

ADVENT 2020



MIRACLES ABOUT

Daily Reflections, Practices and Prayers



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INTRODUCTION

“He appeared and the soul felt its worth.”

Recently I heard that line in one of my favorite Christmas songs (“O Holy Night”), and I realized I had never really paid attention to it before: “He appeared and the soul felt its worth.”

If you ask several people why Jesus was born into our world, you’ll probably get many different answers. Perhaps a core reason is that, because God became one of us, we know, really know, who we are. We are beloved. We are cherished. We are worth it.

Souls sense their worth when they are loved. God’s presence with us tells us of our worth, and we can offer that gift to others. The movie *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood* reminds us how Fred Rogers devoted his life and work to sharing God’s love with every person by reminding them of their inherent dignity and goodness.

“There are no ordinary people,” C.S. Lewis wrote. “You have never talked to a mere mortal....It is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry....Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses.”

During this Advent/Christmas season, the message of the Incarnation proclaims exuberantly to each of us—and to each person with whom we share life in the worldwide family of God—that we are worthwhile.

I pray that during these days you have many moments when you know your value as you also take time to help others feel their worth.

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Busy or Watchful?

Be watchful! Be alert!

MARK 13:33

There's an old joke about an associate pastor who excitedly ran to the pastor's office: "Jesus has returned and is coming up the walk! What should we do?" "Quick!" replies the pastor, "Everybody, look busy!"

Perhaps that's similar to what Jesus says in today's gospel. Yet there also might be a key difference.

It probably wouldn't be difficult to look and be busy during the next month; that seems to be the way our culture lives this season. Many people lament that this is the busiest, most scheduled and hectic time of the year. Instead, our Advent readings emphasize watching and staying alert to the myriad—simple as well as extraordinary—ways God is continually with us. This calls us to quiet and reflection rather than constant busyness.

DAILY PRACTICE To balance this season's busyness with reflection, write out the Christmas story day by day. Luke 2 tells of Jesus' birth from verse 1 to 20. Write down one verse each day of Advent. (Since Advent this year encompasses 26 days, reflect on some lines for two days.) You might do this on a poster in your kitchen or in your journal. Let this time of being alert to the whole story of Jesus' birth call you to be watchful of how you meet Jesus each day.

ADVENT PRAYER *God-with-us, make me attentive to your unceasing presence both in my reflective watchfulness and my harried busyness.*

Using Our Feet

How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!

ROMANS 10:15

Australian Janelle Boston's dream of climbing Mount Tyson in Queensland seemed to end when she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in her 20s. When friends found out about her dream, they asked the local Rugby League if they'd be interested in doing a training run up the mountain, taking Janelle with them. A local welder built a special chair, and forty Rugby volunteers took turns carrying her on the five-hour hike, carefully positioning their feet as they carried her chair on the rugged turns up the mountain.

We often take our feet for granted, but they do so much, including taking us to those in need, helping another to fulfill their dream, and traveling to a new place because someone needs to be affirmed or hear good news. On this feast of St. Andrew, we are reminded that we, too, are called to walk with Jesus, to be his hands and feet in today's world.

DAILY PRACTICE Place one of your shoes next to your bed. Each evening jot down on a small piece of paper a way you were the hands and feet of Jesus during the day. Place them in your shoe.

ADVENT PRAYER *God who always travels with us, inspire me to be your instrument, using the steps of my day to make a difference in the lives of others.*

Dreaming Lavishly

The wolf shall be a guest of the lamb.

ISAIAH 11:6

Often when we read today's Isaiah passage we respond, "Yeah, right. The world (especially today) doesn't work that way."

Isaiah dreamt of a better world, not just of wonderful weather or non-rushed time or many close-by friends. He dreamt of a whole new world where traditional enemies sit down and enjoy each other.

Isaiah's dream of a better world is a God-given dream. The first question for us is: What sort of world do we dream of? The second question is: Are we childlike enough to know that one day our dreams will come true? G.K. Chesterton said there's a reason why Cinderella is younger than her ugly sisters. She has not had time to be hardened by years of routine; she has not swallowed the lie that today has to be exactly the same as yesterday, which has to be exactly the same as the day before that. She has not lost her sense of wonder; she is open to a dream of a miraculous new tomorrow.

DAILY PRACTICE What is your dream for the world? What is one thing you can do to bring it to reality?

ADVENT PRAYER *God of dreamers, enlarge my dreams so they are your visions of peace. Guide my actions so they bring about the peaceable kingdom.*

Multiplying Miracles

He took the seven loaves and the fish, gave thanks, broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, who in turn gave them to the crowds.

MATTHEW 15:36

Leaving church one Sunday morning, a seven-year-old asked her family, “How come Jesus fed the five thousand when they were hungry, and now he lets millions of people go hungry?” Before her parents could answer, their twelve-year-old son responded, “God was in his prime in those days. There were all kinds of miracles when Jesus was alive.”

Perhaps the little girl’s question is the question of many today—in the face of the suffering that happens in much of our world, what is the answer? And her brother’s response hints at our own mission.

The surprising and challenging reality about the Incarnation is not just that God became one of us, but that—because of that gift—we are asked by God to “incarnate” or make known God’s presence in our everyday world. God’s presence, God’s work of multiplying the good, continues in and through *us*. We can make a difference, bringing about a world that abounds with miracles of compassionate caring, reverent respect, and easing of suffering.

DAILY PRACTICE During this month of December, multiply God’s love by doing one additional miracle of caring each day, something you’ve not done before.

ADVENT PRAYER *God of miracles, open my eyes to your wonders surrounding me. Nudge me to be your miraculous presence of love in my world.*

Responding to Needs

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

PSALM 118:26

At the end of 2019, I was dealing with a herniated disc, which made doing everyday things very difficult. Our young mailman, in addition to bringing my mail directly to my door, offered to run errands for me. “I’m up and down these streets all the time,” he said. “I can easily run to the store for you.” Certainly beyond his job description!

Responding to need: perhaps that is at the core of the Advent-Christmas message. Jesus becoming one of us was God’s luxurious response to our need. Jesus’ very life modeled for us that being human is about responding to life: its questions and sufferings, its joys and triumphs, its needs and cravings.

Because Jesus lived humanity to its fullness, we are called to do the same. As we trust in our need for Jesus, God sends us to be fully human also, compassionately caring for the needs of the hurting around us.

DAILY PRACTICE Respond to the need of someone today: compliment someone who has low self-confidence; visit a nursing home; listen to someone who is lonely; become a mentor or tutor; think of a favor that would make someone’s life easier.

ADVENT PRAYER *God who fulfills every need, thank you. Energized by the example of Jesus, I promise to respond to the purpose of living—to be there for the needs of others.*

Seeing Ourselves

The eyes of the blind shall see.

ISAIAH 29:18

When my great-niece was a baby, I watched her stare intently at people; as soon as she recognized them, she responded with absolute delight. Witnessing that one day, I realized that this is how God looks at us, watching us with absolute, enchanted delight.

Today's readings are about the ability to genuinely see. They challenge us to reflect on how we view the people around us, how we perceive the joys and dilemmas of life. Perhaps the readings also summon us to ponder how we see ourselves. We are born with unique gifts and qualities as well as deficiencies and flaws: Which do we dwell on? We are created good; we are created in God's image and likeness. Seeing our goodness, of course, does not negate the necessity of conversion, of continuing growth. A friend of mine suggests a rewrite of our prayer during liturgy: *O Lord, I'm as worthy as I can be today. Help me to continue to grow to be even more worthy tomorrow.*

DAILY PRACTICE Take a favorite photo of yourself; write under it: "You are the temple of God" (1 Corinthians 3:16). You're a temple, not a courthouse. We're made to respect and appreciate, not to judge and criticize.

ADVENT PRAYER *God, help me to believe and live your words: "You are precious in my eyes and honored, and I love you" (Isaiah 43:4).*

Open-Hearted Generosity

The Lord will give you bread in adversity and water in affliction.

ISAIAH 30:20

A young boy with a rare blood disorder was in need of a blood donor. After much searching, the doctors realized that his seven-year-old sister was a match. With much questioning in her eyes, she said she was glad to do it for her brother. After the transfusion—which immediately helped the young boy—his sister asked the doctors, “How long will it be before I die?” She had misunderstood the doctors, thinking she was giving all her blood.

Such self-giving generosity! Today’s readings remind us of the generosity of God, the constant generosity of Jesus for others. Generosity is a lavish giving away, not an individualistic focus—everyone for themselves—but a concern for the common good: What can I give to those in need?

The poet Hafiz said, “Even after all this time the sun never says to the earth, ‘you owe me.’ Look what happens with a love like that, it lights up the whole sky.” Our generosity—large and small—can light up the whole sky.

DAILY PRACTICE Be aware of your small (but always significant) acts of generosity: remembering to call (more than once) someone who is suffering; being a generous tipper; giving compliments, etc.

ADVENT PRAYER *Generous God, help me to echo the generosity of your Son, and of the sun: living as a constant giver of care, kindness, and thoughtfulness.*

Constant Preparations

“Prepare the way of the Lord.”

MARK 1:3

When a young man was hired as a farmhand, he told the farmer, “I can sleep through a storm.” One night, the farmer was awakened by a violent storm. Calling for his new farmhand, he found him sleeping soundly. So the farmer quickly began to check to see if everything was secure: the shutters were tightly fastened; a supply of logs was next to the fireplace; bales of wheat were bound and wrapped; the barn was locked tight; the animals were calm with plenty of feed. The young man’s words came back to the farmer, “I can sleep through a storm.” Because the farmhand worked faithfully when the skies were clear, he was prepared for any storm. When a storm did actually break, he was not concerned or afraid. He could sleep in peace.

Today’s gospel calls us to prepare the world for the presence of our God. Do we do that only in the difficult times or are our trusting prayers and actions embedded in our very way of living—in the serene times as well as the stormy times?

DAILY PRACTICE Watch your actions and thoughts today. Which ones pave the way for others to recognize and welcome the presence of God?

ADVENT PRAYER *God desiring to always be with us, encourage me to prepare the world for you in its good times and its challenging times.*

Being Human

Some men brought on a stretcher a man who was paralyzed.

LUKE 5:18

Over the entrance of the Hall of Nations in the UN building in New York is a quotation from the Persian poet Saadi Shirazi: “Human beings are all members of one body. They are created by the same essence. When one is in pain, the others cannot rest. If you do not care about the pain of others, you do not deserve to be called a human being.”

We often give thanks that we’re well, safe, and thriving (and we should). Yet does our good fortune—or our own suffering and worries—stand in the way of seeing the pain of others? The friends who brought the paralyzed man to Jesus forgot about their aching backs, the many things on their to-do lists, and the possible reactions of the crowd (and the homeowner). They cared for their friend because he was part of their one body, the human family; they cared for him because they were human beings.

The message of Advent/Christmas is that Jesus became a human being to teach us what it means to be human.

DAILY PRACTICE As you ponder the message over the entrance of the Hall of Nations, what message would you like inscribed over the entrance to your home?

ADVENT PRAYER *God, Creator of all, help me to see everyone as one body; let me never rest if someone else is in pain.*

Living with Full Hands

“May it be done to me according to your word.”

LUKE 1:38

A woman dreamed that she died and came before God. Holding out her hands, she said, “You see, Lord, I’ve done nothing wrong. My hands are clean.” God said, “Yes, but they are empty.”

Mary’s greatness does not consist in the fact that she did no wrong, but rather in her yes to God. While totally dependent on God, Mary was not passive. A free human being, she had to say yes and then actively cooperate at every stage. It wasn’t easy. There were tears, hardship, and pain that caused her great suffering and anguish. There were also times of joy, meaning, and hope that brought happiness, confirming her faith.

Mary’s greatness lies not just in her sinless conception, but in what she became. It has been said that what we are is God’s gift to us; what we become is our gift to God. Like Mary, our calling is to live our lives so our hands will be filled with yeses: yeses of caring, concern, and service to others. This is our gift of our self to God.

DAILY PRACTICE Trace your hand on a piece of paper. For the next week write within it all the ways you have filled your hands (your life) with yeses.

ADVENT PRAYER *God, who calls us to be people with hands filled with giving, nudge me to say yes today.*

Promises of Care

“Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest.”

MATTHEW 11:28

A friend of mine received a lumpy manila envelope in the mail. Its contents were puzzling until she read the accompanying note from a friend: “This is a Care Kit. Each of these items represents a promise from God. Remember how much God cares about you—and how much I do, too.” The items included:

A candy bar: Psalm 34:9

A shiny dime: Philippians 4:19

A packet of colorful tissues: Job 11:16

A bandage: Psalm 147:3

A pretty comb: Matthew 10:30–31

A photograph of friends: Matthew 18:20

Today’s Scripture reading proclaims one of the key promises of God, especially in our world and at a time when we might feel burdened, worried, troubled, or anxious. Do we stay immersed in our fears and difficulties or find rest in God?

DAILY PRACTICE As you read and hear Scripture during the next couple of months, watch for the promises of God. With these promises in mind, work on assembling a Care Kit of God’s Promises for someone for Valentine’s Day.

ADVENT PRAYER *God of abundant promises, you assure us over and over again of your care. Deepen in me the awareness of your unfailing protection.*

Making a Difference... Even to One

The afflicted and the needy seek water in vain, their tongues are parched with thirst. I, the Lord, will answer them.

ISAIAH 41:17

As a man strolled the beach, he noticed an earnest fellow picking up starfish that had been washed ashore during low tide and throwing them back into the ocean.

The man said, “But there must be thousands of starfish here. You can’t possibly get to all of them. And this is probably happening on hundreds of beaches along this coast. You can’t possibly make a difference.”

The local native picked up another starfish, and as he threw it back into the sea, he replied, “Made a difference to that one!”

In Isaiah today, God’s words are for all of us as well as for every single one of us. God’s promise to us calls us—because of the mystery of the Incarnation—to be Godlike, to make a difference in the seemingly large challenges around us, but also in the simple, small ways that matter to each individual person.

DAILY PRACTICE As you let go of feelings of hopelessness because today’s challenges might seem impossible, focus on the people near you. What seemingly insignificant thing could you do to make a difference for one person today?

ADVENT PRAYER *God who created each life as precious, remind me of ways to care that will make a difference for someone in their need.*

Judging Never Works

“Wisdom is vindicated by her works.”

MATTHEW 11:19

During a flight delay, passengers got off the plane to stretch their legs. The pilot noticed that one woman stayed behind—a blind woman with a Seeing Eye dog. When he asked her if she wanted to get off the plane, she declined, saying, “But maybe Max would appreciate the break.” The people in the gate area came to a complete standstill when they saw the pilot—wearing sunglasses—walk off the plane with a Seeing Eye dog! People scattered, trying to change planes.

Things aren’t always as they appear; how often we judge, thinking we know the whole story.

In today’s gospel, Jesus and John were both misjudged. Because John was ascetic, the people thought he was possessed. Yet they criticized Jesus for his table fellowship with those they judged unworthy.

The Incarnation, God as one of us, reminds us that each person is unique with their own story. When we don’t know the whole story, it is easy to misjudge. Jesus’ way of living challenges us to listen, to be open to the beautiful and exceptional story of each person.

DAILY PRACTICE Is there someone (or group of people) whose story you do not know? Find a way to ask them; or read about their history and experiences.

ADVENT PRAYER *Welcoming God, teach me to be attentive, appreciating the story you have woven into each person’s life.*

One Human Family

I am coming to dwell among you, says the Lord.

Many nations shall join themselves to the Lord on that day...

ZECHARIAH 2:14–15

An old cartoon illustrates several people waiting to enter heaven. The fifth and sixth people in line say to each other, “We’re Americans, so that must mean we don’t have to wait.” (We might use other labels there—Catholics, millennials, etc.) At times, because we know our world and our experiences, we see them as the only way of understanding things. Yet reality is bigger than we are; we belong to the human family, to God’s family—surrounded by everyone.

We might think of today as a feast for the people of Mexico. Yet, in 1910, Our Lady of Guadalupe was declared Patroness of Latin America; in 1945 Pope Pius XII declared her to be the Patroness of all the Americas. Our Lady of Guadalupe witnesses that we are, in every way, one human family, the family of God.

DAILY PRACTICE Join a celebration of today’s feast with a Hispanic parish in your diocese. Continue to learn about the Church’s vision of comprehensive immigration reform (e.g., www.justiceforimmigrants.org).

ADVENT PRAYER *God of all nations, through the patronage of Our Lady of Guadalupe, may we continue to grow in our awareness of and gratitude for each other as sisters and brothers. May your love, alive in us, empower us to work for peace and unity throughout the world.*

Never-ending Joy

Rejoice always.

I THESSALONIANS 5:16

In an old fable, a girl named Mula encountered a frowning man walking into town “What’s wrong?” Mula asked. Holding up a tattered bag, the man moaned, “All that I own in this world barely fills this miserable, wretched sack.”

“Too bad,” said Mula, snatching the bag and running down the road. The man burst into tears, more miserable than before. Meanwhile, Mula ran around the bend, placing the sack in the middle of the road. When the man saw his bag sitting there, he laughed with joy, “My sack! I thought I’d lost you!” Watching through the bushes, Mula chuckled. “Well, that’s one way to make someone happy!”

On this *Gaudete* (Rejoice) Sunday, St. Paul calls us to be continuously joyful. In the midst of suffering, anxieties, and struggles we wonder how that is even possible. So often, we miss the reasons for joy that are already in our lives. As the story illustrates, appreciative joy is not a distant bird somewhere in some bush. It is often perching right on our own shoulder. Do we fail to recognize it unless it flies away, or as in the story, gets taken away?

DAILY PRACTICE Catch yourself today from saying “I am worried (fearful/concerned) about _____.” Substitute “_____ brings me joy.”

ADVENT PRAYER *God of never-ending joy, because of your presence and care, my life is one of joy-filled moments. Thank you! Help me to recognize each and every one.*

Time to *Sonder*

He...teaches the humble his way.

PSALM 25:9

In 2012 John Koenig began a project—*The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows*—that endeavors to come up with new words for emotions that currently lack words. One of the words he included is *sonder*: the realization that each random passerby is living a life as vivid and complex as our own, filled with fears and joys, loneliness and friendships, regrets and dreams. Each person has an impulse to make things better, to connect and to contribute.

When *sondering* happens to us, we see the world—and each person—in a completely new way. In today’s psalm we realize that God is with the humble; it takes humility to *sonder*—to know each person’s life is as precious as our own, to embrace and celebrate our oneness, even in the midst of our diversity. In many circumstances in which we find ourselves—family, friends, work relationships, our nation and world—we might find *sondering* difficult. The Christmas reality is that Jesus became one of us to show us that it is possible; it is imaginable and achievable (and at the heart of our wondrous humanity) to cherish each and every person.

DAILY PRACTICE As you interact with each person today, picture in your heart their marvelous, awe-inspiring life.

ADVENT PRAYER *God who calls us to sonder, deepen my humility so I can recognize my connectedness with each and every person.*

In the Mess

A people humble and lowly, who shall take refuge in the name of the Lord.

ZEPHANIAH 3:12

Two women, in their 80s, lived on a farm that had seen better days; the barn was falling down, the rusted machinery was falling apart. One day while visiting, their nephew took a picture of his weather-worn aunts, with the barn and rusted machinery in the background. The aunts decided to use the photo for their Christmas card. Above their picture, it said: “Merry Christmas!” Below it said: “God is with us in our mess.”

Often we feel in the midst of a mess: health challenges, disagreements, and a chaotic world. God does not only come to us when we—and all our circumstances—are perfect. God does not take a vacation from us when our lives or the world seem to be falling apart. God is there to comfort and to strengthen us to handle those moments.

The message of Christmas is not that we are insulated from life’s messiness, but rather, in the mess, God is always with us, giving us strength, understanding, and wisdom to live in the messed-up world inside us and around us.

DAILY PRACTICE Choose a short Scripture passage to pray when you experience the messiness of life, one that reminds you that God is with you.

ADVENT PRAYER *God-with-us in the mess, thank you for never leaving. Strengthen my resiliency, courage, and hopefulness.*

Called to Relationship

“Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?”

LUKE 7:20

A challenging story tells of a man who meets an angel walking down the road. In one hand the angel is carrying a bucket of water, in the other a flaming torch. When the man asks the angel what she is doing, she replies, “With this water I’m going to quench the fires of hell; with the torch I’m going to burn the mansions of heaven. Then, perhaps, we’ll find out who really loves God.”

In today’s gospel, John’s disciples ask Jesus if he is the one. Hopefully, they are searching for a relationship rather than being motivated by reward or fear of punishment. The comfort and the challenge of the Incarnation, the mystery celebrated in this Advent season, is that God first loved us so absolutely that Jesus came to reveal more of the wonder of God, inviting us to fall deeper and deeper in love with God.

DAILY PRACTICE Following some of your various actions today, take short moments to ask yourself: Why am I doing this—to be rewarded, because of fear, or because my loving relationship with God animates my decisions and activities?

ADVENT PRAYER *God of connection, the reality that you desire an intimate relationship with me is overwhelming. Because of your love for me, deepen my love for you, letting it shine forth in compassion, kindness, and gratitude.*

Living the O Antiphons

May his name be forever.

PSALM 72:17

Today begins a “season within a season,” often called the “Great Advent.” Since the seventh century, for the last seven Advent days, the O Antiphons have been sung in monasteries throughout the world during Vespers.

Since the Second Vatican Council, they have been adapted for the Alleluia verse before the day’s gospel reading. These antiphons are also kept alive for us since they are the basis of our hymn “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.”

The seven titles for Jesus in the antiphons are Wisdom, Ruler of the House of Israel, Root of Jesse, Key of David, Rising Dawn, King of the Nations, and Emmanuel. In Latin the initials of the titles make an acrostic which, when read backwards, means: “Tomorrow I will be there” (“Ero cras”).

A custom in ancient monasteries was for different monks to provide treats on these days to the community. The gardener might share his finest fruits when they prayed: “O Root of Jesse...” The wine steward might unlock the best wine for “O Key of David...”

DAILY PRACTICE In these “Great Advent” days, give a simple gift—related to the themes/titles of one of the O Antiphons—to someone who is not expecting a gift from you.

ADVENT PRAYER *O Wisdom, holy Word of God, you govern all creation with your strong yet tender care: Come to teach us the path of knowledge.*

Unafraid of Untried Ways

“Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid.”

MATTHEW 1:20

Joseph lived by the Jewish tradition that the law is tempered with mercy. Yet that wasn't totally adequate for the situation Joseph found himself in. In God's plan, something was needed that went beyond the usual patterns of action that Joseph knew so well.

Through a dream, God reached out to this good and righteous man; his life, his religion, his ethics were questioned and stretched by the angel in a dream, inviting Joseph to a different perspective and response. Joseph is asked to make a leap, to take an action that goes beyond how he would normally understand the law.

Are we like Joseph sometimes: limiting ourselves by our tried-and-true ways of believing and doing? If we listen, is there a voice that is asking us to go beyond our familiar beliefs and behaviors in order to bring about a new world, in order to be co-creators with God of a transformed world?

DAILY PRACTICE Listen to your heart, to others, to God in prayer. Do you hear a message that encourages you to take a tiny leap of belief or action that draws you to new understandings, to changed actions?

ADVENT PRAYER *God of the new, take away my fear, my rootedness in “it’s always been this way.” Expand my awareness that at this time you might be calling me to something different, something untried.*

Right Now

On you I have depended since birth....my hope in you never wavers.

PSALM 71:5-6

When my great-nephew Tyler was two years old, he was spending the night with me a few days before Christmas. As we played with my Nativity set and talked about Jesus being born and still coming to us each day in all kinds of ways, the phone rang. When I hung up, Tyler asked, “Was that Jesus?”

In his childlike way, he was literally figuring out the reality of Jesus coming to us today in all kinds of ways. The Advent-Christmas season is about past, present, and future mysteries of our faith; Tyler, like most children, was zeroing in on the present.

Many books on spirituality remind us that two pitfalls of modern life are nostalgia for the past and needless dreaming about the future. God was with us in our past and will certainly be in our future. But right now God is in our present moments. Our lives are simply composed of right nows. The best is not in front of us or behind us. It’s within each moment.

DAILY PRACTICE Rather than focusing on what needs to be done in the next six days, enjoy what is happening today. Where is God with you today?

ADVENT PRAYER *God of here and now, slow me down. Open my heart to all the ways you are with me, here and now, today.*

Fear Not

“Do not be afraid....nothing will be impossible with God.”

LUKE 1:30, 37

Angels are often present in our Advent/Christmas readings. One of their messages is the same in all the instances: there is nothing to fear. Often we find that message a challenge; it’s easier to believe in angels than to believe that there’s nothing to fear.

Mary was perplexed by Gabriel’s message. As we live our daily lives, our lives in our church, nation, and world, we, too, experience fear and confusion. Why is this happening? What’s going to happen to us? How can there be suffering, a pandemic, disappointments? How can injustice, hatred, and violence continue to exist?

Like Mary, we have angels in our midst who remind us that life and hope are always possible even if the world tells us the opposite. The good news Mary receives is that nothing is impossible with God. Like Mary, we can be afraid and confused about the logistics of how things will work out, but, at the same time, know that God is with us, waiting for our yes to join God’s plan to make new things possible.

DAILY PRACTICE Think of one of your fears as belonging to another person; write down four things you would suggest they do. Then, do one of them yourself.

ADVENT PRAYER *Reassuring God, help me to have faith bigger than fear. Nudge me to trust in you as I say yes to courageous actions.*

An Embracing Welcome

Mary set out and traveled to the hill country in haste...

LUKE 1:39

There are numerous theories on why Mary, after learning of her pregnancy from Gabriel, hurriedly began the long trek from Galilee to a village in the hill country of Judea.

One possibility is that Mary's world had been turned upside down. Her plans had been shattered. Her reputation was in danger. She was "greatly troubled." In those times, her pregnancy would have been earth-shattering, a scandal to everyone in her hometown.

When she enters Elizabeth's house Mary finds neither judgment nor rebuke. She encounters only joy. Elizabeth wraps the bewildered teenage mother-to-be in her strong embrace, offering her welcome and affirmation in a difficult time. What that must have meant to Mary! Elizabeth declared her—and her child—a blessing.

Perhaps in our world today we need more Elizabeths, people willing to let go of judgment and criticism and offer, instead, God's blessing. If there were more Elizabeths, might there be more people singing a holy song, like Mary?

DAILY PRACTICE As you look at the people you encounter today (face-to-face, in the news, etc.) what do you see? Their faults, failings, and worst traits? Things you would like to change about them? Or do you see God's blessing alive in them?

ADVENT PRAYER *Affirming God, show me how to be an Elizabeth, affirming others by recognizing the blessing you have placed within them.*

Breaking into Song

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord.

LUKE 1:46

Two of the gospels begin with passages about the Christmas story; in some ways, Luke's account might be compared to a Broadway musical. He shares with us three hymns of praise by people who respond in song in the middle of the action, as the story is unfolding. Having been deeply affected by God's presence with them in Jesus, they cannot help but burst into song.

Today's gospel is the first canticle: Mary's *Magnificat*. (We hear Zechariah's *Benedictus* on Thursday; some years we hear Simeon's *Nunc Dimittis* in the days following Christmas.)

While visiting Elizabeth, Mary praises God in song because she is in awe of the great things God has done for her; she is astonished by how God shakes up the status quo; and she is amazed at how God never forgets promises.

How often do we have these same realizations! What would we proclaim in our grateful song of praise? How often would we pray this canticle of ours? When would we share it and pray it with others?

DAILY PRACTICE Write your own *Magnificat*.

ADVENT PRAYER *My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. Ever-present God, you have always been with me, remembering your promises of mercy.*

Living Our Name

“He will be called John.”

LUKE 1:60

My youngest nephew and his wife are expecting their firstborn. They haven’t talked much about names, but word has leaked out that Stephen would like to name the baby after his grandparents.

Often parents pick names based on how a name sounds, or what it reminds them of, or whether it is a common name or not. In today’s gospel, Elizabeth and Zechariah give their baby a name that astonishes their relatives because it’s not a familiar or family name. Because of the instruction of the angel, they name him John, which means “God is gracious,” an appropriate name, since they never expected to have a child at their age.

But the name says more than the gift to Elizabeth and Zechariah; it tells us how John lived his life: marked and motivated by grace, preparing the way for Jesus, who came to reveal the abundance of God’s grace.

No matter what your name is, how do you live your life because God has been gracious to you? I’m sure that, even though it’s been twenty-seven and fifteen years since my parents died, Stephen remembers that how they lived showed God’s grace to the world.

DAILY PRACTICE As you reflect on your name, does its meaning and the way you live show to the world God’s gracious love?

ADVENT PRAYER *Gracious God, because of your generosity to me, help me to spread your compassion throughout my world.*

A God Close By

“The Lord...has visited and brought redemption to his people.”

LUKE 1:68

If you weren't able to talk for a year, what would you say when you finally could speak? After nine months of enforced silence, when he was not able to speak, Zechariah bursts into a song of praise for God's faithfulness and presence.

Zechariah sings, “The Lord has visited us.” The word “visit” often refers to a short or temporary appointment or stay. Do we, at times, think that God is distant and removed from us, but once in a while pops in and visits our lives?

Some translations of this passage say, “God has come to take care of God's people and to set them free.” Zechariah's song (known and prayed today in the Church as the *Benedictus*) is a thanksgiving that our God is not a detached and remote deity who watches and observes all creation, all the events that surround our lives, but a loving, involved, and concerned creator and parent who has chosen to live and move among us.

DAILY PRACTICE Pretend that you haven't been able to speak for several months. That deprivation has given you reflection time to become more aware of God's promises and protection. What would be your first words when your speech is restored?

ADVENT PRAYER *God close by, guide my words and actions to be a living song telling others of your constant presence.*

THE NATIVITY OF THE LORD

(MASS DURING THE DAY) ISAIAH 52:7–10; HEBREWS 1:1–6; JOHN 1:1–18

God in You

This life was the light of the human race...

JOHN 1:4

A youngster watched as a gypsy drank from the town well. After drinking, the man gazed into the well, as though looking at someone. The boy approached him and asked, “Who lives down there?” “God does,” answered the gypsy. “Can I see him?” “Sure you can,” said the gypsy. He took the boy into his arms, so he could see into the well. All the boy could see, however, was his own reflection in the water. “But all I see is me,” he cried in disappointment. “Ah,” replied the gypsy, “now you know where God lives. God lives in you!”

As we began our Advent journey, this booklet’s Introduction recalled the line from O Holy Night: “and the soul felt its worth.” Christmas—the incarnation—proclaims enthusiastically to us the value, wonder, and splendor of our humanity—for God has chosen to live in us.

Sometimes people wish that every day was Christmas. In a way, every day is. The birth of our God happens in each one of us each day.

DAILY PRACTICE If God lives within you, so does God live within each person. Today and during these twelve days of Christmas, thank a person for how they mirror God to the world.

CHRISTMAS DAY PRAYER *Thank you, God-in-us, for choosing to live with us, empowering me to see you in everyone, to reflect you to everyone.*



LITURGICAL CALENDAR FOR

ADVENT 2020

NOVEMBER

29 SUN **FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT**

30 MON **St. Andrew, apostle**

DECEMBER

1 TUE **Advent Weekday**

2 WED **Advent Weekday**

3 THU **St. Francis Xavier, priest**

4 FRI **Advent Weekday**

St. John Damascene, priest & doctor of the Church

5 SAT **Advent Weekday**

6 SUN **SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT**

7 MON **St. Ambrose, bishop & doctor of the Church**

8 TUE **THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY**

9 WED **Advent Weekday**

Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin

10 THU **Advent Weekday**

Our Lady of Loreto

11 FRI **Advent Weekday**

St. Damasus I, pope

12 SAT **Our Lady of Guadalupe**

13 SUN **THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT**

14 MON **St. John of the Cross, priest & doctor of the Church**

15 TUE **Advent Weekday**

16 WED **Advent Weekday**

17 THU **Advent Weekday**

18 FRI **Advent Weekday**

19 SAT **Advent Weekday**

20 SUN **FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT**

21 MON **Advent Weekday**

St. Peter Canisius, priest & doctor of the Church

22 TUE **Advent Weekday**

23 WED **Advent Weekday**

St. John of Kanty, priest

24 THU **Advent Weekday**

25 FRI **THE NATIVITY OF THE LORD**

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