

adventus

ANCIENT PRACTICES FOR AN ADVENT AT HOME

This is a publication of the Western North Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church.



Western North Carolina Conference
The United Methodist Church

Introduction

There are so many published Bible studies available at our fingertips. The most common studies seem to feature an “expert” teaching about the Bible while we follow along with a study guide or small group discussion. This Advent, we invite you into this ancient practice of Lectio Divina (pronounced lek-tsee-oh dih-vee-nuh) and ask you to invite the Holy Spirit to speak to you through meditative reading of scripture.

ADVENTUS

Advent comes from the Latin word *Adventus*, which means “coming.” It marks the start of the church year, beginning with the fourth Sunday before Christmas Day and ending Christmas Eve. Advent is a season to prepare for the coming of Christ in various meanings: the promised coming of the Messiah to the Jews, the coming of Jesus being born in Bethlehem, the promised return of the risen Christ in final victory, and the continual coming of Christ into the lives and hearts of believers.¹

HISTORY

The origins of Advent are fuzzy. There are traces of it in the early 4th century, but the oldest witness to Advent as a time of preparation comes from Saint Perpetuus, Bishop of Tours (France) in the 5th century. It was meant to be similar to Lent (a tradition that was already established) as a time of fasting from the feast of St. Martin on November 11 to Epiphany on January 6.² In 567, the Council of Tours used the name Advent to refer to this season of fasting and, by the end of the 6th century, the four Sundays were established to focus on the incarnation of Christ and to prepare for a celebration of His birth.

Rome adopted the practice of wearing purple vestments by the 12th century and fixed the length of the season to at least four Sundays. Toward the end of the 20th century, Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Anglicans/Episcopalians, Methodists, Presbyterians and other ecumenical partners came together around a revised calendar of the church year and a three-year lectionary system. This lectionary gave each Sunday of Advent its own distinctive theme.³

First Sunday of Advent: Christ's coming in final victory

Second and Third Sundays of Advent: John the Baptist

Fourth Sunday of Advent: The events immediately preceding birth of Jesus Christ

In this study, we use Advent and Christmas scripture lessons for Year B of the Revised Common Lectionary.

¹ <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/all-about-advent>

² <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Advent>

³ <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/where-did-the-season-of-advent-come-from>

Lectio divina

HISTORY

Each session of *Adventus* follows the monastic practice of Lectio Divina. *Lectio Divina* is Latin for “divine reading.” This ancient practice was established in the 6th century by Saint Benedict of Nursia (Italy), although Origen engaged in the practice of meditative scripture reading as early as the 3rd century.⁴

The structured *Lectio Divina* we know today was formalized during the 12th century in France by Carthusian monk Guigo II. The practice gained popularity throughout the 16th century, as evidenced by Protestant Reformer John Calvin and Puritan Richard Baxter each advocating its use.⁵

STRUCTURE

The five movements or steps of *Lectio Divina* are:

Lectio (Reading): What does the scripture say?

Meditatio (Meditation): What does the scripture say to me, specifically, today?

Oratio (Prayer): What do I say to God in response to this text?

Contemplatio (Contemplation): What is God asking of me through this scripture?

Actio (Action): What am I going to do in light of this scripture and meditation?

For the purposes of this study, we have added three additional elements:

Illumiatio (Lighting): To begin, light a candle to center yourself and set the stage for a meditative experience. We encourage you to utilize an Advent wreath.

Amen: Close your time with prayer and extinguish the candle.

Ad Libitum Actio (Optional Activity): These are additional ancient practices that can enhance your spiritual life throughout the Advent season.

FOR INDIVIDUALS, SMALL GROUPS, OR FAMILIES

This study was designed to be utilized in a variety of settings.

For individuals: Follow the prompts, as is. You can simply reflect upon your answers to questions/prompts throughout the study or use a journal to record your thoughts.

For small groups: Invite different individuals to read the scripture aloud at each step and engage in discussion using the questions/prompts throughout the study.

For families: Depending on children’s ages, you can follow the above recommendations for small groups. If you have younger children, you might need to read the scripture for them. Use the scripture lessons provided in this study or utilize a child’s Bible or Bible storybook.

⁴ Cunningham, Lawrence S.; Egan, Keith J. (1996) *Christian spirituality: themes from the tradition*. Paulist Press.

⁵ Thompson, Marjorie J.; Howard, Evan B. (2005). *Soul Feast: An Invitation To The Christian Spiritual Life*. Westminster John Knox Press.

advent wreath

HISTORY

The Advent wreath has been traced back to the 16th century among German Lutherans, however Johan Hinrich Wichern is credited as the inventor. Wichern was a Protestant pastor in Germany in the 19th century. He built a large wooden ring with candles for each day of Advent. The wreath grew in popularity and shrunk in size to the 4-5 candles we are familiar with today.⁶

SYMBOLISM

Advent wreaths are traditionally circular to represent God's infinite love. The wreath lays flat. Evergreen leaves/branches are often used to represent the hope of eternal life through Jesus.

There are 4 candles, equally spaced around the wreath, representing the four weeks of Advent. The four candles symbolize hope, peace, joy and love. Sometimes, a fifth candle is added to the center of the wreath – the Christ candle – and light it on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day.⁷ We will follow these themes throughout this study.

MAKE A WREATH

We encourage you to utilize an Advent wreath with this study. You can create one by arranging 4-5 candles on a plate, then decorating the plate with natural items from around your home. For you, that could be spruce branches and pinecones, or it could mean palm leaves, sand and seashells. This would be a fun family activity.

Do you have kids (or adults!) who would rather color an Advent wreath coloring page than build one for your table? Oriental Trading offers a free printable coloring page at <https://www.fun365.orientaltrading.com/download/advent-wreath-free-printable-coloring-page>. Begin by coloring only the wreath. Then, instead of lighting the candles each week, color the corresponding candle.



⁶ Mosteller, Angie (2010-05-15). *Christmas, Celebrating the Christian History of Classic Symbols, Songs and Stories*. Holiday Classics Publishing.

⁷ <https://www.umc.org/en/content/ask-the-umc-what-do-the-candles-in-our-advent-wreath-mean>

hope

FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

ILLUMINATIO

Center your mind and prepare your devotional space by lighting a candle. If you are celebrating the season with an Advent wreath, light one candle.

LECTIO

Read the scripture lesson slowly and prayerfully.

MEDITATIO

Read the scripture lesson again. Pay attention for a word or phrase that sticks out. What are the words or phrases that spoke to you? What stood out? What does the text say to you, today?

ORATIO

Read the scripture lesson aloud and respond to what God is saying to you in prayer.

COMTEMPLATIO

Be still with God and remain in silence for a period of time. If the silence is difficult for you and you find your mind wandering to your to-do list, recite and repeat in your mind the word or phrase that spoke to you during *Meditatio*.

ACTIO

How might God be calling you to act in response to the scripture reading?

AMEN

Close with a personal prayer of adoration, confession, thanksgiving and supplication, then extinguish the candle.

SCRIPTURE LESSON

1 Corinthians 1:3-9 NRSV

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind — just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you — so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.

He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

daily examen

PRACTICE

Commit to the ancient practice of the Daily Examen throughout this Advent season.

HISTORY

This practice comes from the 16th century. Saint Ignatius of Loyola (Spain) thought that the Examen was a gift directly from God and he required Jesuits to practice the prayer twice daily — at noon and at the end of the day.⁸

The prayer has five steps that focus on recognizing God's presence, reflecting upon your day with gratitude, and listening for God's guidance.

THE FIVE STEPS⁸

1. Become aware of God's presence.
2. Review the day with gratitude.
3. Pay attention to your emotions.
4. Choose one feature of the day and pray from it.
5. Look toward tomorrow.

REFLECTION

How might you find more hope in this Advent season if you were to create a habit of praying the Daily Examen at the end of each day?

⁸ <http://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-examen/>

peace

SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT

ILLUMINATIO

Center your mind and prepare your devotional space by lighting a candle. If you are celebrating the season with an Advent wreath, light two candles.

LECTIO

Read the scripture lesson slowly and prayerfully.

MEDITATIO

Read the scripture lesson again. Pay attention for a word or phrase that sticks out. What are the words or phrases that spoke to you? What stood out? What does the text say to you, today?

ORATIO

Read the scripture lesson aloud and respond to what God is saying to you in prayer.

COMTEMPLATIO

Be still with God and remain in silence for a period of time. If the silence is difficult for you and you find your mind wandering to your to-do list, recite and repeat in your mind the word or phrase that spoke to you during *Meditatio*.

ACTIO

How might God be calling you to act in response to the scripture reading?

AMEN

Close with a personal prayer of adoration, confession, thanksgiving and supplication, then extinguish the candles.

SCRIPTURE LESSON

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Rejoice always.

Pray continually.

Give thanks in every situation because this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

Don't suppress the Spirit.

Don't brush off Spirit-inspired messages, but examine everything carefully and hang on to what is good.

Avoid every kind of evil.

Now, may the God of peace himself cause you to be completely dedicated to him; and may your spirit, soul, and body be kept intact and blameless at our Lord Jesus Christ's coming.

The one who is calling you is faithful and will do this.

fasting

PRACTICE

Commit to fast from (some or all) technology for a defined period of time each day or one day each week throughout the rest of this Advent season.

HISTORY

To fast is to willfully abstain from something, typically food, for a period of time. It is an ancient practice that has been used by nearly every major religion.

In Exodus 34, we read that Moses fasted for 40 days and 40 nights before he came down from Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments.

John Wesley practiced a weekly fast from sundown on Thursday to 3pm on Friday and encouraged Methodists to do the same. For some time, Wesley even advocated fasting on both Wednesdays and Fridays.⁹

REFLECTION

How might you find more peace this Advent season if you were to create a habit of regularly fasting from technology?

Is there something specific that would make the biggest impact – social media, cell phone, business emails, video games, news stations, television in general?

⁹ <https://www.resourceumc.org/en/content/fasting-the-most-neglected-means-of-grace>

Joy

THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT

ILLUMINATIO

Center your mind and prepare your devotional space by lighting a candle. If you are celebrating the season with an Advent wreath, light three candles.

LECTIO

Read the scripture lesson slowly and prayerfully.

MEDITATIO

Read the scripture lesson again. Pay attention for a word or phrase that sticks out. What are the words or phrases that spoke to you? What stood out? What does the text say to you, today?

ORATIO

Read the scripture lesson aloud and respond to what God is saying to you in prayer.

COMTEMPLATIO

Be still with God and remain in silence for a period of time. If the silence is difficult for you and you find your mind wandering to your to-do list, recite and repeat in your mind the word or phrase that spoke to you during *Meditatio*.

ACTIO

How might God be calling you to act in response to the scripture reading?

AMEN

Close with a personal prayer of adoration, confession, thanksgiving and supplication, then extinguish the candles.

SCRIPTURE LESSON

Luke 1:46-55 CEB

Mary said,
“With all my heart I glorify the Lord!

In the depths of who I am
I rejoice in God my savior.

He has looked with favor
on the low status of his servant.

Look! From now on,
everyone will consider me highly favored
because the mighty one has done
great things for me. Holy is his name.

He shows mercy to everyone,
from one generation to the next,
who honors him as God.

He has shown strength with his arm.

He has scattered those with arrogant
thoughts and proud inclinations.

He has pulled the powerful down from their
thrones and lifted up the lowly.

He has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty-handed.

He has come to the aid of his servant
Israel, remembering his mercy, just as he
promised to our ancestors, to Abraham
and to Abraham’s descendants forever.”

the psalms

PRACTICE

Sing a psalm or write your own. Commit to listening to music, spoken word, or poetry that brings you joy throughout this Advent season.

HISTORY

The Psalms were written over at least five centuries and many were most likely utilized in the Temple of Jerusalem.¹⁰ They represent a wide range of human experience and emotion — from lament to thanksgiving to joy and everything in between and beyond.

The original Hebrew text did not have a title for the book of Psalms, but the word *mizmor* appeared in many of the individual titles. *Mizmor* means a sung poem accompanied by a stringed instrument. The Greek translation of *mizmor* is *psalmos*, and that's where the book title Psalms came from.¹¹

SING

Choose a psalm and set it to a melody. Sing along or play an instrument. Make up your own tune or set it to the familiar tune of another song.

WRITE

Write your own psalm. Write about what you're feeling and experiencing in life right now. To take it to the next level, turn your poem into a song.

REFLECTION

Are there songs that act as prayers for you? What songs are they and why do you think they are important to you?

How might you find more joy in this Advent season through music?

¹⁰ Kselman, John S. (2007). "Psalms". In Coogan, Michael David; Brettler, Marc Zvi; Newsom, Carol Ann (eds.). *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*. Oxford University Press.

¹¹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Psalms>

LOVE

FOURTH WEEK OF ADVENT

ILLUMINATIO

Center your mind and prepare your devotional space by lighting a candle. If you are celebrating the season with an Advent wreath, light four candles.

LECTIO

Read the scripture lesson slowly and prayerfully.

MEDITATIO

Read the scripture lesson again. Pay attention for a word or phrase that sticks out. What are the words or phrases that spoke to you? What stood out? What does the text say to you, today?

ORATIO

Read the scripture lesson aloud and respond to what God is saying to you in prayer.

COMTEMPLATIO

Be still with God and remain in silence for a period of time. If the silence is difficult for you and you find your mind wandering to your to-do list, recite and repeat in your mind the word or phrase that spoke to you during *Meditatio*.

ACTIO

How might God be calling you to act in response to the scripture reading?

AMEN

Close with a personal prayer of adoration, confession, thanksgiving and supplication, then extinguish the candles.

SCRIPTURE LESSON

Isaiah 9:2-6 CEB

The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light.

On those living in a pitch-dark land,
light has dawned.

You have made the nation great;
you have increased its joy.

They rejoiced before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as those who divide plunder rejoice.

As on the day of Midian, you've shattered
the yoke that burdened them,
the staff on their shoulders,
and the rod of their oppressor.

Because every boot
of the thundering warriors,
and every garment rolled in blood
will be burned, fuel for the fire.

A child is born to us, a son is given to us,
and authority will be on his shoulders.

He will be named
Wonderful Counselor,
Mighty God,
Eternal Father,
Prince of Peace.

BREATH PRAYER

PRACTICE

Commit to the ancient practice of the breath prayer throughout the rest of this Advent season.

HISTORY

The breath prayer is an ancient way to pray that likely began with the Desert Fathers and Mothers, Christian hermits who lived in the Egyptian desert at the beginning of the 3rd century.¹² They took very seriously Paul's command to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17) and most likely originated the Jesus Prayer,¹³ which is a recitation of Luke 8:13:

**Lord Jesus Christ, son of God,
have mercy on me, a sinner.**

Set the prayer to the rhythm of your breathing. The first part is prayed silently while you breathe in or aloud afterwards. The second part is then prayed after or while you breathe out. Hence, the "breath" prayer.

WRITE A BREATH PRAYER

To practice the breath prayer, choose the Jesus Prayer above or write your own personal breath prayer. There are two parts of a breath prayer:

Invocation: How will you call on God?

Petition: What do you need?

Examples:

- Lord God, lead me in your way.
- Creator, open my eyes to recognize you.
- Holy One, heal me.

REFLECTION

How might you find more love in this Advent season if you trained your heart and mind to turn to the breath prayer instead of wandering to worries or to-do lists?

¹² <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Desert-Fathers>

¹³ Mathewes-Green, Frederica. (2009). *The Jesus Prayer: The Ancient Desert Prayer that Tunes the Heart to God*. Paraclete Press.

christ

CHRISTMAS DAY

ILLUMINATIO

Center your mind and prepare your devotional space by lighting a candle. If you are celebrating the season with an Advent wreath, light all four candles plus the center Christ candle.

LECTIO

Read the scripture lesson slowly and prayerfully.

MEDITATIO

Read the scripture lesson again. Pay attention for a word or phrase that sticks out. What are the words or phrases that spoke to you? What stood out? What does the text say to you, today?

ORATIO

Read the scripture lesson aloud and respond to what God is saying to you in prayer.

COMTEMPLATIO

Be still with God and remain in silence for a period of time. If the silence is difficult for you and you find your mind wandering to your to-do list, recite and repeat in your mind the word or phrase that spoke to you during *Meditatio*.

ACTIO

How might God be calling you to act in response to the scripture reading?

AMEN

Close with a personal prayer of adoration, confession, thanksgiving and supplication, then extinguish the candles.

SCRIPTURE LESSON

Matthew 1:18-23 CEB

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. When Mary his mother was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit.

Joseph her husband was a righteous man. Because he didn't want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly. As he was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." Now all of this took place so that what the Lord had spoken through the prophet would be fulfilled:

Look! A virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they will call him, Emmanuel.

(Emmanuel means "God with us.")