

ADVENT

The following four Rest Stops focus on spiritual preparation for the season of Advent and Christmas. They explore the themes of waiting, hope and finding Jesus in the most unlikely places. If people didn't see him for who he was back then, what's to stop us from missing Jesus today?

REST STOP #1: Maranatha Merry Christmas

Sometimes we forget there's another Christmas coming. Surrounded by the tinsel and the twinkling lights, we think it's over. He's already here.

Time to party.

And in some ways that's true. God did come to "dwell among us" and we have "beheld his glory." Trading divinity for dirty diapers is an act of love almost incomprehensible. Taking upon a human body, with all its limitations, to meet a world of people who don't even want you demonstrates a love we can hardly fathom. What great love! How can we not celebrate?

But there is another Christmas coming, and if that is true, we are in another waiting period, another Advent. We are in a continual holding pattern, a waiting that feels like a pregnant woman in week 36. Christ is coming back, and we must ... wait. It's different than 2000 years ago, and yet it's much the same.

The violence is the same. While we hang lights around our front porch, children in Iraq dodge bullets and cry themselves to sleep to a lullaby of bombs.

The poverty's the same. While we show till we drop for Christmas presents, starvation moves slowly, meticulously through a village in Sudan. A mother crosses the Rio Grande, because somehow she has to get to a place where she can work to buy medicine for her sick child. A homeless man hurries down a New York street so he can get first dibs sleeping on the grate where the heat comes up from below.

The ethnic hatred, the political unrest, the scandals against the poor—much of our world looks just like that little town of Bethlehem did in Jesus' day. "How still we see thee lie?" Probably 20 little boys lost their lives in that town because Herod was on a manhunt to kill Jesus. No, there was no peace the night Jesus was born, just like there is no peace in so many villages around the world today.

It was the same for the Christians in 90 AD, when John saw a vision and then wrote what we have as the book of Revelation. He gave this message of hope to a persecuted people. They lived in what seemed a hopeless world, where the Roman emperor had complete power. To openly live as Christians meant possible torture or death. To these beleaguered people, the vision was all they had to hold onto as they waited. It's what we have too, as still we wait. He's coming back. Maranatha.

Revelation 22 paints a Christmas picture better than any Hallmark card ever could. In vivid imagery, it describes the river of the water of life, flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb. In this Christmas scene, God will dwell, not in a pillar of cloud and fire as of old, and not in a lonely manger, but enthroned in our midst. God will dwell with us again—in our very neighborhood. We will see God's face.

On each side of this crystal clear river will be the tree of life, bearing a different fruit every month of the year. The leaves of this tree will be for the healing of the nations. Earlier in the vision (Rev. 21:24) John pictures the kings of the earth walking into the New Jerusalem,

bringing their splendor into it. God cares about the nations. God longs for reconciliation.

There will be no more curse. There will be no more night. There will be no more need of even the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give light. There will be no more crying, no sickness or pain.

There will be no more death.

In a world filled with violence and war and sickness and poverty and environmental disasters and hatred and persecution, this is good news. This is something to celebrate.

This is Christmas.

Come Lord Jesus. Maranatha Merry Christmas.

Rest Stop #2: 25 Scriptures till Christmas!

What a better way to count down for Christmas than with scriptures? Use these verses to help you wait and hope and prepare for the coming of Christ.

- 1 Read Psalm 27. Light a candle to symbolize the light of the world coming into our darkness.
- 2 Read Psalm 130. What does it mean for you to wait on the Lord?
- 3 Read I Samuel 1. What was Hannah waiting for? What made her waiting so painful? Where can you go to pour out your soul?
- 4 Read Isaiah 30:18. What do you do when the Lord doesn't rise up to show you compassion?
- 5 Read Zephaniah 3:17. Picture in your mind the Lord holding you, quieting you as a mother quiets her baby. What lullaby is the Lord singing to you right now?
- 6 Read Isaiah 40:1-5. In Isaiah's day, they leveled the mountains and filled up the low places to make a new highway for the king. How are you preparing for the King's arrival?
- 7 Read Luke 3:1-20. How does John suggest people prepare the way for the King?
- 8 Read Psalm 40. Which verse in this chapter do you most clearly identify with today?
- 9 Read Judges 13. What part of this story intrigues you the most? Who's the mysterious angel in your life right now?
- 10 Read Matthew 1:18-25. What special meaning does your name have?
- 11 Read Philippians 2:5-11. Christ made himself nothing. The one who was God became a defenseless infant.
- 12 Read Jeremiah 31:15-17. For what are you weeping? Where is the hope for your future?
- 13 Read Matthew 2:16-18. Why don't we talk much about this part of the Christmas story?
- 14 Read John 1:1-13. They missed their own creator. Can we? Do we?
- 15 Read Exodus 33:7-11. The presence of the Lord, represented in the pillar of cloud and fire, tabernacled or dwelt among the people. Does the Lord speak to you face to face, as a friend?

- 16** Read John 1:14-18. Now the pillar of fire and cloud in the wilderness becomes an infant in a tiny village. But will he be welcomed?
- 17** Read Isaiah 60:1-3. Praise the Lord that his glory appears over us.
- 18** Read Matthew 2:1-12. Are you willing to travel by night, following a star, to a foreign place to find a king?
- 19** Read Luke 1:5-25. Do not be afraid; your prayer has been heard.
- 20** Read Luke 1:26-38. Do not be afraid; you have found favor with God.
- 21** Read Luke 1:39-45. Blessed is the one who believes that what the Lord says will be accomplished.
- 22** Read Luke 1:46-56. "The Lord scatters the proud, and sends the rich away empty ..." Do these verses bother you? Should they?
- 23** Read Luke 1:57-66. If you were kept silent for nine months, what would be the first words out of your mouth when you finally had a chance to speak?
- 24** Read Luke 2:1-7. Will you make room for the child? Remember that he may come disguised as the poor and the weak. Read Matthew 25:31-46.
- 25** Read Luke 2:8-14. Do not be afraid. The good news of great joy really is for everyone.

Rest Stop #3: Advent prayer stations

As a gift to yourself and the people you love, create Advent prayer stations this season. These stations can be set up at church or in homes. They may be used for private prayer times or with groups.

ADVENT PRAYER STATION #1: WAITING

Need:

- 5-8 watches with Bible verses attached to them. Use these verses: Ps. 25:1-5, Ps. 27:14, Ps. 37:7, Ps. 62:1-2, Ps. 69:3, Ps. 130:5-6, Hos. 12:6, Is. 59:9-11, Mic. 7:7.
- Hourglasses (you may use the little plastic ones that come with table games). Have Bible verses attached (same verses as above).
- A table for placing the watches and hourglasses
- Instructions written on paper or a card

Instructions

Sometimes ...

It's hard to wait.

The not knowing.

The feeling of being out-of-control.

Maybe it's the anticipation of something joyous.

You just can't wait.

"Someday the Messiah will come

Bringing justice, showing us the way ...

Bringing peace"—no wait!

That's what they said right before Jesus was born.

That doesn't apply to us.

Or does it?

Maybe it's a sick stomach feeling of dread.

The world—your world—feels so out of control.

"Soldiers killing baby boys,

The emperor forcing people to bow to him or die,

Rising unemployment, unrest in the streets, hungry children"—no wait!

That was Jesus' world.

That doesn't apply to us.

Or does it?

So we wait.

Look at a watch.

Flip over an hourglass.

Read the verse that is attached.

Is it okay to wait? How long are you willing to wait?

As long as it takes?

Pray for strength. Pray for patience.

Pray for Christ to come.

ADVENT PRAYER STATION #2: PREPARATION

Need:

- Sandbox
- Toy shovels and rakes
- Instructions written on paper or a card

Instructions

How are you preparing for the coming of the King?

Back in the days of the prophets—like Isaiah, like John the Baptist

The people would build a new highway for the king.

You've heard of the King's Highway?

Before his scheduled arrival,

They would level the mountains—flat.

They would fill up the valleys—smooth.

They worked for a long time, making this new road.

This time of year, we celebrate the King's coming.

Do we need to build a new highway

In our hearts?

What mountains of pride and sin stand in the way?

What valleys of low self-esteem and depression loom as pitfalls?

Go to the sandbox.

Make a sand mountain for all the ways you

Exalt yourself

Choose something over God to satisfy your deepest longings

Sin.

Pile those mountains high.

Did you notice something?
The mountains automatically make valleys.

Is that true in your life too?

What are you going to do to get rid of the mountains?
How are you going to get rid of the valleys?

Make the sand smooth.
Pray for God's help.

Make a highway for the King.

ADVENT PRAYER STATION #3: ONE-WORD POEMS

Need:

- Strips of paper, 11 inches long and 3 inches wide
- Pens or pencils
- A sample poem
- Instructions written on paper or a card

Instructions

Before you there are strips of paper.
Perhaps some strips are already folded in such a way that you can only see one word.
Using that word for inspiration, write three of your own words, one on top of the other.
Fold the paper so that only the last word you have written is visible.
When the strip of paper is full of words, you may open it and read this Christmas poem.

ADVENT PRAYER STATION #4: HOPE

Need:

- Candles, matches, candle holders
- Table to place the candles
- Instructions written on paper or a card

Instructions

"Jesus is the light of the world."

But elsewhere in the Bible, Jesus says that we are the light of the world.

So which is right?

In what areas in your life are you discouraged, not a light,
can't even see light at the end of the tunnel?

For all those areas, blow out a candle.

In what areas in your life do you see hope?

Where you see Christ working?

Where you see Christ working in you?

For all those areas, light a candle.

Feel the warmth.

Let the light shine.

Rest Stop #4: Book review and suggested activity

How awful, we think, that Mary and Joseph had to walk all over Bethlehem just to find a place to rest. How sad that they had nothing better than a cave or a stable where animals slept. Couldn't they see she was about to give birth? What was the matter with those people?

But what if the tables were turned, and Mary and Joseph were walking down ... our streets? Would we have taken them in? Would we have seen the miracle? Would we have brought gifts? These are the questions a Canadian youth asks in a wonderful Christmas book called *Northern Nativity*. Here author William Kurelek brings to life 20 different Christmas dreams where Mary and Joseph appear in modern-day Canada. The problem is that most people

don't recognize them. The couple and the baby sometimes are Ukrainian immigrants or First Nation people or just another one of the families needing food at the homeless shelter. Every dream begins and ends with these questions:

"If it happened here
as it happened there ...
If it happened now
as it happened then ..."

These are excellent Advent questions, questions each of us should wrestle with. Here are several ways that you can process them for yourself or with others.

- Buy *Northern Nativity* and use it as a 21-day countdown to Christmas (1 dream each day plus the introduction, making it a good devotional for 21 days). See below for specific book information.
- Visit a homeless shelter and volunteer your time there. Go with the expectation that Jesus is already there, as one or maybe several of the regular attendees. Come expecting for them to give you a gift—the gift of faith, the gift of laughter or maybe the gift of hope.
- Ask God to open your eyes to the marginalized people in your town, the "Josephs and Marys." Who in your town would have trouble being let in?
- Read Matthew 25:36ff. Understand that, when you least expect it, you will meet Jesus as you interact with the "least of these." Don't be hospitable just so you can get a reward, (if people would have known it was God in a blanket, would they have let him in? Of course!) but do it out of love. Don't be surprised, however, when you receive more than you give. You will meet Jesus in the most unlikely people.
- Spend a couple hours being Christmas bandits. Fill bags with groceries and money and slip the bags into someone's garage or front porch. Ring the doorbell—and run!

A Northern Nativity: Christmas dreams of a prairie boy, by William Kurelek, Montreal: Tundra Books, 1976. This book is available through Provident Bookstores, www.ProvidentBookstores.com.