



First Sunday of Advent

Great Expectations: A Session on the Theme of Waiting

OVERVIEW

Advent is a time of great expectations. We wait not only for Jesus's coming as an infant but also for his Second Coming at the end of the world. Using the readings for the first Sunday of Advent, this session focuses on the theme of waiting and the need to be ready for the end times. It is designed for use with groups of teens but can be adapted for intergenerational settings.

Readings for the First Sunday of Advent

- Cycle A: Isaiah 2:1–5, Romans 13: 11–14, Matthew 24:37–44
- Cycle B: Isaiah 63:16–17,19; 64:2–7; 1 Corinthians 1:3–9; Mark 13:33–37
- Cycle C: Jeremiah 33:14–16, 1 Thessalonians 3:12–4:2, Luke 21:25–28,34–36

Suggested Time

60 minutes

PREPARATION

- Gather the following items:
 - an Advent wreath and candles
 - purple, pink, and white cloths for the prayer table
 - Catholic Youth Bibles* or other bibles, one for each participant
 - hymnals, at least one for every two participants
 - a purple candle
 - newsprint and markers
 - index cards or large adhesive labels, one for each participant
 - pens or pencils, one for each participant
- Create a prayer space using the Advent wreath, the purple, pink, and white cloths, a Bible, and any other items that will add to the prayerful atmosphere.
- Choose an Advent song that is familiar to the participants. See the introduction for suggestions, or consider using a song that is used at parish Sunday liturgies.

PROCEDURE

1. Gather the participants around the prayer space. Recruit a volunteer to light one purple candle while you read the following prayer, which is drawn from handout 1, "Praying the Advent Wreath."

Some things cannot be rushed. O God of love, as we light this candle, we pray for the grace to wait patiently. Your people waited so long for the coming of a Savior. We, too, are anxious for the celebration of your coming. We pray to be ready and alert, always trying to live the life you want for us. We light this candle in the name of Jesus, the Christ, who comes as light to the world. Amen.

Close the blessing ceremony by singing an Advent hymn.

2. Gather the participants in the middle of the room. Tell them that you will present two occasions when someone is waiting or expecting something to happen. They will be asked to choose between the two alternatives and, based on their response, to move to the side of the room that you have designated as *a* or *b*.

Read as many entries from the following list as time allows, pausing after each one to let the participants choose an option and move. Elicit comments about why the participants made their particular choices.

- Which is harder to wait for?
 - a. a school vacation or holiday weekend
 - b. a major test to be over
- Which would be more stressful for you?
 - a. waiting to find out whether you got into your first-choice college
 - b. waiting to find out if you made the varsity team or got a major role in the school play
- Which is more frustrating?
 - a. being stuck in a traffic jam on your way to a favorite vacation place
 - b. being stuck in a traffic jam on your way home from a long trip
- Which would be more difficult?
 - a. waiting outside the principal's office to find out your punishment for skipping school
 - b. waiting for your parents to come home and get the message that you skipped school
- Which is more difficult?
 - a. waiting for someone you really like to ask you out
 - b. waiting for the right moment to ask out someone you really like
- Which would be more difficult?
 - a. waiting in line to take your driver's test
 - b. waiting for the driver's license examiner to let you know if you passed the test
- Which one do you look forward to more?
 - a. your birthday
 - b. Christmas

3. Explain the following themes of the session in your own words:

In our culture, we are used to getting immediate results. We often do not like to wait for anything. We bristle at the thought of waiting in line, waiting in traffic, waiting for downloads, waiting to find out important news.

- ✦ Advent, which means “coming,” is about waiting—waiting for something big to happen. In the twenty-first century, the “wait” time of Advent has both secular and religious meaning. Our secular celebrations of the holiday also involve waiting: people wait in checkout lines, children wait to see Santa, and we wait for Christmas break and family celebrations.
- ✦ Christmas celebrates the Incarnation—God’s becoming fully human as well as fully divine in the person of Jesus. The Scriptures of Advent guide us to a fuller appreciation of what it means to wait in God’s time.
- ✦ The readings for all three cycles of Advent speak of waiting, not only about the first coming of Jesus but also his Second Coming. The Old Testament prophets give us a hint of God’s time, of what God has done for us, and of what God promises to do.
- ✦ The Gospel writers look ahead to the Second Coming of Jesus. Matthew and Mark were writing for a people who believed that Jesus would return in their lifetime. But God’s timeline was beyond the comprehension of Jesus’s early followers, just as it is for us today.
- ✦ The Scripture readings tell us what we must do to be ready in God’s time. We are invited to reflect not so much on the coming of Jesus as an infant but on his Second Coming, what we call “the end times.”

4. Ask the participants what images they think of when they hear the phrase “the end of the world.” If they are not familiar with the word *apocalypse*, define it for them as “the visions and events surrounding the end of the world.” Ask the participants to name apocalyptic images that come to mind from movies, songs, books, and other sources. List the images on newsprint. Images may include fire, floods, and nuclear war. The Book of Revelation, with its references to beasts, dragons, and plagues, may emerge as one of the sources.

5. Create small groups of three to four participants and distribute to each group two bibles, a sheet of newsprint, and a marker. Assign each group several chapters of the Book of Revelation, and direct them to make a list on newsprint of apocalyptic images and events from Revelation. Allow about 5 minutes for the groups to complete the task. Then invite the small groups to share their lists with the full group.

6. Use the following information to explain what the Catholic Church teaches about the end of the world:

- Just as the Bible begins in the Book of Genesis with the story of the creation of a world in which everything is good, it ends in the Book of Revelation speaking of a new creation where God’s goodness again overflows.
- The last three chapters of the Book of Revelation contain John’s vision of the Reign of God, the end of history, and eternal life. He describes a new heaven and a new earth.
- John tells his readers that they should look forward to the time of this new city with joy, because when it comes, God will live in their midst. It will be a time when evil is destroyed and suffering is banished.

(The information in the preceding bulleted items is adapted from the article “The New Jerusalem” in *The Catholic Youth Bible*, first edition, near Revelation 20:4.)

- The Book of Revelation also contains bizarre descriptions of terrible things that will happen at the end of the world, and some people think that this final book of the Bible proves that

it will happen very soon. For those who read the Bible as literal truth, the writing in Revelation can sound like the end of the world is near. The writer was, in fact, addressing the people of the early Church, who did expect that Christ would return in their lifetime. As Catholics we do not believe the descriptions are factual. Instead, we believe they contain symbols that offered hope to a Church that was under persecution at the time the book was written. The Book of Revelation does not predict when the world will end but instead brings us hope in proclaiming God's ultimate triumph over evil in history. (Adapted from the introduction to the Book of Revelation in *The Catholic Youth Bible*, first edition)

- Our belief about the end times can be summed up in our profession of faith, the Nicene Creed: “[Jesus] will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end. . . . We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, pp. 49–50)
- The readings for the first Sunday of Advent speak about being ready for the return of Jesus. We never know when it will happen, so it is essential that we stay awake and be ready.

7. In the large group, brainstorm several scenarios in which staying awake or alert while waiting for something is difficult but extremely important, for example, waiting in line all night for concert tickets or waiting for parents to come home when you are babysitting. After each scenario, brainstorm creative ways that someone might stay awake and ready while he or she is waiting.

8. Tell the participants to return to their small groups. Give each group a sheet of newsprint and a marker. Tell them to list on newsprint ways to stay awake spiritually in order to be ready for the coming of Jesus at Christmas. For example, one way to stay awake is to repeat the phrase “Come, Lord Jesus” frequently throughout the day.

After about 5 minutes, invite the groups to share their lists with everyone and then to post them. When all the lists are posted, ask the participants to consider how many of the ideas are applicable to their lives throughout the year.

9. Distribute index cards or large adhesive labels and pens or pencils. Invite the participants to write down at least one thing from the list that they will try to do during this season of Advent—and beyond. Suggest that they keep the card or label in a conspicuous place to remind them to stay awake and be ready.

10. Close with this prayer, which follows the Lord's Prayer in the liturgy:

Deliver us Lord, from every evil,
and grant us peace in our day.
In your mercy keep us free from sin
and protect us from all anxiety
as we wait in joyful hope
for the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

(*Sacramentary*, p. 562)

Invite the participants to respond as they do at Mass: For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever.

(P. 562)

You may want to close the session by singing “The King of Glory” or another appropriate song.

