



Advent
2021

DAILY
REFLECTIONS,
PRACTICES &
PRAYERS

Waiting in
Wondrous
Expectation

JANET SCHAEFFLER, OP

Introduction

Since I'm writing this in the early months of 2021, it's hard to predict what this Advent will look like. One thing we do know—and feel—is that we have lived the Advent theme of waiting for many, many months: waiting for hugs, for the vaccine, to see family and friends, to celebrate weddings, birthdays, anniversaries, graduations, and memorial services.

The waiting of Advent—in addition to remembering the waiting of the Old Testament people for a Messiah—is about how we wait in the everydayness of our lives. Even when we aren't in the stronghold of a pandemic, waiting is always with us: waiting for a phone call, a perfect job, a diagnosis, a healing.

Advent waiting, though, is not passive. We're always called to be more, to be a part of the solution. Meister Eckhart said, "What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to the Son of God if I do not also give birth to him in my time and my culture?"

What if instead of waiting for good-enough things to happen to us, we could be the good thing to happen to someone else who's waiting? What if we could cure our own waiting-room addiction by making room in our life to be the good others are waiting for? What if Advent living isn't about what we can expect from life, but what life can expect from us?

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On God's Side

"Be vigilant at all times..."

LUKE 21:36

In replying to one of his advisors who demanded that he take a particular course of action because he was convinced that "God is on our side," Abraham Lincoln replied, "Sir, my concern is not whether God is on our side; my great concern is to be on God's side, for God is always right."

Today's readings invite us, challenge us, to be vigilant, to continually ask: Am I, are we, on God's side?

God's plan is a community concerned about one another, rather than possessions and status. God's vision is care and justice for those who are poor and suffering. Are we on God's side?

God's plan is individuals taking time for prayer. God's vision is pray-ers who put their prayers into action. Are we on God's side?

God's plan is a world daring to forgive, not counting the cost. God's vision is people committed to inclusivity and peacemaking. Are we on God's side?

God's plan is each of us living our calling, created in the image and likeness of God. God's vision is each of us acting as the body of Christ, hope-filled, compassionate, and courageous. Are we on God's side?

DAILY PRACTICE: Decide two things you will do during this Advent season to intensify ways you live on God's side.

ADVENT PRAYER: *Visionary God, guide my actions so that they are on your side, your plans and visions.*

Back to Normal?

House of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!

ISAIAH 2:5

“I just want to get back to normal!” How many times have we said or heard that in the last twenty-two months?

That wish probably means various things. Yet how are we created? Who are we called to be? Today, Isaiah exhorts us to “walk in the light of the Lord.” Perhaps that means we are created and called not simply to exist but to always be more, to adapt and grow. Stan Lee, the legendary Marvel comic writer who created many superheroes, used an optimistic mantra throughout his life: *Excelsior*, a Latin word meaning “ever upward.”

Looking at all we have become aware of in our last two years, a case can certainly be made for not wanting to return to “normal.” There is a painting that appeared during these times in which two people are looking into the distance. One asks, “When this is over, what should change?” His friend answers, “Everything.”

DAILY PRACTICE: How do you want your life to be “ever upward” because of your recent experiences? What are your dreams for our nation and our world to now walk in the light of the Lord?

ADVENT PRAYER: *Beckoning God, nudge us to learn from our experience, to pay attention to what needs to be changed, to build the world you dream of.*

Scattering Good News

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

ROMANS 10:15

As a mom drove her eight-year-old to school one morning, he cheerily asked, “Mom, do you want me to throw the confetti in my pocket?” Imagining the time it would take to clean up, she said, “Please, no! Not in the car.” Then she asked, “Why do you have confetti in your pocket?” Her son responded, “It’s my emergency confetti. I carry it everywhere in case there’s good news.”

In today’s first reading, Paul quotes from Isaiah. In Semitic cultures, poets often celebrated various parts (here, feet) of the body of the messenger who brings welcome news. Often people apply this Scripture passage to preachers and catechists.

Yet we are all called to bring good news—by our words, by our actions, by our lives. The little boy was prepared in case there was good news. In reality, there always is—if we just look.

DAILY PRACTICE: During the day, when you might be inclined to comment negatively or see the bad news in a situation, pause to look for, speak, and celebrate the positive, the possibility, the gift, the good news. Share your emergency confetti.

ADVENT PRAYER: *God of Good News, help me to scatter the good news of positivity, of affirmation and support, of kindness and care, of your love in my world today.*

F.R.O.G.

The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I lack.

PSALM 23:1

During our COVID days, a cartoon appeared illustrating a dialogue with God. The faith-filled person said, “I took advantage of time away to try to find myself.” God asked, “And did you?” “Yeah,” was the reply. God then asked, “Then why are you coming to me?” The honest fellow replied, “I wasn’t enough.”

Many self-help books tell us we are enough: believe in yourself and you can do anything. There’s a kernel of truth there: God created us with the potential (and the call) to use our gifts to become the best we can be. It’s our nature to want to be in charge, to try to figure things out. Often we ask, “Why, God?” or “When, God, when?” We want to know all that’s ahead, how things will work out.

At an art fair recently, I saw frog magnets, each carrying a little sign: “F.R.O.G.—Fully Rely on God.” The psalmist today prays, “The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I lack.” When we trust God, we have what we need. We can be comfortable with not knowing everything, knowing God is much more than we are.

DAILY PRACTICE: Place a tiny picture of a frog on your mirror, in your car, beside your bed—wherever you need a reminder to trust in God’s protection.

ADVENT PRAYER: *Shepherding God, deepen my trust in you.*

Prayer Calls Us to Act

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father.” MATTHEW 7:21

Toward the end of his life a rabbi was exhausted and prayed that his last days might be made easier and financially secure. So he asked God that he might win the lottery. He prayed constantly about this.

Weeks passed. Months passed. Years passed. Finally, he screamed out in frustration and desperation: “God, give me a break!” To which God answered, “Give me a break, yourself. Buy a ticket!”

Even though I don’t think God’s will is concerned with winning the lottery, this humorous story illustrates the point of today’s gospel—and our lives as prayerful people. Prayer is crucially important, but how we live, what we do, our simple—and extraordinary—actions reveal who we are and exemplify our commitment to God’s dream for us. It’s possible to make prayer a time of words without then going forth to live the words.

DAILY PRACTICE: Today as you pray prayers of intercession (for the needs of others) and prayers of petition (for your needs), think of the actions you can do that flow from those prayers. Then do them.

ADVENT PRAYER: *God of word and action, strengthen me in my prayer. Show me how to live the words of my prayer, acting to bring about your dream for us.*

One-Inch Seeing

The eyes of the blind shall see.

ISAIAH 29:18

Isaiah reminds us of our blindness. What might we be missing?

In *Bird by Bird*, Anne Lamott suggests writers imagine what they can see in a one-inch picture frame as a way to make the task of writing less daunting.

If we did this with life, would it help us to slow down, to zero in on what's before us, to see things that—in our usual busyness—we might miss?

At the store, do we really notice the checkout clerks? Do we see them as persons loved by family and friends, rather than just there to serve us? Do we realize the worries, concerns, and perhaps sufferings they are carrying? Do we take time to say something that might brighten their day?

As we walk through our neighborhood, listen to a family member on the phone, read the news, and go to work using a one-inch frame, do we realize that life—and our responses—aren't always about grand gestures? Often, it's the simple things that make a difference.

DAILY PRACTICE: Make (or purchase) a simple one-inch frame. As you gaze at it during your morning prayer, think of whom/what you will see this day through your frame.

ADVENT PRAYER: *God who always notices, help me never to miss the feelings and realities behind the actual picture, but to be more aware—as you always are.*

Hatched, Not Broken

The Lord rebuilds Jerusalem, and gathers the dispersed of Israel, healing the brokenhearted, and binding up their wounds. PSALM 147:2–3

In many ways, we could say that Humpty Dumpty has fallen a lot lately: in our own personal experiences, in the happenings throughout our nation, in the challenges around the world, in the various ways that creation is not cared for. Once an egg is broken, all that we can do is make an omelet—unless the egg hasn't just broken but has hatched.

Psalm 147, which we pray today, praises our powerful creator who restored exiled Judah. Because of God, their hearts didn't remain broken and their wounds didn't stay open and hurting. Their reality didn't remain shattered. New life was birthed (hatched) because of God's never-ending presence and care.

The Advent-Christmas season is the celebration of new life that changed our world forever. Because of the birth of God in our midst, we are called, not to make omelets, but to hatch something new.

DAILY PRACTICE: Place a hard-boiled egg on your dinner table for the next few days. Using paint or magic marker, draw on it a symbol of new life. Let it remind you of your call to bring new life out of brokenness.

ADVENT PRAYER: *God who births (hatches) new life, help me be aware of ways to bring new life amid the suffering and struggles within and around me.*

Restoring and Renewing the Pathways

Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.

LUKE 3:4

During a retreat, a woman shared with me an action she had recently undertaken. She had realized that she was separated from a number of relationships from her past. Most of them weren't horrendous ruptures but just some small things that caused the relationships not to continue with the depth and consistency there had once been. She decided to call each person and reestablish the caring friendship. To her surprise, it turned out to be easy. Everyone was eager to pick up where they had left off, some not even remembering what had caused them to drift apart. The most amazing thing, she related, was that everyone answered on her first try. Not one call went to voicemail. (How often does that happen in today's world?)

Today John beckons us to make straight the paths. The paths of life, the paths that God has given us, include precious relationships.

DAILY PRACTICE: Is there someone from your life with whom you have lost touch, perhaps because of a misunderstanding? Reach out today, making straight and glorious the path of relationship.

ADVENT PRAYER: *God of promising pathways, nudge me to deepen my connectedness with the people in my life—for they are among the cherished gifts you have given me.*

Shoulder Taps

I will listen for what God, the Lord, has to say...

PSALM 85:9

There is a YouTube video (*Shoulder Taps*) in which executive coach Bill Hart talks about his belief that often God taps us on the shoulder, encouraging us to do something. He recalls a time when he was in a restaurant and noticed a woman at another table who exuded gentleness, loveliness, and peacefulness. He kept feeling that he wanted to tell her that. On his way out of the restaurant, he stopped at her table and said, “If anyone hasn’t told you yet today, you are lovely.” She replied, “I know you; I know your spirit. My husband died a year ago and that is something he would say.”

We often wonder if God speaks to us. We often experience strong feelings, intuitions, and insights. Sometimes we act upon them; sometimes we dismiss them because we’re not sure where they’re coming from. The author Wayne Dyer reminds us, “If prayer is you talking to God, then intuition is God talking to you.” The psalmist prays, “I will listen for what God, the Lord, has to say”

DAILY PRACTICE: This week, pay attention to God’s shoulder taps. If you have an intuition that will bring comfort, affirmation, or support to another, act on it.

ADVENT PRAYER: *God who comes in many and varied ways, help me to listen, to be more aware of your constant, and sometimes unexpected, messages.*

You Matter

“...leave the ninety-nine out on the hills and go in search of the stray.”

MATTHEW 18:12

The “You Matter Marathon” was created to enrich positive connections between individuals and within communities by collectively sharing 10,000 “You Matter” cards during November, when the holiday season starts and many people find reasons to feel they don’t matter. The “You Matter Marathon” envisions a world where individuals naturally and regularly affirm the significance and value of the “other.”

The project (youmattermarathon.com) provides 30 free “You Matter” cards (the size of a business card), encouraging people to share them, especially with someone going through a difficult time. Often people leave them anonymously: tucked inside a library book, for example. (I slipped them under the doors of my apartment complex.)

Today’s gospel, a parable of three short sentences, compassionately and emphatically illustrates that this is how Jesus lived (and calls us to live). Often, we think this passage is about those who are “lost” because of their failings. Could it also be about those who are “lost” because of feelings of unworthiness, discouragement, disregard, or mistreatment?

DAILY PRACTICE: Make and share your own “You Matter” cards especially with people who are hurting, ignored, or feeling slighted.

ADVENT PRAYER: *Thank you, God, our Good Shepherd, for unconditional care. Help me to mirror your attitude and action.*

**DECEMBER 8 * FEAST OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION
OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY**

GENESIS 3:9–15; EPHESIANS 1:3–6, 11–12; LUKE 1:26–38

Original Goodness

“The Lord is with you.”

LUKE 1:28

In the first chapter of the Bible, we read five times that God looked at creation and “saw that it was good.” After the sixth day, God “found it very good” (Genesis 1:31).

We often ask: What is life all about? Where is life (my life) going? God reminds us again and again that life is going someplace good because life—all life—comes from goodness—original goodness, original blessing.

One of our life tasks is to continually rediscover—and live—our original goodness. Scripture (and the news) remind us that sin has infected everyone and everything. At the same time, Scripture affirms that we are “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139), created in the very “image of God” (Genesis 1:27). Original goodness is the truth that God has invited us to a deep relationship, and, no matter what, God is faithful.

We remember today that Mary never forgot her original goodness; because of that assurance and gift from God, her life was always full of grace.

DAILY PRACTICE: St. Bernard of Clairvaux said that the highest degree of love is simply that we love ourselves the way God loves us. Reflect today on the ways you love yourself as God loves you.

ADVENT PRAYER: *God of original goodness, help me discover over and over again what it means to live a life steeped in grace.*

Holding Up the Sky

The afflicted and the needy seek water in vain, their tongues are parched with thirst. I, the Lord, will answer them. ISAIAH 41:17

A sparrow was lying in the street with its legs straight up, sweating a little under its feathery arms. A meddlesome horse walked up and asked, “What on earth are you doing?” The sparrow replied, “I heard the sky was falling, and I wanted to help.” The horse laughed a loud, sneering horse laugh, and said, “Do you really think you are going to hold back the sky, with those scrawny little legs?” The sparrow answered, “One does what one can.”

In Isaiah today, we hear of God’s promise to answer the needs of the world. At the same time, the Incarnation reminds us that we, too, are Godlike. One of the ramifications—and challenges—of that mystery is that God works through us. The sparrow’s story is a story of trusting hope: openness to doing what one can while confident that God will do the rest.

DAILY PRACTICE: Think of one of the challenges in your family, your neighborhood, our nation—one you might feel hopeless to do something about. Through reflection, conversation, and/or research, decide on one small step you could do. Do it this coming week.

ADVENT PRAYER: *God who holds up the sky and the universe, strengthen me to be your arms and legs in our hurting world.*

Prophetic Hope

“Wisdom is vindicated by her works.”

MATTHEW 11:19

In the last few years, have you read news stories of people advocating for change and new possibilities, but whom the world ignored? Every age has prophets. The perennial challenge is: If they don't fit our image (the wrong gender, color, ethnic group), do we have a difficult time accepting their message?

Neither Jesus nor John the Baptist satisfied the people's expectations. The people had preconceived ideas; neither Jesus nor John met those. The people found fault with both.

To be a prophet, according to Scripture, is to be a risk-taker, a living witness for justice, compassion, and truth—which often is very different from what the world is proclaiming.

During Advent we recall the well-known prophets of the past. Are there others in Scripture, in our tradition, in today's world, whom we don't think about? Are there prophets in other cultures, other walks of life, among all God's people?

DAILY PRACTICE: Is there a contemporary prophet whose way of living inspires you to hope, to goodness? Think of well-known people, but don't forget people you meet every day. If you can, thank her or him.

ADVENT PRAYER: *Prophetic God, thank you for the people you have given us—people throughout history, those surrounding us today; those we know, those we've never met; those who give us hope, those who challenge. Guide us as we listen to each and every prophetic voice.*

Gifts from Suffering

“So also will the Son of Man suffer..”

MATTHEW 17:12

The parents of a 12-year-old girl thought she had a beautiful singing voice. They asked a well-known musician to listen and give his opinion about her musical potential. The girl sang her best; the parents waited. The musician finally said, “She sings well. When her heart has been broken, she will sing sublimely.”

In today’s gospel, Jesus tells his disciples that just as John the Baptist suffered at the hands of others, he, too, the Son of Man, was going to suffer. This was the result of John and Jesus being faithful to their call from God.

As the musician reminds us, there is a gift in suffering: it can make us more attuned to the lives and feelings of others, more aware of the wonder and meaning of all life. As in the gospel, suffering can come because of the attitudes of others. Many times, suffering is the result of living in an imperfect world. The suffering of John and Jesus brought truth, freedom, and life to many. Are there gifts amid our sufferings?

DAILY PRACTICE: In addition to many day-to-day sorrows, the pandemic brought suffering that we would have never chosen. Take time to ask: Were there gifts in the suffering I endured during the pandemic?

ADVENT PRAYER: *Companioning God, help me to see the gifts you give in all things: the joys and sufferings of life.*

Joy of Hygge

Rejoice in the Lord always.

PHILIPPIANS 4:4

Every year the United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network issues a World Happiness Report. Every year Denmark is one of the top three happiest countries, despite their miserable winters. (Last year the U.S. was number 19.)

What is it about their lifestyle? It might be: *hygge* (pronounced “hoo-ga”), a Danish concept that encompasses a feeling of cozy contentment and well-being through enjoying the simple things in life. It is the idea of going slow in the winter when, in Denmark, it gets light late and dark early for five months out of the year.

Hygge (which now has spread throughout the world) invites us to embrace that which is: to celebrate the now.

Perhaps, too, that is the wisdom of Advent and especially this Third Sunday, where, every year, we are invited to reflect on and live the joy that comes from simplicity, from living in the now. Perhaps Advent (and *hygge*) tell us that joy can always be ours (even in days and months of darkness), not in the hurriedness around us, but in the simple moments of time with God, of time with others, of enjoying each surprising day—just as it is.

DAILY PRACTICE: Slow down; savor the joy of one of the simple things in your life.

ADVENT PRAYER: *God of joy, may I be thrilled by the simple gifts you give because of your constant presence in all things.*

A Safe Home

“By what authority are you doing these things?”

MATTHEW 21:23

When Lawrence Anthony, the South African conservationist, died several years ago, two herds of wild elephants traveled single-file through the bush to his home. One of the many things Anthony had devoted his life to was providing a home for elephants on his reserve so they would not be killed in the wild.

Their propensity, however, was to escape from the reserve. Anthony’s problem was to convince them this was now their safe home. He realized the answer: he would live with them. To save their lives, he would stay with them, feed them, talk to them. Day and night, he would repeat, “This is your home now. You have no need to run anymore.”

God knew the best for us: “I will live with them,” said God. God sent Jesus to live with us. This Advent/Christmas season is about the challenge to live this awesome mystery, this astounding gift: God living among us, offering us home.

DAILY PRACTICE: If God lives among us, offering us home, we, likewise, are called to do that for others. There is someone in your world waiting for you to offer them “a safe home.” Reach out to them today.

ADVENT PRAYER: *God living among us, in gratitude for the home you provide for us, let my thank you be my response to your people, all those who need “a safe home” in my caring.*

Always Love

*The Lord is close to the brokenhearted,
saves those whose spirit is crushed.*

PSALM 34:19

In this week that began with Gaudete (Rejoice) Sunday, today, in sadness and grief, we remember the 26 people—20 children between six and seven years old, and six staff members—who were killed at Sandy Hook School in Newtown, CT.

Today's psalm is a thanksgiving prayer in which David praises God for rescuing him from trouble and then calls upon the people of Israel to never forget that God is their protector. What do people do who know they are protected by God? They give thanks and then do something.

During the last nine years we have witnessed the courage, the commitment, the grief-turned-to-action of many of the parents and siblings of the children and the families of the teachers/staff in their efforts to bring nurturing, healing love to the world. Scarlett Lewis, mother of 6-year-old Jesse, said, "You can't always choose what happens to you, but you can always choose how you respond. You can always respond with love."

DAILY PRACTICE: There's been a movement each December to encourage people to do 26 random acts of kindness to honor the lives lost at Sandy Hook Elementary. Do one today (or one each day for the next 26 days).

ADVENT PRAYER: *Protector God, you are here, even in the most devastating times. With you, as our shelter, help me choose love and life.*

Always and Everywhere

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

LUKE 7:20

In his book *Finding God in Unexpected Places*, Philip Yancey talks about a South African woman named Joanna who began a prison ministry that radically transformed one of her country’s most violent prisons. When Yancey asked her how she did it, she said: “Well, of course, Philip, God was already present in the prison. I just had to make him visible.”

John the Baptist and his followers were expecting a conquering Messiah who would deliver Israel from all its oppressors, leading them into a new golden age. John didn’t see that in Jesus, so he wondered if they should look elsewhere.

Joanna, in her prison ministry, didn’t need to look elsewhere for God, because she knew God was in all—always and unconditionally. Her conviction reminds us that there are no unsacred moments. Our ordinary—and maybe even our annoying or fearful—experiences all are imbued with God. The Advent message is that every moment can explode with God’s presence—when we’re hopeful, aware, and trusting.

DAILY PRACTICE: As you think back on the events of the day, are there one or two happenings that don’t seem to be God-moments? Look a little closer; see God’s care, strength, and presence.

ADVENT PRAYER: *God in everything, open my eyes to see you everywhere, to magnify your presence in all the places and situations of my day.*

The Music of Reassurance

*My love shall never fall away from you
nor my covenant of peace be shaken.*

ISAIAH 54:10

An early image from the pandemic was Italians playing music and singing from their balconies even as the virus attacked their cities. That practice spread throughout other areas of the world, including musicians live-streaming performances from their homes, and choirs sharing concerts: so many people trying to provide connection during a terrifying and uncertain time.

Music, of course, has brought people together for millennia, not only during crises. During the last few decades, researchers have been exploring how music affects our brains and how it might be used to facilitate health and healing.

Music also connects us to God. Isaiah today reminds us that nothing can disturb God's covenant with us. Music—over and over again—has reassured us of God's covenant and bonded us with God and God's people. During these pandemic times, music has been comforting, calming, and strengthening.

DAILY PRACTICE: Include music in your prayer: listen, sing, hum. Find and reflect on a song that is a reassurance from God. Find a song that reminds you we are one community.

ADVENT PRAYER: (PRAY WITH PSALM 150:3–5) *“Give praise with blasts upon the horn, praise God with harp and lyre. Give praise with tambourines and dance, praise God with strings and pipes. Give praise with crashing cymbals, with sounding cymbals.”*

God in Our Family's History

The genealogy of Jesus Christ...

MATTHEW 1:1

COVID drastically affected families, forcing us to live closer together with some and further apart from others. Many were separated from loved ones whom they were used to seeing and hugging frequently. Many essential workers stayed in hotels or basements, out of reach of their families in order to protect them. Others, living (and working and studying online) in the same household, spent more time together than ever before.

In addition to those realities, job loss, financial stress, lack of medical care, sickness, and the death of loved ones were the stark reality for many.

In the midst of our Advent days—when we focus on the coming of one person into our world—today's Scripture reading reminds us of family, the entire family. God was present in Jesus' family from the very beginning—through the difficult times and times of triumph, in people who were leaders and in people who were far from perfect. Our own families might have been challenged in many ways lately. Yet we were never alone. In the struggles, worries, and obstacles, God was and is with us.

DAILY PRACTICE: Was there a family member who helped you through the pandemic? Have you thanked them? Is there a family member who still needs you? How will you reach out?

ADVENT PRAYER: *God who made us a family, thank you for your presence with us. Strengthen us in love, unity, and care.*

Side by Side

Joseph...took his wife into his home.

MATTHEW 1:24

In Denali National Park, the permafrost, just below the surface, is a delicate fabric that holds the earth together. When crushed, that fabric is broken. Therefore, hikers are asked not to walk in the same place twice, not to form or follow a path. Instead of one hiker following another, they are asked to walk side by side. In doing that, a network of original steps is formed that keeps things together, rather than singular grooves that are deepened into ruts that will split things apart.

We are created and called—in all things—to walk side by side.

Even though Joseph probably had no idea of all that was going to happen to his young family, he knew that he and Mary were in it together. They were sustained by walking side by side, in their faith, courage, and care of each other and their son.

That is how we are called to live: walking side by side with those we encounter each day as well as with those we will never meet or know—because we are all companion hikers on the path of life.

DAILY PRACTICE: Think especially of those who might feel alone, rejected, or ignored; decide on one way to walk with them, side by side.

ADVENT PRAYER: *Companion God, urge me to always walk side by side, appreciating, supporting, and encouraging.*

Courageous Tenderness

“Blessed are you...”

LUKE 1:45

In October 2020 Pope Francis wrote: “Tenderness is the path of choice for the strongest, most courageous men and women.”

“Tenderness” and “courage” in the same sentence! Tenderness and courage personify Elizabeth and Mary. We need their example more than ever. In too many places today, rather than tenderness, we see rage, anger, the intention to rile up or to confuse.

Tenderness can be life-changing. Bestowing tenderness allows a person to feel seen; they feel their worth. When we actually “feel” worthy we feel as though we belong. We feel as though we can stand up, put our shoulders back, and speak up. Tenderness bestows courage; it requires courage to bestow tenderness.

Elizabeth did that for Mary, and it may be just as easy for us to do the same with persons we love. But what about responding with tenderness to someone whose views are very different from ours, for the boss who frustrates us, for that sibling who has always irritated us, for that child who exhausts us, for a neighbor who can be such a bother?

DAILY PRACTICE: Begin each morning with an “I will...” statement. “Today I will remember to think ‘tenderness toward all’ when I meet...”

ADVENT PRAYER: *God of tenderness, as I have experienced your tender love, show me where I can tenderly care today.*

In the Darkness

“Then the angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary...’”

LUKE 1:30

“To glow in the dark, you first you need to be in the light.” That was an observation from my great-nephew Owen when he was five years old.

In the Northern hemisphere, tomorrow is the longest night of the year. The darkness of that night reminds us that many people might be experiencing darkness, loss, or worry at this Advent-Christmas time of year. The longest night reminds us that perhaps all of us experienced darkness, fear, and anxiety during the COVID months—just as Mary’s first response in today’s reading must have been of fright.

Mary moved from fear to peace, from worry to deep trust. During all the days of her life, Mary was able to glow in the dark times, because she was rooted in light, the light of God’s presence. If you are experiencing darkness, recall how you have been—and always are—first grounded in the light, experiencing the light of God’s presence.

DAILY PRACTICE: Remember in prayer someone who might be experiencing darkness, loss, worry, or sadness. Call, email, or spend time with them. Listen; be God’s light to them.

ADVENT PRAYER: *Comforting God amid the darkness, thank you for your constant, consoling light. Keep me mindful of those who are now feeling—and will go into the coming year with—grief, questions, and sorrow.*

Living the Incarnation

“The infant in my womb leaped for joy.”

LUKE 1:44

A couple had been married for sixty-five years; the husband was dying of COVID. His wife couldn't be with him. She sat in the hospital parking lot, terrified, distraught, and grieving. Her husband's nurse called her frequently: “I haven't left him. We're praying. I'm telling him how much you love him.”

In today's gospel, because of her concern and compassion, Mary traveled to Elizabeth, letting go of her own needs and uncertainties. Mary brought Jesus, and Elizabeth was comforted, experiencing the love of God in a new way.

Our faith is rooted in the reality of God touching us. The Incarnation—God becoming flesh with us in an intimate way—is not just about God; it is about each one of us.

How do we put flesh on God? How do we make God's presence, strength, and care real, visible, and touchable? The nurse in the story above was doing that. Amid her tiredness and many responsibilities, she enfleshed God, bringing God's presence, strength, and care.

DAILY PRACTICE: Who around you is lonely, frightened, or grieving? Visit them (in person, virtually, email, a card, a phone call) not just once but as often as they need.

ADVENT PRAYER: *God-with-us, help me be your hand of comfort, your presence of reassurance and never-ending love.*

Newfound Gratitude

“God who is mighty has done great things for me...”

LUKE 1:49

With the season of Advent directly preceded by the celebration of Thanksgiving (in the United States), I’ve always thought that gratitude and Advent are closely connected (in addition to the many Advent Scriptures that call us to trusting gratefulness, especially today’s reading, Mary’s song of gratitude).

During our many COVID days, I read an article of how one family decided—in the midst of the challenges of distancing from friends and family, online learning, canceled events, and missed milestones—to compile an alphabetical list of the moments they enjoyed and/or endured. Taking time to write down various occasions revealed times of vulnerability and care, moments of accepting and embracing changes, opportunities to live in a new way. Without the list, without time for gratitude, they might have missed all the wonderful things.

In their list, Mary’s words, in her prayerful *Magnificat*, became theirs (and can be ours in all situations, in all the days of our lives): “God who is mighty has done great things for me.” Thank you!

DAILY PRACTICE: Make an alphabetical list of moments of your life. (Being constrained—or expanded—by the alphabet could reveal things you might ordinarily miss.)

ADVENT PRAYER: *God-with-us in all things, thank you for the great things you have done for me, as well as the simple things, the forgotten things, the taken-for-granted-things. Help me live every moment gratefully.*

The Whole Picture

“He will be called John.”

LUKE 1:60

Have you ever been in a situation where someone offered their opinion, yet you knew they did not have all the pertinent information? We see that very human circumstance in today’s reading: the relatives of Zechariah and Elizabeth quibble over what to name the newborn child; they are convinced they know the correct name.

But Elizabeth objected to their presumptions: “He will be called John.” Why was Elizabeth willing to cross her relatives? Because, through patient listening and prayer, Elizabeth knew the truth—the truth from God. During the nine months of Zechariah’s silence, somehow he had managed to communicate to her the angel’s message, a message that included their child’s name.

One of the reminders of today’s reading is that there are times we don’t know the full picture. In today’s world, Gabriel probably isn’t going to appear to give us the answers, the truth. Yet we have many gifts and abilities from God helping us seek the truth: prayer and reflection, understanding Scripture, listening (to God and others), conversations with others, research, and reaching out.

DAILY PRACTICE: As we prepare for a new year, make a resolution to listen, to pray, to research one of the questions/challenges you’re experiencing or witnessing in our world today.

ADVENT PRAYER: *God of Truth, guide me to see with your vision, seeing the whole picture with all its varied nuances.*

The Path of Peace

“The tender mercy of God by which the daybreak from on high will visit us...to guide our feet into the path of peace.”

LUKE 1:78-79

A teenager was diligently working on a term paper one night when her dad asked her about it. “I’m writing about the condition of our world today and how to bring peace.” “Isn’t that a little heavy for a young girl?” “No, Dad,” she replied. “Don’t worry—there are three of us working on it.”

It doesn’t take much study to realize the conditions of today’s world—violence and abuse, the ramifications of COVID-19, war, racism, oppression of the poor, discrimination, ecological degradation, and lack of reverence for all life.

In the midst of all that, we pray—and are comforted and challenged by—the words of Zechariah in his song of praise, the *Benedictus*. Zechariah names why God comes among us; Zechariah specifies one of the core reasons why Jesus became human—to guide our walking in the way of peace. This jubilant song reminds us that we’re never striving for peace alone. Our God envisions and guides us to peace; we just need to respond.

DAILY PRACTICE: Is there a situation of conflict or friction about which you’ve avoided saying or doing something? Knowing God guides you, do something today.

ADVENT PRAYER: *God of tender mercy, because you live with us, guide our feet into the path of peace.*

Recognizing God

They shall name him Emmanuel, which means “God is with us.”

MATTHEW 1:23

One of Leo Tolstoy’s classic stories is about a humble shoemaker, Martin, who had faced many difficulties, including the death of his wife and several children, including his three-year-old son. Sad and despondent, Martin heard the voice of God one night in a dream saying, “I’ll visit you tomorrow. Watch for me on your street.”

Martin watched diligently but was interrupted several times as he saw people who were in need of something he could give: nutritious food, warm blankets, sturdy shoes. At the end of the day, worried that he hadn’t watched carefully enough, Martin, in the night’s darkness, heard God repeatedly saying, “It is I,” as each of the faces of the people Martin had helped that day came to his mind.

At times we might wish we lived during the years of Jesus’ earthly life. We are convinced we would have recognized him. Emmanuel, God-with-us, reminds us that God is always in our world today, but often in people and circumstances we might not immediately recognize. Like Martin, we can see God-with-us in the faces of all whom we help.

DAILY PRACTICE: On this Christmas Day, prepare for 2022. Make a calendar with space to write, each day, one small (or large) thing you do to help another.

ADVENT PRAYER: *Thank you, Emmanuel, for being God-with-us. Nudge me to see you, especially in those who need me.*



LITURGICAL CALENDAR FOR

ADVENT 2021

NOVEMBER

28 SUN	FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT
29 MON	Advent Weekday
30 TUE	St. Andrew, apostle

DECEMBER

1 WED	Advent Weekday
2 THU	Advent Weekday
3 FRI	St. Francis Xavier, priest
4 SAT	Advent Weekday
	St. John Damascene, priest & doctor of the Church

5 SUN	SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT
6 MON	Advent Weekday
	St. Nicholas, bishop
7 TUE	St. Ambrose, bishop & doctor of the Church
8 WED	THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY
9 THU	Advent Weekday
	St. Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin
10 FRI	Advent Weekday
	Our Lady of Loreto
11 SAT	Advent Weekday
	St. Damasus I, pope

12 SUN	THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT
13 MON	St. Lucy, virgin & martyr
14 TUE	St. John of the Cross, priest & doctor of the Church
15 WED	Advent Weekday
16 THU	Advent Weekday
17 FRI	Advent Weekday
18 SAT	Advent Weekday

19 SUN	FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT
20 MON	Advent Weekday
21 TUE	Advent Weekday
	St. Peter Canisius, priest & doctor of the Church
22 WED	Advent Weekday
23 THU	Advent Weekday
	St. John of Kanty, priest
24 FRI	Advent Weekday
25 SAT	THE NATIVITY OF THE LORD

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