

Find the peace of Advent

Many of us look forward to Christmas all year but let Advent pass unnoticed. This quiet season can't compete with the lights, the joy, the excitement, and the preparations for Christmas that can go on for months before the day.

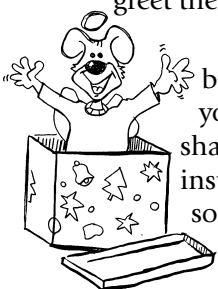
This year, why not use the whole season of Advent to prepare for Christmas? Look beyond what your eyes can see to focus on your inner preparations.

Keep watch. Jesus is coming.

We know this because we celebrate his coming every Christmas. He will also come again in glory but we don't know when that will be. Advent reminds us to always be prepared for the coming of Christ. *"Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths (Matthew 3:3)."*

Give the gift of yourself. This year prepare the one gift for Jesus that he truly wants: YOU. Jesus thought each of us was worth love and his life. To him, we are a gift from the Father (John 17:24). Prepare yourself during Advent so that when he unwraps your gift on Christmas morning, it is the very best you have to offer — your love.

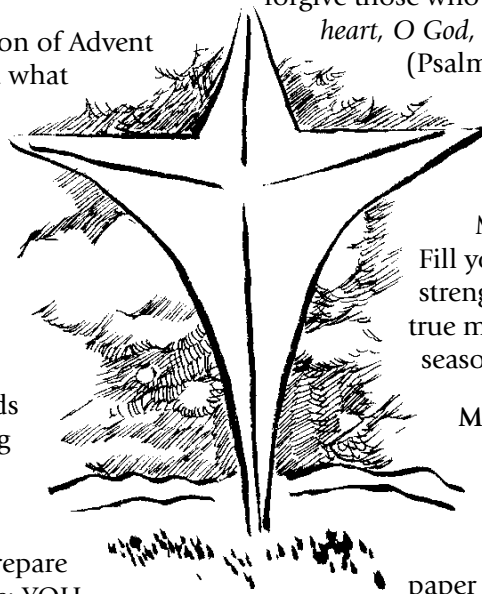
Break down barriers. Let go of anything that stands between you and your faith. Perhaps you have a bad habit or a companion who is a poor influence. Take this opportunity during Advent to make things right. Ridding yourself of opportunities for sin will help you be ready to greet the Savior when he comes.



Give gifts from the heart. Instead of buying gifts, give from your heart. If you're a good baker, make treats to share with others. If you sing or play an instrument, create CDs of your favorite songs for friends and family. Jesus showed us that the greatest of gifts come in the simplest form. Remember a gift given

with love is the best gift of all.

Clean house. Just as you would clean your home to prepare for an honored guest, clean your soul of sin through the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Remember to forgive those who have hurt you, too. *"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me" (Psalm 51:10, RSV).*



Decorate with special meaning.

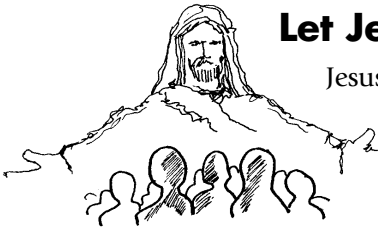
Make every decoration count this year. Fill your home with religious items that will strengthen your faith and remind you of the true meaning of the Advent and Christmas seasons.

Make your own. Look for sacred images of the season that touch your heart and turn them into decorations. One likely source is religious Christmas cards you receive. Even mounting one on colored paper and taping it on your desk or a wall can be a cheerful way to call Christ to mind.

Shine the Light. When you string lights or light Advent candles, let them be a reminder to you throughout the Advent and Christmas season to share the light of your faith with others through your words and actions.

Keep Life Evergreen. In his Angelus (Dec. 19, 2004), Pope John Paul II said that the evergreen fir is a symbol of undying life. *"The message of the Christmas tree is consequently that life stays 'evergreen' if we make a gift of it: not so much of material things but of life itself: in friendship and sincere affection, in fraternal help and forgiveness, in time shared and reciprocal listening."* Give the gift of friendship this season.

Bring your Nativity to life. Place the pieces in your scene at different times. Anticipate the coming of Jesus by keeping his bed empty until Christmas morning. Let the Magi arrive at the Epiphany and follow the Star by looking for signs of the Savior every day throughout the year.



Let Jesus find you.

Jesus came into the world for us. His birth, his death and his rising were meant to save us. He never left us and is looking for each of us. Make sure he can find you.

"Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep (Luke 15:6)."

Invite him in. This is the time to let God occupy a bigger place in your life but he is a gentleman and waits for an invitation. The problem is that we are often too preoccupied by everyday worries to invite him in. Start by ridding yourself of negative thoughts or worries that may take up too much mental energy and keep you from feeling God's love.

Seek him out. Jesus came to us humbly. Look at those in your community who have been humbled due to hardship and reach out with a smile or comforting word. God is in all of us and by showing our love to others, we show our love for God.

Visit him. Try to attend a weekday Mass. Don't miss Mass on the weekend. Spend time at a Perpetual Adoration Chapel or in the presence of our Lord outside of Mass. Take a pilgrimage to different churches to admire their nativity scenes.

Listen for him. Mother Teresa said, "In the silence of the heart God speaks. If you face God in prayer and silence, God will speak to you. Souls of prayer are souls of great silence." Look for ways to practice silence during Advent.

Make room in your "Inn."

When Mary and Joseph reached the inn, there was no room, not even for the King. During Advent, look for ways to make more room for our Savior in your life.

Make room in your prayers. Consider giving fewer gifts and offering spiritual bouquets instead. Use the time you save shopping and wrapping in prayer for the people on your list.

Make room in your mind. God is always with us but it is easier to find him during quiet times. Cut back on social engagements and entertaining. Limit activities other than work or volunteering. Schedule extra prayer time during the season and protect it on your calendar. Don't let anything come between you and God.

Make room in your heart. When they arrived in Bethlehem, Mary and Joseph had to rely on the kindness of strangers to provide them even the barest place to stay.

Imagine what it would be like to have no home at all this year. In honor of the Holy Family, seek out a homeless shelter in your area. Find out what the residents may need to help celebrate the coming of the Savior.

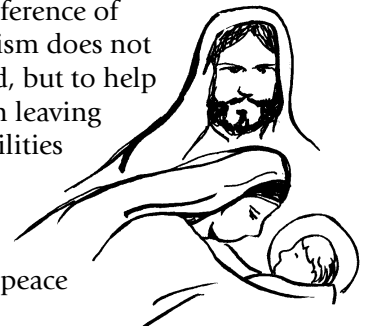
Or, call your parish rectory and find out if there is anyone in your parish who is struggling and in need of special attention during the holiday season. Do what you can to make someone else feel welcome at the "Inn."

Make room in your day. Instead of spending time watching television or on the computer, use the time to enrich your soul. Read scripture. Pray the Rosary. Pick up a good book.

Make room in your home. The holidays can be a lonely time without

family or close friends. Look for someone at work or in your neighborhood who may not be connected and invite her to Mass, or to join in your Christmas celebration.

According to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Catholicism does not call us to abandon the world, but to help shape it. This does not mean leaving worldly tasks and responsibilities but transforming them." During Advent this year, try transforming your tasks to acts of prayer, penance, and peace to honor the coming Savior.



O Antiphons

On the last days of Advent, you can add these "O Antiphons" to your evening or bedtime prayers. Each one highlights a title for the Messiah and refers to the prophecy of Isaiah of the coming of the Messiah.

December 17

O Sapientia — O Wisdom of our God Most High, guiding creation with power and love: come to teach us the path of knowledge!

December 18

O Adonai — O Leader of the House of Israel, giver of the Law to Moses on Sinai: come to rescue us with your mighty power!

December 19

O Radix Jesse — O Root of Jesse's stem, sign of God's love for all his people: come to save us without delay!

December 20

O Clavis David — O Key of David, opening the gates of God's eternal Kingdom: come and free the prisoners of darkness!

December 21

O Oriens — O Radiant Dawn, splendor of eternal light, sun of justice: come and shine on those who dwell in darkness and in the shadow of death.

December 22

O Rex Gentium — O King of all nations and keystone of the Church: come and save man, whom you formed from the dust!

December 23

O Emmanuel — O Emmanuel, our King and Giver of Law: come to save us, Lord our God!