

# The Three Advents of Christ



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*“Advent has a twofold character: as a season to prepare for Christmas when Christ’s first coming to us is remembered; as a season when that remembrance directs the mind and the heart to await Christ’s second coming at the end of time. Advent is thus a period for devout and joyful expectation”* (General Norms for the Liturgical Year and the Calendar 39).

## THE MEANING OF ADVENT

Most Catholics have some awareness of the liturgical year, but what may not be so obvious is that the liturgical year is not about archaeology or history. It’s not just a matter of remembering things that happened long ago. Rather, the liturgical year is about our Lord Jesus Christ, and so it is also about us! The most common description of the Church is probably “the body of Christ.” If the liturgical year is about Jesus Christ, and we are his body, the liturgical year is also about us and the meaning of our lives in Christ as Christians.

Advent, then, is about watching and waiting for Christ in joyful expectation. Since the word “advent” is the Latin for “coming,” we might say with our medieval forebears in the faith that there are three advents of Christ, or three comings of Christ, and the holy season of Advent is about all three: the advent of Christ in the Incarnation—the past; the advent of Christ in word and Eucharist—the present; the advent of Christ at the second coming or, to use the New Testament term, the Parousia—the future. Each one of these advents or comings of Christ is paralleled by our coming to Christ. Remember, there is no Christ, Head of the body, without his members!

### The First Advent

The first advent (past) is this: Christ came in the Incarnation // We come to “incarnation” in Christ. Christ first came to us in the Incarnation, in the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The purpose of the Incarnation, however, is to bring about, through grace, what we might call our incarnation in Christ. Think of the words of the thirteenth-century Dominican mystic Meister Eckhart: “The Incarnation of the Word in Jesus

of Nazareth long ago is of no interest and importance unless that same Word becomes incarnate in us today” (Sermon 22). The Word becomes incarnate in us through baptism, or you might say we come to “incarnation” in Christ through baptism. This would be more intelligible if we recall another word for baptism, “Christening,” which means “being put into Christ.”

### The Second Advent

The second advent (present) is this: Christ comes in word and Eucharist // We come through word and Eucharist to Christ. Having been put into Christ through baptism, we are further shaped as Christ, we are “christified,” as it were, through word and Eucharist. All the sacraments are related to the Eucharist, as to their center. In the Eucharist, Christ, sacramentally and substantially, becomes available to us as food, “advents” in us, and we become what we eat. If this sounds strange, think of the words of the Lord in St. Augustine’s experience in the *Confessions*: “I will not be changed into you, like the food your body eats. You will be changed into me.”

### The Third Advent

The third advent (future) is this: Christ will come at the Parousia // We will come to Parousia in Christ. The New Testament and tradition is clear that we do not know the date or the details of Christ’s coming in glory. Nor do we know the date or details of our final coming to Christ in and through the portal of death. So we ought to be vigilant and alert, watching and waiting, but in joy not fear.

To illustrate this further, think of the Dutch Jewish woman Etty Hillesum. She left a diary and letters of the months she spent in a transit camp before she was sent to Auschwitz, where

she died. This is what she wrote: “People here fritter their energy away on the thousand irksome details that grind us down every day; they lose themselves in detail and drown. That’s why they get driven off course and find existence pointless. The few big things that matter in life are what we have to keep in mind; the rest can be quietly abandoned. And you can find those few big things anywhere, you have to keep rediscovering them in yourself so that you can be renewed. And in spite of everything you always end with the same conviction: life is good after all.... And that’s what stays with me, even now, when I’m about to be packed off to Poland with my whole family” (Etty Hillesum, cited by David F. Ford, *The Shape of Living*, London: HarperCollins, 1997, 39).

Etty Hillesum’s perspective liberated her from the countless trivial pursuits that take up so much of life, even life in a transit camp destined for Holocaust. She was liberated to love life, and loving life is loving the Author of all life. It’s loving God through all the different aspects of one’s life, through all the gifts one has been given by God through our families and communities. It’s about developing a gift-like approach to life, and an upbeat habit of deep gratitude. That’s living in real relationship to this third advent of Christ, when we come through death to our final advent in him.

## THE ADVENT READINGS

The readings for the four Sundays of Advent form a choreography around these three advents of the Lord.

**Advent I:** Jeremiah 33:14–16; Psalm 25:4–5, 8–9, 10, 14; I Thessalonians 3:12–4; Luke 21: 25–28, 34–36

Jeremiah tells us that God will raise up a just shoot from David’s line, the coming Messiah. He is

looking forward to the first advent of Christ. In a similar fashion, the psalmist advises us that he waits all the day for his saving God, and lifts up his soul to him. We lift our souls to the Lord as we wait for him all the day long, as we wait for the Lord’s advent in word and Eucharist, and as we wait for his third advent. In his first letter to the Thessalonians, St. Paul prays that the Lord will help us increase our love for one another and for all as we ready ourselves for the coming of the Lord Jesus, the third or future advent.

**Advent II:** Baruch 5:1–9; Psalm 126:1–6; Philippians 1:4–6, 8–11; Luke 3:1–6

The prophet Baruch proclaims that the exile in Babylon is over and that God will advent to lead his people home in joy. This same note of joy in liberation from exile and homecoming is sounded by the psalmist, whose poem may be summarized in this way: When God led the exiles home their hearts were filled with joy; and so our hearts are filled with joy. St. Paul prays that the Philippians’ love will continue to be abundant up to the day of the Lord’s coming. St. Luke and John the Baptist tell us to prepare the way of the Lord, to repent of sin, so that all humankind will be readied to see the salvation of God. The advent-ing of God-in-Christ is the message of all these readings.

**Advent III:** Zephaniah 3:14–18a; Isaiah 12:2–6 (Psalm response); Philippians 4:4–7; Luke 3:10–18

Twice Israel is told by the prophet Zephaniah that the Lord is in her midst, that the Lord has advented, we might say. He rejoices over Israel and renews Israel in his love. The psalmist reiterates this idea in repeating that the Holy One of Israel is great in their midst. That is occasion for joy, and St. Paul picks up this note of joy. He tells the Philip-

pian always to rejoice in the Lord, because this Lord is in their midst. They are placed in him through baptism. Finally, St. Luke offers us a portrait of John the Baptist, the Advent prophet. The Baptist tells the crowds who flock to see and hear him that the advent-ing Messiah will baptize in the Holy Spirit.

**Advent IV:** Micah 5:1–4a; Psalm 80:2–3, 15–16, 18–19; Hebrews 10:5–10; Luke 1:39–45

We are now virtually at the end of Advent. The prophet Micah anticipates that the future Davidic king/Messiah will be a shepherd to his people and he shall be their *shalom*, the fullness of peace. The psalmist echoes this, insisting that if we see the face of the Shepherd of Israel, we shall be saved. He will come to save us and to give us new life. And, of course, this advent-ing of the Shepherd is almost here, Christmas. The anonymous author of the letter to the Hebrews writes that by God’s will we have been made holy through the offering of the body of Christ once and for all. His emphasis is on the first advent of Christ in the incarnation-ministry-death-resurrection, into which we are drawn by becoming members of this body of Christ, first in baptism then renewed and deepened through Eucharist. St. Luke proclaims that John leaped in Elizabeth’s womb as Elizabeth greeted her kinswoman Mary, the Ark of the New Covenant. The Messiah-in-Mary is about to be born.

Advent is that holy time when we prepare to celebrate liturgically Christ’s first advent, when we weekly celebrate his advent in our midst, and when we anticipate our final advent in him.

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