

# Yearning for the Messiah

## Advent 2004 Retreat



Recognizing that our culture tends to plunge into the celebration of Christmas without encouraging the anticipation and longing of Advent, this half-day prayer retreat invites participants to engage in quiet preparation for the coming of Christ. Interaction with three of the seven O Antiphons, first used by the church in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries, will help give voice to cries for the appearance of the Messiah and awaken a sense of Advent yearning.

In *Reawakenings* (Crossroad Publishing, 1992), Thomas Keating highlights Advent personalities who illustrate the potential of what might be learned during the waiting and watching of Advent. Keating suggests that during the longing of this season, we come to understand, like the prophet Isaiah, that we cannot save ourselves. Out of our inmost being comes a cry for help.

Longing for the light eventually brings the light. Our longing to be whole can come about only by God's gift; all we can do is wait for it...and offer this longing, too deep for words, to God's infinite compassion. Advent is not just waiting for a feast. It is waiting for God, waiting to be reborn, waiting to be transformed (pp. 65-66).

### What Are the O Antiphons?

Typically used in Advent worship between December 17 and 23, each of the O Antiphons offers a name for the Messiah and harks back to the longing of the prophet Isaiah. For the purposes of this retreat, three of the O Antiphons—Immanuel, Rod of Jesse, and Dayspring—relating to this year's Advent scriptures will be highlighted. The text of "O come, O come, Immanuel" (172) is based on the O Antiphons and will provide appropriate supporting music for this event. More information on the O Antiphons is readily accessible on the internet.

### Schedule

9:00 a.m.	Gathering/time alone
9:30	Yearning for the Messiah: O come, O come, Immanuel
10:15	Yearning for the Messiah: O come, thou Rod of Jesse
11:00	Yearning for the Messiah: O come, thou Dayspring
11:45	Closing conversation and worship
12 noon	Retreat ends

### Materials needed

- An Advent wreath with four candles, surrounded by winter greens on a beautiful cloth

- If you choose, other visuals appropriate to the season, appealing to the senses
- Recorded music for the Advent season, including a recording of “O come, O come, Immanuel”; also hymnbooks (or copies) with the theme song
- Tea, coffee, muffins and fresh fruit for refreshment breaks
- Handouts with scripture texts and reflection questions; antiphonal readings of O Antiphons (these might also be projected on an overhead projector or PowerPoint)

### **Gathering**

Welcome participants with coffee, tea, muffins or light refreshments of your choice as they arrive. Invite them to gather in a circle around an altar you have prepared in advance with the first of four advent candles already lit. Appeal to a variety of the senses by having music playing and incorporating one interesting visual, perhaps a framed piece appropriate to the season or another personal memento that invites touch or provides visual stimulation and helps set the tone for a quiet, contemplative time. A beautiful cloth, winter greens, and well-chosen advent candles may be all you need. Lighting the Advent candles one per session will enhance the waiting theme; you may also wish to add to your altar a symbol designating the O Antiphon highlighted in each session.

Outline the morning’s activities briefly, and begin by asking participants to share their name and reason for choosing to attend today’s retreat. If many in your group have attended previous retreats, you might ask a different question: How do you wait, long, anticipate, yearn, seek for Jesus, the gift of God, during the season of Advent? Move from person to person around the circle so that both the more and less talkative have the same opportunity to share. (Tailor this brief get-acquainted time to your group. If all know each other, the need to interact at this point may be less necessary, though becoming acquainted in terms of how we seek Jesus during Advent may be important information for your group to share; offer the opportunity to “pass” on answering the get-acquainted question in case a shy person prefers not to share.) Offer thanks for each one present and invite God’s blessing on your day together.

Read aloud Isaiah 2:1-5 (the Old Testament lesson for Advent 1) as an invitation to retreatants to “go to the mountain” and “walk in the light” during this retreat time. Provide a handout of the passage including the invitation to use the approach of “lectio divina” -- reading for spiritual formation rather than for gathering information (see handout on lectio divina at the end of this document). Dismiss retreatants to find a place alone (where individuals might read the passage aloud, if they choose), ultimately settling on a word or phrase that catches their attention.

Include questions on the handout, such as:

- What circumstances in your life may have caused you to notice the word or phrase?
- What is God’s invitation to you in light of the word or phrase you selected and the circumstances in which you presently find yourself?

Give participants 15 minutes alone before calling them back to the group setting.

### **Yearning for the Messiah: O come, O come, Immanuel**

Light the second Advent candle during the group’s absence. With the appearance of the second lit candle, you might address the building anticipation of waiting in Advent or, alternatively, allow the silent message of the second flame to speak for itself. If you are using symbols to depict the O Antiphons, place tablets of stone or communion symbols on the altar. Sing or play a tape or CD of the first verse of “O come, O come, Immanuel,” followed by the reading of Isaiah 7:10-16 (the Old Testament lesson for Advent 4).

Invite participants to follow along on a handout of the scripture passage. Point out that Isaiah 7:2 suggests that Ahaz and his people, though seriously frightened by their circumstances, find strength in the promise of Immanuel, God-with-us. If size allows, invite retreatants to break into groups of three or four for five to ten minutes (depending on whether or not small groups become engaged with the subject matter) to share their fears and ways they have experienced God-with-us in the midst of those fears.

Before they break into groups, help participants consider ways to claim God's abiding presence by calling to mind a time when they were fully in the moment, experiencing the present as completely as possible with past memory and future anticipation temporarily suspended. (Give a personal example if necessary to help participants understand what kinds of experiences might give one a sense of abiding in the presence: Classic examples include eating an orange or taking a shower without thinking of anything but the activity in which you are involved. Practicing the presence of God involves spending similarly uninterrupted time with the Divine. When we experience moments free of distraction, it is wise to take note).

Invite participants back as a group and debrief as necessary. Conclude this segment by repeating the following, which may be included on the scripture handout or posted in large print on a flipchart pad:

Leader: O Immanuel, God with us, our King and Lawgiver, the expected of the nations and their Savior: Come to save us, O Lord our God.\*

People: O, come, O, come, Immanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear. Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!

Offer participants a short break for refreshments.

### **Yearning for the Messiah: O come, thou Rod of Jesse**

Light third Advent candle during the break; if you are using symbols to depict the O Antiphons, add a vine or plant with flower for this segment. Play or sing the second verse of "O come, O come, Immanuel," if time permits. Note that Isaiah foretold a new branch budding from David's throne. The Rod of Jesse Antiphon refers to the messianic lineage from the line of David, who was fathered by Jesse. If you wish, provide a handout of Isaiah 11:1-10 (the Old Testament lesson for Advent 2). Explain the process of group lectio divina (see below), now employing the group version of the lectio process used by individuals in the opening segment. Explain once more that lectio divina is sacred reading—reading for spiritual formation rather than to take in content or discern facts. Describe the process below briefly and reiterate as each step takes place.

**First stage:** Read the passage three times using a different voice each time (leader plus two participants) as individuals listen for the word or phrase that catches their attention. After a short period of silence, invite each member of the group to share (with no explanation or elaboration) the word or phrase that caught his/her attention. (For newcomers to this method of reading scripture, it works well for the leader to model sharing and move around the circle to the right.)

**Second stage:** Read the passage aloud again one time (leader's voice), this time asking participants to comment on what in their recent or upcoming experience might have caused them

to notice a particular word or phrase. After a short period of silence, invite participants to share around the circle—this time offering the opportunity to “pass” if a participant wishes.

**Third stage:** Read the passage one more time, now asking participants to consider God’s invitation to them. To what is God inviting the listener in light of the word or phrase he/she noticed and the circumstances in which he/she finds him/herself. After a brief silence, ask participants to share around the circle, offering the opportunity to “pass” once again.

If time and group circumstances permit, invite each participant to pray aloud or silently for the person to his/her right, verbalizing amen at the close of their silence. If you choose to use this final step of group lectio divina, participants should be informed in advance.

Close this segment with the following antiphonal reading (available on handout or flipchart pad):

Leader: O Rod of Jesse, who stands for an ensign of the people, before whom kings shall keep silence and unto whom the Gentiles shall make supplication: Come to deliver us, and tarry not.\*

People: O, come, thou Rod of Jesse, free thine own from Satan’s tyranny. From depths of hell thy people save, and give them vict’ry o’er the grave. Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!

#### **Yearning for the Messiah: O come, thou Dayspring**

Light the final Advent candle (doing it in view of participants this time will call the growing light to their attention if they have not already noticed). If you are using symbols to depict the O Antiphons, add a rising sun to your altar. Sing the third verse of “O come, O come, Immanuel.” Distribute a handout of Isaiah 60:1-6 (the Old Testament lesson for Epiphany). The reference to the O Antiphon (Dayspring) may not be as obvious here, but note that Isaiah 60:5 speaks of seeing and being radiant.

Invite a retreatant to read the passage, followed by leading participants into an extended silence with these words: Take time in the silence now to look toward the coming of Christ as you read the passage to yourself. Bring the passage to life in your imagination, envisioning the coming of light and the glory of the Lord rising upon you. See nations and kings gathering as the light touches all of humanity. Where are you in the picture? How does the light touch you? What people and circumstances do you wish to hold in the light of God’s love apparent in this scene?

Offer opportunity for retreatants to share their responses to the quiet time, assessing whether small group or large group interaction would be most useful for your setting. Conclude by repeating the following antiphonal response from the handout or flipchart pad:

Leader: O Dayspring, brightness of the light eternal, and Sun of Justice: Come, and enlighten those that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.\*

People: O, come, thou Dayspring, come and cheer our spirits by thine advent here. Disperse the gloomy clouds of night, and death's dark shadows put to flight. Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!

### **Dismissal**

In the final few minutes, give participants the opportunity to share their reflections on the retreat time. Sing or play the first three verses of "O come, O come Immanuel," if appropriate to your group. Offer a closing prayer of thanksgiving for the day together, asking a sense of God's presence for each individual during the remainder of the busy Advent season.

- Credit for Leader parts of antiphonal readings taken from internet site: Adapted from *Celebrating Advent and Christmas—A Sourcebook for Families*, Women for Faith & Family (PO Box 8326, St. Louis, MO 63132) Permission is granted to reproduce this text, with proper acknowledgement of source.

## LECTIO DIVINA (Praying Scripture)

From the Benedictines of the fifth century comes a way of “praying the scriptures” known as *Lectio Divina* (literally, sacred reading). The Benedictines were people of God who lived a life of prayer and manual labor. They developed an approach to prayer which encouraged restful silence, waiting, listening, and thoughtful response.

The idea behind *Lectio Divina* is a simple but potent one. It is as revolutionary as the yeast kneaded by the woman in the gospel parable. If we devote ourselves to meditation on God’s Word for a few minutes a day, we will gradually be changed; a new person will emerge who looks at life and humanity with a transformed attitude, a person who sees with the heart of Christ.

The approach consists of four movements:

### 1. *Lectio* – Reading – Under the eye of God

Begin by consciously placing yourself in God’s loving presence. You may want to spend a few minutes in silence, light a candle, pray a prayer of openness, or listen to a piece of meditative music.

Read through the scripture in a slow, thoughtful way, listening to God’s Word to you. It is best to read the text out loud very slowly – perhaps several times.

### 2. *Meditatio* – Meditation – When your heart is touched

Read the text until you come to a word, a phrase or a sentence that attracts you or touches your heart. Stop to re-read the phrase, savoring its goodness and sweetness in much the same way that you would delight in a well-seasoned meal.

You may want to jot down the words or phrases that emerge during this time of meditation. Especially if the text is a story or poetry, you may find yourself entering into the actions or images. Let your thoughts and imagination be part of the meditation.

### 3. *Oratio* – Personal prayer – Expressing to God what is in your heart

Respond to God in prayer -- silently, aloud, or by writing. You may be prompted to give thanks or make a confession, to respond to an invitation or warning, to note some connection to your life, mood or need, to pour out your heart to God, or to intercede for others. This is the prayer of the heart.

### 4. *Contemplatio* – Contemplation – Giving yourself up to love

Rest in God’s presence. Wait silently. Thank God for being with you and loving you. This is being held by God, surrendering to God, trusting the Spirit to pray within you.

Again, this may be a time for journaling -- for writing down what God has given you in prayer.