

Advent

The season of Advent, which comes from the Latin word *adventus* meaning “coming” or “visit,” begins four Sundays before Christmas and ends on Christmas Eve. Advent is the beginning of the liturgical year for Christians. [Liturgical -- from liturgy, which means the forms and functions of public worship.] During Advent, we prepare for, and anticipate, the coming of Christ. We remember the longing of Jews for a Messiah and our own longing for, and need of, forgiveness, salvation and a new beginning. Even as we look back and celebrate the birth of Jesus in a humble stable in Bethlehem, we also look forward anticipating the second coming of Christ as the fulfillment of all that was promised by his first coming.

How Did We Come to Advent as a Season?

- The first faint traces of Advent emerge in popular piety and custom in various places by early fourth century, Western Europe, Christians observed a period of fasting and preparation for baptism. The region had close links with Eastern Christianity’s (Syria and other eastern Mediterranean areas) celebration of the feast of Christ’s birth on Epiphany (January 6) as a day for baptism.
- Under our current ecumenical practice (the calendar and Revised Common Lectionary) the first Sunday of Advent can be as early as November 27 and as late as December 3. This makes for some interesting calendar situations. For example, every few years the fourth Sunday of Advent falls on December 24. On such days, the church gathers for worship on the fourth Sunday of Advent in the morning; then it gathers again after sunset to celebrate Christmas Eve.
- In this revised liturgical approach, each Sunday of Advent has its distinctive theme: First Sunday — Christ’s coming in final victory; Second and Third Sundays — John the Baptist; Fourth Sunday — the events immediately preceding birth of Jesus Christ (See *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, 238)
- The oldest witness to Advent as a time of preparation comes from Bishop Perpetuus of Tours (490) who called for times of fasting from the feast of St. Martin on November 11 to Epiphany Day on January 6. There was already a custom of “St. Martin’s Lent” that lasted eight weeks. The use of “Lent” may reflect the desire to parallel the disciplines of Lent in the weeks prior to Epiphany and shows the importance of preparing people for baptism.