

The Vigilant Heart

An Advent Journey of Faith, Repentance,
and Joy



Advent 2024

Advent is a season of anticipation, preparation, and hope. It calls us to be both watchful and joyful as we await the coming of our Savior. The Vigilant Heart invites us into this sacred time with reflections that draw us deeper into the heart of Advent—where faith, repentance, and joy meet.

Each week, we are challenged to focus our hearts and minds on the meaning of Christ's coming. From the call to stand ready amidst the chaos of the world, to the voice of John the Baptist inviting us to repent, and finally, to the rejoicing that springs from recognizing the presence of the Lord—Advent is a journey that transforms us.

This booklet offers reflections on the Gospel readings from the First Sunday of Advent through Christmas Day. Along with reflection questions and prayer prompts, it provides an opportunity to pause and prepare our hearts, cultivating a vigilant faith that remains open to God's transforming grace.

As we embark on this journey together, may we all stand watchful, with hearts ready to embrace the joy of the Lord's coming.

DECEMBER 1, 2024

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

“But when these signs begin to happen, stand erect and raise your heads because your redemption is at hand.” Luke 21:28

The first and second readings and the Psalm for the first Sunday in Advent include pleasing images of safety, security, kindness, and abounding love. And then, there's the Gospel.

But, it is fitting to start this season of penance and waiting with a look at what's coming for believers: signs in the sky, dismay, people dying of fright, the end of the age, and the coming of Jesus. He doesn't sugarcoat it for his disciples—or us. But there, in the middle of his description of the coming turmoil and struggle, Jesus tells us to stand up, raise our heads, be on watch, and pray for strength. It's the best pep talk for Christians in the history of pep talks.

This time of year, we deal with Advent's paradoxical nature. It's a time of frantic busyness, but it's also a time when we can feel a little weary and inattentive. That's what makes this Gospel great for the first Sunday of Advent: It gives us a little nudge (kick?) to wake us up and get us focused on what's important: preparing for the coming of the Lord.

Reflection questions:

- How do I cope with the paradox of Advent?
- What are one or two new things I can do this Advent to raise my head up and be ready for my redeemer?

Prayer prompt:

- For the clarity to focus on preparing our hearts for the Lord

DECEMBER 2, 2024

MONDAY OF THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

“Amen, I say to you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith. I say to you, many will come from the east and the west, and will recline with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob at the banquet in the Kingdom of heaven.” Matthew 8:10-11

This guy gets it.

In today's Gospel Jesus is approached by a centurion who begins by telling Jesus that he has a servant at home that is suffering. It is implied that he's asking for Jesus to heal this person, and Jesus essentially says okay, let's go. What happened next was amazing—even Jesus was amazed. The centurion, a gentile, said there was no need for Jesus to be present to heal the servant. He could do it with just a word.

In no one in Israel had Jesus found such faith, his present company included. We can just imagine Jesus turning to his followers and saying, “Guys, did you hear that? This fellow gets it.” With that, Jesus says that the banquet is open to everyone who believes.

Reflection questions:

- Am I convinced that Jesus can work in my life with just a word?
- Who in my life has such strong faith that I am amazed? What can I learn from them?

Prayer prompt:

- For an increase in faith this Advent season.

DECEMBER 3, 2024

TUESDAY OF THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

Turning to the disciples in private, he said, "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see. For I say to you, many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it."

Luke 10:23-24

It was the triumphant return of the seventy-two who had been sent out. They returned rejoicing, having been witnesses to God's mighty power over sin and evil. You can just imagine the exuberant scene when they reached Jesus. Unable to contain themselves any longer, they shouted, "Master, you wouldn't believe what we've seen!" One of them shouted, eyes wide with wonder. Another chimes in, "Even the demons submit to us in your name!"

Today's Gospel picks up on that "very moment." Jesus, rejoicing in the Holy Spirit, offers a joyful prayer to the Father, praising him for revealing himself to the childlike as was his will. His intimate relationship with the Father is unmistakable: "No one knows who the Son is except the Father, and who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son wishes to reveal him."

That's when Jesus pulls his disciples aside to tell them that they are actually seeing the plan at work. They are seeing what God can and will do through Jesus.

But he's not telling just them. "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see," he says, referring to other believers of that time and of all time, including us. A response is needed and natural. We are sharers in the revelation, and we can participate in it by sharing Christ with others. Advent seems like a good time to start.

Reflection questions:

- When have I been aware of God working in my life?
- What is one simple way I can share my relationship with God with another person?

Prayer prompt:

- For the eyes of my heart to be opened.

DECEMBER 4, 2024

WEDNESDAY OF THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

“My heart is moved with pity for the crowd, for they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, for fear they may collapse on the way.” Matthew 15:32

Compassion—the feeling of deep sympathy that drives a desire to offer help—isn't spoken of much these days. When it is, the concept can be polarizing. The word “compassion” can sometimes be used as a tool of power when groups insist that others demonstrate compassion according to their own definitions. It can be perceived as a weakness or vulnerability, believing that showing concern for others could lead to being taken advantage of. In some cases, people may argue that showing compassion means tolerating or excusing behavior under the guise of being non-judgemental.

These views of compassion can lead us to suppress or misuse it—distorting the essence of what it means to care for others.

Today's Gospel is a master class on compassion. Jesus had been curing the sick for three days straight. The crowds kept bringing people to him, and he kept healing them. He healed day after day because he felt compassion for them, and he had the power to alleviate their suffering.

By the end of the three days, their sack lunches and road snacks had run out, and everyone was hungry, and we can assume



Jesus was too. His heart was moved with pity. In his compassion for them, he took what was there, blessed it, broke it, and fed them all. Jesus had the power to not just tamp down hunger but to fully satisfy them. His extravagant love even spilled over into seven more baskets full.

Advent is a wonderful time to consider how we feel and show compassion for others. Having deep sympathy for someone's adversity or hardship is a good thing. But having our hearts moved with pity that drives a desire to help stop their suffering takes compassion to Jesus' level.

Reflection questions:

- What is my experience with feeling and showing compassion for others?
- When has someone shown true compassion for me? What was the outcome?

Prayer prompt:

- To be able to see others through the compassionate eyes of Christ.

DECEMBER 5, 2024

THURSDAY OF THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

“But when these signs begin to happen, stand erect and raise your heads because your redemption is at hand.” Luke 21:28

The world places a lot of emphasis on "authenticity" these days, and it's not a bad thing. When someone is not their authentic self, it may stem from fear, insecurity, or a desire to maintain harmony at all costs. It can create distance and misunderstanding in a relationship and prevent genuine connection and communication.

In our relationship with Jesus, the stakes are even higher. In today's Gospel reading, Jesus lays out the cost of being inauthentic in our relationship with him. Calling him "Lord, Lord" might get his attention, but if it's not backed up by an authentic, 100% genuine desire to do the will of God, then it's pretty much meaningless.

That may sound a bit harsh, but when you look at Jesus' two examples, he is not pulling any punches. If we listen to Jesus' words but do not act on them, he says we are like the "fool who built his house on sand." It will not stand.

Advent is a great time to think about what it means to do God's will and, as importantly, what it means to want to do God's will. The good news is that we don't have to "try harder" and "do better"—we just need to rely on his grace to help us get there.

Discussion questions:

- Am I 100% authentic in my relationship with Christ?
- Do I ask God to reveal his will for my life?

Prayer prompt:

- For the grace to desire God's will above all.

DECEMBER 6, 2024

FRIDAY OF THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

“Do you believe that I can do this?” Matthew 9:28

Two persistent blind men, one unanimous response. Yes, they said that they believed that Jesus could “do this,” meaning restore their sight. According to their faith, it was done for them. “And their eyes were opened.”

At the center of today's Gospel is faith. It isn't a matter of Jesus' ability to restore sight to the blind. He could and did, but in this story, their faith is what it took. These men showed Jesus their faith by their actions. Blindness in Jesus' time meant abject poverty and, most likely, begging for money and food.

So, for them to cry out for help probably wasn't what got Jesus' attention. In fact, in this story, he kept right on walking to his destination, with them following along as best they could, begging for him to have pity on them. Only when he got where he was going did he turn to

address them. Their persistence, despite the difficulty, demonstrated their faith.

Then, despite Jesus' stern warning, the two men who could now see spread the word.

Many people today see faith as something personal or deeply interior, almost like it's meant to be kept to ourselves. But real faith calls us to show it in how we live and how we relentlessly follow after Jesus regardless of the pain, obstacles, or “blindness.”

Discussion questions:

- Am I persistent in prayer, or do I give up if I don't have an immediate answer?
- What are my blind spots in terms of my relationship with Christ? Do I believe he can “do this?”

Prayer prompt:

- For renewed energy and zeal in my prayer life.

DECEMBER 7, 2024

SATURDAY OF THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

“Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, drive out demons.
Without cost you have received; without cost you are to give.”

Matthew 10:8

Can we put ourselves in the shoes of the twelve when Jesus gave them their instructions and commission? It wasn't for the faint of heart. Jesus didn't ask them to “go out and make friends and be nice guys” – although those things probably happened along the way. There was an urgent need to boldly minister to the bodies and souls of people who Jesus loved with the Father's love. Not wanting any of them to be lost, he pulled his band together and gave them authority to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, and drive out demons.

This mission is more urgent than at any time in history. We are the laborers now. Why not consider Advent a time in which we are sent out? As we wait for the Newborn King at Christmas, we proclaim to the world around us, “The Kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

Discussion questions:

- Do I see people in my community, family, or church who need healing in body and soul?
- Is my heart moved with pity for them? Those on the margins?

Prayer prompt:

- For the fire of the Holy Spirit to ignite me for the mission of evangelization.

DECEMBER 8, 2024

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the desert.... Lk 3:1-2

The second and third Sundays of Advent are always St. John the Baptist's days. In today's Gospel, we are presented with the historical and political context of the time in which "the word of God came to John." It was under these conditions, and at this very moment, that God called John to proclaim a baptism for the repentance of sin. John's mission was to prepare the hearts of the people for the coming of Jesus, and his message was clear, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths."

In Advent, the path leads us to a stable and to the promise that "all flesh shall see the salvation of God" through the infant we find in the manger.

Discussion questions:

- What is the special mission God has given to me, and how has his word come to me?
- How am I helping point people to Christ?

Prayer prompt:

- That I would be open to hearing the voice of God.



Gospel: Luke 1:26-38

**Solemnity of the Immaculate
Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary**

DECEMBER 9, 2024

MONDAY OF THE SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT

Then the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.” – Luke 1: 30

We often focus on Mary's fiat in today's Gospel reading, as we should. But taking another look, we can see that in the event of the annunciation, the angel Gabriel does most of the talking. He greets her, and then, seeing her reaction (note that she pondered), he reassures her that she is favored and that God has a special love for her. Next, he outlines the plan and its importance: she would be the mother of the Messiah. She asks a question, he answers it, and then gives her a sign to confirm that what he has told her is true. And she simply (and beautifully) gives her consent.

Mary's ability—and willingness—to listen when she should and speak when necessary is another of the Blessed Mother's traits that we can try to model in our own lives. With our family, friends, and business associates, it is often better to listen first and speak later. But this can also apply to our relationship with God. We tend to want to dominate the conversation with the Lord.

Can we let him speak to our hearts this Advent? And with Mary, say, “May it be done to me according to your word.”

Discussion questions:

- What message is God trying to send me? Am I open enough to be silent and listen to his plan for me?
- Today's Gospel reading reminds us why it was so important for Mary to be immaculately conceived. Only the most pure could give birth to the second person of the Trinity. How do I acknowledge this doctrine of our faith?

Prayer prompt:

- For the grace to have an open, listening heart.

DECEMBER 10, 2024

TUESDAY OF THE SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT

“What is your opinion? If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them goes astray, will he not leave the ninety-nine in the hills and go in search of the stray?” Matthew 18:12

In today’s Gospel, Jesus starts by asking His listeners a question: “What is your opinion?” Then He offers the answer with a leading question of His own: “will he not leave the ninety-nine in the hills and go in search of the stray?”

This is a question meant to stir us. It isn’t just about sheep. It’s about how deeply God cares for each one of us, even when we stray. Imagine one hundred sheep—a lot, right? Yet the shepherd knew his flock so well that he recognized immediately when just one was missing. And without hesitation, he went searching for that one.

The shepherd in this parable reflects the heart of God. Whether the sheep was the strongest, the weakest, or simply the most ordinary—he would have gone after it because each one mattered to him.

What kind of love would drive the shepherd to leave the ninety-nine and go after the one?

A love so profound that even in the face of pain and suffering, the shepherd does not regret seeking out the lost. Jesus doesn’t simply say, “I love you.” He shows it by seeking after us, rejoicing when He finds us. And we, as part of His Church, are invited to do the same.

This Advent, let us embrace the truth that God’s love is personal, relentless, and shared through us. No matter how far we wander, God will always come after us, for it is not His will that any of His little ones should be lost.

Discussion questions:

- What is my response to the idea that God knows each one of us individually and seeks us out when we stray?
- How can I participate in the mission of seeking the lost?

Prayer prompt:

- To be the hands and feet of Jesus, helping bring the lost back into the fold.

DECEMBER 11, 2024

WEDNESDAY OF THE SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT

“For my yoke is easy, and my burden light.” Matthew 11:30

Today's reading is a tender invitation from Christ to give us rest. Weariness can take over any time, but in Advent it often seems even heavier and more present. The words in our reading today are a balm: “Come to me...and I will give you rest.”

But, Jesus being Jesus, there is a deeper meaning to his words. And here we again face the paradox of discipleship. He says we are to take his yoke – meaning link up and get ready to work to bring others to him. He says to learn from him – he has shown us what work he needs us to do and demonstrated how he himself does it. This does sound like work. It's the work of evangelization, spreading the Good News of Christ to the world.

It is precisely in this work that he tells us, “you will find rest for yourselves.”


It's a good time to shake off the weariness of the world, and take on the yoke of the disciple.

Discussion questions:

- What would it mean for me personally to take on the yoke of Jesus?
- How can I learn from Jesus' meekness and humility that I can use in my relationships today?

Prayer prompt:

- For the willingness to be ready to work with Jesus to bring others to him.



Gospel: Luke 1:39-47

Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe

DECEMBER 12, 2024

THURSDAY OF THE SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT

But Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?” Luke 1:34

In today's Gospel for the Feast of our Lady of Guadalupe, we hear the story of the Annunciation, which we also heard on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception. It's another chance to really reflect on the significance of this event in the life of Our Lady, and on Mary's total abandonment to God's will and her complete trust in his plan for her life.

She was trusting enough to ask the question, “How can this be?” And she was brave enough after hearing the answer to say: “May it be done unto me according to your word.” In a sense, these two statements from Mary could help us form a guide for discernment. When faced with big life changes, challenges, or difficulties, we can trust him and ask, “how can this be?” And, surrendering to his will in complete trust we can say, “may it be done unto me according to your will.”

Discussion questions:

- What is one small way I can emulate Mary today in accepting God's will for my life?
- Do I have the courage to ask God to help me understand his will?

Prayer prompt:

- For an increase in the virtue of faith.

DECEMBER 13, 2024

FRIDAY OF THE SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT

“To what shall I compare this generation? It is like children who sit in marketplaces and call to one another...” Matthew 11:16

In many ways, this generation can't be pleased, either. Like the petulant children Jesus describes in the Gospel for today, we tend to interpret people's words and actions based on our own biases rather than on truth. Solemnity and devotion are for sanctimonious prigs. Joyfulness and exuberance are silly and embarrassing.

Jesus was describing the critics' rejection of John the Baptist whose message was repentance, and their rejection of his own message of mercy. What his audience wasn't getting was that both men's messages were vital for salvation. Repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And mercy to embrace us in our brokenness. Without repentance, we remain blind to our need for God's grace, and without mercy, we fail to experience the depth of his love and forgiveness. Together, they call us to a transformative relationship with God, in which we can live fully in the light of his promise and grow in faith and the confidence to share this truth with others.

Fasting during Advent is the perfect time to consider our call to repentance, preparing our hearts for the coming of our savior. Then we'll be prepared for the great feast of Christmas, where we can push out our boundaries and invite everyone into the feast.

Discussion questions:

- In what ways do I experience my need for God's grace?
- In what ways do I experience the forgiveness and mercy of God in my life?

Prayer prompt:

- For the grace to be spiritually prepared for the coming of Christ at Christmas.

DECEMBER 14, 2024

SATURDAY OF THE SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT

“So also will the Son of Man suffer at their hands.” Matthew 17:12

Today's Gospel reading takes place immediately after the Transfiguration, “As they were coming down from the mountain.” The disciples had just experienced Jesus’ meeting with Moses and Elijah, which probably triggered their question: “Why do the scribes say Elijah must come first?” The Jewish expectation, based on Scripture and prophecy was that Elijah would come before the Christ, so to them his appearance was out of order.

Jesus explained to them that John the Baptist was the messenger who was sent ahead, so he fulfilled the role of Elijah. And that “they” (the authorities) did not recognize him which led to his being beheaded by Herod. Jesus tells them that he himself would also suffer at their hands.


This is all a bit of a sobering end to the glorious mountaintop moment of the transfiguration, but the intention is to prepare the disciples for what is coming (even if they are a bit slow on the uptake). And these types of readings can be sobering for us in Advent, as we consider that the child in the manger will suffer at the hands of the humans he came to save.

Discussion questions:

- What “mountaintop experiences” have I had with God (think: a retreat, a spiritual book, a conversation with a person whose faith I admire)? And what was my reaction when I had to “come down from the mountain?”

Prayer prompt:

- For an increase of the virtue of hope.



Gospel: Luke 3:10-18

DECEMBER 15, 2024

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

The crowds asked John the Baptist, “What should we do?” Luke 3:10

John the Baptist was a pretty compelling speaker, with the ability to capture people's attention and hold it. A worthy gift to have if you are sent to be the messenger announcing the coming of Christ. In today's Gospel, John is making big waves by proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And the crowd was listening. So much so that they knew there would need to be some evidence of this transformation—how were they to show it? “What should we do?”

John the Baptist didn't miss a beat. They asked, he answered. He tailored his message to his audience, knowing their specific temptations, and he wasn't shy about calling them out on them.

Be honest and stop taking what's not yours – an occupational hazard of being a tax collector. Don't blackmail people and be content with what you've got – a challenge for underpaid and overworked soldiers.

And more broadly, if you have more than you need, give it to someone who doesn't have anything – a temptation for any of us.

MORE



These are the fruits of true repentance and a move toward a life of holiness. It is a message for us any time of year, but particularly important for us in Advent as we wait for the one who comes to baptize us with the Holy Spirit and fire.

How will we show him the evidence of our repentance?

Discussion questions:

- What challenges me the most about today's Gospel reading?
- It is Gaudete Sunday. Gaudete means, "Rejoice!" Joy is one of the most obvious ways we can be "Christ-bearers" in our world. Is there anything holding me back from expressing joy in my salvation?

Prayer prompt:

- For an increase of the virtue of charity.

DECEMBER 16, 2024

MONDAY OF THE THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT

“I shall ask you one question, and if you answer it for me, then I shall tell you by what authority I do these things. Where was John’s baptism from? Was it of heavenly or of human origin?” Matthew 21:25-27

Jesus said to them in reply, “I shall ask you one question, and if you answer it for me, then I shall tell you by what authority I do these things. Where was John’s baptism from? Was it of heavenly or of human origin?” Matthew 21:25-27

Just who do you think you are? This is essentially what the chief priests and elders were asking Jesus. Who did he think he was to do “these things,” like clearing out the temple area and healing people? Who was he responsible to? Jesus replied to their question with a question, a common practice in debates among Jewish rabbis. “Where was John’s baptism from? Was it of heavenly or of human origin?”

The scene that follows could be funny if it weren’t pathetic. These religious authorities decided among themselves it would be better to just not answer the question. Their own authority would be threatened by an answer either way. So, this round goes to Jesus. He will have several more question/answer sessions with these same leaders, with increasing intensity.

MORE



This passage may seem an odd choice for Advent, but it is important to reflect on it for a couple of reasons.

First, it challenges us to consider how we receive the authority of Jesus in our own lives and reminds us to submit to his divine authority in preparation for his coming. Second, the pride of the elders and chief priests stands in contrast to the humility that we are called to embody as Christians. This passage encourages us to set aside pride and skepticism as we await the birth of Christ.

Discussion questions:

- What is my reaction when I am put in a tough spot?
- "Authority" is not a popular idea in our culture. How do I feel about submitting to Jesus' divine authority? What needs to change in my heart?

Prayer prompt:

- For an increase in humility.

DECEMBER 17, 2024

TUESDAY OF THE THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT

Eleazar became the father of Matthan, Matthan the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary. Of her was born Jesus who is called the Christ. Matthew 1:15-16

You know it's Advent when the priest starts reading the genealogy of Jesus, and Catholics start playing the "How many names can I remember?" game. Spoiler alert: everyone taps out by Jechoniah!

But seriously, it was important for the readers of Matthew to understand who Jesus was. At the time of Christ, a person's identity was tied directly to their lineage. These verses told readers that Jesus was Jewish, descended from Abraham and David.

For us, when we (finally) hear "...the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary," we find ourselves oriented because we know that "of her was born Jesus, who is called the Christ." As scripture scholar George Martin says in his book *Bringing the Gospel of Matthew to Life*, "Jesus' past is Israel's past; Jesus marks the next stage in God's plan for his people."

We are walking steadily toward Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus, where we will see in the infant the incarnation of that plan, which is for all of us.

Discussion questions:

- How does knowing Jesus' long line of ancestors help me embrace Jesus' human nature?
- What can the diverse and imperfect people in Jesus' family tree teach me about how God works through my own family history?

Prayer prompt:

- For my family and all families this Advent season.

DECEMBER 18, 2024

WEDNESDAY OF THE THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT

"When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took his wife into his home." Matthew 1:24

Although the Gospels don't record a single word spoken by Joseph, his actions speak volumes. What is known about him shows why he was chosen to protect Mary and the Christ child.

The situation Joseph faced was difficult. By all appearances, the child Mary had conceived was not his, and he planned to quietly end their engagement to protect her from shame. Yet, in a dream, the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph with a remarkable message: the child Mary was carrying was conceived by the Holy Spirit, and this child would save people from their sins.

When Joseph awoke, he did not hesitate or question the dream. Instead, he took Mary into his home, beginning the Holy Family's journey.

Joseph's openness to God's presence allowed him to trust that this message was from the Lord. His response was one of unwavering obedience and faith. In this Advent season, we are invited to reflect on how we, too, can discern God's voice in our lives—whether through prayer, scripture, or the sacraments. Let us ask St. Joseph to intercede for us, so that we may have the courage and clarity to do God's will, just as he did.

Discussion questions:

- How can Joseph's example inspire me to act when I feel uncertain or challenged by God's call in my life?
- In what ways can I cultivate a deeper awareness of God's presence so that I can recognize and follow His will?

Prayer prompt:

- To be open to the Holy Spirit's guidance in every area of our lives.

DECEMBER 19, 2024

THURSDAY OF THE THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT

Both were righteous in the eyes of God, observing all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blamelessly. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren and both were advanced in years. Luke 1:6-7

Poor Zechariah. Every year in Advent, we hear the story of the annunciation of John the Baptist and every year, the focus seems to be squarely on how Zechariah questioned the angel of the Lord and was struck mute until the baby's birth.

Think about it: Zechariah and Elizabeth were both "righteous in the eyes of God" and walked in his ways without reproach. The couple prayed for a child, God heard their prayer and sent an angel to tell them that they would conceive and have a son who would be "great in the eyes of the Lord." He would be filled with the Holy Spirit from the womb and he would inspire people to return to the Lord. The parents of this particular child were important to God, and play a part in our salvation history. It wasn't that it "couldn't happen to a nicer couple," it's that it couldn't happen to ANY other couple. They were chosen.

So even though Zechariah crossed the line by disbelieving the message of the angel, he was still a witness to God's miraculous plan unfolding. Though Zechariah was made mute for his disbelief, he continued to play an essential role. In his silence, he experienced the anticipation of God's promise, watching his wife Elizabeth carry the child who would prepare the way for the Lord. When the time came for John's birth, Zechariah's voice was restored, and he used it to glorify God, recognizing the incredible blessing they had received.

[MORE](#)



Even in our moments of doubt, God remains faithful to His promises and continues to invite us into His story of redemption.

Discussion questions:

- In times of doubt, is my relationship with God weakened, or strengthened?
- How do I respond to the knowledge that God has a special plan and mission just for me?

Prayer prompt:

- To wait in anticipation as God reveals his perfect plan for my life.

DECEMBER 20, 2024
FRIDAY OF THE THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT

Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God." Luke 1:30

Do you ever wonder what Mary was doing when the Angel Gabriel came to her? Unlike Zechariah, who was visited by the angel while serving as a priest in the Holy Place in the sanctuary just paces from the Holy of Holies, we have no idea what she may have been up to. Mary was simply a young woman from the small town of Nazareth, preparing for her future marriage to a man in the same small town. For all we know, she may have been doing her chores, helping with family tasks, or just spending time in quiet reflection. All pretty ordinary things for a woman during that time period.

But Gabriel told her she had found favor with God.

Mary was ordinary in the sense that she lived like many women of her day. She was part of her community and interacted with neighbors and family members. She practiced her Jewish faith, attending synagogue and observing religious traditions. So, in this sense, we can identify with Mary as a real person, dealing with daily life and interactions.

But she was also extraordinary. She was conceived without the stain of original sin, and she conceived Jesus by the Holy Spirit, making her the Mother of God. In these ways, we may not be able to relate to her, but we venerate her for her role in our salvation.



We can pray for the grace to imitate the Blessed Mother in her full cooperation with God's will, her endurance and faith through the many trials she faced, and her always pointing everyone toward her son. All these virtues of Mary can be lived out in our own ordinary lives every day, in every circumstance, and in every relationship.

Discussion questions:

- How can I find ways to please God in my ordinary life?
- What virtues of the Blessed Mother do I most desire?

Prayer prompt:

- Through Mary's intercession that I would desire to always remain in God's will.

DECEMBER 21, 2024

SATURDAY OF THE THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT

Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God." Luke 1:30

Mary was, among all of her other amazing qualities, a determined little woman. Once the Angel Gabriel had made his visit and told her that her elderly and infertile cousin was expecting a baby and that this was her sign that what he had announced to her was going to happen, she set out "in haste" to go to Elizabeth. She had to have been determined because Zechariah and Elizabeth lived in a town some 80 miles away, so getting there would have taken her four or five days on foot. Chances are she wasn't traveling alone, so she had to make all the arrangements for her companions as well. It would have been quite an undertaking for anyone, let alone a young Jewish woman from a small town. But she went.

Today's reading does not spell out her reasons for going. Did she go to see the sign for herself? Did she go to offer help to Elizabeth? Did she go to share her own amazing news with a faithful female relative? It could have been any or all of these reasons that made her take this trip. Had she stayed home, she would not have had the experience of Elizabeth's overwhelming reaction to her greeting and her description of John's leaping for joy in the womb.

Mary's journey to Elizabeth wasn't just a physical one; it was also a journey of faith and love. By taking that step "in haste," Mary teaches us about trusting God's plan, even when the road ahead seems uncertain or difficult. Her visit to Elizabeth not only affirmed the angel's message but also offered a moment of mutual support and joy in the shared experience of God's grace.

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In our own lives, we are often called to make similar journeys—to reach out, to trust, and to share in the joy and faith of others. Like Mary, may we have the courage and determination to step out in faith, and may we always be open to the blessings God has in store for us along the way.

Discussion questions:

- What "journey of faith" is God calling me to make in my own life, and how can I respond with the same determination as Mary?
- When Mary greeted Elizabeth, she received a profound affirmation of her role in God's plan. Who in my life has offered me affirmation or encouragement in my own faith journey? How might I offer that same encouragement to others?

Prayer prompt:

- To grow in the virtue of perseverance.



Gospel: Luke 3:1-6

DECEMBER 22, 2024
FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Mary set out and traveled to the hill country in haste to a town of Judah, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. Luke 1:39-40

As Catholics, today's Gospel reading is very familiar. The Visitation is a critical moment in salvation history, but we might tend to pass over it precisely because it is so familiar. What can we learn from this reading?

Presence. The angel Gabriel had just told Mary she was to be the mother of the Son of God and that her infertile and elderly relative was also bearing a child. So what did she do? She went to her. It would have been easier to stay home, but instead, she traveled "in haste." There are times we can and should be physically present to a friend or relative to offer help, hope, and care as Mary did, even if it is difficult or inconvenient.

Celebration. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting she recognized Mary and Jesus for who they were. Through the Holy Spirit she saw that Mary was the mother of the Lord, and she couldn't contain her joy. Even little John the Baptist leapt for joy in his mother's womb. When we recognize the significance of Mary's role, we are invited to acknowledge the presence of Christ in our lives and the lives of others and celebrate it!

MORE



Surrender. Another way we can imitate Mary is perhaps one that we may always be striving for, and that is total abandonment to God's will. Elizabeth told Mary, "Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled." What would it be like if others could say that of us?

Discussion questions:

- Is there someone I need to be present for this Advent?
- How do I respond to the knowledge that God has a special plan and mission just for me?

Prayer prompt:

- To wait in anticipation as God reveals his perfect plan for my life.

DECEMBER 23, 2024

MONDAY OF THE FOURTH WEEK OF ADVENT

When they came on the eighth day to circumcise the child, they were going to call him Zechariah after his father, but his mother said in reply, "No. He will be called John." Luke 1:59-60

Elizabeth and Zechariah had nine long months to think about what would happen when their baby arrived and when it came time to give him a name. It's very likely that they envisioned the scenario that we see in today's reading. In their time, it was tradition for the son to be named after his father, so the relatives and neighbors who came to the circumcision would have been expecting the baby's name to be Zechariah.

Zechariah and Elizabeth as we know, were a righteous couple, obedient to God. Their conceiving and bearing a child when they were elderly and infertile was a miracle, an answer to prayer, and even more than that. God chose them to be the parents of the forerunner of the Messiah. So, there was no way they were going to go back on this. It was that important. Regardless of the gasps or raised eyebrows, Elizabeth spoke right up and said, "No. He will be called John."

Zechariah confirmed it, and immediately, he could speak, and when he did, he praised God.

The sense of the divine must have been powerful, as "fear came on all their neighbors," and the word of this incident spread like wildfire. They would be watching and waiting to see what would become of little John.

John the Baptist and Jesus are inextricably linked. John showed people how and why to prepare their hearts for the Messiah. Can we hear him speaking to us today, just two days from Christmas?

Discussion questions:

- When have I experienced something powerful and divine? What was my reaction?
- Have I ever been surprised at what I believe God is calling me to do?

Prayer prompt:

- For courage to remain obedient to God's will regardless.

DECEMBER 24, 2024

TUESDAY OF THE FOURTH WEEK OF ADVENT

"You, my child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way..." Luke 1:76

Our Gospel reading for the last day of Advent is Zechariah's beautiful, prophetic prayer of praise. Also known as the Benedictus, it is prayed during Lauds in the Liturgy of the Hours. It is recited or sung every day during Morning Prayer as part of the Church's daily prayer cycle. It's that important.

Zechariah's speech was restored, and the Holy Spirit inspired him to prophesy—explaining exactly the divine nature of what has happened and what will happen. "You, my child, will be called the prophet of the Most High..." John will prepare the way for the Messiah, giving them "knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins." And that glorious day is made possible through God's mercy and compassion toward us.

As we stand on the threshold of Christmas, Zechariah's prophetic prayer reminds us of God's faithfulness to His promises and His deep

compassion for humanity. John the Baptist's mission to prepare the way for the Lord is a call for us, too—to prepare our hearts for Christ's coming and to share the knowledge of salvation with others.

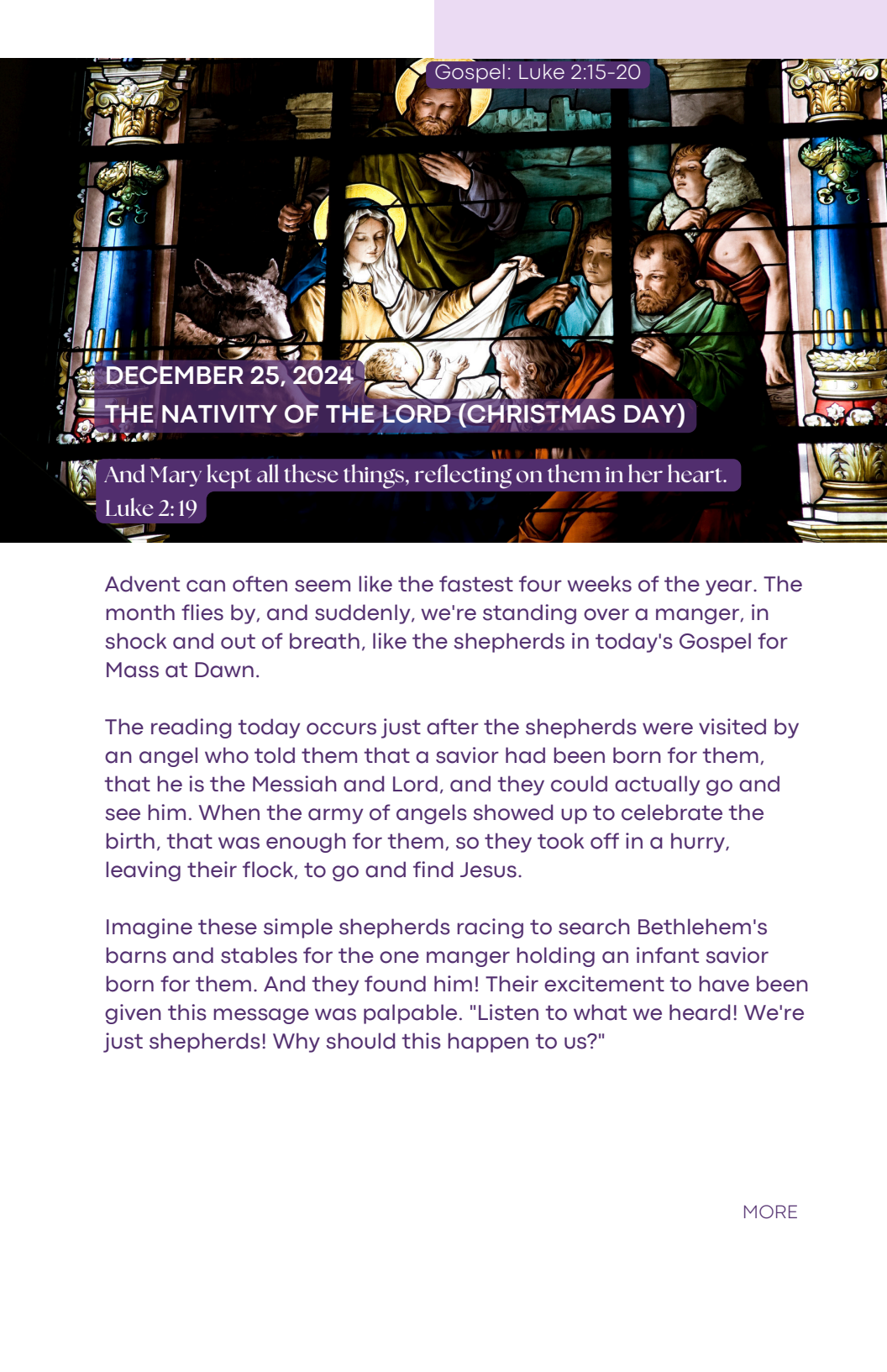
It starts with the birth of Christ, with the infant in swaddling clothes. As we prepare to gather around the manger tomorrow, let us reflect on God's mercy toward us. He sends us his only son as the "dawn from on high," who will "guide our feet into the way of peace."

Discussion questions:

- What has been the biggest challenge for me spiritually during this Advent season?
- The Benedictus praises God for His mercy and the forgiveness of sins. How does reflecting on God's mercy help me better understand the true meaning of Christmas?

Prayer prompt:

- For the grace to share my faith in word and in deed.



Gospel: Luke 2:15-20

DECEMBER 25, 2024

THE NATIVITY OF THE LORD (CHRISTMAS DAY)

And Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart.

Luke 2:19

Advent can often seem like the fastest four weeks of the year. The month flies by, and suddenly, we're standing over a manger, in shock and out of breath, like the shepherds in today's Gospel for Mass at Dawn.

The reading today occurs just after the shepherds were visited by an angel who told them that a savior had been born for them, that he is the Messiah and Lord, and they could actually go and see him. When the army of angels showed up to celebrate the birth, that was enough for them, so they took off in a hurry, leaving their flock, to go and find Jesus.

Imagine these simple shepherds racing to search Bethlehem's barns and stables for the one manger holding an infant savior born for them. And they found him! Their excitement to have been given this message was palpable. "Listen to what we heard! We're just shepherds! Why should this happen to us?"

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As we stand before the manger today, we are not only in awe of the miracle of Christ's birth but also reminded of our own journey through Advent. Like the shepherds, we may feel unworthy of such a profound gift, yet here we are, invited into the story. Their joy and urgency in seeking the Savior mirror our own longing to encounter Christ in our lives.

Mary's quiet reflection on these moments invites us to do the same. In the busyness of the season, let us take time to reflect on the significance of this moment—not just as a historical event but as a living reality that continues to unfold in our hearts today.

Discussion Questions:

- What does it mean for you personally to come "in haste" to the celebration of Christmas? How can you cultivate that sense of urgency in seeking a deeper relationship with Christ?
- In what ways can we, like the shepherds and Mary, share our experiences of encountering Christ with others this Christmas season? How can we encourage others to reflect on the significance of Jesus's birth?

Prayer prompt:

- For the grace to recognize and cherish the moments of joy, wonder, and obedience in our own faith journeys and to invite others to experience the love and light of the Savior born for us all.



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