

The Christmas season is in full swing in shopping malls, in office parties, and in homes aflutter with baking and anticipating holiday visits to loved ones near and far.

But not in church! By comparison with the world outside, churches are decorated with sobriety and restraint. They provide space where you may pause, reflect, and prepare spiritually for Christmas.

Last Sunday, a new liturgical year of the Christian Church began with the first Sunday of Advent.

The Advent season is marked by four Sundays. This means that the season can last as many as 28 days—as it did last year when December 25 was a Sunday—or as few as 22 days—as it does this year, when Christmas Day falls on a Monday.

Many churches feature Advent wreaths with four candles, one lit each Sunday. Three of these are purple—lit on the first, second, and fourth Sundays—and one is pink to signal rejoicing because Christmas is just around the corner—lit on the third Sunday.

Advent begins with members of the Church expressing their joyful expectation of the coming of Christ in glory at the end of time—the “Parousia” or “Second Coming” of Jesus.

To help orient the disciples of Jesus to this “Second Coming,” on the next two Sundays, the gospel readings emphasize how John the Baptist prepared the way to Jesus by inviting listeners to repentance and renewal.

Finally, on the fourth Sunday—Christmas Eve morning this year—the Church will mark Christ dwelling in the womb of the Virgin Mary, what we call the “Incarnation.”

The Advent season comes to completion on Christmas Day. It recalls the birth of Jesus in the “little town of Bethlehem.”

At services on Christmas Day, we read of the angels' proclamation to outcast Jewish shepherds of Jesus' birth as the Prince of Peace. A few days later, at the Epiphany, the gospel message will remind believers of the star that guided the Gentile Magi to the Christ Child, filling them with joy.

Advent, then, expresses not just our anticipation of Jesus' final coming, but also our remembrance of His arrival in our world more than 2,000 years ago.

The hope of Advent is not the hope that Jesus will come back into the world at Christmas. Jesus has already come into the world—God-made-man, the Word made flesh. This is a historical fact. Hope is rooted in history, but hope is also about our present and our future.

Hope is the knowledge that our lives have meaning—that each day that we live matters, and indeed, that we matter, because we are beloved by God and because He has an eternal plan for our lives.

Through hope, we know that our joys and consolations are a foretaste of what God promises us in heaven. Further, we can unite our sorrows and sufferings in this life with those of Christ on the cross for our salvation and the salvation of the world.

Through hope, we know that God's love for us gives the deepest meaning and purpose to our existence: how we live in this world can bring us into eternal happiness with God.

In hope, we know that this world is fleeting and that real and lasting joy awaits in the Lord's promise of our salvation.

"Advent," Pope Francis says, "is a journey toward the horizon of hope."

This hope, the Holy Father adds, "does not disappoint because it is founded on the Word of God. A hope that does not disappoint, simply because the Lord never disappoints! He is faithful!"

A blessed Advent to you!

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