



## TEN TIPS FOR PREACHING ADVENT

*By: Reverend R. Nicholas Peterson*

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The start of the new year in most secular contexts is a time of intense celebration and joy. For example, the Chinese New Year is marked by festive parades. And in the United States, Times Square in New York City becomes a focal point with a count down into the new year with a dramatic ball drop. For most cultures, the new year marks a time of new beginnings, new hopes, and new aspirations.

Since the 5th century, the Christian church has marked its new year as starting four Sundays before Christ's birth. We call this Advent. The church fathers recognized the need to hold two mysteries of the Christian faith in productive tension. First, they wanted to anchor the Christian calendar around the life cycle of Christ in the flesh. Secondly, they wanted to look to his return. Thus, the season of Advent marked a time of paralleled preparation for Christ's birth with preparation for Christ's return, and living in anticipation of the light of God breaking forth into the world. This presents the preacher with a great opportunity. Below are some tips to consider for this season.

**1. Plan Advent as a season.** If you're not a lectionary preacher, it might work to your advantage to become one for Advent. RCL's year C usage of Luke's gospel for the season offers an excellent opportunity to plan an Advent preaching series from the gospel lessons. If you aren't a lectionary preacher, consider preparing your sermons around the four themes of Advent: Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love. By planning out your preaching for the season, you can more clearly weave your sermons together from Sunday to Sunday.

**2. Plan preaching and music together.** Give your music ministry a heads up on your sermonic scriptures and themes. Invite them to select songs that speak to those themes or scriptures. While our tradition is rich in Christmas music, we are a little less robust in hymnody that considers preparation for the Lord's return. Consider expanding your Christmas music to include music that speaks of Christ's return, music that is particular to Advent.

**3. Integrate.** Now is a great time to provide continuity across the Sunday sermon and the weekly bible study and/or prayer focus. Consider inviting the entire community to read through all of Sunday scripture lessons each week during the advent season.

**4. Center the theology which is unique to Advent.** In as much as Advent is about our preparing to receive Christ as a child and as The King, it is ultimately about God's desire to instill us with hope amid our human frailty. In your preaching, consider how humanness emerges, not as a weakness but as an invitation to receive God's grace. We are fragile, not God's grace and compassion. Lean into this truth as good news.

**5. Tell the stories of God's breaking forth in the life of your community over this past year.** As a preacher, part of your task is to be the community's bard and hold the community's story. Testifying to God's presence in the community's story builds faith.

**6. Anticipate new people.** After all, it's the holiday season. Keep your sermons straightforward. Now is not the time to go into a profound apology on the doctrine of the incarnation. It is, however, always a time to preach the gospel. This does not mean we have to end the sermon with a trip to Calvary, but it does mean we have to thoughtfully consider how the good news emerges in the text.

**7. Be inclusive.** The story of Christ's birth includes women, shepherds, elderly people, babies, kings, and a whole cast of characters and personalities. In your preaching, consider the diversity of your community and read the text trying to see how Christ's Advent can mean different things to different people.

**8. Keep your sermons to the point.** This consideration matters most if you are trying to reach people in digital and virtual mediums. To do this, you have to edit your sermons and make sure each word counts. If you are an extemporaneous preacher, be clear about what you want to communicate and how you will do that. Otherwise, you'll find yourself down a 5-minute rabbit trail to make a minute point. The significant difference between online and in-person worship is that the folk online can quickly close the screen or step away altogether. Whereas in-person people can wander off mentally for a few moments and return and pick back up.

**9. While most preachers know to make eye contact with the physical audience, don't forget to talk to the camera.** It is okay to look directly at the camera and speak to the community joining worship online. This strengthens engagement and lets the

viewers know you are there. Invite worshippers to engage in the chat section or in other virtual ways.

**10. Be pastoral.** Too many preachers try to preach clever and witty sermons that show off their homiletical and oratory skills during the holiday season. That's fine and dandy, but what most people need as we continue in a pandemic is a *pastor* – someone who can journey with them for the long haul. So let your creativity serve the pastoral office to which you are called.



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