

What is Advent about?

(Answer is excerpted from the Introduction to "Words for Advent," written by Jamie Howison, priest at st. benedict's table)

It is often assumed that Advent is little more than a prologue to Christmas. But preparation for the Church's celebrations of Christ's nativity is really only the season's **secondary** purpose. Advent is a season that calls Christians to a posture of readiness for Christ's return, for the world's final Advent, when all of time and history will be drawn to its culmination. The words and phrases that appear in the opening weeks of the season – 'be awake,' 'be alert,' 'watch,' 'prepare,' – are anything but reminders to get our shopping done and the Christmas baking underway. They call us into a place of fundamental openness to what God is ever and always about to do in us and in our world.

In the Western Christian tradition there has been some version of Advent in place for almost as long as there has been a mid-winter celebration of the birth of Christ. In some times and contexts it has been observed with an almost Lenten sense of penitence. What the season was most often meant to do, though, was to set the celebrations of the nativity in a larger context, saying, in effect, "For all of its glory, Christmas is but the first chapter in a much longer story, and one that remains as-of-yet unfinished." In taking hold of Advent in this spirit, we not only facilitate a posture of openness to God's ongoing and re-creative work and purpose for the world, but we also begin to free Christmas from some of the heavy baggage with which it has been laden in our current cultural context.

Following the three-year cycle of Sunday readings set out by the wider church in what is known as the Lectionary, Advent always begins with a reading from one of Jesus' apocalyptic teachings, set late in his ministry. Over the next three Sundays, the congregation moves through readings dealing with John the Baptist and his role in heralding the arrival of an adult Jesus, on toward the story of the Annunciation (The angel's invitation to Mary to become the mother of God's Son). In this way, the community more or less backs its way toward Christmas, slowing down the pace at which that great feast is approached. While all around us the culture is declaring that these December days are the 'holiday season' to be filled with parties, shopping and indulgence, in the pulse of the liturgical calendar we are challenged to keep a different rhythm. The feast will come soon enough – and we'll keep it for a full twelve days, thank you very much – but in the meantime we have other stories to attend to.