

Promise & Praise

Advent Word Reflections

Richelle Thompson • Hugo Olaiz

Miriam McKenney • Scott Gunn

With Michael B. Curry and Lisa Kimball

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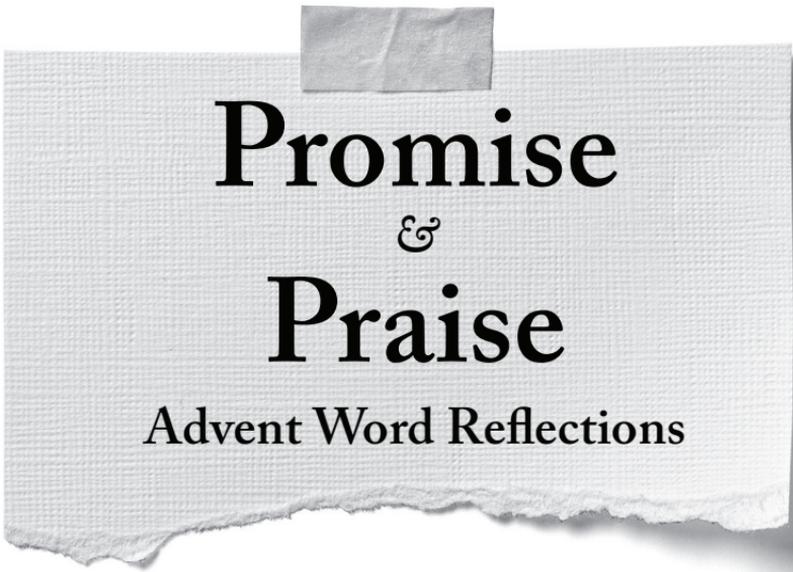
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FORWARD MOVEMENT
Cincinnati, Ohio

INTRODUCTION

Advent calendars play a prominent role in our home. Over the years, we've marched through the season by opening flaps on a bucolic scene of a manger under a starry sky. Hidden behind windows in various calendars, chocolate treats and Lego pieces and even bracelet charms have helped us count the days to Christ's birth.

As a writer and a lover of words, I can think of no better way to mark time than with AdventWord. Reflecting on one word each day of the season of Advent offers a special intentionality, a way to countdown to Christmas, focused on God's promise in a posture of praise.

The AdventWord initiative began in 2012 with the brothers of Saint John the Evangelist as a way to move through the season one day and one word at a time. The goal was a practice that is both particularly individual, with each person contemplating the day's word, and purposefully communal, with people sharing pictures and stories on social media.

As AdventWord grew, Virginia Theological Seminary began shepherding the initiative and expanding its reach through new social media channels. In 2021, the seminary graciously turned over stewardship of AdventWord to Forward Movement. We are delighted to build upon their good work and grateful for their continued participation.

Under the leadership of longtime project manager Sarah Stonesifer Boylan, AdventWord continues as an online, dynamic calendar, filled with brief daily reflections in English, Spanish, French, and American Sign Language and visual images, augmented by contributions from around the world. The words for each day of this journey were drawn from the Sunday scripture readings and prayerfully selected by a diverse team of church leaders. The longer meditations in this book provide an opportunity to spend more time with each word. The Spanish and French translations are included with each meditation.

We hope you'll participate however you feel called—this year and in years to come. *Promise & Praise* is designed with enough daily readings for even the longest season of Advent. If you're reading in a year when Christmas comes earlier in the fourth week of Advent, simply skip ahead to the Christmas Eve and Christmas Day readings (and consider the extra meditations a bonus!)

In a world that likes to rush, it's easy to jump ahead in the story, to the words we know by heart of a babe born in a manger. But AdventWord calls us to slow down, to be tender in our expectation, to offer praise and glad tidings, so we may fully prepare for the fulfillment of God's promise.

Richelle Thompson
Managing Editor
Forward Movement

Ways to Connect with AdventWord

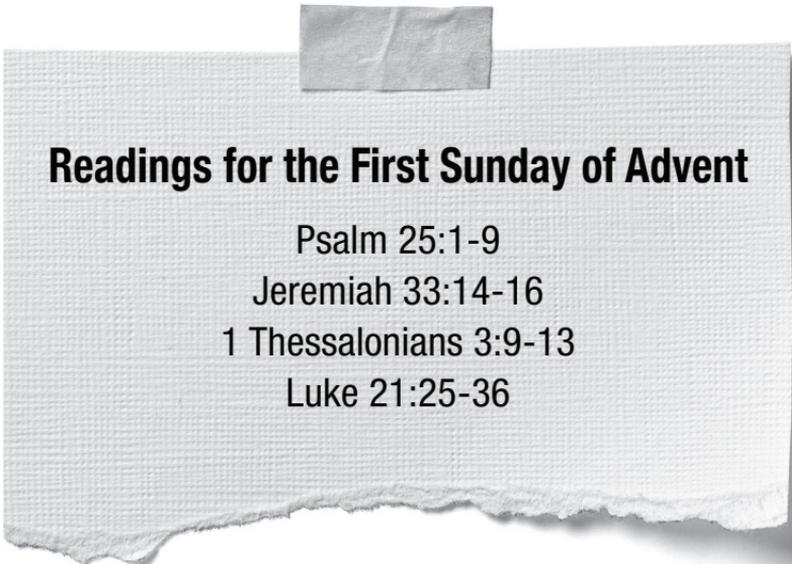
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Make sure to tag #AdventWord or our official accounts!



Readings for the First Sunday of Advent

Psalm 25:1-9

Jeremiah 33:14-16

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Luke 21:25-36

PROMISE

PROMESA PROMESSE

*Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering,
for the one who has promised is faithful.*

—HEBREWS 10:23

Advent is, of course, a season of hopeful expectation, pressing on toward the promise. It could very well be said that all of life is about hopeful expectation, pressing on toward the promise despite the long, hard journey we face. Indeed, throughout the biblical narrative and the church's history, we encounter faithful people hanging on to hope, sometimes by a slender thread, clinging to a promise far removed from their harsh reality.

Some caught a glimpse of something glorious as they struggled on. As Martin Luther King Jr. proclaimed before he was slain, "I have seen the promised land." Like Moses before

him and far too many others through the ages, Dr. King did not witness the full realization of that promise. But he caught a glimpse, and in his life, he shared a dream of justice and equality and opportunity for God's children...for ALL God's children. He held fast to hope, refusing to waver, and he urged others to do the same.

At times, it is difficult to still see the promise through the fog that envelops us, the storm that bears down on us. Life can be so very hard and the forces of darkness so overpowering that we might understandably be tempted to give up, to let go of the hope, to let go of the dream. Yet, as the psalmist notes, even in "the valley of the shadow of death," we are not alone; the Shepherd is with us. We make our song, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," precisely because we dare to believe in Emmanuel, God with us. And if God is indeed with us, God is with ALL of us. The promise endures. The hope—the dream—remains sure...despite the fog and storm, despite the darkness.

As a prophet and bridge-builder in South Africa both during the wicked time of apartheid and in the years since, Archbishop Desmond Tutu has said, "Your ordinary acts of love and hope point to the extraordinary promise that every human life is of inestimable value." Through our small and seemingly insignificant acts of kindness and care each day, we commit ourselves once more to the promise. By speaking up and standing up for those who are being silenced and

pressed down, we proclaim that we refuse to waver in our hope of the promise.

The promise of a world that is Beloved Community is real and true, and we are its ambassadors, heralds of the Way of Love, for God's sake and for the sake of ALL God's children.

—*Michael B. Curry*

Lord, you now have set your servant free to go in peace as you have promised; for these eyes of mine have seen the Savior, whom you have prepared for all the world to see: a Light to enlighten the nations, and the glory of your people Israel.

—The Book of Common Prayer, p. 140

STRENGTH

FORTALEZA FORCE

Too often, strength is confused with might.

But time and again, scripture tells us strength is not the ability to outmuscle someone or something. It is not an Instagram snap of a barbell jerk, hoisting hundreds of pounds to our chest and shoulders. It is not clawing our way to the top, intent on emerging as the lone victor.

Rather, strength is the fortitude of a mother to gather her sons and the last bit of cash and start over in a new town and a strange state so they might be protected from the calamities of a derelict father.

It is the woman born with no arms and legs who paints and cooks and inspires others with words of hope and expectation.

Strength is seeking out “good trouble,” pushing back against injustice, on bridges and streets, in classrooms and

courthouses. And strength is a community refusing to be bowed by a virus, with neighbors checking in on one another, drawing notes of encouragement in chalk on sidewalks, gathering virtually and at the end of driveways to nurture bonds of affection.

David fells Goliath with the strength of faith, a slingshot, and a stone, and Mary's strength lies in her unequivocal yes to an unimaginable request. We have the ultimate example of strength in Jesus, who bloody and dying, still thinks of others, asking God to forgive us for we know not what we do.

And yet, we still conflate strength with force and elevate the strong-armed. We forget that true strength comes in making peace with our weaknesses, in offering our raw and vulnerable selves in service of others. Strength is principle and compassion, selflessness and sacrifice.

Dear Lord, let me be strong like that. Help me set my heart on the pilgrim's way, happy to have my strength in you.

—*Richelle Thompson*

O God, the strength of all who put their trust in you:
Mercifully accept our prayers; and because in our weakness
we can do nothing good without you, give us the help of your
grace, that in keeping your commandments we may please you
both in will and deed; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives
and reigns with and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and
ever. *Amen.*

—The Book of Common Prayer, p. 216

SOUL

ALMA ÂME

To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul; my God, I put my trust in you.

—PSALM 25:1A

The opening verses of Psalm 25 provide a lovely invitation to reorient our lives away from self-centered living and toward the true and living God. Our fancy church word for this is repentance. Repentance means turning in a new direction, starting with a clean slate, changing our destination in life. Repentance is the very essence of Advent.

This short season encourages us to prepare to meet Jesus. Perhaps we are preparing to meet him when he comes in glory. Or maybe we will meet him first when we die. Of course, Advent also points us toward our worship of Jesus at Christmastime. Wherever and whenever we meet Jesus, we need to be ready. But how do we do that?

Psalm 25 gives us some help. To lift up our souls to God is to dedicate our very lives to God. To trust God means that we depend on God's grace, not on human power or earthly wealth. But what does that look like, exactly?

Much of the psalm reminds us that we need to learn God's laws. This might seem foreign or even unpleasant to us. You mean we have to follow laws?!

The thing is: God's laws lead us to true freedom. They help us live as God hopes we might live. God's laws pull us away from selfish impulses and toward the sacrificial love that Jesus showed us.

God tells us to love our enemies. We are commanded to welcome strangers. We should give generously of what we have to those who have less than us, and we should give generously so that God's work can be carried out in the world. God expects us to tell the truth. God's law favors mercy.

You get the idea. In the assigned scriptures for Advent, we encounter stirring prophets calling us to change. We meet those who prepared the way for Jesus. We see that the world wasn't right before Jesus lived among us, and it still isn't right as we wait for Jesus to come in glory.

Advent is my favorite season, but I need to take care never to make the mistake of thinking Advent is a time for sentiment and nostalgia. The liturgical season of Advent is a bit like

the voice crying out in the wildness, inviting the church to prepare the way of the Lord.

May we all lift up our souls to God. May we all be ready to meet Jesus, whether in this life or the life to come.

—*Scott Gunn*

Almighty God, you know that we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves: Keep us both outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls, that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

—The Book of Common Prayer, p. 218