

## Welcome and Reminders

Welcome to any visitors and welcome back to the group members. It is important to remember that everything said and done in this group is confidential. The expectation is that there will not be discussion about our conversations to anyone outside of the group that is represented here and now. We understand that sometimes personal insights or information may be shared by someone who feels comfortable doing so in this group and not around others. Let's be respectful of that and carry our commitment to confidentiality as we leave this group. *(Pass out the confidentiality reminder to anyone who has not yet received one).*

## Prayer and Praises

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## Introduction to Advent

Advent is the first season of the church calendar. Unlike our annual (January to December) calendar the church calendar begins with Advent. Advent begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas. This year the first Sunday of Advent will be December 2nd and will continue through December 23rd.

The word Advent is translated as "coming or arrival." The Advent season celebrates Jesus' arrival into the world. *Revelation 1:8 and 22:13 reminds us: "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first the last the beginning and the end, says the Sovereign God."* In the Hebrew alphabet Alpha is the first letter and Omega is the last. This symbolism of the beginning and the end emphasizes Christ throughout history and is meaningful as we go through the season from Advent to Pentecost.

- *How does the symbolism of Christ being the beginning and end work in your life?*

Each week in Advent we celebrate a theme which serves to direct us to a better understanding God. This year our specific themes will be Exhort; Prepare; Rejoice and Behold.

During these weeks we will be focused on the preparation for the celebrations of the birth of Christ. We are blessed to be able to pick our own themes as some churches only focus on the same themes year in and year out.

I would like to take a few minutes before we go on to talk about the rest of the church calendar. Churches use what is called a common lectionary (there are a variety of lectionaries, each adopted by different denominations - we use the revised common lectionary) to go through a 3 year cycle. This coming Advent we will begin year cycle C. A 3 year cycle (A through C) will cover all the major themes of the bible. Many churches use the lectionary as a guide while are strictly tied to it in their worship planning and response. At Valley Ministries we use the common lectionary as a guide for preaching and teaching.

- *In your past church experiences, to your knowledge, to what extent did your church use the lectionary?*
- *Share any thought you have on using the lectionary.*

The seasons of the church lectionary calendar are:

**Advent** – Four weeks before Christmas

This year the dates are December 2, 9, 16, 23

**Christmastide** – 1 or 2 weeks after Christmas depending on when it falls.

**Epiphany** – Epiphany is January 6 and is celebrated through February 12

Baptism of Our Lord: January 13

Transfiguration (Last Sunday in Epiphany): February 10

Shrove or Fat Tuesday/Mardi Gras: February 12

**The Season of Lent** (February 13 – March 30, 2013)

Ash Wednesday begins the season of Lent each year and this coming year it begins on February 13, 2013.

First Sunday in Lent: February 17

Holy Week (March 24 - 30 [31, including Easter Sunday], 2013)

Palm/Passion Sunday: March 24

Maundy Thursday: March 28

Good Friday: March 29

Holy Saturday: March 30

**The Season of Easter** some churches call this Eastertide (March 31 – May 25, 2013)

Easter Sunday: March 31

Ascension: May 9 (observed on May 12)

Pentecost: May 19

**Ordinary Time/Season After Pentecost** (May 26 – November 24, 2013)

Trinity Sunday: May 26 (some traditions include with Pentecost)

All Saints Day: November 1

Christ the King: November 24

**The Season of Advent** the next cycle Year A is (November 28 – December 24, 2013)

For more information you can check out different web pages on the lectionary:

[www.textweek.com](http://www.textweek.com), [www.lectionary.com](http://www.lectionary.com), [www.lectionary.org](http://www.lectionary.org).

- *From your experience, or looking at the list above, what time or times of the liturgical year mean most to you and why?*

Each year the Advent topics are relative to expectation, anticipation, preparation, and longing for Christ. Advent is a time when we anticipate the newness of Christ being brought into the world. Sometimes the meaning gets caught up with the commercialism of the day. Thus we invite you to refocus on the idea of Christ instead of the gifts. We invite you to be productive in the ways you will use your time, your gifts, your treasures! I want to reiterate a principle that I've been trying to live by: If you want more of something, give more of it away. We can make a positive effort to be the change that we desire especially during the holidays.

Wouldn't it be great if we could use the time of Advent to be productive in other ways than going into debt buying gifts that will be used and tossed or re-gifted?

- *Name some ways you could apply this principle.*

Advent can also be a time of fasting and renewal. Many times we think of fasting and associate it with the season of Lent but fasting can be a great way to decompress from the Christmas parties that we may attend. We can be intentional about fasting from over-shopping, over eating or how about fasting from being a Grinch during Christmas time. We fast to refocus our hearts and lives into the Spirit of Christ and the purpose of this season. If we can do this we will have found the spirit of Advent in our preparations for Christmas.

Being in the full cycle of the seasons of the church can bring to full circle the emotions and the kindred spirits that cause us to deepen our faith. There will be time along the journey for repentance, the remembrance of our sins, the epiphany moments and the hallelujahs of Pentecost.

## **Symbols of Advent**

Each season of the lectionary is also associated with a color. The primary color for Advent is purple which represents that of penitence and fasting. Purple is also the color of royalty i.e. the

Advent of the coming King Jesus.

There are other symbols used during Advent such as the Evergreen, The Advent Wreath, Lighting of Candles, Christ Candle, The Advent Calendar, and The hanging of the Greens - Evergreens and The Advent Wreath.

The beginning of Advent is a time for the hanging of the greens, decoration of the church with evergreen wreaths, boughs, or trees that help to symbolize the new and everlasting life brought through Jesus the Christ. Some churches have a special weekday service, or the first Sunday evening of Advent, or even the first Sunday morning of Advent, in which the church is decorated and the Advent wreath put in place. The Advent wreath is an increasingly popular symbol of the beginning of the Church year in many churches as well as homes. It is a circular evergreen wreath (real or artificial) with five candles, four around the wreath and one in the center. Since the wreath is symbolic and a vehicle to tell the Christmas story, there are various ways to understand the symbolism. The exact meaning given to the various aspects of the wreath is not as important as the story to which it invites us to listen, and participate.

The circle of the wreath reminds us of God and the eternity of God's endless mercy. We know that God is the Alpha and the Omega the beginning and the end. The green of the wreath can represent the hope we have in God, the hope of newness, of renewal, of eternal life. Candles symbolize the light of God coming into the world through the birth of Jesus. The four outer candles represent the period of waiting during the four Sundays of Advent, which themselves symbolize the four centuries of waiting between the prophet Malachi and the birth of Christ. The colors of the candles vary with different traditions, but there are usually three purple or blue candles, corresponding to the sanctuary colors of Advent, and one pink or rose candle. The center candle is usually white and is lit on Christmas Day.

- *Can you identify or teach the group of any symbols you have used during the time of Advent?*
- *Does it give you a great understanding, seeing these symbols as a way to tell the story of Jesus the Christ?*

Next CARE group we will discuss the specific topics that Valley Ministries is using to celebrate Advent this year (Exhort, Prepare, Rejoice, and Behold). To conclude this week's study talk, as a group, to develop a new or unique way that you might tell the Advent story.