



# ***A Season of Gracious Gifts Advent Retreat Kit***

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## **Overview**

This retreat offers a prayerful opportunity to slow down in the midst of this busy season and reflect on the gracious gifts of Advent. What is offered to us? How might we respond?

This guide includes three sessions, each exploring a different gracious gift of God during the Advent season (and beyond). These sessions can be used in one of the following ways:

- **A full-day retreat.** For this case, you will want to exclude opening and closing portions of some of the sessions.
- **A series of shorter, retreat-like events.** For example, you could offer one session per week for three weeks, or three consecutive mornings or evenings.
- **A single morning or evening event.** In this case, you would use only one of the three enclosed sessions and save the others for subsequent years.
- **Adapt for other uses.** You can also use these materials as a personal retreat, or as source material for preaching, presentation, or other gatherings. This kit is well suited for gatherings of RCIA participants, parents, parish ministers (e.g. catechists, liturgical ministers, parish pastoral council and commissions, etc.), members of the parish staff, or anyone else in the parish.

This kit has been designed as a guide for parish leaders – with all the components prepared for you (talking points, prayers, handouts, etc.). You will not necessarily need all of the included options, so feel free to exclude whatever does not fit in the time you have available.

Thank you for your ministry and your role in helping your people prepare for Advent!

# Advanced Planning

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## Room setup

- A hospitable room with round tables (if possible), each seating six participants.
- Podium and microphone.
- Small table for a prayer setting – candle, Scripture, Advent symbol(s).
- Table for refreshments and lunch (if provided).

## Leaders

- One or more leaders who will provide the reflections and lead the sharing and prayer. There are easy opportunities for participants to lead portions of the prayer or proclaim from Scripture.
- A hospitality team to provide a welcoming atmosphere, refreshments, general set-up, and cleanup.

## Materials needed

- A prayer center with Scripture, candle, and symbols of Advent (purple cloth, Advent Wreath, etc.)
- Copies of the handouts provided within this packet
- Name tags
- 3 x 5 cards
- Music player (if desired for music during prayer and/or quiet times)
- Paper and pens (for taking notes)
- Thin magic markers
- Small pots with dirt
- A few fast-growing seeds for each participant (marigolds, zinnias, nasturtiums, etc.)

# The Gracious Gift of Never-Ending Presence

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## Welcome & Introduction

The leader welcomes everyone and explains organizational details, such as the location of restrooms, schedule for the gathering, etc.

Explain that retreat includes three components:

- Reflective talk
- Time for personal reflection or journaling (with an optional handout)
- Group conversations

If you wish to invite participants to use different locations for their quiet times, point out these spaces (outside, church, chapel, adjoining rooms, etc.)

## Opening Prayer & Reflection

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## Opening Song

Choose an Advent song with which your parishioners are familiar.



## Scripture Reading

Mark 13:33-37



## Prayer of Petition

Have one or several leaders (one for each petition) pray each of the following petitions aloud. The response to each is: **"Never-ending Presence of God, comfort and challenge us."**

1. Never-ending Presence of God,  
wake us so that we may prepare the way of the Lord.
2. Unceasing Presence of God,  
excite our wonder at your wisdom that has given us the Word made flesh.
3. Boundless Presence of God,  
deepen our generosity so that we may give to others the gift of ourselves.
4. Never-ending Presence of God,  
prepare us for your constant coming into our hearts and our lives.
5. Unceasing Presence of God,  
plant the seeds of compassion within us so we may live as Jesus did.
6. Boundless Presence of God, intensify joy in us,  
the joy of experiencing your Presence, the joy of bringing your love to others.



## Song

Choose another Advent song with which your parishioners are familiar. “Open My Eyes” by Jesse Manibusan (OCP) is one good possibility.

## Main Reflection

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## Leader’s Talking Points

### A Blessed Time

Lyrics to a song by Susan Werner read: “May I suggest to you... this is the best part of your life. This time is blessed for you.... Just turn your head and you'll begin to see the thousand reasons that were just beyond your sight: the reasons why I suggest to you this is the best part of your life.” (Listen on Youtube: [https://youtu.be/4E\\_tho7E0WQ](https://youtu.be/4E_tho7E0WQ))

- These words can have several different meanings; they can take us to new realizations and new challenges.
- In one way, we could say that for each of us – these next few hours “are blessed for us” - amid the hurry of this season, we have chosen to slow down, to be uniquely blessed in these moments.
- In another way, many of the Advent Scripture readings declare that this day – each day – is the best part of our lives – if we take the time to be aware.

## Looking Back, Looking Ahead

Often people think of the past and/or the future when they reflect on Advent:

- The past: because we're remembering the Old Testament times which led to the coming of Jesus
- The future: because often during Advent homilists and various readings focus us on the second coming of Jesus – sometime in the future
- In reality, perhaps the most important part of Advent is about today. The message of Advent is about never-ending Presence, here, now, always. Theologically we call it in the Incarnation: God becoming human.

## Believing the Incarnation

There is a story about Benedictine Fr. Godfrey Diekmann (1908-2002), a well-known liturgist at the time of the Second Vatican Council.

- One day in the student dining room at St. John's University in Collegeville, Minn., in a conversation with some colleagues, he got worked up about the key to Christian theology and life. He shouted, "It's not the Resurrection, damn it! It's the Incarnation!"
- Then, as students slipped away, he continued, "But we don't really believe it. We don't believe we are invited to become the very life of God!"

Advent's message exclaims to us that God is Never-Ending Presence, always and everywhere.

- God became one of us; therefore, God is constantly with us in everything imaginable in our lives.
- God as Unceasing Presence with us has many ramifications for our lives and for our world.



## Discussion Questions

Invite the participants to talk in groups of about three about what they think might be some of the ramifications of the reality and mystery of God's Unceasing Presence with us. If there is time, invite some of the groups to share their thoughts with the full group.



## Leader's Talking Points

Let's look at three (other) ramifications of God's unceasing presence:

### 1. We are never without God.

We don't need to wait until heaven to be with God; God is with us constantly. This, of course, leads us to another consideration: how do we experience God? What are our names, our images for God?

### 2. God becoming human means God pervades our world.

We can find God in everything that happens, in every person that we meet in our 24/7 days which makes all the moments of our everyday lives holy.

Advent summons us to be watchful for the many ways God's Boundless Presence is alive in the ordinary:

- the kindness of a stranger, the love of family and friends, a phone call when we need it
- the older person who has trouble hearing and is difficult to converse with
- the young mother with the restless toddlers behind us in the grocery line
- the inconsiderate driver who cuts us off on the freeway
- the telephone solicitor who calls at mealtime
- the friend who disappoints us

The Advent and Christmas seasons are a call to see God everywhere, and especially in those places we would not expect to find glory and grace.

Advent-Christmas is the obligation to see that everything leads us directly to God, to realize that there is no one, nothing on earth that is not the presence of God for us.

Everyone – everything is a revelation of God. If everyone realized that, what might our world look like? Would racism cease to exist? Would war be no more? Would hunger disappear? Would we cease to hear about (and experience) violence? Would everyone be treated respectfully for who they are: holy and sacred?

### 3. God's coming should change us.

God became human, one of us, but that Benedictine Diekmann reminded us about our too-often response. "But we don't really believe it. We don't really believe we are invited to become the very life of God!"

- God became human, not simply that God might be with us, but so that we might be with God. In other words, the incarnation is the starting point of who we are. One with God, we are capable of working with Christ to rebuild the world.

- We are not passive bystanders in the Incarnation. The incarnation radically transforms the history of the world and the personal history of each of us. Because of the incarnation, each of us must measure up to God's plan and play our role in it.
- Meister Eckhart (13th century mystic) said, "What good is it to me if the eternal birth of the divine Son takes place unceasingly but does not take place within myself? What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to the Son of God if I do not also give birth to Him in my time and my culture?"
  - Usually it's easy to believe in God, but do we believe in God-in-me?
  - We believe in God in heaven, but do we believe in God-on-earth?
  - We believe in God out there, but do we believe in God-with-us?
- Advent reminds us that each day is always the best part of our lives because
  - There are thousands of reasons, thousands of ways God is with us
  - There are thousands of ways we can give birth to God – we can be the very life of God in our world



## Quiet Journaling Time

Invite the participants to take some quiet time to reflect on one (or more) of the questions on Handout One.



## Discussion

Invite small groups (groups of about three or table groupings) to share some of their thoughts from the quiet time. If time allows, invite some people to share something of their group's discussion with the full group.

## Closing Prayer & Reflection

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## Leader's Talking Points

During this Advent/Christmas season we often reflect on this name for God - Emmanuel: God-with-us. The Incarnation, the mystery that we celebrate on Christmas – God becoming one of us – summons us to be constantly aware of the many ways of God's Never-Ending Presence always and everywhere in our ordinary lives.

I invite you to take a moment of quiet and then write on your 3 x 5 card three ways that God has been with you within the last two weeks. When did you experience God? Where did you see God? When did you know that God's love, presence and care were with you?



## Song

Choose an Advent song with which the participants are familiar. You may want to use the same song used in the opening prayer.



## Scripture Reading

Psalms 139:1-12



## Prayer of Thanksgiving

Invite the participants – if they wish to – to name one of the ways they have experienced God-with-them in recent weeks.

Response after each one: **We give you thanks, Gracious God, for your never-ending presence.**

Conclude the prayer by inviting participants to share the sign of peace with each other.



## Prayerful Commitment

Invite the participants to think about our call to see God everywhere, especially in those places we would not expect to find glory and grace. Who/where might that be for you? On the reverse side of the 3 x 5 card, write down two places/two settings/two people where you don't usually expect to see God. During this Advent season watch for God in these people/these settings/these places.



## Closing Song

Close with a song with which the participants are familiar. "Open My Eyes, Lord" or "We Have Been Told" might be appropriate.



## The Gracious Gift of Never-Ending Presence

"May I suggest to you...this is the best part of your life. This time is blessed for you.... Just turn your head and you'll begin to see the thousand reasons that were just beyond your sight: the reasons why I suggest to you this is the best part of your life." —Susan Werner

**What are some of my thousand reasons?**

"One poet said that you 'tumbled' down to earth whereas the church says you leaped down  
Either way you came and we are  
overwhelmed by the nearness of our God."  
—Bishop Robert F. Morneau

**Who am I looking for this Advent season?**

**What Scriptural images of God comfort me?**

**What Scriptural images disturb my comfort zone and ask something of me?**

**What new images of God do I perceive, in my world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, beckoning me?**

"The presence of God is like walking out of a door into the fresh air. You don't concentrate on the fresh air. You breathe it. And you don't concentrate on the sunlight. You just enjoy it. It's all around you.... The things in life that correspond somewhat to the presence of God are not things on which you can concentrate or on which you do concentrate. You just simply are in them. When you swim, you don't concentrate on the water.... To be in the presence of God is, in a certain sense, like being in water."  
—Thomas Merton

**How do I experience being in God's presence?**

**What are some of the longings, dreams or hopes that have led me to recognize God's presence in my life? in the lives of others?**

"Are you looking for me? I am in the next seat. My shoulder is against yours. You will not find me in ... synagogues, nor cathedrals. When you really look for me, you will see me instantly – you will find me in the tiniest house of time." —Kabir

**Where do I find God?**

**Might there be a new place to find God this Advent?**