and come to plead with me,
I will listen to you.

When you seek me you shall find me,
when you seek me with all your heart. Jeremiah, 29, 11-13

These sufferings bring patience, as we know,
And patience brings perseverance,
And perseverance brings hope.
And this hope is not deceptive,
Because the love of God has been
Poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit,
Which has been given to us. Romans, 5: 4-5

And Mary said:

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my saviour;
because God has looked upon his lowly hand maid.
Yes, from this day forward, all generations shall call me
blessed

For the Almighty has done great things for me. Luke 2: 46-49



Saints for the Season of Advent

Here is a short list of some saints whose commemorations come during or just before early Advent, depending upon the year. Each has an Advent message:

Mary: Most of us readily think of Mary, Mother of God, during Advent. After all, Mary is the one closest to Jesus. Two Marian feasts fall during Advent: the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception (Dec. 8) and the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe (Dec. 12). From Mary we learn the greatest traits of the Christian: love, humility, justice, openness to God's grace and willingness to act.

St. Francis Xavier (Dec. 3): He tirelessly evangelized in the Far East. Busy as he was, he took time to set religious truths to verse and fit them to popular tunes in the countries he served. This was such a successful way of spreading the Good News that his songs were sung in the streets. Ask for his intercession if you want your time spent in Advent to bear fruit long after you've left the season behind.

St John Damascene (Dec. 4): "The one who seeks God continually will find him, for God is in everything," says St. John Damascene. It is to this little-known saint that we owe the pleasure of looking at religious art. In a period of Church history when others wanted to forbid use of images, John Damascene insisted they could be used to inspire us. Take time looking at your Madonna and Child Christmas cards, and thank God for clear thinkers like John Damascene.

St. Nicholas (Dec. 6): Nicholas is known for his faithfulness to Christ, his devotion to justice and to charity. Santa Claus is a character that started with Nicholas and took on a life of its own. Ask for Nicholas's intercession as you pray for a charitable heart.

St. Ambrose (Dec. 7): Ambrose spent much of his time listening to St. Monica as she wept about her sinful son – the future St. Augustine – and Ambrose was able to comfort her. This Doctor of the Church saw himself as a lifelong learner. "In the endeavor to teach, I desire that I may be able to learn." he said. We only learn if we keep listening –especially when we're the teachers! Pray with Ambrose to improve your listening skills.

St. Lucy (Dec. 13): This martyr from the fourth century chose to be Christian when being a Christian was illegal. She wanted to give up all her wealth and devote her life to the poor, but she herself became a victim of oppression. After resisting the advances of a Roman soldier, she was denounced as a Christian and executed. She teaches us that life in Christ's light is worth devoting your life to – even dying for.

St. John of the Cross (Dec. 14): He is the great mystic of Advent. John was a gifted writer and poet who took upon himself the most menial jobs wherever he was. His life reminds us that no matter how soaring our spirituality, it must be grounded in humble day-to-day duties or we miss the whole meaning of the Incarnation.

Making a Difference this Christmas

Christmas is undeniably the most commercialized religious holiday our culture has created. The consumerism that surrounds it creates stress for individuals, families and the environment while pulling us away from the religious meaning behind the holiday: "the reason for the season." The challenge is to help our youth reclaim what it means to have a God who has become flesh. How do we care for other people, how do we celebrate life and how do we act as good stewards of our environment.

Below are a few ideas or strategies to help us celebrate Christmas well, by caring for others, our own spiritual needs and the environment.

Gifts for Others

Gift baskets

Contact local agencies to find any families in particular need. Then one or two homerooms can put together baskets/boxes for them collecting specific toys/clothes for children of the appropriate ages.

Put a Giving Tree in the school foyer

This tree can be decorated with ornaments with the name and age of children in need so students may take an ornament and then bring back a gift for them or leave the ornaments on the tree and just bring gifts and place around the base of the tree.

Shoe boxes for the homeless

Contact local homeless shelters. Students can bring in a shoebox full of gifts for the homeless containing personal hygiene items such as toothbrushes, toothpaste, soap, socks, hats, mitts, scarves, etc.

Christmas dances

If you have school dances encourage a can (or two) of food to be part of admissions. The local food bank will appreciate the support.

Have two people dress up as Santa and Mrs. Clause. Have pictures taken with them. A small fee can be attached to this and the money can go to support a local agency.

Programs

The Advent Wreath program in the Faith Ways program, book one, put out by the Center for Ministry Development gives students the opportunity to explore the liturgical seasons of the year, compare and contrast the way the media, church and their own families prepare for Christmas and explore the meaning of Advent. The program concludes with students making their own advent wreaths. (Helpful hint: the base for wreaths can be made inexpensively from a cardboard circle and 4 cardboard egg carton egg holders turned upside down and glued to the cardboard ring with an X slashed through the top. Then just cover the cardboard with greenery and don't allow the candle to burn too low.)

Encourage Families to Prepare Together with An Advent Sharing List For Families (please see the following page).

Host a Christmas Caroling opportunity for students/parents. You can sing songs out in the community or where you are to get into the spirit. Hot chocolate and cookies can be served. Have craft stations set up so that Christmas cards and/or Christmas ornaments can be made by teens, parents or younger siblings. And don't forget a favorite Christmas story reading. You can even include a visit from St. Nick himself handing out candy canes!

Have a Green Christmas. Wrap gifts in reusable fabric or previously used wrapping paper.

Instead of gifts give coupons to friends or family members for hugs, unloading dishwasher, doing dishes, a foot massage, or a half an hour play date for a younger sibling, etc.

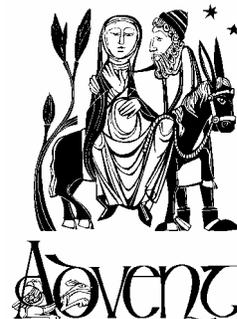


AN ADVENT SHARING LIST FOR FAMILIES

- U** Look through your clothes for things in good shape that you will never wear again. Bundle them for delivery to a church-run thrift shop or shelter.
- U** Buy a gift you would personally like to have. Wrap it for distribution to someone your age at a local family shelter.
- U** Read the Christmas story in the Bible as a family (Luke 2:1-20)
- U** Bake and decorate sugar cookies as a family. Keep half for yourself and give the rest away.
- U** Offer to help a family member, relative or friend do their Christmas shopping or wrapping.
- U** Thank a salesperson for her assistance. Tell her you understand how hard it must be to keep smiling during the pre-Christmas rush.
- U** As a family, go without between-meal snacks or even a meal. Contribute the money saved to a local soup kitchen or food pantry.
- U** Donate a package of heavy-weight socks to your local homeless shelter.
- U** Borrow or buy a book about Christmas traditions around the world. Add an idea you like to your family celebration of the season.
- U** Locate Israel and Bethlehem on a globe or world map. Pray for peace in the land and continent of Jesus' birth.
- U** Call or write a family friend you haven't seen for a while. Let him or her know how much you appreciate their presence in your life.
- U** Schedule a date for a family visit to a local nursing home – not now, but in February or March when Christmas caroling is just a memory.
- U** Buy a family's worth of gloves and hats, then give them away to a family in need.
- U** Invite someone who lives alone to join you for a special Advent or Christmas meal.
- U** Select a cause or charity you would like to support as a family during the coming year and decide how you will work it into your budget.

- U** Think of a no-cost, "invisible" present (story, joke, favor, hug) you can give to a family member or friend—and share it today.
- U** Clean house together in preparation for putting up your Christmas tree and decorations.
- U** Sing a favorite Christmas song together.
- U** Make an ornament for your family Christmas tree.
- U** Offer a prayer of thanks for someone who went out of their way today to make your day better.
- U** Look at everything your family does to prepare for Christmas and how these tasks are shared. Cut back on or redistribute the responsibilities so that no one feels overburdened.
- U** As you watch or read the day's news reports, think about where Jesus is being born in poverty today and what you can do to help.
- U** Call or write a friend to thank him or her for being a good listener and faithful friend.
- U** Take time today to sit and pray. Think about what you are thankful for and what your hopes are for the coming year.
- U** Do something good today for someone who will never know you did it or be able to do something for you in return.
- U** List the things you least like about Christmas preparation. Decide as a family to eliminate at least a couple of these things from your list.
- U** Figure out what makes you feel best at Christmas time. Figure out a way to incorporate the feeling into your life throughout the year.
- U** Take an hour off today to do nothing, nap, listen to music, or go through photos of the past year.
- U** Look three strangers in the eye today, smile, and wish them a cheerful Merry Christmas.
- U** List the things you most like about Christmas preparation. Schedule time together to do them, so that they do not get lost in the rush.

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ADVENT HYMN SUGGESTIONS

CBW = Catholic Book of Worship III (1994); G = Gather, 2nd Edition (1994); GP = Glory & Praise (1984)

Gathering/Recessional Songs:

Advent Gathering – G250
Awake! Awake, and Greet the New Morn – CBW303
Be Light for Our Eyes – CBW305, G354
The Advent of Our God – CBW315
Come, O Long Expected Jesus – CBW306
Every Valley – CBW308, GP14
The King Shall Come – CBW318, G248
Like a shepherd – CBW490, G251, GP35
O Come, Divine Messiah – CBW310
O Come, O Come Emmanuel – CBW312
Prepare the Way of the Lord – CBW317
Sing a New Song – CBW563, G384, GP47

Suggested Seasonal Responsorial Psalms:

25 (To you, O Lord, I lift my soul.) – CBW16, G34
85 (Lord, let us see your kindness.) – CBW15, G73
146 (Lord, come and save us) – CBW23, G124

Preparation of the Gifts/Meditative Songs:

The Angel Gabriel – CBW316
Bread of Life – CBW597A
Come to Set Us Free – G257
Creator of the Stars of Night – CBW307
God of All People – CBW314, G255
Listen, My People – CBW309
My Soul Rejoices – GP123
My Soul in Stillness Waits – G252
Now in This Banquet (Advent refrain) – CBW608, G600
Patience, People – GP131
Save Us, O Lord – GP234
Soon and Very Soon – G555
Wait for the Lord – CBW 319, G256
Within Our Hearts Be Born – G253

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WEB SITE LINKS FOR TEACHERS

http://www.nrvn.net/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=276&Itemid=27
http://www.sacredspace.ie/retreat/retreat200511_index.htm
http://www.holycross.edu/publicaffairs/features/2007-2008/adventretreat_07

Please forward any comments or suggestions for this newsletter to kings@uwo.ca. We value and encourage your participation in the development of the Chaplains Newsletter

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