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Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
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Study guide:

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Wait, it's Advent

By Robert C. Blezard

North Americans hate to wait for anything—as evidenced in the avalanche of advance orders for the iPhone 6, blockbuster midnight releases of Hollywood movies and the popularity of takeout dinners. So for our culture, Advent provides an especially countercultural corrective and a reason—and method—of experiencing a different flow of time and way of life.

Exercise 1: Winter rhythms

In centuries past, the coming of winter, the cooling of the earth and the shortening of days brought a slowing of pace. The harvest now in and seedtime yet months away, winter meant quieter rhythms and different work.

- How do traditional Advent observances relate to this pattern?
- How is modern life different from ancient times, and for what reasons?
- What is lost by the absence of a “slow” season in our lives?
- Why do we need Advent?

Exercise 2: Day by day

Who says Advent calendars are just for children? They provide a great vehicle to remember to relish every day—and to anticipate the next day in the Advent season. As a study group, agree to use Advent calendars as a spiritual practice aid, brainstorming ways to make opening the daily window a personal or family ritual. Write and share prayers for waiting and receiving a gift. Invite innovation and creativity. When the group gathers, share experiences of the Advent calendar.

Exercise 3: Slow-lane living

Modern life is very rushed. Practicing delayed gratification and reveling in the slow processes of life can be a spiritual exercise. It teaches us patience, helps us think through to the end of that for which we are waiting—an outcome, an event, attainment of a goal or possession. As a study group, covenant to practice “slow lane living” for a week by consciously waiting and avoiding rushing. For instance, drive at or close to the speed limit and practice patience with other drivers. When eating, don't take the next forkful or spoonful until you have swallowed what is already in your mouth. What other ideas can you think of to slow down? Share your experiences.



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Exercise 4: Advent adventures

- What memories do you have of Advent traditions that your family or your congregation celebrated when you were a child? What were the meanings and memories?
- What would it take either to revive them or renew them?
- Research Advent traditions and select one or two that you find interesting. What steps would you have to take to bring them into your family or congregation? Why not plan a big Advent this year?

Exercise 5: 12 days of Christmas

Until only a few generations ago, Christians held off celebrating the birth of Christ until after Dec. 25, but then the festivities lasted 12 days—until the Day of Epiphany on Jan. 6.

- In what ways has our culture turned this around to celebrate Christmas during Advent?
- What are the dominant pressures to bring on Christmas early?
- How can a well-observed Advent and joyous 12 days of Christmas complement each other?
- Explore ways you can revive this tradition in your family and congregation.

Exercise 6: *Not* Christmas

- When did you first see Christmas merchandise and decorations in a local store?
- Who benefits from an earlier Christmas season?
- In what ways have you succumbed to the lure of celebrating Christmas before Christmas?
- What is lost when we celebrate Christmas too early?
- List 10 ways that you could resist that temptation this year. How can embracing Advent help?
- Make and share with everyone an Advent plan for your family and congregation.

Exercise 7: *Lectio divina*

Sure, you've heard and read the traditional Advent readings, but have you prayed them by *lectio divina*? It's a practice of reading Scripture slowly and prayerfully (see "The process of *lectio divina*" in *The Lutheran's* December 2003 issue at www.thelutheran.org/article/article.cfm?article_id=3469). *Lec-*



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tio divina is designed to slow your thoughts and help you experience Scripture with your heart, soul and imagination.

As a study group practice *lectio divina* with the readings from each Sunday in Advent and covenant to work with the texts individually during the week for at least 15 minutes a day. Share the insights and experiences.

Exercise 8: St. Nick vs. Santa

Compare and contrast the stories of the real St. Nicholas and the fictional Santa Claus. Compare and contrast the values and ideals each embodies.

- Which one better represents the spirit of Christmas?
- Why is Santa Claus the poster boy for Christmas in North American culture and not St. Nicholas?



Wait, it's Advent

By Gertrud Mueller Nelson

“I can’t wait!” Children say it all the time. They can’t wait for their birthday, for dessert, for it to snow, and then for the snow to melt But we adults say it too: I can’t wait to get this cast off; to get the test results; for the weekend to come.

For a study guide see page 25. To read “Searching for shelter,” find this article at www.thelutheran.org/feature/december.



SHUTTERSTOCK

Waiting is hard, and it's not the great American pas-time. We *spend* time, we *lose* time. We *waste* time. And when we suddenly *have* time, we don't know what to do with it.

Advent comes and gently invites us Christians into a period of waiting. It actually teaches us the art of waiting—and the joy of preparation and anticipation. Advent invites us to be spiritually pregnant with all the hopes for which we long.

In Advent we learn that everything of value needs

time to come to fullness. We learn to *take* time. And in taking time, we anticipate the reward and relish with joy the fruits of our waiting. Waiting helps us enjoy what finally arrives and that which we otherwise might take for granted.

The cake in the oven needs time to be fully baked. Then it will taste good. The poem, after a period of mulling, incubation and corrections, finally emerges on the paper in full bloom. Over time, the grapes are transformed into fine wine.

A big chunk of one's spiritual life is learning to have confidence in the darkness of winter, in times when things look bleak, to know that there is something out of our sight that is coming into being. Advent is one time in the year when the church says, "Waiting may be difficult, but we have to wait, so let's wait together."

And so, in the darkest time of the year, we wait with longing for the slow return of light.

As the culture rushes Christmas, the Christian is invited to be countercultural. The outer world is whipping itself into a buying frenzy, decoration overload, and a season of budget strain, parties and anxiety in what society now calls the "holiday season" (that began, somehow, in October).

Don't be cheated

It's hard work swimming against that cultural tide. But if we don't, we are cheated of a season we need: Advent. And without patience, we lose Christmas as well.

We are accompanied through the dark days of Advent by the gospel reminders of Christ's coming in time and coming again at the end of time.

Like the family counting the trimesters of a baby on the way, we count the days with the Advent calendar. We weave the fragrant branches of evergreen onto a hoop, and it's more than just a decoration. It's an archetype:

When the far north ancients watched the waning of days, they took in their harvest, brought their animals to shelter and then removed the wheels from their carts. Out in the snowy forest, one tree seemed to remain green, alive and hopeful. They collected and wove those branches around their wheels and fashioned torches to these wreaths. In their great halls, they hung the wheels from the rafters and, lighting one torch at a time, they danced and sang and told their stories.

They lent each other courage in the darkness as they wooed back the sun, the source of light and life. And it worked! What a relief. Slowly the sun returned and the light grew.

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A bishop who gave to the poor

St. Nicholas Day, Dec. 6

St. Andrew Lutheran Church, Parsippany, N.J., in 2012 returned Santa Claus to his roots by bringing St. Nicholas to life.

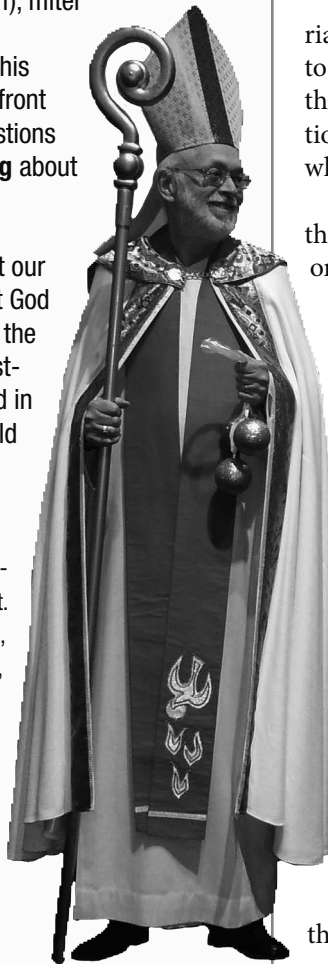
Member George Uhlman, whose trimmed gray beard made him look like the Greek icon of St. Nicholas, came down the aisle dressed as Santa. With his red hat and fur cuffs, the children had no trouble identifying him. But they were told Santa didn't always look the way he does today.

With good humor and appropriate background music, Uhlman removed the Santa clothes and was "redressed" as St. Nicholas, the bishop, with an alb, stole, cope, crozier (pastoral staff), miter and three gold balls.

Instead of a sermon, he took his place in his cathedra (a chair in front of the sanctuary) to answer questions from www.stnicholascenter.org about his life and legends.

His most important message: "There is no St. Nicholas without our Lord Jesus, the greatest gift that God has given to the world. So let all the stories about Santa, Father Christmas or St. Nicolas begin and end in Bethlehem and the birth of a child in a humble stable."

George Uhlman, who died in September, played a perfect St. Nicholas at St. Andrew Lutheran, Parsippany, N.J., in December 2012, said Kurt Gahan, who cast him for the role as part of his responsibilities for Christian education at the church. Gahan recommends www.stnicholascenter.org, a nonprofit organization in Michigan, for its wealth of ideas for celebrating St. Nicholas at home, school or in the parish.



Our Advent wreaths are a powerful symbol. They are our inner wheels removed. This means we *stop* time as we know it and we *take* time to spend it in anticipation and preparation.

If we were required to make our Advent wreaths out of just one tire from our cars, life would be vastly altered throughout the culture. We would stop.

Wheeling and dealing would come to a halt. We would be "snowed in" in the darkness to prepare heart and hearth for the coming of the Son and source of light and life. We might take the time to make cakes and jams, to knit mittens, make quilts or carve dolls, work with wood, or bake and store up the traditional cookies and breads to be ready for the coming season.

The Creator God inspires the creativity in our gift-giving. The gifts we give remind us of "the gift": the Christ child.

The "stuff" of our gift preparations is *materia*—material that is holy because God took on a material being to live among us, also taking on our humanity through the body of a human woman, Mary. In the Incarnation, Spirit and matter marry to heal all our dualities. In wholeness, the marriage brings us the God/man.

Without understanding that marriage, in which God thought humankind good enough to join it, we rush only to one side: *materia* devoid of the Spirit.

That is materialism.

Then it becomes that driving hunger where we keep devouring stuff, things and material—and can't be sated. We uncork the bottles looking for that spirit and come away empty. In a feeding frenzy that has us pawing through the sales tables and earmarking the catalogs, we often buy things for others with a sense of duty and despair.

And because they didn't find Christ in their Christmas gifts, stores are mayhem again on Dec. 26, when presents are returned in disappointment because Christ came in the wrong size or color.

Tunes & traditions light the way

But anticipating, preparing, creating, making—all can be a prayer that leads us through the darkness into the new light.

There are dozens of hymns and Advent carols that speak to our longing, our fears, our cheer in these waiting days:

People, look east. The time is near of the crowing of the year. Make your house fair as you are able, trim

the hearth and set the table. People look east, and sing today—Love, the Guest, is on the way (“People, Look East,” Evangelical Lutheran Worship, 248).

Come, thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free; from our fears and sins release us; let us find our rest in thee (“Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus,” ELW, 254).

Rejoice, then, you sad-hearted, who sit in deepest gloom, who mourn your joys departed and tremble at your doom. All hail the Lord’s appearing! O glorious Sun, now come, send forth your beams so cheering and guide us safely home (“O Lord, How Shall I Meet You,” ELW, 241).

Advent hymns such as these keep us focused. These and other traditions—in the church and in our homes—are stepping-stones that carry us through the season. They allow us to celebrate the darkness, lending us courage and joy in our longing.

Advent isn’t dour. Each festivity points from itself to the mystery ahead.

Congregational life should be the “first responder” to our basic human need for time out, time taken, time returned to us loaded with grace and joy and appreciation of simple things glorified.

Parishes can bring members through this collective celebration of darkness-before-dawn, to the dawning of Emmanuel, God-with-us, to a great manifestation in the feast of Epiphany.

Save children’s pageants, choir concerts and staff parties for the 12 days of Christmas. Instead, consider how you might celebrate, or help families celebrate, St. Nicholas Day or St. Lucia, for instance. Our country is a fine ethnic salad full of customs that could add richness to our December.

The ‘real’ St. Nick

Eastern and Northern Europeans celebrate St. Nicholas of Myra on Dec. 6.

He is the true Santa Claus whose bishop’s miter has been replaced with a clown’s cap and his shining vestments with a snowsuit. Apparently, a chubby elf sells better than a dignified bishop/father figure. Angels have been replaced with more elves, and since we can’t touch heaven, we have housed him at the North Pole. He is used as both a threat and a promise to get children to behave.

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Mary & mariachi music

Virgin of Guadalupe, Dec. 12

When Trinity of Manhattan [N.Y.] Lutheran Church started celebrating the Virgin of Guadalupe, it was both early in the day and at a Spanish-speaking worship service nearest that day (Dec. 12).

Several years ago, Spanish-speaking worshippers decided to move their Guadalupe service to a morning bilingual worship to share the tradition with Anglos and African-Americans, who also make up Trinity’s congregation.

The day commemorates the vision and miracle when a girl appeared to peasant Juan Diego on a hill outside of Mexico City with instructions to build a temple on the site. When he delivered the message to the local bishop, roses

not native to the area fell from Diego’s cloak and an image of the Virgin Mary was impressed on the simple garment.

The first part of Trinity’s celebration, *Las Mañanitas*, occurs at 6 a.m. on Dec. 12. Worshipers leave roses at the altar. They sing songs to Mary, enjoy Mexican sweetbread and a rice drink, and go on to work or school.

The full worship service with flowers and lighting candles often falls on the third Sunday of Advent, said Heidi Neu-



Vanessa (last name withheld), 10, was chosen to play the Virgin of Guadalupe when the children of Trinity of Manhattan [N.Y.] Lutheran Church acted out the story last December.

mark, pastor—perfect for the Isaiah 35 reading regarding flowers blooming in the desert. Because mariachi bands are in great demand (and of great expense) on that day, members put together their own group for “lots of music, food and dancing,” she said. Last year the children acted out the Virgin of Guadalupe story.

“The ‘ignorant’ peasant layman was given a word to evangelize the church . . . like the shepherds of the Christmas story who the angels entrusted with the message of Jesus’ birth,” Neumark said in her explanation of why Lutherans can, and do, celebrate this day. “The Guadalupe is a biblical message. As such it belongs to all Christians.”

JIM TURNER



Not so Nicholas. His stories and legends lead us right into understanding that God needs him to distribute justice and goods, and Nicholas needs us to do the same.

We don't outgrow Nicholas, as we might outgrow Santa Claus. Instead, we grow into him. We learn that we, too, must leave our egos behind in the dark and become givers of gifts, responsible for distributing justice and being healers in a broken world. God needs humankind to do the work of salvation.

Children should hear those Nicholas stories. They can wake to a shoe filled with a sample of the Christmas cookies-to-come, an orange and some nuts. They can, in turn, be a Nicholas to someone in the neighborhood or at school who could use a treat, given anonymously and devoid of an ego. That's a thrill in its own right.

The Latino culture celebrates Mary, the Virgin of Guadalupe, on Dec. 12. Radiant as the sun, standing on the glowing moon, the duality of night and day is brought together in her earthy, human body. This calls

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Jessica VanRanken enters Bethany Lutheran Church, Lindsborg, Kan., in a procession honoring St. Lucia, who was martyred for her Christian faith. St. Lucia reportedly brought food to persecuted Christians in Rome, entering caves with candles on her head. St. Lucia Day, also the winter solstice and shortest day of the year, is celebrated by Scandinavians—and in many ELCA congregations, especially those with Swedish roots.

Candles in her hair, food in her hands St. Lucia Day, Dec. 13

Gretchen Revay Esping's claim to fame is that she was, at age 13, the first St. Lucia in Lindsborg, Kan. Her father, a metalsmith, made her crown, which is still worn today.

The crown has remained the same, but Esping is amazed how much has changed 52 years later. The administrative assistant of Bethany Lutheran Church is a wealth of St. Lucia information.

Traditionally, St. Lucia is celebrated in homes, with the eldest daughter bringing coffee to the family

and wearing a crown of candles to usher in the season of light.

Esping did that as a child, too (carrying a candle), but remembers in later years when the Swedish Folkdancers and Bethany began celebrating the day in the community. Now it is a full-fledged festival on the Saturday nearest Dec. 13 in this town famously founded by Swedes.

All fourth-grade boys and girls celebrate St. Lucia in the morning, and the high school Swedish Folkdancers lead a procession (Lucia Tag) to Bethany in the afternoon, where

hundreds are treated to folk dancing, singing and the crowning of St. Lucia. Then hot cider, coffee and ginger cookies are served.

Donations are collected to help those in need. "This is the spirit of St. Lucia, who gave away all her dowry to the poor," Esping said. "In the deep dark cold of winter, it's nice to celebrate warmth and light and to remember that everything will not remain in a frozen state, but that things will come to life again."

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for processions with banners and candles.

On Dec. 13, Scandinavians share St. Lucia (light) customs: a “Lucy” is chosen and wears a crown of candles on her head, followed by a bevy of star children. They serve traditional rolls, shining yellow with egg yolk and saffron and fragrant with cardamom. They wake up a household or a whole parish after eucharist with their breakfast for a dark morning.

On the last days of Advent, Latinos celebrate *Las Posadas*—seeking a home for Mary and Joseph. The crèche figures process from household to household, hoping to be invited in and honored as they make their way to the stable.

How many ways do we refuse shelter to the poor? How do we discover Christ in the lowliest? Is our

understanding of this—a moment of goodwill—a public charity to assuage our consciences of overconsumption?

Advent leads us to the tree

Can we see all of these Advent opportunities as a lesson in not just waiting for Christ, but becoming the Christ-bearer through this season and on to the mystery of the crucifixion and resurrection?

If we prepare and hear the Gospels for the four weeks of Advent, certainly our Christmastime is not a single day. The “12 days of Christmas” aren’t *before* Christmas, but they *are* the Christmas season that now, fully prepared and ready, we celebrate, clear that Jesus Christ is born in our own flesh and blood.

What a burst of joy when we gather around the tree, which is fresh, green and fragrant (which it can’t be, if we set it up at Thanksgiving).

Out of the darkness, and in the glow of only four candles from our Advent wreath, we are finally greeted by the blaze of lights on this tree of life.

On Christmas Eve the waiting really does lead us into promise. Here this tree of life and promise is the tree of knowledge, the tree of our fall, the “happy fault” that brings us onward through Christ’s tree of the cross, the tree of our salvation.

We sing our first carols, the table dances with our favorite traditional breads and foods. The hearth breathes warmth and lights. If you have even an ounce of creative theater in you, you’ll know how to bring this moment to life.

Bring on the gatherings and visits, with gift exchanges and feasting, with outings and carol singing, with the full-on cheer that Christ is indeed among us.

Behold, these are the tidings of great joy that we have longed for. This is a taste of heaven. The darkness is behind us. □



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Author bio:

Mueller Nelson, a freelance writer, illustrator and speaker, lives in San Diego. She is the author of several books, including *To Dance With God: Family Ritual and Community Celebration* (Paulist Press, 1986).