

Parish Advent

DEVOTIONAL



A collection of writings
by Christ Church Parishioners

“The spiritual life of individuals has to be extended both vertically to God and horizontally to other souls; and the more it grows in both directions, the less merely individual and therefore more truly personal it will become.” – Evelyn Underhill

The Christian life is cross-shaped: We extend ourselves upward as we reach toward God in prayer and devotion, and we reach from our sides to embrace each other with a strong arm and helping hand. I truly believe that this little book of Advent devotionals, composed by you—members of the parish—accomplishes just that. What follows are prayerful witnesses to our life with God and encouragement for the road ahead as we journey through Advent to Christmas Day.

This year, Advent is 24 days long, the first 24 days of December. Each day, I encourage you to set aside five minutes for this Parish Advent Devotional. Read the scripture and then read the devotional offering. Prayerfully consider how the day’s devotion uplifts your spirit, helps you understand scripture through a new perspective, and supports you on your Advent journey.

Thank you to everyone who contributed to this devotional and to our rector for her encouragement.

Share these writings with your loved ones. Write me to tell me your experience. We hope each day brings you one step closer to the manger on Christmas Day and the joy of God here on earth.

*–The Rev. Michael Kurth
Associate Rector*

The First Sunday in Advent, December 1

Isaiah 60:1-3: Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth and thick darkness the peoples, but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

I’m afraid of the dark. I’ve always been afraid of the dark. I hate it when the days get shorter. I always keep a small flashlight in my pocket. When my children were 8 and 6, we took them to Disney World. My daughter sat next to me during the Haunted House ride because she’s afraid of the dark too and knew I had my flashlight. When we shined the light on scary things in the attraction, the secrets were revealed, and we weren’t scared anymore.

Advent means “the arrival of a notable person, thing, or event.” The term is an anglicized version of the Latin word *adventus*, meaning “coming.” In the Christian church, it’s the first season of the church year leading up to Christmas. In the season of Advent and right before Christmas, the days actually start getting longer with the arrival of the Winter Solstice.

To me, Advent means new beginnings, longer days, and the birthday of our Lord and Savior. I love Christmas lights because they decorate and shine in celebration. I love longer days because it means more light. Illumination reveals what is hidden by darkness and makes things lucid and clear. But light doesn’t need to come only from the sun, fire, or light bulbs. It also comes from each one of us, every soul on earth.

Be illuminated and share your light, your gifts, and your talents. Jesus did!

– Michael Sayer

Monday, December 2

Jeremiah 33:14-16: *The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness."*

*An Advent hymn to the tune of Puer Nobis
(Come, thou redeemer of the earth)*

or Old 100th (Praise God, from whom all blessings flow)

In days of old, in ancient time
the prophets spoke your word divine
to Israel scattered far and wide,
"The righteous Lord; he will provide."

Our darkest day, our longest night
are nothing, save your brightest light.
The lost are found and gathered home
beneath your wing, your safety known.

"I will fulfill the promise made,"
and to your people Christ you gave
to free us from the stain of sin
and bring us love and joy within.

Now we, like ancient Israel, pray
for you to visit us this day.
Renew our life, O righteous one,
our blessed savior, Christ the Son.

– Michael Kurth

Tuesday, December 3

Psalm 130:4-7: *I wait for the Lord; my soul waits for him; in his word is my hope. My soul waits for the Lord, more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning. O Israel, wait for the Lord, for with the Lord there is mercy; with him there is plenteous redemption, and he shall redeem Israel from all their sins.*

O come, O come, Emmanuel

And ransom captive Israel...

Singing this hymn as a young girl, I used to wonder about the word "ransom." It sounded criminal in my young girl mind. Reading Psalm 130 now as an adult reminds me of this much beloved Christmastime hymn.

Feel the waiting, the hoping, the longing of those who seek God's mercy. Hear the unfailing, steadfast hope—*yachal* in Hebrew—no matter the circumstances. Turn to the hope that is conveyed in God's word, this psalm, and this hymn.

Like the watchmen during the dark hours, we, too, look for the light of morning when all things feel just a little better.

Hear the covenant of overflowing redemption for the remnant of Israel waiting for when God will come and pay their ransom to free them forever.

During this time of Advent when we all wait, hope, and look for the Light that is to come in the birth of Jesus, I remember God's covenant that he will redeem His people. Jesus has ransomed us so that we will be with Him forever.

O come, O come, Emmanuel

And ransom captive Israel...

– Heather Jefferson

Wednesday, December 4

Romans 13:11-14: *You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.*

Twice, I have visited Ancient Corinth in Greece, where Paul wrote his letter to the Romans. In Paul's day, Corinth, 50 miles southwest of Athens on a trading route between east and west, was a vibrant city of 100,000. Walking through the ruins of Corinth's Agora marketplace, it is easy to imagine Paul fired with the Spirit of God living there as a tent maker.

When Paul wrote to the young church in Rome, it was under persecution. A pagan society hostile to the message that Jesus was Lord surrounded its members. Imagine how Paul's words resonated in their hearts: "You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near."

In 2024, with wars and rumors of war abroad and a political winner-take-all conflict at home, we, too, are living in a time darker than we might have ever expected. The words of Paul's Letter to the Romans also resonate for us to awake from the sleep of a dark night to see the salvation of daylight nearby.

Earlier this year, I felt this at the 9 AM Blessing of the Animals service, held outside on a stunningly beautiful fall day. Christ Church members of every age attended: old, young, toddlers, and newborn babies carried by their mothers. While that morning, a threatening world surrounded us on many sides, we discovered once again, just as we do at Christmas, that when we gather in Christ's name, we find ourselves awake from a dark, troubling night and that the spirit of salvation is near.

– Cal Wick

Thursday, December 5

Isaiah 52:7-10: *How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns." Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices, together they sing for joy; for in plain sight they see the return of the Lord to Zion. Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.*

When contemplating the joy of the season, two traditional English Christmas carols come to mind. The first being the 16th century song, *Tidings of Comfort and Joy*, also known as *God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen* (the phrase "God rest you merry" translates to "may God grant you peace and happiness"):

God rest you merry, gentlemen, let nothing you dismay,
For Christ our Savior was born upon this day,
To save us all from Satan's power when we were gone astray;
O tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy,
O tidings of comfort and joy.

The second song, *Joy to the World*, was written by English hymnist Isaac Watts in 1719:

Joy to the world, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King:
Let every heart prepare him room,
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven, and heaven, and nature sing.

Both songs reflect the hope and joy that radiate from Isaiah 52:7-10, which describes the return of God to save his people. The good news of man's salvation gives rise to collective shouts of joy! God has come back to provide comfort to those left in ruin and despair. At Christmas, we remember this redemption and are inspired to continue lifting up our voices in song.

Repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat, repeat the sounding joy!

– Shelley Kinsella

Friday, December 6

Baruch 5:7-9: For God has ordered that every high mountain and the everlasting hills be made low and the valleys filled up, to make level ground, so that Israel may walk safely in the glory of God. The woods and every fragrant tree have shaded Israel at God's command. For God will lead Israel with joy, in the light of his glory, with the mercy and righteousness that come from him.

Waiting for the Light

In the quiet hush of winter's breath
Where shadows blend with time
A gentle glow illumines the night
And whispers soft as rime
The world is wrapped in velvet cold
Awaiting dawn's embrace
With hearts alight and eyes upturned
All seek the Savior's grace
Lamps are lit, one by one
Beacons in the dark
Leading hopeful seekers home
To Love's eternal mark
Oh, Star that lights the midnight sky
Hear whisperings of Earth
Steadfastly with each passing hour
Await our Christ Child's birth
May peace descend o'er restless hearts
And joy take up its flight
For in this season shall love reign
Through Blessed Advent's light

– Beth Duncan

Saturday, December 7

Luke 1:76-79: John, you my child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

John the Baptist was a prophet sent from God to foretell of the coming of the Messiah. He proclaimed, “Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand.” He made this proclamation of the coming of the Messiah to a people who desperately needed a Savior. He knew the Messiah was coming and spent his days “preparing the way” for the Lord’s coming. He shared the Good News of Jesus Christ to give his people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins. As John the Baptist’s ministry and popularity grew, the people confessed their sins and were baptized. He knew the importance of repenting of one’s sin in order to live a holy and righteous life before God.

As John the Baptist lived his life to introduce people to Jesus Christ, so today shall this be our ultimate focus. As we prepare for the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ this Advent season, may we share the Good News and introduce people to the Messiah who came to be the sacrificial lamb for the forgiveness of our sins, thus bringing healing and forgiveness to ourselves and those around us. In our world today, is it any less important to share the Good News for forgiveness and healing of our brokenness so as to cleanse the decay in ourselves and our society?

– Lynette Turner

The Second Sunday in Advent, December 8

Luke 3:2-6: *The word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”*

“The word of God came to John” signals that John is a prophet with a message from God to all humanity. He is in the wilderness, a place of danger and vulnerability, but also from Israel’s beginning, a place where God’s people learned to trust that God will provide for them. John proclaimed that to become morally pure, people need to be baptized by means of ritual immersion. But first, people have to sincerely repent of their sins—repent by turning away from evil thoughts and deeds and turning toward God for their life’s meaning and direction. This change of heart and mind is to be manifested in changed behavior. Baptism is then a sign that people have repented and that God, in the workings of the Holy Spirit, has forgiven and released them from their sins.

To prepare the way of the Lord in ancient times meant literally to fix the roads that a king would travel on his journeys among his people. It also recalls the Israelites’ return from exile in Babylon when the glory of the Lord would be revealed once more in Israel. In Luke, preparing the way of the Lord by a baptism of repentance and a change of life results in all flesh seeing the salvation of God through Jesus Christ. May we prepare the way of the Lord in our own lives by asking God to smooth our rough places and enable us to fully embrace our life in Christ.

– Elinor Knodel

Monday, December 9

Isaiah 11:6-9: *The wolf shall live with the lamb; the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.*

Wilderness Again!

Nothing has changed in thousands of years. Tribes still at war!
But the Messiah has come to redeem the same inhabitants
foreseen in Isaiah’s Wilderness!

The Lord is there indeed. No longer manifest as a child,
the Messiah leads all to the sea covering the banks of Gaza!
The wolf can live with the lamb.

Try!

The Advent is with all of us.

– Walter Rowland

Tuesday, December 10

Luke 1:26-33: *In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."*

A woman—early 40s, mother of two kids under 10—phones her older sister with news that she has cancer. Big sister goes straight into logistics mode: fly in on this date, go to that appointment, neighbor can organize a meal train, Mom and Dad will stay with sister's kids, search Dr. Google for the latest treatments...so much to do! Big sister's daughters stare at her, wide-eyed, still on step 1: their adored Auntie has cancer. "When are we going to talk about how we feel?" they plead. Mary received big news from Gabriel, not necessarily good news for an unmarried woman of Nazareth. Imagine her mind still at step 1 while the angel carried on about titles and thrones... "I'm going to bear a son?" What we don't see in this moment is Mary jumping up, making plans, rehearsing how she'll break this news to her parents. Instead? She ponders. When life-changing news comes, often we jump ahead to action, avoiding feelings of shock, fear, or grief in favor of logistics we can control. Mary and the cancer patient's nieces remind us that before acting on big news, first must come stillness...to ponder, feel, and pray.

God, place your steadying hand on me when news tempts me to leap into action. In the quiet, I remember only you are in control. Amen.

– Jennifer O'Connor

Wednesday, December 11

Luke 1:34-38: *Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.*

It starts like a flutter. Is that it? Was that just something I ate? Or is it my first awareness of my baby? Little by little, it becomes an unmistakable signal: LIFE is here!

As the baby grows stronger, it becomes an all-consuming call—pulling you instantly into the present moment. In the grocery store, on a phone call, or in a deep state of focus—boom, boom, boom—and once again, all my awareness, concentration, and physical sensations are called to attention. Here. Now. Life is here!

In a way, we are all pregnant with the anticipation of a newborn baby in this season. In the quiet contemplation and the happy anticipation, we wait with our loved ones. We prepare—getting our home ready to welcome the baby, decorating, making food and gifts, anticipating needs, and gathering together.

I have always loved the quiet parts of Christmas. And, since becoming an Episcopalian and learning about Advent, I've enjoyed it even more. Don't get me wrong, I love the glitz too! But Advent is so much truer to our hearts' needs—it encompasses all the variety of human emotion. For there are labor pains too. There is grief for those who are no longer with us. There are reminders of Christmases past. When I am in my nineties and see the Advent candles, and hear the carol songs, and see the church alive with the bustle of the Green Show, may it always draw me back into the present moment—boom, boom, boom—there is LIFE here!

– Christina von Duyke

Thursday, December 12

Luke 1:39-42: *In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb."*

As a young school girl, I eagerly awaited the arrival of spring break each year. This was the time I would embark on a cherished journey to the quaint town of Vicksburg, Mississippi to visit my beloved grandparents. It was always a solo adventure, as I waved goodbye to a loving mother and my seemingly flawless older brother. This was my special time, a sacred week devoted entirely to the warmth and wisdom of my late Daddy's parents.

Each afternoon, Mimi's friends gathered for their ritual tea. They would greet me with smiles and say, "I remember you when." At the age of nine, I found myself pondering, "When what?" I couldn't help but wonder if perhaps they were simply playing with language—was it a grammatical puzzle or an unfinished thought?

In today's reading, we witness Mary embarking on a journey to visit her cousin, Elizabeth. Both women, in a remarkable twist of fate, find themselves miraculously pregnant—Elizabeth, defying the odds of age, and Mary, astonishingly, as a virgin. An angel named Gabriel, clearly busy with divine errands, has graced both women with news of their extraordinary motherhood. Scripture reveals their profound understanding of God and their unwavering obedience to His will.

And now, I find myself reflecting on that familiar phrase often heard in my childhood: "I knew you when." Did Elizabeth tell nine-year-old Jesus that she knew him while he was nestled in his mother's womb? Did John tell Jesus, "I knew you when we were not yet born"? John's ministry was to make the way ready for the Lord. In this season of preparation, I pray we make our hearts ready to meet anew the Savior we remember when.

– Trish Hennessy

Friday, December 13

Luke 1:46-51: *And Mary said, "My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior. For he hath regarded the lowliness of his handmaiden. For behold from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed. For he that is mighty hath magnified me, and holy is his Name. And his mercy is on them that fear him throughout all generations. He hath showed strength with his arm; he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts."*

Mary exclaims, "My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior!" upon hearing the announcement of the Angel Gabriel tell her that she, chosen vessel of all of humankind, would be the bearer of God's Son, God's Christ for the life of the world. What an announcement! What a response! This is not just ANY baby she will bear.

I don't know about you, but if a heavenly (otherly) being were to pop into my room and tell me something like this, I would likely recoil and be completely taken aback! Whatever strength, control, willingness, and humility was present in that moment with Mary ultimately pours forth in her words from her soul and from her spirit.

Soul and spirit...different, yet linked. A common understanding of these elements in the Hebrew/Christian tradition is that the soul is the essence of humanity's being; it is who we are. The spirit is the immaterial part of humanity that connects with God. Understood this way, Mary's response to this spiritual interaction with God emanates from EVERY part of her being. She has not just a gut response (a soul response) nor a singularly emotional response (a spirit response)—rather, it is fully both.

May our response to God-incidents in our lives be of such overwhelming depth and rootedness that we can exclaim the same with Mary, "My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior!"

– Bruce Barber

Saturday, December 14

Luke 1:52-55: *And Mary said, "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."*

Unexpected Grace: A Prayer for Advent

In the stillness, where faith takes root,
we seek the soft flicker of an Advent candle's flame,
a guiding beacon, leading us to Your shelter.
Thank You for brilliance that dispels shadows,
filling our hearts with hope, unquenchable and bright.

You bring down the powerful from their thrones,
lifting the lowly and humble,
inviting us to gather with the hungry,
while sending the rich away empty,
echoing the song of Mary's heart,
where fears transform into a cradle of peace.

I recall a winter night,
when strangers became friends over soup and bread,
the aroma mingling with laughter,
feeling the weight of Your promise,
that in every shared meal, Your joy unfolds—
each bite a reminder of Your goodness,
each laugh a thread weaving us together.

As we journey through this Advent,
help us see radiance at work—
in laughter and smiles shared in Your name,
in moments of kindness, both great and small,
reminding us that in our waiting,
we are blessed.

You have helped Your servant Israel,
remembering promises made long ago,
showing that truth unfolds in quiet ways,
often unnoticed yet deeply felt.

In You, O God, we find our strength,
and in the world's turning, let us see justice.
As we look to the dawn of Your coming,
let us carry this light into the world,
spreading unexpected grace.

– Cindi Cozza

The Third Sunday in Advent, December 15

Luke 3:15-16: *As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."*

This passage reminds us of a time when the people were filled with expectation, eagerly awaiting the Messiah. Some first-century Jews saw John the Baptist as a possible fulfillment of that hope. But John, in humility, redirected their attention, pointing them to the one who was far greater than he. "I baptize you with water," John said, but the one coming would baptize "with the Holy Spirit and fire."

This season of Advent is a time for us to embrace that same sense of expectation. Like those who gathered around John, we too are called to look forward—to the arrival of Christ, not only in the manger but in our hearts and lives through the Holy Spirit. John's words remind us that the true Messiah doesn't just cleanse us on the outside, like water, but transforms us from the inside out with the fire of His Spirit.

As we prepare for Christmas, let us open ourselves to this transformation. Let us allow the Spirit to purify, renew, and empower us, filling us with the hope and joy of Christ's coming. May we, like John, be humble in pointing others toward the far greater one—our Savior, Jesus Christ.

This Advent, let our hearts be filled with expectation for His arrival so that we too may go and set the world on fire.

– John Meyer

Monday, December 16

Isaiah 12:2-6: *Surely, it is God who saves me; I will trust in him and not be afraid. For the Lord is my stronghold and my sure defense, and he will be my Savior. Therefore you shall draw water with rejoicing from the springs of salvation. And on that day you shall say, Give thanks to the Lord and call upon his Name; make his deeds known among the peoples; see that they remember that his Name is exalted. Sing the praises of the Lord, for he has done great things, and this is known in all the world. Cry aloud, inhabitants of Zion, ring out your joy, for the great one in the midst of you is the Holy One of Israel.*

The season of Advent is the beginning of the Church's calendar year as well as a season of preparation for the coming of the Christ Child. Yet for many of us—I'm sure it is as true in your household as it is in mine—it is a time of hustle and bustle when the focus is mostly getting ready for Christmas, where you get ready for the holiday, and somehow the true meaning of Christmas is pushed to one side. It has to do with getting the décor ready both inside and out and where you spend time and a lot of cash at the grocery store buying food to entertain family and friends with fancy feasts and good eats. There is Christmas shopping for presents for your spouse, your kids, your bosses, your mother-in-law, and Christmas cards need to be sent and mailed, and the Elf on the Shelf must be moved one more time if you can only remember where you last left him. Office parties. The Christmas tree—do we go live or artificial this year? Either way, it must be decorated, and the last-minute presents need wrapping.

Really, it can get too exhausting.

Isaiah 12:6 brings the season of Advent down to earth and into focus: “Cry aloud, inhabitants of Zion, ring out your joy, for the great one in the midst of you is the Holy One of Israel.”

Dare we simplify this verse to: “Cry out for joy, God is with us.”

Advent is the season of quiet joy, looking forward to the coming of our Savior Jesus.

As you go about your tasks during the season of Advent, keep in mind the message from Isaiah: “Cry out for joy, God is with us” and make it a mantra before, during, and after every one of the tasks you undertake before Christmas Day.

– Ed Balog

Tuesday, December 17

Matthew 1:18-21: *Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”*

When I think of Joseph, my first thought is my mother's nativity scene. Displayed with great reverence and pride every year, she made it in a ceramics class before I was born, and Joseph, in a red robe, is looking over the crèche, kneeling, holding a shepherd's staff. Since becoming a father, I think of Joseph shepherding Jesus as a baby, ensuring the world would not hurt the precious child and loving Him the way only a father can. We don't know much about Joseph; the New Testament focuses on someone else. But maybe we don't need to know much more about the chronicles of Joseph. Joseph did what needed to be done when he was least likely to do it. He took the mantle of responsibility and protected Jesus when he was young, allowing Him to fulfill the prophecy. Joseph helped the world receive the light in its darkest hour.

As a father of two boys with another one on the way, I can understand Joseph's initial reaction to being overwhelmed by the news of being a father. Like Joseph, fathers must also understand the necessity of staying, even when the world is dark and overwhelming. Consider what responsibilities you might be walking away from because you don't want your reputation tarnished. What messages are you ignoring during your darkest times? What opportunities are available where responsibility has been abandoned? What news are you dismissing because you don't want to hear the positive part of the message? Where does God encourage your involvement?

– Aaron Dallaire

Wednesday, December 18

Matthew 1:22-24: *All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife.*

This passage reminds me how well the name Emmanuel describes Jesus. Jesus was quite literally God with us humans here on earth, and this name stretches beyond a literal interpretation and reminds us of the omnipresence of God and how Jesus was not just with us during his time as a human on Earth but is also with us here and now, providing a sense of peace and comfort.

The idea of Emmanuel and God being present was exactly what Joseph needed in this moment. The woman he was about to marry was pregnant with a child that wasn't his, and he was worried he was going to have to leave her; but God stepped in and was there for Joseph in this time of need. God sent an angel to Joseph in his dream to give him that sense of peace and comfort to know that his wife is faithful, and this is truly a miracle, and that God was with them.

Christmastime is full of gifts, but none is greater than the gift we have in Jesus and his presence. This Advent, let us all enter that holy presence and find that same peace and comfort Joseph found all those many years ago.

– *Mason Cruz*

Thursday, December 19

James 5:7-10: *Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.*

Ah, patience. This morning I had the task to make a change in the way we're billed for services from the power company, our internet provider, and our phone company. There followed those long minutes being on hold, while music played, often interrupted only by ads for other services offered by the provider.

What to do? I considered spending the down time preparing a lecture I'll have to give a few weeks after Christmas. I even considered starting this devotion but decided I'd get interrupted when someone came on the line. I thought about reading an article in the paper, but again the idea of being interrupted mid-sentence ruled out that possibility.

Like so many of us living in the computer age, I am prone to expect things to happen immediately and to get frustrated when there is a delay—and there are so many: waiting in line at the drug store behind someone who has a time-consuming order to be filled; at a gas station when the person ahead of me can't figure out how to operate the pump; when someone cannot understand what I'm trying to tell them; when I take some medicine and am not immediately made well.

Then it occurred to me that here was a wonderful opportunity to pray, to give thanks for the new day, to ask God for help in making my life a reflection of my thanks to Him for all the blessings He's provided me.

Like so many of us, I am guilty of thinking of prayer as something that must be done in the study, or at bedtime, or kneeling in church. What if we took every opportunity when we're waiting in line or on the phone to pray? What better way to strengthen our hearts in preparation for the coming of the Lord?

– *John Newlin*

Friday, December 20

Isaiah 11:1: A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.

Decorations up
Why rush, the holy birth?
Take your time—Savior
Watch the seedling grow
And its own time just wait
Wonder all its own
Jesus in human form
Took exactly time needed
According to nature—wait!

– Carolyn Stankiewicz

Saturday, December 21

Zephaniah 3:14-17: Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more. On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.

The name Zephaniah is believed by some to mean “Yahweh [God] lies in wait.” Jewish tradition says that he helped King Judah in his efforts to re-center the Temple and the Jewish people on Yahweh. For many, that time of changing cultural and religious practices must have felt like a frightening judgment. In this passage, Zephaniah emphasizes restoration after the judgment. It will end one day, and very importantly, God will only further our thriving with victories, gladness, love, and even exultation.

Judgment can be scary—our faults are exposed, and our way of life can change entirely. Historically, Advent has been like Lent—a time to re-center and repent as we prepare for judgment and the anniversary of the physical presence of Jesus Christ. Nowadays, that can feel hard to prioritize with all the events around the end of the year. Many feel this is also a time of great changes to our social and religious traditions. How do we stay centered in our faith? Maybe we can start with smaller steps of opening ourselves up to God and the divine love for humanity that has endured over many eras of great changes. How can we remind ourselves of Zephaniah and that God lies in wait? How will you prepare the way of the Lord in time to come?

– Scott Nickle

The Fourth Sunday in Advent, December 22

Philippians 4:4-7: Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Advent is the season of waiting, they say. That's what Paul was doing—waiting—when he wrote the words above to the Philippians in the middle of the first century. He seems to have had a knack for it. Imprisoned in the dark dungeon of the Mamertine Prison, expecting his term to end in execution, Paul wrote of peace and trust in God. He rejoiced.

I have done my share of waiting, and I bet you have too, but I still fight it. I've waited on doctors, diagnoses, job offers, juries, babies, houses, and more, and I've never gotten any better at it, despite all of the practice. I still want what I want, and I want it right now.

Waiting and suffering has been the experience for people of faith since the beginning. They waited for deliverance for the Egyptians. They waited for the Promised Land. They waited for a return from exile. They waited centuries for a Messiah, and when he came, they waited for him to do what they wanted. Some people, like Lazarus and Jairus' daughter, were made to wait until it seemed like it was too late.

What's the point? Maybe the waiting is the point. When I'm waiting and not knowing, I know that I am powerless, that the result is out of my hands, and there is nothing I can do. The Sufi poet Rumi called it being dragged by the hair into the presence of God. In those moments, even though I don't like it, all of a sudden my world becomes rightly ordered. I forget about me and what I can do, and I focus on God.

– Mike Socha

Monday, December 23

Isaiah 40:1-5: Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

A Song of Salvation

Those were our ancestors,
Their lights twinkling in the velvet sky
Today joined by the brightest star.
In the desert make a straight highway,
Lift high the valleys and smooth the mountains.
For the Lord, the almighty, the creator of heaven and earth,
Who freed us and fought for us,
Loved and redeemed us, again and again,
Will be glorified in our flesh.
Make us ready, Lord.
Let us close our ears to the sound of ourselves.
Let us close our eyes to the mirror-room.
Let us wait.
As night gives way to the dawn,
Comfort our people, Lord,
Who wait in hope for the child
Who will touch our hearts
Beyond the earth of our imagination.
He who saves, heaven's grace,
Emmanuel: God with us.

– David Beresford

Christmas Eve, December 24

Luke 2:4-7; 13-14: Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no place in the inn. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

As we go about our day-to-day life, sometimes it can feel like we are toiling and toiling with no reward. We may not be sure we are doing what we are supposed to be doing. We may not feel like we are fulfilling God's purpose for our life.

Then, in ways we might not expect, God suddenly shows up, and we learn we were always where God intended us to be.

I am sure that despite all of the prior validation, Joseph and Mary were still nervous about what was happening with their baby. Is this really the path for them? Are they really playing such an important role in God's story? What are they doing in this manger anyway?

And then, all of a sudden, out of nowhere, a host of angels appears. Although we know the angels appear to the shepherds and the shepherds visit Mary and Joseph, perhaps Mary and Joseph could see the angels from where they were and wondered about their glow in the dark night. When Mary and Joseph welcome the shepherds, and later the magi, and when they hold baby Jesus, their toil and wonder is validated. Here is God, in the flesh.

Keep the faith. Continue to look for how God shows up in your life. Hold these moments in your memory, so if God ever seems far away again, we can remember when God helped us see we were always on the right path.

– Lucas Quagliata

Christmas Day, December 25

John 1:14: And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

For all eternity—in the past, in this moment, and in future's forever, God IS. God speaks to create the world and everything that is in it, giving light and life. Today we celebrate that the Word which was in the beginning with God is now revealed in human flesh in Jesus. He was born at a particular time and place. Advent's waiting is over. In Jesus, the eternal and invisible God has been made known in the very fullness of God's love and truth. And it is glorious!

Ponder that word. Let your memory recall moments you found glorious and what made it so. We may use the term to describe a sky filled with stars or a sunrise as it colors the sky—nature shows us God's glory because it reflects its Creator. We may use the term to describe a beautiful work of art or a stirring piece of music—creative works are glorious in the making of them and the receiving of them.

It was a glorious moment in that mean stable when new life was cradled in loving arms—glorious, awesome, a little overwhelming, and holy. Mary and Joseph received the creative work of God in their miraculous newborn, as all parents do. Yet the glory of this child awakens something deep within us as we come to behold him. Grace and truth are born for us today. And it is glorious!

– Ruth Beresford

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