

Ten ways to keep a holy Advent

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Advent is a time to keep watch for the unexpected comings of God, to prepare our own hearts to make room for the Blessed One, and to be ourselves signs to the world around us of divine compassion and justice.

In a month that is already far too busy and rushed, these ten general practices are not offered as one more to-do list to work through, but as ways to slow down, take a breath, pay attention, and make room in our lives for the birth of the Holy.

These practices do not begin to exhaust the possibilities, but I hope they may stimulate your own thoughtful and prayerful responses. If anything here speaks to you, or prompts your own variation, try it out—for a minute, an hour, a day, and leave the rest to God. Let every heart prepare him/her room.

1) Interrupting

Breaking the flow of habitual patterns can prompt new kinds of noticing and stimulate awareness. Once a week, or once a day, practice difference, welcome surprise.

Take a route to work/school/errands you have never used before. What do you see?

Take a walk in a place or a time that is not customary, and pay attention, trying to notice details of color, movement, and shape before words and labels start to fill your head.

Wear your watch on the “wrong” wrist, or not at all. Every time you look at the time and feel the interruption of automatic behavior, turn your attention to God’s presence in the here and now.

2) Silencing

Schedule a fixed time each day (between 1 and 10 minutes) for wordless silence in the presence of God. Unplug yourself from all media one day a week, or at least for an evening. Pay attention to how your soul wants to use that quiet time.

Spend one whole evening during Advent, or at least one hour, in total stillness and silence. Turn everything off, light a candle or a fire, abstain from books and music, stop talking in your head. Listen. Who is knocking at the door of your heart? What does your deepest desire want to tell you?

3) Waiting

Make every experience of waiting in daily life a time of prayerful attention to the hope and desire within you. What are all of the things you are waiting for? But what are you *really* waiting for?

Practice attentive and patient waiting. Sit or lie by a window where you can see only the sky. Wait for something to pass by: a cloud, a plane, a bird, an angel . . . Wait for the full moon to rise (tonight). Wait for the first star to appear on Christmas Eve.

4) Listening

When you are out in the world, pause and close your eyes sometimes. What do you hear? Make those sounds the subject of a prayer. Spend some time each day in a place of stillness where you can listen to your heart, and listen for God.

In conversations with friends, family, spiritual director, or stranger, listen for what wants to be heard. Spend some time each day with music that awakens your heart and evokes the beauty of holiness for you.

5) Watching

Rise early one morning to watch night turn to day. Fit your prayer to the slow rhythm of dawning. Pick a day to watch both the sunrise and the sunset, from a viewpoint that is unusual for you.

Notice the faces of strangers. Can you see in them icons of the holy? Take a photograph of something that catches your prayerful eye. Write an Advent reflection, poem or haiku to go with it, and post on social media.

Watch a film that focuses your attention on the traces of God in our world or in our lives.

6) Praying

For at least part of one day each week, every time you enter a new space or begin a new activity, say this prayer: “Maranatha, come Lord Jesus.” Four times a day (rising, midday, evening, bedtime), face the horizon and pray, “Maranatha, come Lord Jesus.”

Four times a day (rising, midday, evening, bedtime) say the Collect-prayer for the week from the Sunday liturgy.

Cultivate a daily prayer practice, at a set time if possible, and keep it faithfully, even when (or especially when) you are pressed or distracted.

7) Reflecting

Select a book for daily spiritual reading. Don’t skip a single day.

Meditate on the daily readings for Advent (Year 2) provided in lectionaries, Advent books, or online sources.

Journal at least a few times each week. Try beginning with “I am waiting for . . . ” or “I am longing for . . . ” and write what comes to mind.

8) Loving

Visit the sick, the lonely, the sad, the prisoner. Practice random acts of kindness. Pray that you may be a sign of Christ to everyone you meet. Pray every day for the person who is hardest for you.

Whenever you are in public space, spend some time praying for everyone you see around you. For one day, or at least one hour, make a conscious act of seeing Christ in every face.

9) Giving

Do an act of volunteering that you have never done before. Do something to make more justice and peace. Send money to a good cause. Take something to a food

bank.

Make a change in your own way of living that will be a vote for “a new heaven and a new earth.” Pick one social concern that engages your energetic attention, and pray every day that God’s will be done. You don’t have to list possible solutions—they are usually beyond our own imagining. Just entrust the object of your concern to God’s mercy and God’s imagination.

Give yourself to deep conversation with family and friends about the Advent season, the feelings it brings, the action it inspires.

10) Receiving

Pay attention. Stay awake. Be ready. Open the door of your heart to welcome the Stranger who knows you by heart.

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