Advent begins November 9!

“What?!” you may be thinking.

It is that time again, when we are leaving that long stretch of the church year called Ordinary Time, the “great green (growing) season” and moving into the half of the year in which we mark the great narrative arc of the Gospel story: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost.

It all starts with Advent, the beginning of the church ritual year. If you are new to celebrating the traditional church year, Advent is the perfect season to enter into the richness of this very old way of understanding time as a gift from God (rather than as a scarce resource).

For Christians who observe it, Advent is a season of waiting and preparation. Instead of rushing ahead to the end of the story (*Christmas!*), led by our reading of the psalms and the prophets, we practice waiting with the children of Israel in the long dark times when they hoped against hope for a messiah. We understand their anticipation as being a model for our own anticipation — as we wait, sometimes in deep darkness, for the second great coming of Christ.

This is why Episcopalians traditionally don’t sing Christmas carols until Christmas; and why some of us do not put up our Christmas decorations until Christmas Eve — *we aren’t being Scrooges!* — we are practicing the Christian virtue of hope. We prepare our hearts for the coming of the Light, by looking squarely into the world’s and our own deep shadows. Then we rest and wait together, trusting that new life and light will always come eventually.

For the past three years, in the weeks between The Feast of All Saints (observed on the first Sunday in November) and the first Sunday in December, I have spoken about many congregations’ long-standing practice of observing a 4-week Advent (beginning the last Sunday of November or first Sunday of December) and a growing number of congregations now returning to the more ancient observance of a 7-week Advent, beginning the week after the Feast of All Saints, observed on the first Sunday of November.

Records from the fifth century CE indicate that church observed a 40(ish)-day-long fast beginning on November 12, the day after the Feast of St. Martin of Tours, until

December 24. This was known as “St. Martin's Lent.” It functioned similarly to the 40-day fast leading up to Easter, without being quite as penitential, a practice still followed by the Eastern churches. It was not until the 12th or 13th century that the Western churches shortened the season to the practice of four Sundays.

The movement behind shifting (back) to a seven-Sunday Advent is driven, in part, by a desire to re-frame the season as more than a countdown to Christmas — more than candles and chocolate calendars. The goal is to unearth Advent’s theological richness and to recover its focus on the great Christian hope: the full manifestation of the Reign of God that will be realized at the second coming of Jesus Christ.

If we look to Advent’s historical roots, the season was not principally focused on Christ’s arrival in the manger, but about anticipating Christ’s second coming in glory.

Our commercial culture pushes us to begin celebrating Christmas the day after Thanksgiving (if not earlier: while on vacation last week, I saw the first of many Christmas-themed commercials, weeks before Halloween!), so keeping an Advent of any length is already a difficult undertaking.

During such a time of year it is good and appropriate that we as Christians be invited into a sacred mindfulness before the holiday rush makes that too difficult. We need to be reminded that we are not bound to the calendars of society, but to the rhythm of the Holy Spirit.

And, so, we begin again. In Advent, when we await the Christ’s return, as we await Jesus’ birth. We then enter into Epiphany and the revelations that await us then. We walk with Jesus to Jerusalem in Lent, stand at the foot of the cross in Holy Week, and celebrate Christ’s resurrection in Eastertide. On the Feast of Pentecost, and in the days of the season that follow it, we remember the birth of the community of followers of Jesus, and the ways in which that manifested itself in the early days of the Church. Coming around the final turn of the year, we celebrate those of the Church who have gone before us on the Feast of All Saints (the Sunday closest, but not before, November 1), fulfilling the commission of Christ.

How fitting, then, that we close the year on that day, and begin anew with Advent 1 the following Sunday?

What do we have to gain from making Advent longer and shifting its focus to the end times? With wars raging in the Holy Land and Ukraine, never-ending political turmoil in our own country, immigration crises, and natural disasters raging all around us, there's no denying that the world is not as it should be.

A season that roots us in God's dream of restored creation and Christ's reign of peace and prosperity would be a gift of tremendous pastoral value.

As the Rev. Dr. William Petersen, founder of the Advent Project has written, "The call is for the Church to reclaim for the sake of its own life and mission Advent's focus on the reign of God and, in so doing, to hone once again the counter-cultural edge of the Gospel at the very beginning of the liturgical year."

This year, the Collaboration Worship Commission, supported by Vestry conversations at Trinity and St. Mark's, invites us to not just talk about the practice, but to try it on.

What will change for this season:

- The Advent Wreath will contain seven candles. At St. Mark's this is being done by expanding the Advent wreath display. At Trinity, we have repurposed our pew candles to situate the growing light among the people.
- We will delve deeper into the Advent-themed hymns and other music of our tradition: you will likely notice some of your favorites, and learn some new tunes and texts.

What we will continue from past Advents:

- The readings as directed by the lectionary stay the same (remember, thematically, the assigned readings for the Sundays between All Saints (obv.) and Advent 1 (of a 4-week Advent) have already shifted our focus to anticipating the Second Coming of Christ, we're just shifting the window dressing to align with where the lectionary has already brought us.
- As in past years, our corporate confession and absolution will move from after the prayers of the people to the opening rite (the gathering hymn, greeting, collect of the day).
- As often happens seasonally, our eucharistic prayer and prayers of the people will change: this time, to Eucharistic Prayer B and The Prayers of the People, Form I from the *Book of Common Prayer 1979*.

I hope that you will find yourselves spiritually renewed in our engaging in this practice together. And I welcome your reflections and feedback.

In Faith,
Lauren+

Looking for more information or for ways to get started with your own, at-home, Advent practices?

Give a 3-minute listen to (or read the transcript of) this story which first aired on Morning Edition on November 20, 2023: A longer Advent helps some Christians prepare for more than Christmas.

The Advent Project and their Rationale for a 7-week season of Advent.

Brother, Give Us a Word Sign up to receive a daily word for meditation from the brothers of St. John the Evangelist. While you are at it, explore their whole site. These guys are awesome, and you should know about them.

Advent Conspiracy If you are interested in pushing back against the commercialization of Christmas, this is your go-to Advent resource: “Worship Fully, Spend Less, Give More, Love All.” That pretty much sums it up.

Praying Advent Lots of general resources here, including ideas for Preparing Children for Advent.