

# ADVENT

GOD'S MANY COMINGS

SUHAIL STEPHEN





# WHAT IS ADVENT?

## WORDS AND MAKE-BELIEVE

We Christians are a sneaky bunch. Somewhere down the line, someone had the bright idea to call a season in the Church's calendar "Advent."

We get "Advent" from "Adventus," a Latin word which means "coming," "arrival," or "approach." The word was used in ancient Rome to describe the fanfare of an emperor's entry into his capital city after a military victory. The resonances with the Christian faith - a victorious Sovereign returning to their beloved city after defeating the enemy - are easily recognizable, not to mention, beautiful.

When I was growing up, I thought Advent was basically twiddling my thumbs for Christmas - for the birth of Jesus in a manger. Each year, it seemed we spent a few weeks in make-believe, pretending that Jesus *hadn't* come till - surprise! - Christmas brought tidings of great joy (and, more importantly, presents!).

As fun as it was, this annual pretense grew stale as I grew older. I wanted to enter into the season more meaningfully but didn't know how.





# WHAT IS ADVENT?

## THREE COMINGS

A few years ago, one book (Journey into the Heart of God: Living the Liturgical Year by Philip H. Pfatteicher) changed all that. Advent, properly understood, was never meant to be make-believe. Yes, God *has* come in human form in the person of Jesus. Over 2,000 years ago in the town of Bethlehem, born to the Virgin Mary, the eternal Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

However, since at least the 12th century, Christians have emphasized two other divine “comings” or “approaches.” While Jesus is not present on Earth in his exact human form anymore, his presence is with and among us now via the Holy Spirit. The Spirit personifies Jesus’ ongoing presence, communication, and work in our lives. Every moment, every day, God is coming to us in the Spirit one way or another.

There’s more. For all the goodness of the Spirit here and now, we are still waiting to behold the Joy that is immense and good unto the ages through infinite ages. We long - *groan* - for complete union, to finally see God face to face and hear his voice and tone without dilution. We similarly groan for God’s Kingdom to come fully, making all things right and making all creation new.

To keep our faith and experience of God from becoming lopsided and malnourished, Advent invites us to attend not just to one, but to God’s three comings. Like a three-part harmony, God’s presence and work - and therefore our life of faith - is past, present, and future all at once.

Advent is a perfect season to experience this sweetness afresh. My prayer for you is that you will.





# WHAT IS ADVENT?

## OVERVIEW AND BENEDICTION

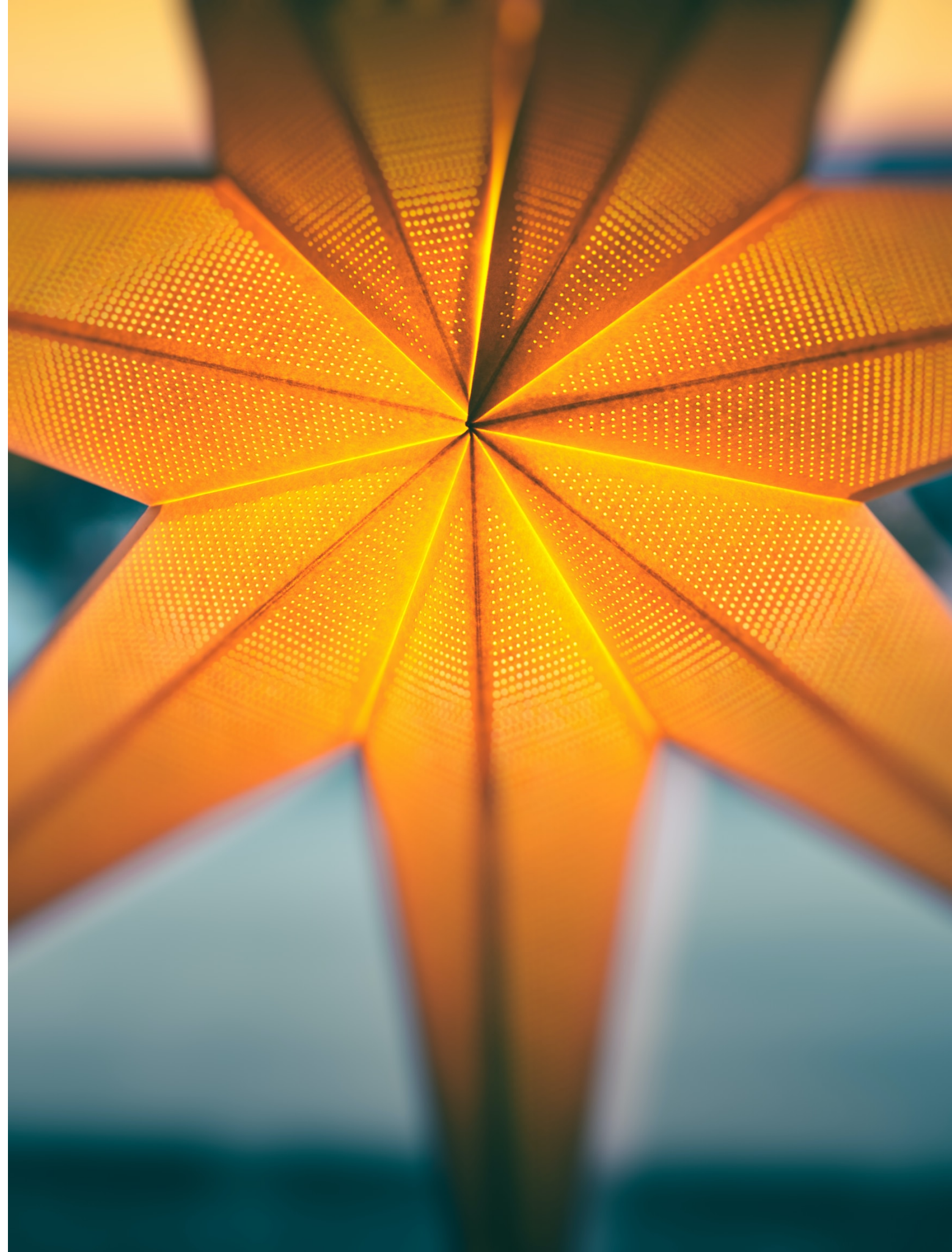
In this resource, I'll provide a little context for each of the three comings of Advent and then highlight a specific spiritual practice. Some of the practices can be done alone or in a group (even during a church service), and some require more than one person. I encourage you to try them and would love to hear how things felt and what your experience of God was like.

I hope this Advent is meaningful and transformative for you. If you would like more information, please visit my site: [writingisprayer.com](http://writingisprayer.com)

Our God has come, our God is coming, our God will come again!

With love,  
Suhail

*Winnipeg  
November, 2023*





# LOOKING BACK

## THE PAST | GOD HAS COME

About a month ago, my three-year-old son, Marcus, asked me if Jesus had a belly button. It was with great glee that I said “Yes he did, and even now he has some kind of one.” I’m grateful that a little concrete detail like a belly button helped me appreciate what theologians call the Incarnation: that in a certain time and place in history, God became human in the person of Jesus. As the Gospel of John says, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” Hence, the belly button.

By now, amidst the typical cacophony of Christmas shopping and festivities, it’s natural for the mystery and wonder of the birth and Incarnation of the Son of God to become old hat. I’ve seen enough manger scenes and sung enough Christmas carols to last a lifetime.

Sometimes, this high degree of familiarity renders the human life of Jesus stale, or worse yet, *ancient*. On the contrary, encountering Jesus’ humanity has a mysterious way of vitalizing our humanity, thereby leaving us marvelling anew at the wonder of God made flesh.

One of the best spiritual practices to reinvigorate your experience of the Incarnation is a form of imaginative prayer called Ignatian or Gospel Contemplation. With the help and inspiration of the Spirit, you invite God to compose a Gospel scene - with all its sensory details - in your imagination. At some point, you imagine yourself in the scene and notice what you’re doing or saying and what your experience of Jesus is like. The idea is to allow the power and reality of something past to become palpable and present in a meaningful way.

Gospel Contemplation places us in close proximity to Jesus and the fruit is often a greater friendship and “heartfelt knowledge” (as the Jesuit writer Kevin O’Brien says) of him. This Advent, you may wish to pray with stories from Luke’s Gospel such as the Annunciation (the angel telling Mary she’ll have a son and to name him “Jesus”), Mary’s visit to Elizabeth, the shepherds, and the Nativity (the birth of Jesus).





# LOOKING BACK

## PRACTICE | GOSPEL CONTEMPLATION

### Silence

- Take a few moments to be still, patiently settling into this time and space of prayer.

### Invitation

- Invite the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to lead and guide you; for the grace to notice and name, and to experience God.

### Selection

- Choose a short (six to ten verses) passage of scripture with which to pray. The Gospels - particularly stories with "action" - are ideal.

### Reading

- Read the passage slowly several (at least three) times, with silence in between each reading.

### Imagination

- Allow God to compose the Gospel scene in your imagination. What details do you see, hear, feel (tangibly and emotionally), smell, and taste in the scene? Where are you? Where is God?





# LOOKING AROUND

## THE PRESENT | GOD IS COMING

I play this game with my kids where I pretend not to see them. It works best when they are literally in front of me. I'll say "Hmm, I thought Anaya was here but now I can't see her." Of course, the kids begin desperately gesticulating to get my attention. The more excited they get, the more I pretend not to see them and begin looking in every direction except theirs.

God is like that. Often right under our noses, working, and communicating while we either pretend not to notice or (more often) are unaware. That's the thing: God doesn't know how to be absent. The Psalmist says that whether we ascend mountains, plumb the depths, or move across oceans, God is there. One of the names for Jesus is "Immanuel," which means "God with us." We see this most radically in the Incarnation, but if that's how Jesus is named and identified, it is still true for you and me here and now.

Two practices that help us experience the truth of God's presence with us today are the Examen and spiritual direction. Because it is often easier to discern God in retrospect, the Prayer of Examen helps us look over our day to notice where God was. This habit of spiritual retrospection forms us into people of true discernment who readily begin to notice God moment by moment, in real time.

Spiritual direction is an ancient Christian practice (which, as Eugene Peterson says, "Most generations of Christians have agreed is essential") intended to facilitate deeper personal awareness of God's presence, voice, and activity in your life. A "spiritual director" provides a non-anxious, unhurried, and confidential space for a "directee" to share their experience of and relationship with God. Ultimately, a director's role is offering compassionate listening without agenda or judgement and asking good questions that deepen awareness of God.

In Advent specifically, these two practices will help you notice and welcome all the ways God is currently reaching out and coming to you.





# LOOKING AROUND

## PRACTICE | EXAMEN

### Silence

- Take a few moments to be still, patiently settling into this time and space of prayer.

### Invitation

- Invite the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to lead and guide you; for the grace to notice and name, and to experience God.

### Thanksgiving

- Review the past day, week, or season. What are you most thankful for?

### Reflection

- When did you feel close to God (consolation)? When did you feel far from God (desolation)? Is there something you want to ask God to forgive?

### One Thing

- So far, what feels most significant? What does God want to say to you about this thing? What do you want to say to God?

### Hope

- As you look to the next day/week/season, what do you want or need God to do for you?





# LOOKING AROUND

## PRACTICE | SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

The following is a selection of certified spiritual directors I trained and consider friends. They are available to meet during Advent and beyond. Prices per appointment vary (~ \$30 - \$70) and except where noted, appointments are available in person or online. Feel free to use the information below to get in touch and book an appointment.

- **Aelea Semenowich** | Nashville, TN, USA  
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# LOOKING AROUND

## PRACTICE | SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

- **Erika Kobewka** | Edmonton, AB, Canada  
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# LOOKING AHEAD

## THE FUTURE | GOD WILL COME AGAIN

You need only look at today's news to realize the world is on fire with all manner of conflicts and crises. As of this writing, some 240 hostages are being held by Hamas after around 1,200 people were killed in southern Israel 38 days ago. More than 11,000 Palestinians have since been killed in Gaza by Israeli bombing and artillery, leading UN Secretary-General António Guterres to describe the humanitarian situation as "an unfolding catastrophe [...] becoming a graveyard for children." There is no permanent reprieve let alone ceasefire in sight.

Regardless of your politics, sit with that phrase for a moment: "A graveyard for children." No one wants a world in which this sort of thing happens *anywhere*. Even after the current Israel-Hamas war ends, it will only take moments before the news cycle churns again with horrors from elsewhere. This is the troubling reality: fire is the status quo of our world and we don't have the power to definitively extinguish it.

Fleming Rutledge, the formidable American Episcopal priest, preacher, and author, says in her book *Advent: The Once and Future Coming of Jesus Christ*, that "Advent begins in the dark. [It] bids us take a fearless inventory of the darkness: the darkness without and the darkness within."

Well, here's a sample inventory: Gaza, Ukraine, wildfires, bleached and dying coral reefs, COVID-19, mass shootings, church scandals and trauma, missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, the discovery of thousands (so far) of unmarked children's graves and remains at former Canadian residential schools, increasing violence against people in the LGBTQ2S+ community. I can't even begin to name the other global, national, communal, familial, and personal trials and tribulations each of us bears; all the tears, death, mourning, or pain.

An honest inventory of all the darkness is terribly painful. The understandable and resulting complaint from the bowels of our being is "Where are you, God?"





# LOOKING AHEAD

## THE FUTURE | GOD WILL COME AGAIN

The reality of darkness and the sense of God's absence is what constitutes the real groan, the real waiting of Advent. To say the least, we are not yet experiencing the fullness of God and the Kingdom.

But we desperately want to. And we desperately need to.

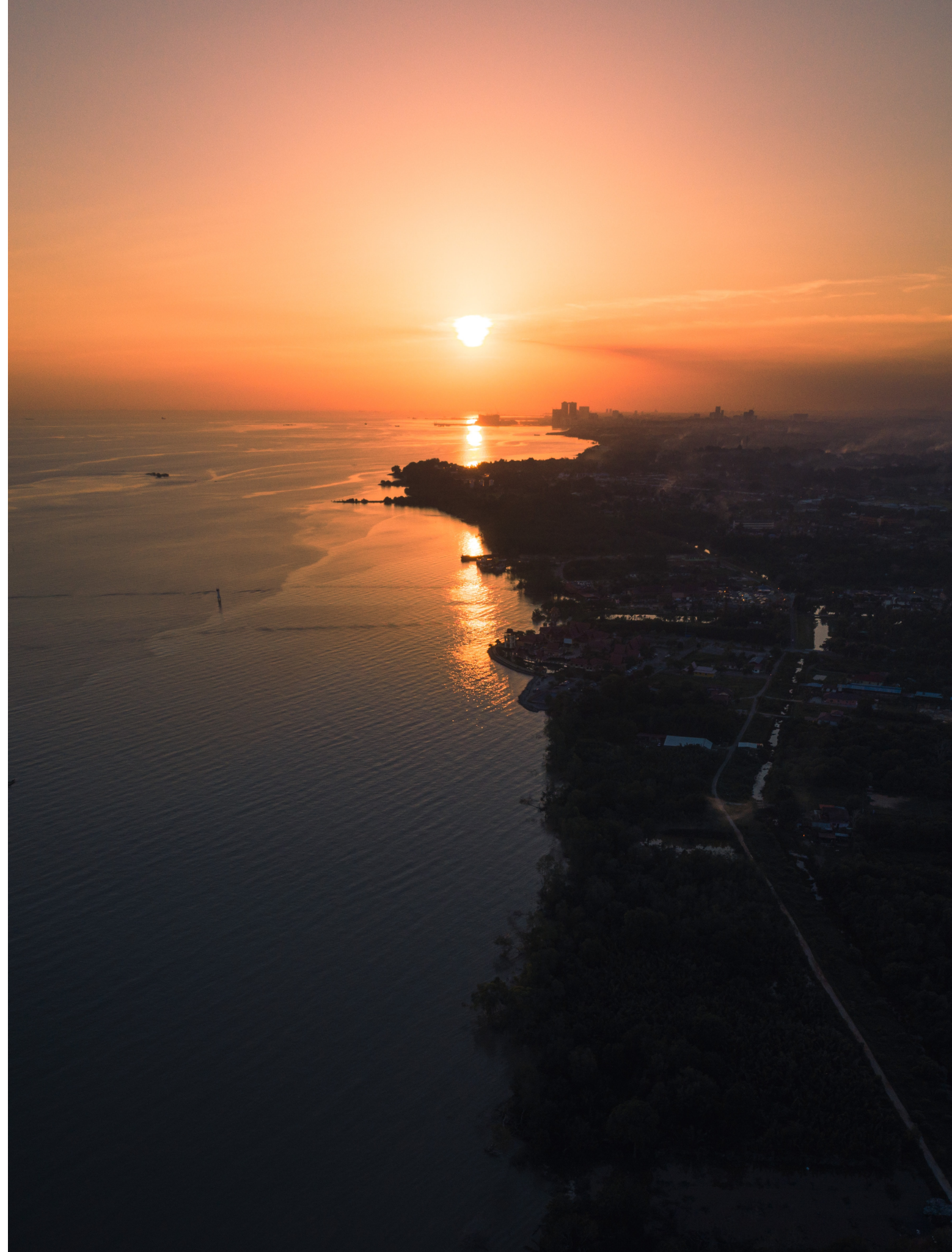
Recognizing the depth of this spiritual desire and necessity - feeling it in your bones - makes the promise of the final Adventus of the Risen Christ the best news in the cosmos. This last, glorious coming of our Lord and our God (in his resurrected body, scars and all) is what Christians call "Hope:" when God dwells with us, brings justice, and makes all things new - totally, completely, forever.

Advent crystallizes Hope precisely because it begins in the dark. In this season, we are invited to renew our commitment to wait in Hope. We are reminded that God has always promised to come to us and has - in the form of a baby in a Bethlehem manger 2,000 years ago and in the abundant movements of the Holy Spirit here and now.

So, if God promises to come again finally in the future - even against the backdrop of an increasingly horrific and seemingly endless darkness - we cling to a trust that God will. We say, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus."

Of all the spiritual practices that encapsulate this dynamic Advent tension (bemoaning darkness *and* waiting in Hope), lament is the best. Biblical lament - the kind which Jesus memorized from the Psalms and vocalized during his crucifixion - is a form of prayer that encourages us to honestly express our anguish and our desire to God.

Lament thrives in the not-yet of the Kingdom, giving unflinching voice to unideal realities and tethering us to God in faith and love. As a result, it is very well suited for Advent as we both agonize and hope for God's last coming.





# LOOKING AHEAD

## PRACTICE | LAMENT

### Silence

- Take a few moments to be still, patiently settling into this time and space of prayer.

### Invitation

- Invite the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to guide you; for the grace to notice and name, and to experience God.
- Consider an experience of suffering (grief, anger, hurt, confusion, betrayal, perplexity, doubt etc.) to pray with.

### Address/Invocation (“Calling”)

- How do you want to address God? Is there a word/name/phrase you want to use?

### Complaint (“Venting”)

- What are your grievances and, perhaps, even your grievances against God?
- Express yourself honestly, without any disclaimers or censorship. This is a form of true worship.

### Petition (“Asking”)

- What do you want God to do for you in response to your complaint?

### Praise (“Trusting”)

- In closing, what can you genuinely thank, worship, or love God for?

