

2023 Advent Guide

A JOURNEY TOWARDS
JUSTICE FOR WOMEN AND
THE LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY



North Carolina Council of Churches
Strength in Unity, Peace through Justice



The Season of Advent

The Advent season lasts four weeks including Sundays. The word, Advent, comes from the Latin, adventus, which means "coming." During this season we anticipate the coming of Christ on Christmas Day, but also the coming of God's kin-dom, when all will be made well with the world. The four weeks of Advent are marked by a heightened sense of preparation for both of these events.

THE WORD,
ADVENT, COMES
FROM THE LATIN,
ADVENTUS, WHICH
MEANS
"COMING."

Visuals for the season may include an Advent wreath with four candles ringed around a central white candle. Traditionally, we light one candle on each Sunday of Advent signifying, in succession, hope, love, joy, and peace. We light the white candle on Christmas Eve and on each day of the Twelve Days of Christmas. Many sanctuaries privilege purple or blue paraments and banners during the Advent Season, switching to the resplendent white and gold for Christmas. Another important visual for Advent is the Chrismon Tree, decked out with white and gold ornaments representing symbols of the Christian faith.



The Advent season coincides remarkably with another occasion for hope the world over. On December 10th each year, the world celebrates [Human Rights Day](#), commemorating the promise made by nations far and wide to advance peace and justice through respect for human rights. Adopted 75 years ago by the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a pledge to respect and protect the fundamental rights and freedoms of all people everywhere.

During this Advent season, which includes the 75th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, we encourage you to pay special attention to the full and total inclusion of women and LGBTQ+ persons. Use this time of preparatory waiting to reflect on how the hope of Christ's coming inspires our work for God's kin-dom, a place where hope, love, joy, peace reach full fruition for all those created in God's image.

Use this worship guide to lead your congregation along the journey of bearing witness to the truth that we are all One in Christ: Equal in Dignity and Rights. And use these devotions to ground yourself in the teachings of our faith that name the truth that we are all One in Christ: Equal in Dignity and Rights.

Sponsor Acknowledgements: A Journey Towards Justice for Women and the LGBTQ+ Community 2023 Advent Guide centers and intersects the voices of women and LGBTQ+ persons. It is a collaborative effort of The North Carolina Council of Churches and Justice Revival in conjunction with the #Faith4ERA Campaign.



North Carolina Council of Churches
Strength in Unity, Peace through Justice



A Journey Towards Justice for Women and the LGBTQ+ Community

One In Christ: Equal in Dignity and Rights

We are all created in God's image, equal in dignity and worth. All people deserve respect for their inherent human rights, including equality under the law, but we are not all granted equal rights in the United States.

Despite ongoing sexual and domestic violence, workplace harassment, pregnancy and pay discrimination, high maternal mortality, rising hate crimes, and other injustices, our nation has never corrected the purposeful exclusion of women and LGBTQ+ Americans from our founding document, the Constitution.

The [Equal Rights Amendment](#) (ERA) is a basic human rights reform that would ensure that no person's rights are denied because of their sex. Many [experts agree](#) that today the ERA protects against discrimination based on sex, gender, and sexual orientation. A [decisive majority \(73%\)](#) of Americans support the ERA, but nearly the same amount (72%) mistakenly believe that sex equality is already recognized as part of our constitution.

Although the ERA has met rigorous constitutional requirements, it has yet to be recognized as the 28th Amendment. A two-thirds majority of Congress passed the ERA in 1972 and three-fourths of states have ratified it. The White House has [called on Congress](#) to recognize the ERA's validity, but some continue to oppose it based on a disputed legal memo issued under the previous administration, which deterred the U.S. Archivist from certifying and publishing the ERA.

Opponents object to the ERA in part based on a 7-year timeframe Congress associated with the amendment. But a [bevy of legal experts](#) have determined that Congress can change or disregard this time limit. It was not part of the amendment itself, and therefore not part of the bargain states approved. Also, the language of the timeframe is aspirational, not obligatory.


There is currently a bipartisan joint resolution proposed in Congress ([SJ Res 4/HJ Res 25](#)) to clarify that the ERA is “valid to all intents and purposes as part of the Constitution.” Although this bill is not necessary to give the ERA legal effect, its passage would underscore broad support for the ERA and resolve public confusion over the ERA’s status.

As people of faith, we believe it is never too late to do justice and love kindness. As we journey through this Advent season, let us reflect that justice is the responsibility of all Christians, and one that benefits the entire body of Christ. Embracing the ERA is one tangible way we can live out our Christian witness for [full inclusion, true equality, and greater justice](#).

“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” – Galatians 3:28

First Sunday of Advent – Corinthians 1:3-9

As members of the transgender community face an onslaught of hate emanating from our country's laws, as women are forced to give up control of their own bodies, as the rights of our queer sisters, siblings, and brothers are erased . . . it is now more than ever that we must stand together with them. We see similar unifying patterns throughout history: some of the greatest strength in the feminist movement came from leaders at the intersections of class, queerness, and color. Where would we be without the [leadership of Black trans women](#) who rallied for our civil rights?



“It is now more than ever that we must stand together with them.”

For far too long, women and LGBTQ+ folks have been told they are not enough. Held to higher standards that we could never hope to reach, while disproportionality facing greater challenges. No matter what the world throws at you, or who tells you that you don't belong, the words from Paul to the church at Corinth ring true: “for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind” (v. 5).

On this first Sunday of Advent, as we welcome the new beginnings of this new liturgical year, may we also relinquish our cycles of oppression and usher in new cycles of acceptance and flourishing. “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 3).

*Ren Martin
Eco-Justice Connection Program Coordinator*

Second Sunday of Advent – Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8

For those well-schooled in scripture, a few verses can conjure an entire image. So it is with the Gospel of Mark directing our thoughts to the prophet Isaiah. Both proclamations come to people in distress (Isaiah speaking to exiles forced from their homes; Mark to the occupied living under the ruling force of another). Mark wants us to remember the long view, that perseverance and faithfulness to God pay off. The exiles came home, we remember; Rome will leave, we continue to hope.

It's human nature to think oppressive situations cannot change without a violent overthrow. The powerful rarely give up power voluntarily—just watch the news. Isaiah's image, "the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him" (40:10), makes me think of John Bunyan striding through the forest felling trees with the mighty swing of an axe. Oppression ending through brute force.

Much to my surprise the next verse from Isaiah paints a very different picture, a picture of gathering lambs and gently leading sheep. There is no strong-arming, but rather the patient care of one who wants only the best for us. And then I recall that the Israelites peacefully departed from Babylon under the gracious guidance of Cyrus. They didn't even have to run away.



While we wait on the in-breaking of God’s kin-dom, how shall we prepare for the end of oppression? Not by gathering ammunition and storing weapons, the use of which only creates oppression by another name. Instead, we should consider creative measures that make a real difference in the lives of the oppressed. Often, it is the oppressed themselves who are the most creative and the rest of us should hear their suggestions. History offers numerous examples of the non-violent overthrow of oppressive situations. This Advent, we’re calling for creative preparation as we continue the work of ending oppression for women and the LGBTQ+ community. Join the voices crying in the wilderness, “prepare the way” (v. 3).

“We should consider creative measures that make a real difference in the lives of the oppressed.”

*Jennifer Copeland
Executive Director*

Third Sunday of Advent – Luke 1:46b-55

As I penned this meditation, my family awaited the birth of a baby that would make me a grand aunt. While excited about this new addition to my paternal line, my work with the Council stifles this anticipation when I consider the risks of childbirth for Black mothers and Black babies.

Mary, did you know that in 2023, Black babies in North Carolina would be 2.5 times more likely to die than white babies, while Black women experience almost twice the rate of maternal mortality than white women, according to the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services.

When I read the Lukan text where Mary sings about her social location and the joy of knowing that God will liberate and overturn the fate of the lowly, I remember the Mighty One is still in control.



As I meditate on Mary's song while considering the challenges of childbirth, not only in ancient Palestine, but also in rural communities in our state, I find assurance that this hope she sings about infuses our day-to-day work of advocating for policy change that supports women, children, the medical care they receive, the food they eat and have access to, and other efforts to support their health and wellness in faith communities across the state.

Arelcia Simmons
Partners in Health and Wholeness Associate Director

Fourth Sunday of Advent – Luke 1:26-38

In the U.S., we are known for narrating and remembering history in a more palatable way than it actually happened. Thus, it's no surprise that we do this with the Christmas narratives in scripture. We whitewash it and bundle it up into a children's play. It would turn many of our churches upside down if we really noticed the scandalous and political implications of the story found in the Gospel of Luke.

The scripture read on Christmas Eve this year is the story of an angel appearing to a young, unwed woman of color. It's the story about a girl named Mary, engaged to be married to Joseph. Or, more accurately stated, promised to Joseph in an arranged marriage by her family. After all, marriage described in the Bible in first-century Palestine is arranged marriage.

It's a story of a pregnancy that came to be without the participation of a man. It's a story about a God who chooses to enter our world in the flesh, choosing the body as a means to reveal God's true nature to the world.

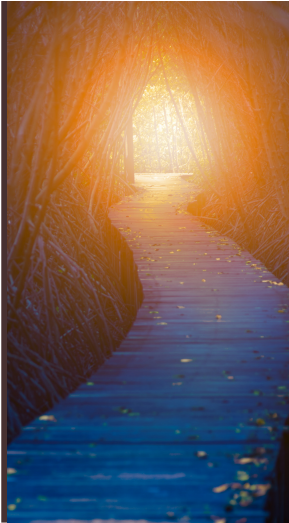
On this night when the veil is especially thin, when darkness settles as we hold our candle and sing "Silent Night," and when the darkness holds the promise of the incarnation, we must be sure to tell THIS story from Luke and remind the world that God continues to proclaim justice.

*"we must be sure
to tell THIS story
from Luke and
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proclaim justice."*

*Carrilea Hall
Partners in Health and Wholeness Associate Director*

Christmas Day – Isaiah 9:2-7

In the path of darkness, a light shines, piercing through the shadows of hopelessness. Isaiah's prophetic words remind us of a new light, one that brings hope and justice. This light, born of love, illuminates a path toward a world where justice prevails for all those who long to be fully valued as a part of the beloved community, especially women and the LGBTQ+ community.



On this Christmas Day, we reflect on the significance of this light. In North Carolina and across the nation, we are in the midst of darkness. Policies are targeting the LGBTQ+ community and women's autonomy, and some of the most marginalized members of our communities are denied equality. Yet, in the same scriptures many of us are reading, we find affirmation of their full worth in God's Kingdom. We're called to wholeheartedly embrace and uplift

women and the LGBTQ+ community in the spirit of Christ's love. The birth of Jesus, who embodies love and compassion, illuminates this path to justice.

This Christmas, let us remember that the light of Christ does not discriminate. It shines brightly for all, igniting a fire within us to champion justice. Together, let us embark on this journey, guided by the promise of a world where every person is seen, heard, and valued. May the dawn of justice for women and the LGBTQ+ community be our shared gift to the world.

Rachel Baker
Communications Director

First Sunday after Christmas – Psalm 148

Praise the LORD!

As the Twelve Days of Christmas draw to a close and we prepare for Epiphany, we praise the Lord for all creation.

Christmas is the time for peace, love, joy, and hope. It is a celebration of God with Us. And then where do we go? Must we return to “normal,” without the colorful lights, beautiful music, and family nearby? Actually no. We should continue to praise the Lord! As we prepare for Epiphany, we have even more reasons to recognize God’s grace, respond with gratitude, and share that love with others. Knowing God’s gift of God’s self to the world, provides the example for us to be generous, gracious, understanding, and accepting of others as we move through the year.

“As we prepare for Epiphany, we have even more reasons to recognize God’s grace, respond with gratitude, and share that love with others.”

Prayer (Matthew 2:13-23):

God of mercy and compassion, we still bask in the warmth of celebrations of Christmas. Alongside these blessings, let us also remember this story of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph fleeing as refugees to escape persecution in their homeland. We pray they found welcome and compassion in their flight, and we pray that the gifts we give and the lives we lead will offer compassion and welcome to your children, wherever they are in need. Help us to be like Jesus. In Christ, who opens his arms to all. Amen.

Donna Parks Hill

Partners in Health and Wholeness Project Coordinator

Epiphany of the Lord – Isaiah 60:1-6

May the peace and blessings of the New Year shine brightly upon you! Epiphany is time to feast and celebrate, for the magi have visited Jesus bearing gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, giving honor and recognition that Christ is born!



Isaiah tells us that we have the light of pure love within our heart and that we should share this light with everyone, trusting that our faith will forever protect us. As we listen to the Gospel of this momentous occasion, we are reminded that we are entering into a dialogue with God, and we are called to understand what God is saying to us here and now, as we practice our responses in 2024.

The ongoing challenges of women and members of the LGBTQ+ communities come from living in a world where many in power lead with the twisted values of patriarchy and hate. At the same time, the arch of time bends towards justice as we continue to work for and seek places of acceptance and just relationships that shine with God's glory.

Epiphany shines the light into the darkest of places, and our faithful, loud, inclusive, and proud response must be **LOVE WINS!** Now, and forevermore. Blessed Be!

*Susannah Tuttle
Eco-Justice Connection Director*

#Faith4ERA

Equal Rights Amendment

The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) is a constitutional amendment, passed by Congress in 1972 and ratified by the necessary 38 states, which provides:

“Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex.”

It ensures equality under the law, which is a foundational principle of human rights. Its affirmation would rectify the intentional exclusion of women from our nation’s founding document and prohibit sex-based discrimination. The U.S. is one of [only 25 nations worldwide](#) that still lacks this type of provision.

Faith4ERA Campaign

The [#Faith4ERA Campaign](#) is a national, nonpartisan, interfaith coalition of diverse religious organizations and leaders calling for full inclusion and true equality under the U.S. Constitution through the Equal Rights Amendment.

Together, we mobilize grassroots and grassroots religious support for the ERA in order to fight gender-based discrimination and injustice.

The #Faith4ERA campaign, launched in early 2021, is a vital part of a broader effort led by the [ERA Coalition](#) to ensure the ERA is recognized as the 28th Amendment. [Justice Revival](#) serves as convener of #Faith4ERA and is a coalition partner within the 300+ member ERA Coalition.

Equal Rights Amendment

What You Can Do

- Ensure all of your elected officials know where you stand on the ERA, and urge them to lead courageously on this vital issue
- Invite your faith leader to sign Justice Revival's [Interfaith Statement for the ERA](#)
- Sign the [sign4era.org](#) petition and [ask your Mayor to sign](#) on, too
- Follow [Justice Revival](#) and the [ERA Coalition](#) for updates

Join Us

- [Subscribe](#) to Justice Revival for updates
- [Bring Justice Revival](#) to your community for an ERA event
- Learn how to [partner](#) with the #Faith4ERA Campaign
- [Contact us](#) about #Faith4ERA

Resources

- [North Carolina Council of Churches](#)
- [Justice Revival](#)
- [ERA Coalition](#)
- [Alice Paul Institute](#)
- [Generation Ratify](#)
- **Kate Kelly, *Ordinary Equality: The Fearless Women and Queer People Who Shaped the U.S. Constitution and the Equal Rights Amendment***
- **Julie C. Suk, *We the Women: The Unstoppable Mothers of the Equal Rights Amendment***



**North Carolina
Council of Churches**





The North Carolina Council of Churches is a faith-based organization that empowers and amplifies faith communities committed to creating equitable, compassionate, and thriving communities for all. Through collaboration, education, and advocacy, the Council seeks to inspire, mobilize, and support people of faith to address the social justice issues they care about most. Visit our website [here](#).


Justice Revival is a leading Christian voice for human rights in the United States and home to the #Faith4ERA Campaign. As a diverse, inclusive community, Justice Revival inspires, educates, and mobilizes people of faith to respond to the call to justice by defending the human rights of all. We are a non-partisan, nonprofit 501(c)(3). Visit our website [here](#).

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