

Sprouting Leaves

This week marks the beginning of Advent, a season of waiting, longing, promise, and preparation. During this time, we are called to heighten our awareness of the signs of God's reign that break through the hopelessness that sometimes surrounds us. This week's scriptures invite us into this time of waiting by reminding us to stay alert for signs of new life, even as we give thanks for what God has already done.

Focus scripture: Jeremiah 33:14–16

After several generations of being tossed back and forth by various rulers, the kingdom Judah is about to experience upheaval: a new Babylonian threat, which will eventually reshape the land and its people. Jeremiah will live to see the destruction of Jerusalem, the Babylonian exile, and the end of the kingdom of Judah.

This prophet addresses a people who are feeling helpless and hopeless. Their lives are under the control of rulers and empires that make decisions based on political expediency and power. Jeremiah is known as a harsh prophet, sternly warning the wicked of the judgment they will incur if they do not adhere to the laws of the God of the Hebrew people. However, in these focus verses, part of what is sometimes called the "Book of Consolation," we hear a more comforting and hopeful voice. Jeremiah has just shown ultimate faith in God, in the face of a seemingly hopeless situation. Under arrest in the palace of the king of Judah, he has just bought a piece of land, trusting that, as God has assured him, "with God, all things are possible."

Jeremiah promises a "righteous branch." This righteousness, however, is not to be embodied in one individual; rather, it is a righteousness given to the community. "Righteousness" is a term not normally used outside church contexts. It could mean doing what is right; attending to religious duties or acts of charity; or conforming to God's standards of fairness, honesty, and justice. Jeremiah tells those who are waiting for redemption that their hope resides in being God's people, and living lives of justice and faithfulness. This promise is with us still.

The other passages for Advent 1 continue with their own words of hope: faithfulness, both from God and within the community, and signs of God's presence and care.

The writer of **Psalm 25:1–10** wants to know the paths of God, mindful that God's ways are "steadfast love and faithfulness" (v. 10). The singer of this psalm declares trust and hope in God.

In **1 Thessalonians 3:9–13**, Paul gives thanks to God for the community that he had to leave. He holds the community in prayer and expresses the hope that he will see them again.

Just as Jeremiah spoke about God's promise of a new day, Jesus uses the parable of the fig tree, in **Luke 21:25–36**. The imagery of verses 25–26 presents a worldview that seems devoid of hope. The signs suggest upheaval across creation. Earth and heaven will show distress. The nations will be confused. "Fear and foreboding" form an understandable response to such crises. But between the lines and through the Hebrew scripture references, another word is affirmed. The future will bring fulfilment of God's purposes. The parable of the fig tree "and all the trees" provides further assurance that new life approaches. "These things" (v. 31), to which the earlier signs point, reveal the nearness of God's reign. For Jesus' listeners and Luke's community, that nearness evokes trust in God's promised redemption (liberation from bondage).

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Advent is a reminder that we live in the "not yet" time. How do we remain faithful to God when our hopes are as yet unfulfilled? Like Jeremiah, our waiting is filled with purpose and a certainty that even in the midst of chaos and struggle, righteousness will prevail insofar as we ourselves embody it.



Focus scripture
Jeremiah 33:14–16

Additional scriptures
Psalm 25:1–10
1 Thessalonians 3:9–13
Luke 21:25–36

Loving God, in our busy and thing-filled world, you call us to be patient. You invite us to trust in your everlasting word. Strengthen us, we pray, to hear your word, to believe your word, and to respond to your word in our daily living. Amen.

If you have Internet access, visit www.seasonsonline.ca to access Spirit Sightings for connections between current events and the focus passage.



The Focus for Adults



Ideas for beginning and ending the church year and other leadership resources are in *From Start to Finish* (go to the Library on the *Seasons* website).

An old saying reminds us, “Pray as if everything depends on God; work as if everything depends on you.” Advent is a time of active waiting during which we are called to do our part to bring about God’s justice and righteousness even as we know that only God can bring our work for the world into fruition.

Yet thinking about the future sometimes evokes a variety of fears and hopes for adults. Some link thoughts of coming days to retirement and current economic times may cause concern. Others view the future largely for what it means for their children and

grandchildren. Issues of safety and security play out in all of these concerns.

Be aware of your own hopes and anxieties about the future. Consider the varied ways in which you and the members of the group view the days that are coming for good and ill. Be sensitive to ways in which the future tempts faith to become fate – “what will be will be” and there’s nothing we can do about it. So “pray as if everything depends on God; work as if everything depends on you.”

Pray that you and the members of the group may experience a fresh openness to God’s promises that are both now and not yet.

Prepare

Before the session

- ❑ Read and prayerfully reflect on this week’s scriptures, Jeremiah 33:14–16, Psalm 25:1–10, Luke 21:25–36, and 1 Thessalonians 3:9–13, and [biblical background material](#) (p. 3).
- ❑ To access connections between current events and the focus passage, visit www.seasonsonline.ca and click on *Spirit Sightings*. Bring information that might inform this week’s session.
- ❑ Review [“About this Season of Advent, Christmas, Epiphany”](#) (p. 1) and [“This Advent, Christmas, Epiphany for Adults”](#) (p. 2).
- ❑ Set a worship space with blue or purple fabric (according to the tradition of your congregation), an open Bible, and an Advent wreath with four candles (four blue, or three purple and one pink).
- ❑ Bring Bibles, matches, and [basic supply kit](#) (p. 2).
- ❑ Bring, if possible, *Seasons Songbook* (Volume 5) and *Seasons Music CD* (Volume 5), CD or MP3 player; downloadable sheet music and MP3 recordings are available at www.seasonsonline.ca.

Gather

- ❑ Bring copies of resource sheet [“Prayers for Advent”](#) (p. 91); save copies for coming weeks.
- ❑ Bring, if possible, song “All Is Wonder” (p. 7 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 5; #17 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 5).

Engage

- ❑ Bring copies of this week’s resource sheet [“Choral Reading.”](#)

Respond

Choose one or two options. Prepare and bring the materials.

- ❑ **Dig deeper:** copies of resource sheet [“Reflections”](#)
- ❑ **Advent service:** information about congregational special appeals and services for this time of year
- ❑ **Advent poems:** copies of resource sheet [“Reflections”](#)
- ❑ **Spiritual practice: Holy Reading** nothing extra required

Bless

- ❑ Bring, if possible, song “Come, O Holy Spirit, Come” (p. 12 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 5; #10 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 5).
- ❑ Bring copies of [biblical background material](#) for December 9 (p. 9).



Sprouting Leaves

Scripture

Jeremiah
33:14–16

FOCUS To live with trust and hope in God's reign now and toward the future

Gather

Welcome participants and introduce any newcomers or visitors. Remind the group that this is the first week of the Advent season, the beginning of a new church year.

Opening ritual

Gather around the worship space. Distribute copies of the resource sheet "[Prayers for Advent](#)" (p. 91) and invite two volunteers to lead the prayer for "Advent One" and light one candle of the Advent wreath.

Sing or listen to, if possible, the song "All Is Wonder" (p. 7 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 5; #17 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 5).

Moving into the theme

Think of a significant change in your life.

- **What helped you see that change was on the horizon? Or did the change take you completely by surprise?**

Engage

Setting the context

The prophet Jeremiah wrote during the time when Jerusalem and the state of Judah were poised on the brink of ruin and invasion. While most of the book of Jeremiah includes pronouncements of judgment on the people of Judah, the reading we have for this first Sunday in Advent comes from the section of Jeremiah called "The Book of Comfort." Earlier in Jeremiah, a message of judgment is spoken in the face of complacency, prior to the people being sent into exile in Babylon. This passage arises from a different situation – Jeremiah offers a message of hope in the midst of uncertain times.

Exploring the texts

Distribute copies of the resource sheet "[Choral Reading](#)," a reading based on [Jeremiah 33:14–16](#) and sections from the other lectionary readings for this day. Form two groups and invite a volunteer to read the part for "One." After the reading, invite general responses to the reading. Then discuss:

- **Where in this reading do you find images or expressions of a future that is in turmoil? Hopeful? Promising?**

Jeremiah promises that God will "cause a righteous branch to spring up."

- **What connection do you see between a tree branch and the fulfilment of God's promises?**
- **Where do you see justice and righteousness springing up in the world?**
- **Where is a renewed sense of justice and righteousness springing up in your own heart?**
- **When justice and righteousness are too far for you to see, what in your life serves as a stable branch that you can hold onto?**

Other readings Look again at the resource sheet "[Choral Reading](#)," inviting group one to read excerpts from [Psalm 25:1–10](#) and group two to read excerpts from [Luke 21:25–36](#). Form three groups, giving each group one of the other readings for this day: [Psalm 25:1–10](#), [Luke 21:25–36](#), and [1 Thessalonians 3:9–13](#). Ask groups to read the texts and then discuss the questions below in the whole group.

- **What sense about the future do you perceive in these readings?**
- **What do these scripture texts say about the now of God's reign, already present among us?**

- In light of 1 Thessalonians 3:9–13, how might Advent provide an opportunity to increase love for one another in the midst of pre-Christmas chaos?

Making life connections

Sometimes, growth is so slow that it can feel like nothing will ever change.

- What is it like for you to hope for growth that you may not see?

- How would it change your life if you lived in a state of expectation and hope for God’s reign, even when the signs are not yet visible?

- What decluttering is needed to make way for new growth (individually and as the church)?

Read the quotation “Advent is a love poem from God” on the resource sheet “Reflections.”

- What does it mean to you to wait for the fullness of God’s reign with trust and hope?

Respond

Choose one or more of the following options.

- **Dig deeper: Reflecting on the future** The readings for the first week of Advent always speak of the future, and of the “now and not yet” reign of God. Distribute copies of the resource sheet “Reflections” and invite group members to form pairs to discuss the questions at the top of the page. Share responses as a whole group.
- **Advent service** Advent is often a time of reaching out in service. The holidays can be a time of loneliness and depression for some. Together, plan to participate in a serving project to bring hope to others. Talk together about how group members might participate in existing projects of the church or community. For example, how might members help with a “Blue Christmas” service for those who find this time of year difficult?



- **Advent poems** Advent can offer an intentional time of reflection in the midst of the commercial Christmas busyness. Distribute copies of the resource sheet “Reflections” and invite group members to read again the section “Advent is a love poem from God.” Invite them to write some “love poems” from God to the world for this Advent season.
- **Spiritual practice: Holy Reading** *Lectio divina* or “holy reading,” is an ancient practice of meditating on scripture. Invite participants to engage in this reflection on this week’s focus passages. Read Jeremiah 33:14–16. Listen to these words in the context of the day ahead of you, or behind you. Write down your thoughts on those connections. Offer prayer that attends to the movement you hear in these passages and your life. If time is limited, encourage them to use this discipline to guide devotion time at home.



Bless

Gather around the lit Advent candle again. Invite group members to spend a few moments in silence, reflecting on ways they can live with hope and trust in God for the future. Read the blessing on the resource sheet “Reflections.”

Sing, or listen to, if possible, the song “Come, O Holy Spirit, Come” (p. 12 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 5; #10 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 5).

Pray the prayer on the [biblical background](#) page (p. 3).

Distribute the [biblical background](#) material for December 9 (p. 9).

Reflect

What evidence did you see that group members hold hope for the future? How might you follow up on the serving project plans (if that Respond option was chosen)?



Choral Reading

Based on Jeremiah 33:14–16 and excerpts from Psalm 25:1–10, and Luke 21:25–36.

ALL: The days are surely coming!

GROUP ONE: My God, in you do I trust.

GROUP TWO: There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars.

ONE: The days are surely coming when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah.

GROUP ONE: Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame.

GROUP TWO: Then they will see God's Chosen One coming in a cloud with great glory.

ONE: In those days I will cause a righteous branch to spring up for David and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.

GROUP ONE: Make me to know your ways, O God, and teach me your paths.

GROUP TWO: When you see these things begin to take place, stand up because your redemption is drawing near.

ONE: In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety.

GROUP ONE: You are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long.

GROUP TWO: The sovereign realm of God is near.

ONE: And this is the name by which it will be called: God is our righteousness.

GROUP ONE: All the paths of God are steadfast love and faithfulness.

GROUP TWO: Heaven and earth will pass away, but God's words will not pass away.

ALL: The days are surely coming!





REFLECTIONS



Reflecting on the future

Reflect on the following questions concerning the future in light of your own journey in faith:

- What gives you a sense of hope about the future?
- What makes it hard to trust in God for the future – in the choices you make, in the votes you cast, in the witness you offer?
- What concerns you about the future? In what ways might you be a faithful witness, in word and deed, in the face of these concerns?
- If you could change one thing about the future that children face these days, what would it be? What might you do to work for that change?
- In what ways can we prepare ourselves for the future?

Advent is a love poem from God

As we move through the season of Advent we are exposed to the simultaneous push and pull of a dual reality. Advent reveals to us a harmony of tension between the “Already” and the “Not yet”... If the Season of Advent were a book I would file it on a shelf, right at eye-level, foremost among the great works of poetry. Advent is a poem of a bright new beginning.

Advent is a love poem written to us from God. This poem of the season of Advent is set to the metre of eternity, the rhythm of our hearts and in the cadence of now.

In the poem of the season of Advent we are pregnant with Mary. We are filled with our hopes for future, our longing for love and our trust in God. We live each day carrying within our bellies the expectation and the reality of the divine.

In the poem of Advent all words rhyme with love. Even Already, even Not yet.

In the poem of the season of Advent every line contains hope as “we wait in joyful hope for the coming of our lord.”

Advent is a love poem written to us from God.

By Deacon Gregory Burch (a portion of the homily preached on the First Sunday of Advent, 2009)

Advent 1 blessing

By Rachel Naomi from *Prayers for a Thousand Years: Blessings and Expressions of Hope for the New Millennium* by Elizabeth Roberts and Elias Amidon, © 1999 HarperSanFrancisco.

May we find each other in the silence between the words.
 May we heal the loneliness of our expertise with the wisdom of our service.
 May we honor in ourselves and all others
 the deep and simple impulse to live,
 to find sacred space and open land.
 May we remember that the yearning to be holy is a part of everyone
 and the only hope for the next thousand years.

Prayers for Advent

Advent One

- One:** The Season of Advent invites us to share in God's promises, in the scriptures and in the promise of Jesus' coming.
- Two:** As we wait for God's promises to be revealed we light a candle to represent our anticipation. (*Lights one blue or purple candle.*)
- One:** May we wait with patience and with trust.
- Two:** May we live with expectation and hope.
- All:** O God, come journey with us through Advent, as we choose hope in this "now and not yet" time. Amen.

Advent Three

- One:** The Season of Advent invites us to look forward, to re-orient our lives to reflect God's reign of justice.
- Two:** We light the first two candles again, remembering God's promises and our longing for peace. (*Lights two blue or purple candles.*)
We light a third candle to represent our repentance and joy. (*Lights another blue or the pink candle.*)
- One:** May we wait with patience and with trust.
- Two:** May we live with expectation and hope.
- All:** O God, come journey with us through Advent, as we proclaim the good news in this "now and not yet" time. Amen.

Advent Two

- One:** The Season of Advent invites us to share in God's blessing, as we live toward God's reign.
- Two:** We light the first candle again, remembering God's promises. (*Lights one blue or purple candle.*)
We light a second candle to represent our longing for peace. (*Lights second blue or purple candle.*)
- One:** May we wait with patience and with trust.
- Two:** May we live with expectation and hope.
- All:** O God, come journey with us through Advent, as we travel in the way of peace in this "now and not yet" time. Amen.

Advent Four

- One:** The Season of Advent invites us to celebrate, to sing of birth and re-birth for all creation.
- Two:** We light the first three candles again, remembering God's promise to be with us, to bring peace and joy. (*Lights three blue candles or two purple and one pink candle.*)
We light the last candle to remind us of Mary's song of justice and salvation. (*Lights last blue or purple candle.*)
- One:** May we wait with patience and with trust.
- Two:** May we live with expectation and hope.
- All:** O God, come journey with us through Advent, as we live with love in this "now and not yet" time. Amen.

