

INTRODUCTION

Thinking back to my childhood, I really don't remember Advent being a part of the Christmas season. I do remember the presents, family gatherings, the decorations, the reading of the Christmas story, and all the desserts. But not any sort of thinking around Advent. I know that we all come from different family cultures and traditions around the Christmas season that have shaped the way we celebrate this season with our families, but we here at Burnt Hickory want to encourage you to give the season of Advent and this Advent Devotional a chance this year. So, for those of you that did not grow up celebrating the Advent season, what is Advent?

“Advent,” in the Christian sense, is a word that describes a season of preparation or anticipation of the coming or visiting of Jesus. Advent, in its inception, was a period of preparation of new believers to be baptized on the day of Epiphany (January 6). Starting later in the 7th century, the Roman Christians attached the word Advent to the anticipation of Jesus's return at his second coming. In the Middle Ages, believers began to look to Advent as a season of preparation and celebration of the birth and anticipated return of Jesus. Today, at Burnt Hickory and in much of the Christian world, Advent is much more than a countdown to Christmas day. It is a time of hope-filled expectation. It is a time of re-centering ourselves and reflecting on Jesus, the One who came to “save His people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21, NIV) and a time to eagerly watch for the final return of Christ Jesus.

Please know that during the Sundays of Advent, we will be looking into four different themes of life that occur as we wait in anticipation. We are looking at the HOPE, JOY, LOVE, and PEACE that Jesus brings with His coming, living, death, and resurrection. This devotional will give you so many more peeks into what the season and promises of Jesus bring as you prepare for Him. We hope that these traditions and devotions will aid you in your Advent reflections!

May God bless you and your family as you prepare for His coming.



Matt Petty
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HOPE.

HOPE IN THE DARK

by Daniella Peterka

“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:5, NIV).

The match struck into the darkness as I lit a candle in the late moments before midnight that Christmas Eve. Not a single thing that year felt like Christmas. Not a single cookie baked. No traditions to speak of. Living in a new house we were supposed to move into together, only to find myself alone with three daughters and a newborn son. I'd had a husband too, until he abandoned us that August.

I'd just nursed the baby, after hastily wrapping some last-minute presents, hoping tomorrow would pass off as a cheery Christmas despite the fact that I felt nothing in my heart. Daily running on empty, my heart and spirit were traumatized, and I found myself in the middle of a Christmas doused with broken hearts, broken dreams, broken hopes. How can I celebrate Christmas like this, Lord?

And there in the dark, approaching midnight, The Holy Spirit lit a small spark in my heart. Just sing with me. Really, Lord?

I picked up the candle from the table and walked into the hallway outside my room. I sat down with my back to the wall, candle at my feet, heart pulsing with pain, and waited for midnight. Growing up in the faith hadn't prepared me for my first taste of bitter suffering. Wounds still clouded my vision with all I'd lost, blinding me to the Holy One who had never left.

I turned my head to see the bright green numbers on the digital clock at my bedside. 12:00am. My voice timidly broke the silence.

“Silent night, holy night
All is calm, all is bright” ...

A peace began to descend over me, stilling me in that holy moment. Just me and Jesus. My voice echoed down the hall as my softly sung words became worship. In that moment, I was beholding and singing to my King, my Friend, my Savior. Our Rescuer. The kids slept on, oblivious to my rising voice outside their rooms.

“Christ our Savior is born
Christ our Savior is born.”

Flickers of joy quickened my heart as my Savior reminded me that He ... was ... still ... there. He was born into the dark, too. The darkness of a small stable, the darkness of a world marred by sin. To become the “hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure...” (Hebrews 6:19, NIV).

What began for me as a gentle invitation from the Lord would become a glorious communion and most anticipated secret tradition for the next four Christmases. No matter the circumstances each year, singing in the dark has become a tangible reminder of what I've had all along. Hope in the dark.

“But now, Lord, what do I look for? My hope is in You” (Psalm 39:7, NIV).

Journal Prompt: Reflect on the present circumstances in your life. Are there deep hurts and disappointments, failures, or broken relationships that threaten to steal your sense of hope this Christmas season? How can you turn your eyes back to The God of all hope?

LOVE.

JOY.

PEACE.

