

At this time of the year, what is happening to our daylight? (it is decreasing each day)
In fact, what day will have the shortest amount of daylight? (December 21). We call that day the winter solstice.



For many people, darkness is a frightening, disturbing, or even depressing reality.

This time of the year can remind us that many people are suffering from the darkness of the world: sickness, poverty, violence, injustice, war, hunger, natural disasters, and death. All of these things can overwhelm us and cause us to lose hope.



That's why Christians celebrate a season of hope at this time of the year. We call this season Advent, a word that means "coming" or "arrival." When something good is coming or when you are awaiting the arrival of something exciting, that time of waiting becomes exciting too.



Not all kinds of waiting are fun and exciting. Waiting at the airport or in line at the supermarket or the doctor's office is no fun. But there is a different kind of waiting that is fun and exciting. We call this ANTICIPATION.

Anticipation




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Anticipating means waiting with excitement because we know that something good is going to happen. During Advent, what are we waiting for? (the celebration of the coming of Jesus at Christmas).



The celebration of Christmas is one of the greatest celebrations of the Church year since we recall that, when Jesus was born, God became one of us and his light dispelled the darkness. For centuries, the Jewish people waited – anticipated – the coming of the Messiah. During Advent, we hear from the Jewish prophets who teach us how to live as a people of hope, a people of anticipating, a people of the light.



Deliver us, Lord, we pray, from every evil, graciously grant peace in our days, that, by the help of your mercy, we may be always free from sin and safe from all distress, as we await the blessed hope and the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ.



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We also wait in joyful hope for the coming of Jesus at the end of time. We believe that Christ will come again and that, for those who have been faithful to him, we will enjoy the fullness of his Kingdom for all eternity.


(Have a volunteer read the prayer on the slide and emphasize the last lines about awaiting the coming of our savior. Ask if anyone recognizes this prayer and then explain that it is a prayer prayed by the priest at Mass after the Lord's Prayer)



It's no coincidence that we celebrate Christmas so close to the winter solstice. At a time when the world is at it's darkest point as far as sunlight goes, we celebrate the coming of the light of Christ into our world. December 25 is not historically the day that Jesus was born...we don't know that exact date. However, we celebrate his birth on this day because it is the perfect time of the year to celebrate the light of Christ entering into a world that is experiencing much darkness.

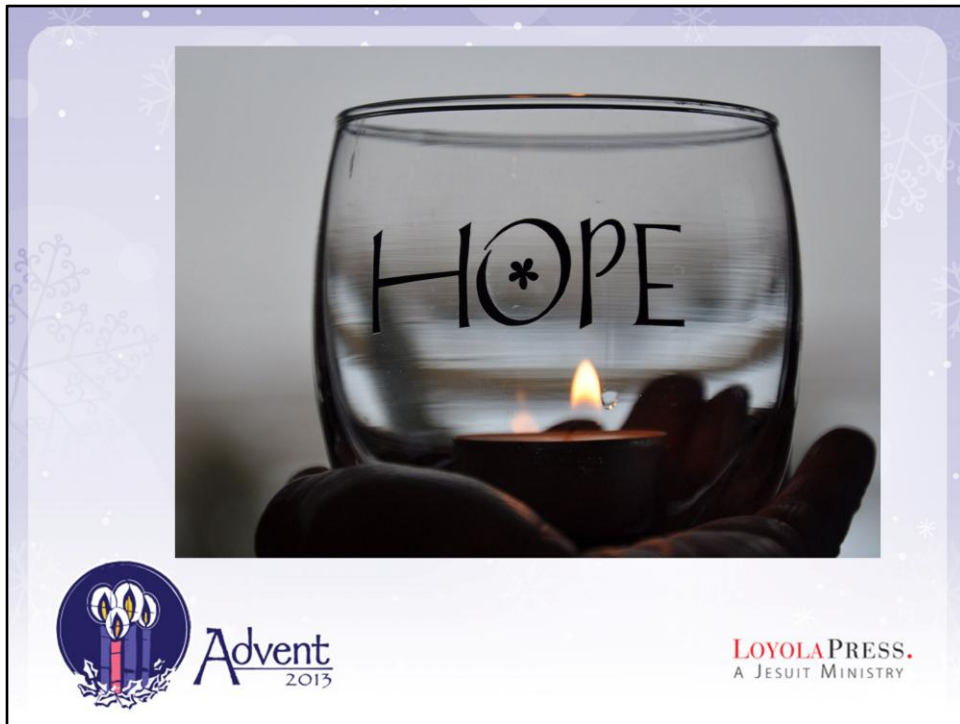
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Advent begins 4 Sundays before Christmas, on the Sunday closest to the Feast of St. Andrew the Apostle (November 30) which means that it varies in length from year to year. It can be as long as 28 days (if Christmas falls on a Sunday) or (click) as short as 22 days if Christmas falls on a Monday. How many days will it be this year? (present a calendar for the current year and invite a volunteer to calculate how many days).



If the theme of Advent can be summed up in one word, that word would be HOPE. Let's face it, we live in a world in which people often lose hope. What are some examples of situations that cause people to lose hope? (possible answers: sickness, unemployment, war, violence, broken relationships, failure, etc.)

As Christians, we have the responsibility of bringing hope to a world that is in despair. We are called to bring light into the darkness. And we can do this because we know that the light of the world – Jesus – has come to live with us!

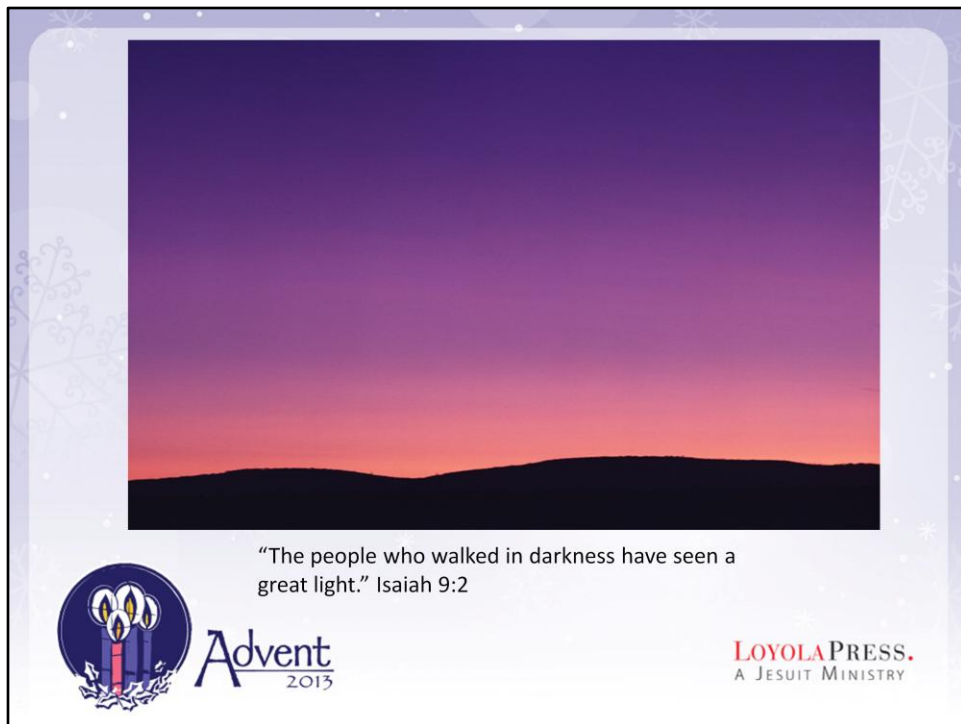


During Advent, then, the light increases each week as we light our Advent candles, symbolizing the growing hope that we have as we get closer to celebrating the birth of Jesus.

The Advent wreath is one of the primary symbols of the Advent season. The wreath itself is made of evergreens which represents life and the circle shape reminds us of the eternity of God who has no beginning and no end. The 4 candles represent the 4 Sundays of Advent. The purple candles represent prayer and penance which we practice during Advent as part of our preparation. The pink candle, lit on the 3rd Sunday of Advent, reminds us of the joy of this season. The 3rd Sunday of Advent is known as Gaudete Sunday, a Latin word meaning "Rejoice!"



Advent focuses on some very important figures from the Bible. We hear Scripture readings from the Prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Baruch, Micah, and Zephaniah, who spoke words of hope to Israel about the coming of a Messiah. We hear about the New Testament prophet, John the Baptist, the cousin of Jesus, who prepared the way for the coming of Jesus. And, of course, we hear about Mary and Joseph and the great faith that they placed in God who asked them to become a holy family with Jesus.




Another major theme or focus of Advent is light and darkness. In the Advent liturgies, the themes of light and darkness surround us and remind us that our time of walking in darkness will end when we invite Jesus to come into our lives.



As mentioned earlier, the color purple or violet is the color of the Advent season. In addition to representing prayer and penance, the color also represents the kingship of Jesus. During Advent, we joyfully anticipate the coming of our king – Jesus Christ – in his fullness.



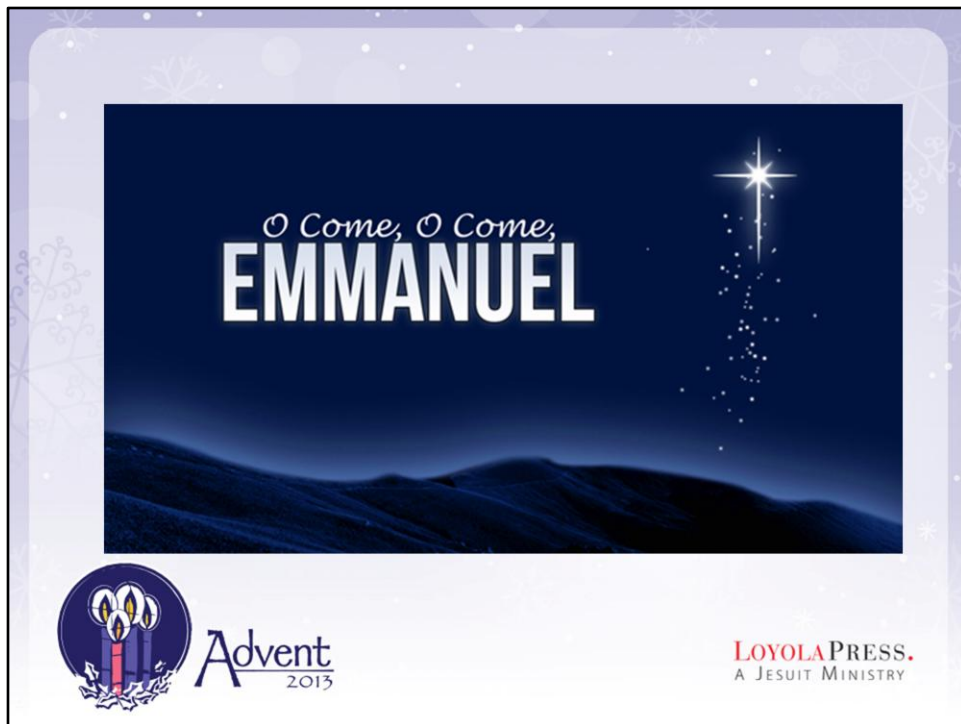
Something else that you will notice during Advent is that we do not sing the Gloria at Mass. While Advent is a joyful season, by comparison, it does not have the same level of joy as does the Christmas season which follows. By not singing the Gloria during Advent, we create a contrast between the 2 seasons. When Christmas comes along, the singing of the Gloria will be all the more festive!



The 'O' Antiphons of the final days of Advent

<p>Dec. 17: O Wisdom, O holy Word of God, you govern all creation with your strong yet tender care: Come and show your people the way to salvation.</p>	<p>Dec. 21: O Radiant Dawn, splendor of eternal light, sun of justice: Come, shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death.</p>
<p>Dec. 18: O Sacred Lord of ancient Israel, who showed yourself to Moses in the burning bush, who gave him the holy law on Sinai mountain: Come, stretch out your mighty hand to set us free.</p>	<p>Dec. 22: O King of all the nations, the only joy of every human heart; O Keystone of the mighty arch of man: Come and save the creature you fashioned from the dust.</p>
<p>Dec. 19: O Flower of Jesse's stem, you have been raised up as a sign for all peoples; kings stand silent in your presence; the nations bow down in worship before you. Come, let nothing keep you from coming to our aid.</p>	<p>Dec. 23: O Emmanuel, king and lawgiver, desire of the nations, Savior of all people: Come and set us free, Lord our God.</p>
<p>Dec. 20: O Key of David, O royal Power of Israel, controlling at your will the gate of heaven: Come, break down the prison walls of death for those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death; and lead your captive people into freedom.</p>	

Beginning on December 17, the Church prays the “O Antiphons” which come from the Evening Prayer of the Liturgy of the Hours. These beautiful prayers express our desire for God to come into our lives and to transform us with his saving grace. (Invite volunteers to read aloud the O Antiphons. Ask if anyone knows what song we sing during Advent that is based on the O Antiphons = O Come, O Come, Emmanuel. If possible, play a recording of the song or sing it with your group.)



The name Emmanuel is important during Advent. Does anyone know what the name Emmanuel means? It means "God with us." So when we sing, "O come, O come, Emmanuel..." we are saying, "O Come, O Come, God be with us." The name Emmanuel is associated with Jesus because, through him, God is with us. As Jesus' followers, it's our job to help others recognize that God is with them, especially during hard times.



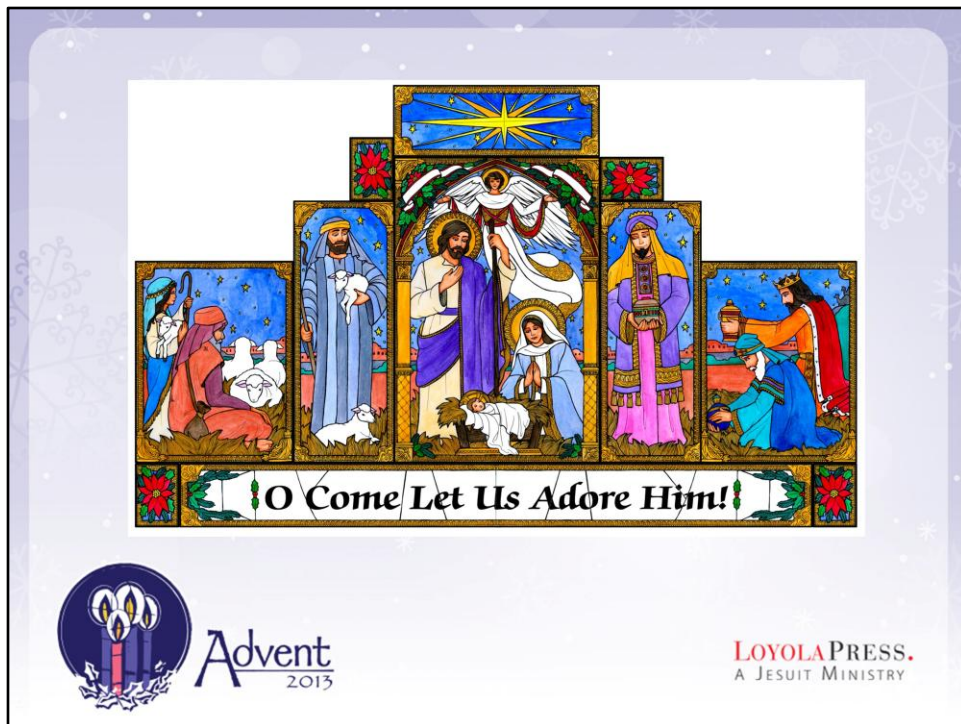
Another tradition associated with Advent is the Advent calendar which we use to count down the days leading up to Christmas. For each day, there is a window or door to open or a pocket to explore which reveals either a symbol, image, or Scripture passage of the Nativity story or Old Testament prophecies. Sometimes they reveal an idea that can be put into practice during Advent, such as praying or doing penance. Families can use Advent calendars as a way of building anticipation for Christmas and keeping the sacredness of the season from being overwhelmed by the commercialism of the secular celebration of Christmas.



Another tradition associated with Advent is the Jesse Tree. Jesse is the name of the father of King David, an ancestor of Jesus. We use the phrase “family tree” when tracing our ancestors. The Jesse Tree helps us to learn about Jesus’ ancestors – his family tree and is based on Isaiah 11:1 – “a shoot shall come out of the stock of Jesse and a branch shall grow out of his roots.” We adorn the Jesse tree with ornaments that represent the people, prophecies, and events leading up to the birth of Jesus. The ornaments of the Jesse tree tell the story of God in the Old Testament, connecting the Advent season with the faithfulness of God across thousands of years of history.

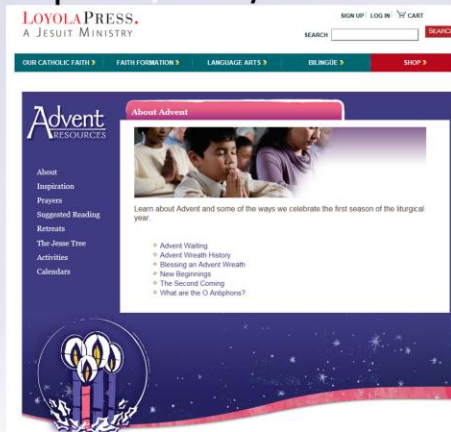


The secular culture we live in has turned Christmas into a season for buying. Advent provides us with an opportunity to prepare for Christmas spiritually, focusing on the light of Christ that our world so desperately needs.



By observing the season of Advent, we will be prepared to celebrate the coming of Jesus at Christmas and to bring his light and hope to those who are living in darkness.

For more information about Advent, visit
www.loyolapress.com/advent



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