



LITURGICAL SEASONS

# ADVENT

*Season of Divine Encounter*

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# *Introduction*

**Alive in the Word** brings you resources to deepen your understanding of Scripture, offer meaning for your life today, and help you to pray and act in response to God's word.

Use any volume of **Alive in the Word** in the way best suited to you.

- **For individual learning and reflection**, consider this an invitation to prayerfully journal in response to the questions you find along the way. And be prepared to move from head to heart and then to action.
- **For group learning and reflection**, arrange for three sessions where you will use the material provided as the basis for faith sharing and prayer. You may ask group members to read each chapter in advance and come prepared with questions answered. In this kind of session, plan to be together for about an hour. Or, if your group prefers, read and respond to the questions together without advance preparation. With this approach, it's helpful to plan on spending more time for each group session in order to adequately work through each of the chapters.

- **For a parish-wide event or use within a larger group,** provide each person with a copy of this volume, and allow time during the event for quiet reading, group discussion and prayer, and then a final commitment by each person to some simple action in response to what he or she learned.

This volume on the topic of Advent is one of several volumes that explore **Liturgical Seasons**. Our church accents seasons within each year in which to enter into the story of salvation. This is commonly referred to as the liturgical calendar. Its purpose is not to mark the passage of time but to understand the overall mystery of salvation in Jesus Christ, from his incarnation and birth through his ministry, death, resurrection, and sending of the Spirit. By meditating on the themes of these various seasons in the church year, we are more fully able to live the mystery of Christ in our own lives.

# Prologue

Our yearly celebration of the season of Advent is a time of both recollection and anticipation. The word “advent” comes from the Latin verb *advenire*, which means “to arrive” or “to come to.” Of course, during Advent, we focus on the arrival of Jesus. We recall his birth, his “becoming flesh,” his coming into our world. We also look forward to his return in faithful expectation of that time when, in the words of St. Paul, God will be “all in all” (1 Cor 15:28).

But as we remember the past and anticipate the future, we must not forget the present. The birth of Jesus has ushered in a new era, a time in which *God is present* with his people in a new and intimate way. This divine presence is a daily reality, and our ability to recognize the ways God “arrives” in our everyday lives has the power to change our hearts and change our world. In fact, this ongoing divine-human encounter is the central message of Scripture and the definitive experience of our lives.

To help us enter into the sacredness of this season of divine presence—as a *past, present, and future* reality—we will reflect together on passages from Scripture that help us recall, recognize, and anticipate encounters with God in our lives. How does God encounter his people? How does God encounter you?

# *Encountering God in the Incarnate Word*



*Begin by asking God to assist you in your prayer and study. Then read John 1:14-18, a portion of the prologue of the Gospel of John.*

## **John 1:14-18**

**<sup>14</sup>And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth.**

**<sup>15</sup>John testified to him and cried out, saying, “This was he of whom I said, ‘The one who is coming after me ranks ahead of me because he existed before me.’” <sup>16</sup>From his fullness we have all received, grace in place of grace, <sup>17</sup>because while the law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. <sup>18</sup>No one has ever seen God. The only Son, God, who is at the Father’s side, has revealed him.**

After a few moments of quiet reflection on John 1:14-18, consider the background information found in “Setting the Scene.” Occasional questions in this section and the following may be used for personal reflection, journaling, or group discussion.

### *Setting the Scene*

Advent presents us with a spiritual challenge. On one hand, nothing could be more natural than anticipating the birth of Jesus. But on the other hand, how do we anticipate something that has already taken place? To answer this, we can rely on the rich legacy of Judaism in *remembering* and *making present*.

In the Old Testament, we find countless examples of the Jewish people recalling and extolling the great acts of God, the ways God “got involved” with human beings. Two premier examples of these great acts are creation and the Israelites’ exodus (departure) from Egypt. In the book of Genesis, creation is described as an act of power and generosity, with human beings as the apex of creation, made to be in relationship with God. In the book of Exodus, the Israelite people are liberated from slavery in a spectacular manner, protected as a journeying community, and eventually enter a land promised to them by God.

Throughout the Old Testament, as these works of God are recalled and told again and again (see Psalm 77 for an excellent example), it is as though these events and God’s powerful presence

in them are realized afresh. They become *present realities*. The God who “fixed the earth on its foundation” (Ps 104:5) and “did wonders, in the land of Egypt” (Ps 78:12) is present *here and now* in the very remembering. In effect, the mighty deeds of the past tell us not so much *who God was in the past as who God is in the present*. He is powerful and generous. He is in relationship with us. He liberates and protects.

This spiritual ability to recall and make present is important for us as we embark on our Advent journey. Of course, in a subsequent chapter we will consider how Advent challenges us to *look forward* with hope to the “end of the age,” the time when Jesus will return as he promised. But for now, as we *look back* at the birth of Jesus, let us attempt to remember in an active and dynamic way that moves us past sentimental recollection and into a real divine encounter.

One thing that will help us in this spiritual challenge is to reflect on the birth of Jesus not only as an event in history but as a central mystery of our faith that we call *incarnation*. As we know, incarnation refers to the extraordinary act of God becoming human (*incarnare* is a Latin word meaning “to become flesh”). During Advent, we reflect deeply on this great mystery of our faith. It is a mystery that reaches far deeper and wider than the image of a baby in a manger (though there is great spiritual depth in that image alone!). Incarnation is a profound recognition of God’s presence in our world in such a way that it has touched every human being deeply, profoundly, and intimately. Indeed,

Imitate the Israelites by recalling some of God’s “mighty deeds” in your own past. How does this recollection help you to recognize God’s presence in your past? What does it tell you about God? How does remembering help you understand the present and the future differently?

the Vatican II fathers wrote that “by his incarnation, he, the Son of God, has in a certain way united himself with each individual” (*Gaudium et Spes* 22).

As we look together at a short passage from the prologue of John’s gospel, we will simultaneously recall, make present, and anticipate the incarnation of Jesus. This may sound complicated or like a great spiritual feat. But as we unpack this rich passage, we will find that God’s word has the power to open our minds and hearts to the dynamic reality of divine presence—*God makes his dwelling among us!*

John’s prologue (1:1-18), from which we will read a brief excerpt, is widely regarded as one of the most densely packed, highly christological, elegantly beautiful passages in the New Testament. It is a spiritual masterpiece with a central theme: the Incarnate Word of God, Jesus Christ, has come into the world to reveal God to human beings. As we consider the final five verses of John’s prologue, we will return to these themes of incarnation and revelation several times.

*The passage from John 1:14-18 will be considered a few verses at a time in the section below.*

### *Understanding the Scene Itself*

**<sup>14</sup>And the Word became flesh  
and made his dwelling among us,  
and we saw his glory,  
the glory as of the Father’s only Son,  
full of grace and truth.**

If remembering God's mighty deeds makes them present to us, then for Christians, one of the central deeds to remember is the incarnation of God in our world. In this verse from John's prologue, John explicitly recalls this great, humble act of God: taking on flesh, becoming human, accepting all that being human means, and simultaneously showing us his glory.



This verse tells us several important things about the one who is called “the Word.” We might first ask ourselves: *What is a word? What is its purpose?* A word exists to communicate, to reveal, to tell something. A word exists to share meaning. We will return to this idea of *telling* and *revealing*.

In addition to considering the basic meaning of “word,” it is useful to know both the Greek and Jewish backgrounds of this key term because both influences are likely at work here. The earliest readers of John's gospel would have recognized the term *logos* (Greek for “word”) as a Greek philosophical concept that described the mind of the divine—its logic, order, and power—which was communicated to the world and human beings. The order of the cosmos and the rationality of the human mind, for example, derived from this divine *logos*. While this Greek usage may not be the primary influence in John's prologue, it certainly is not in conflict with it,

and its meaning may have enhanced early interpretations of this passage. Certainly the Word in John's gospel has given order to the world (John 1:3) and is the agent through which human beings come to know the divine mind (1:18).

The Hebrew background of "word" (the Hebrew word *dabar* is used in the Old Testament) takes us even deeper into understanding John's depiction of Jesus as "the Word." In the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures, God's word has great power and purpose. God creates simply by speaking words (e.g., Gen 1:3), his prophets carry on centuries of fearless ministry by speaking God's word on his behalf (e.g., Jer 1:9), and God's word is even personified as a potent, active presence that is sent into the world to accomplish God's will: "So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but shall do what pleases me, achieving the end for which I sent it" (Isa 55:11).

In Jewish interpretation, God's *word* was also closely associated with God's *wisdom*. It seems clear that as he wrote his prologue, John was intentionally hearkening back to the following passage from the book of Sirach (composed second century BC). Here God's wisdom is associated with the covenant law of Israel. The law was holy, as though God was *dwelling within it*, because it was the way of life, love, and worship that bound Israel so closely to her God. In Sirach 24, we read this fascinating personification of God's wisdom:

In a prayer spoken near the end of his life, Jesus said to the Father, "Your word is truth." Jesus is God's Word. How is Jesus the central truth of your life? How does his presence with you ground your life and give it purpose?

<sup>3</sup>“From the mouth of the Most High I [Wisdom] came forth, and covered the earth like a mist. . . .

<sup>6</sup>Over waves of the sea, over all the land, over every people and nation I held sway.

<sup>7</sup>Among all these I sought a resting place. In whose inheritance should I abide?

<sup>8</sup>Then the Creator of all gave me his command, and my Creator chose the spot for my tent. He said, ‘In Jacob make your dwelling, in Israel your inheritance.’

<sup>9</sup>Before all ages, from the beginning, he created me, and through all ages I shall not cease to be. . . .

<sup>12</sup>I struck root among the glorious people, in the portion of the Lord, his heritage.”  
(Sir 24:3, 6-9, 12)



Another spectacular Old Testament passage, Proverbs 8:22-31, also depicts Wisdom as pre-existing with God, assisting God at creation as an “architect” or “artisan,” and dwelling with human beings. In John’s prologue, we hear clear echoes of passages such as these from the Hebrew Scriptures. Note, for example, John’s declaration that the Word “made his dwelling among us.” This phrase literally means that the Word “tabernacled” or “pitched his tent” among

How does the description of Wisdom from the book of Sirach correspond with the incarnation of the Word? Can you hear echoes of the life of Christ in this ancient text that predates his birth?



Recall a time in your life when words deeply impacted and enriched a relationship. How does Jesus as God's Word deeply impact and enrich your relationship with God? What has God said to you in Jesus?

us, just like Wisdom in Sirach 24:8: “my Creator chose the spot for my tent.” That “spot” is with God’s “glorious people.” That “spot” is “among us.”

A final note on John’s use of “Word” in this passage: Words are not typically spoken in a vacuum. Words are spoken between persons. Words are part of a relationship. The one who hears the word of another must respond to it—either by ignoring it, resisting it, accepting it, or embracing it. Later in the gospel, Jesus will make clear that he hopes we will listen to and believe in his word and that his word (meaning he himself) will dwell within us (John 5:24, 15:7).

Let us briefly consider several more important phrases from this jam-packed verse. Of course, the major “action” of the Word in this verse is *becoming flesh*. This bold statement leaves no room for debate whether or not this *Logos* who “was God” and who “was with God” (see John 1:1) has become a human being. John also writes that “we saw his glory.” This statement of witness (“we saw”) is a common theme of Johannine writings (see, for example, 1 John 1:1-3). The Word is now present among us, to be seen and touched, revealing to us something beyond this world: the glory (*doxa*) of God.

Finally, we learn something very important about the relationship between the Word and God: it is the relationship of a Father and his “only Son.” This characteristically Johannine language of “Father and Son” will be crucial in the early church’s understanding of God as relationship, a relationship we all have access to now that the Word has become flesh.

**15John testified to him and cried out, saying, “This was he of whom I said, ‘The one who is coming after me ranks ahead of me because he existed before me.’”**

John’s prologue is interspersed with several “interruptions” about John the Baptist, and this single verse is one of them. This tongue-twisting and mind-bending declaration by the Baptist not only insists upon Jesus’ superiority (“ranks ahead of me”) but also proclaims the preexistence of the Word (“existed before me”). John the Baptist’s words reaffirm the claim made by John the Evangelist in the first verse of his gospel (“In the beginning . . . the Word was with God”). This preexistence, associated with divinity, will later be explicitly claimed by Jesus himself (John 8:58). Again we are reminded that the now-incarnate-Word existed before anything was created. Awe-inspiring!

Every Advent, the Lectionary readings invite us to recall the ministry and testimony of John the Baptist. John said that he came to “make straight the way of the Lord” (John 1:23; see Isa 40:3). How can we imitate John the Baptist by being voices in the wilderness that “make straight the way of the Lord” in our world?



<sup>16</sup>From his fullness we have all received, grace in place of grace, <sup>17</sup>because while the law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

As our passage continues, John writes of the grace we have received through the incarnation of the Word, who is now identified by name and title: Jesus Christ. The title *Christ* is the Greek rendering of the Hebrew word “messiah,” which means “anointed.”

From Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of the Father, we have all received grace. While some translations of this passage prefer “grace *upon* grace” (which would mean more and more grace), the NABRE prefers “grace *in place of* grace.” This latter translation makes sense given the verse immediately following: “because while the law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” If we consider the basic meaning of the word “grace” as gift, we can understand what John is telling us. The law (given through Moses) was pure gift. It was God’s gift of himself to his people—a pledge of faithfulness, a way of life, an encouragement toward covenant love and worship of the one true God. According to John, we now have an *even greater gift* in the person of Jesus Christ. God has not only communicated himself through the covenant but through his own Son.

John associates Jesus with the word “grace” (1:14, 16). Grace means gift. Jesus is a generous, voluntary, unexpected, and undeserved gift. How has this gift arrived (*advenire*) in your life? In what areas of your life do you most experience this grace?

<sup>18</sup>No one has ever seen God. The only Son, God, who is at the Father’s side, has revealed him.

John's gorgeous prologue comes to an end with these profound words. First John insists that no one has ever seen God. Even Moses, who spoke with God "face to face, as a person speaks to a friend" (Exod 33:11), did not see God as God really is. But those who have read John's entire prologue know that the Word has been with God from the beginning and that the Word is God (John 1:1). Only the Word, who has been identified as the Son of the Father and as Jesus Christ, has truly seen God in all of his glory, from a time before time existed.

In the verse above, John describes Jesus by saying he is the "only Son" and "God." A vivid phrase then declares that the Son "is at the Father's side." Other translations read "is close to the Father's heart" (NRSV), "is turned toward the Father" (Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, Sacra Pagina series), or "is in the bosom of the Father" (KJV).

Finally, John sets forth a major theme of his gospel and indeed of Christian faith: "The only Son . . . has revealed him [the Father]." This Word, which speaks, tells, and communicates, has a single purpose: to reveal the Father. As we know, the Son will ultimately reveal the Father on the cross as a God of boundless, self-giving love. Incarnation, crucifixion, and redemption are one grand divine-human moment in salvation history, a moment inaugurated by the birth of Jesus, a moment we recall, encounter, and anticipate in our Advent longing.

**In what ways does Jesus reveal the Father to you? How can you renew your sense of encounter with the Father this Advent?**

## *Praying the Word / Sacred Reading*

*Ponder for several moments the awesome reality of God incarnate. As the book of Revelation declares: "God's dwelling is with the human race" (21:3).*

*Now slowly pray the following (a eucharistic preface prayed by the church during Advent). As you say it, take time to ponder each line:*

For all the oracles of the prophets foretold  
him,  
the Virgin Mother longed for him  
with love beyond all telling,  
John the Baptist sang of his coming  
and proclaimed his presence when he came.

It is by his gift that already we rejoice  
at the mystery of his Nativity,  
so that he may find us watchful in prayer  
and exultant in his praise.

(Eucharistic Preface II of Advent)

## *Living the Word*

*In a commentary on John's gospel (Sacra Pagina series, Liturgical Press), biblical scholar Francis Moloney paraphrases the final verse of John's prologue (1:19) with the profound conclusion: "He [Jesus] has told God's story."*

*As disciples of Jesus, we strive to imitate him. How can we tell God's story in our families and communities this Advent? Some ideas are below.*

*Choose one, or an idea of your own, and put it into action during this season of divine encounter.*

- *Renew your commitment to pray with your family, sharing with them your love of God.*
- *Join a social outreach ministry in your parish community, telling God's story of love by helping others.*
- *Take up a cause of social justice that you have felt like giving up on in the past. It is easy to become discouraged, but God's story is not one of defeat and apathy. It is a story of presence and hope!*
- *If you feel so called, ask at your parish about becoming a catechist either in a youth or adult setting. Is God calling you to share his story by witnessing in this way?*
- *Invite a friend or loved one whom you have not seen in a while into your home. Make a date and keep it. We tell God's story best by being with each other.*
- *Visit an elder from your parish or town community. Let this person tell you God's story in his or her own way, either in words or simply by being. Share in the divine wisdom so often present in a long life.*