

ADVENT 2021

Awaken to New Light



DAILY REFLECTIONS,
PRACTICES & PRAYERS

S. James Meyer

Advent on the Inside

Are you ready for this? Are you ready for the promise fulfilled and the possibility realized? Ready for anticipation, excitement, and gobsmacking, joy-filled amazement? Are you ready to lace up your sandals, grip your walking stick, and journey down the dusty road that leads to the love you believe in?

This changes everything. At least it ought to. But before Christmas can truly change the world around us, we must first let it change the world within us. Advent calls us to prepare our hearts and minds, our muscles and bones, and our moods and attitudes so incarnation can seep through our neurons and soak into our marrow.

The journey ahead awakens us to new light. Are we ready to turn our lives toward this brilliant sun? Are we ready to encounter the radiant Creator not only around us and among us, but also within us? Christ seeks to enter the world by first coming to life inside us. We know this, of course, but are we ready to let it happen? If so, let's go...

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NOVEMBER 28
First Sunday of Advent

JEREMIAH 33:14-16 • 1 THESSALONIANS 3:12—4:2 • LUKE 21:25–28, 34–36

The Light WE LET IN

“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars.”

LUKE 21:25

Driving east at dawn, the sunrise is awe-inspiring. Initially. But before long, you're reaching for sunglasses, lowering the visor, and squinting your eyes as the bright morning star clears the horizon.

As finite beings, we are overwhelmed by our Creator's full magnificence. God's brilliance is mind-blowing. Fortunately, we are continuously gifted with flashes of divine warmth, joy, mercy, kindness, and unrelenting love. They are given to us in the giggle of a child, the comfort of hot chocolate on a cold day, the opening of a flower, the smile of a stranger, and the hug of a grandmother.

This creation and everything in it, as noted in our Genesis story, is good. It is the artwork of the loving Creator. When journeyed well, Advent opens our eyes, our ears, our minds, and our hearts to it. By seeing God in the sun, the moon, and the stars, we prepare ourselves to bask in the full warmth of Christ.

DAILY PRACTICE Be someone's sunrise today. With a smile in your eyes and joy on your face, make a call, send a note, or write a post that simply says, "I see Christ alive through you!"

ADVENT PRAYER *Loving Creator of dawn, may the warmth of your light and the spark of your joy ignite compassion in my life.*

The People WE LET IN

“Many will come from the east and the west.”

MATTHEW 8:11

The last words Rooster said to me were, “Thank you for giving me someone to love.” I thought I was on the street to serve him, but I was so wrong. Rooster was a homeless man in the most stereotypical way—a war veteran who self-medicated to numb the pain of trauma and loss. His speech was slurred, his clothing was tattered, and his odor was pungent.

Surely, this man was not a prophet. Oh, but he was! His suffering and vulnerability were right there for all the world to see, yet nearly all the world looked away. I was there to be Christ to him, and in my shallow arrogance was surprised that he was there to be Christ to me.

Divine love is all inclusive. If the conditions of Jesus’ birth teach us anything, it is this: prepare to encounter Christ in the most unexpected people and in the most unexpected places.

DAILY PRACTICE Identify one person whom you would normally ignore or avoid. Look into their eyes and see the vulnerability, the humanity, the pain, and the divine love wanting so badly to be shared.

ADVENT PRAYER *Open my eyes, my mind, and my heart, O Lord, that I might see you, smell you, hear you, and touch you in the vulnerability of every person I encounter.*

The Self-Talk

WE LET IN

They left their nets and followed him.

MATTHEW 4:20

As a ten-year-old little-leaguer, I couldn't hit the ball. Every time I stepped to the plate, I was anxious and tense, and a voice in my head kept saying, "You can't hit a fastball." Sure enough, I never got a hit.

Then one day I looked out and saw Mikey Kleinschmidt pitching for the other team. I liked Mikey. He went to my school and we played together at recess. Suddenly, all I saw was a friend. And when Mikey fired the first pitch, I swung with all my might and knocked the ball off the center field wall. In the flash of friendship, I set down the nets of my anxieties and self-doubts. I quieted the negative voice. I was changed.

When Jesus calls his disciples, when he calls us, the easy part is saying yes—yes, I will follow you! The hard part is leaving our nets behind and walking away from all the inner voices telling us we can't.

DAILY PRACTICE Name the nets that entangle you, the nets that hold you back from swimming freely in the current of Christ's love. What happens if you set those nets down and walk away? Try it today.

ADVENT PRAYER *Grant me the compassion to love as you love, and the spiritual freedom to live as you lived.*

The Loaves

WE LET IN

They all ate and were satisfied.

MATTHEW 15:37

The steak was amazing, the wine brilliant, and the dessert rich. But later I sat up unable to sleep. My heart burned and my mind raced. Clearly, I had eaten until I was full, perhaps too full, but the dinner itself had been unsatisfying. It was a business dinner intended to foster relationships, but there were agendas and politics, so no one relaxed; no one dared recline at table.

There is a difference between being full and being satisfied. How much of our energy and our mind space do we fill with things that are entirely unsatisfying? The brims of our cups often overflow with stress and anxiety. Our lives can be quite full, perhaps even rich, but still empty and unsatisfying.

The gift Jesus shares with us is, indeed, very satisfying. It fills us lovingly with peace, joy, hope, and all good things. Are we preparing for a Christmas that is truly satisfying or one that is merely full?

DAILY PRACTICE Tune yourself to another's deeper hunger. What is it they starve for? A sense of belonging? Forgiveness? Encouragement? Affirmation? Let that be the loaf and fish you share today.

ADVENT PRAYER *Divine Source of all nourishment, you feed the need in others through the gifts you've given to me. Help me see what I have in abundance to feed the world.*

The Rock

WE LET IN

“...be like a wise man who built his house on rock.”

MATTHEW 7:24

Like so many families on hot summer days, Michelle and I would take our kids to the beach where we'd build elaborate sandcastles. The trick was to find the sweet spot where the sand was wet but not within reach of the lapping waves. Still, by late afternoon, the winds would pick up and a more aggressive surf would wash our work back into the cold Lake Michigan waters.

It was a great life lesson on impermanence. Nothing material endures. What remains of all those sandcastles even to this day, however, is the joyful memory of afternoons shared together. I like to believe we raised our kids on these rocks of love.

As we journey through Advent, we find ourselves building sandcastles out of tinsel and lights. In January, the shifting winds will blow it all back into boxes we store in attics. What endures? Hopefully, the love we share. Such is the bedrock that lies in the manger.

DAILY PRACTICE Create a story-worthy memory for someone. This might take a little thinking. What can you say, give, or do that will lift the day for another person?

ADVENT PRAYER *Prepare my heart, my mind, and my character, O Lord, to serve as a solid rock upon which the tired and weary can find rest.*

The Faith

WE LET IN

“Do you believe that I can do this?”

MATTHEW 9:28

In the holiday movie *Elf*, Santa’s sleigh is powered by Christmas spirit. As the spirit wanes, the sleigh sputters until it crashes in Central Park. Only after New Yorkers dig within themselves, find their childlike belief, and share Christmas spirit does the sleigh take to the skies once again.

It is a fabulous story that, like most good works of fiction, expresses a larger truth. Our faith, what we actually believe, gives power to all great things. Jesus often links the miracles he performs to the faith of the one who benefits. Indeed, we are reminded that the power of everything he offers us—hope, compassion, healing, wholeness—has no lasting effect if we don’t place our faith in it.

Advent invites us into a deep evaluation of our own faith. What do we really believe in? The idea of a loving unity of all humanity with God has no power unless we truly believe in love, unity, humanity, and God.

DAILY PRACTICE Keep a trust journal today. Write down the names of people, beliefs, experiences, and things you truly trust. How are they different from the sources of your anxiety?

ADVENT PRAYER *Thank you, O God, for the gift of faith, for showing me where my mind, my heart, and my soul can find lasting and profound peace, hope, and love.*

DECEMBER 4
Saturday the First Week

ISAIAH 30:19–21, 23–26 • MATTHEW 9:35—10:1, 5A, 6–8

The Heaven WE LET IN

“The kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

MATTHEW 10:7

Charles waited nervously as Katy walked up the aisle with her father. As they approached, he stepped forward, took his bride by both hands, and whispered, “I love you.” He then embraced her dad who said to him, “This is the day the Lord has made. Rejoice. Be glad.”

Surely, for Charles, Katy, and their families, the kingdom of heaven is at hand. If heaven is eternal life in union with our loving God, then the kingdom of heaven is as near as our own heartbeat, as close as our compassion. It can start right here, right now if we choose it.

Jesus comes among us in a radical demonstration of how close God is, so close in fact that he embodies the same flesh and blood as our own. It’s very personal and extremely present. As we walk up the aisle of Advent toward union with the living Christ, let us rejoice and be glad!

DAILY PRACTICE Let this be a day for spreading joy sevenfold. Make a list of seven people and send a small expression of joy toward each.

ADVENT PRAYER

*This is the life, the love, and the day the Lord has made,
let us rejoice and be glad.*

The Opening

WE LET IN

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

LUKE 3:4

Have you ever tried talking to someone at a giant tech company? Or an insurance company? Or even the Vatican? I mean actually have a human-level exchange that includes listening and conversation? You will feel like Don Quixote flailing at a giant windmill. The massive mechanism simply churns its wind, oblivious to your presence.

In the name of efficiency, we create bureaucracies that make life more complicated for people with real issues, concerns, and problems. Arguably, it can feel dehumanizing.

Such is not the way of the Lord. If we sincerely want more Christ in our world, we simply need to clear the clutter that gets in the way of direct relationships. It’s a straightforward proposition: Love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. What holds us back?

DAILY PRACTICE Identify a single way to simplify Christmas this year. Perhaps you bake one less type of cookie or serve dinner buffet-style. Find just one thing to make Christmas more about time shared with people and less about the trimmings.

ADVENT PRAYER *Brother Jesus, you came into this world in the simplest and most humble way possible. Grant me the insight to see the value in that, and the wisdom to live my own life in the same way.*

The Others

WE LET IN

“We have seen incredible things today.”

LUKE 5:26

The woman had just two items: a box of crackers and a package of diapers. It was late, past 10 pm, and she looked exhausted as she inserted her card into the reader at the checkout. It didn't work. She tried again. And again. “I have to buy these diapers,” she said nervously as she rummaged for cash but came up empty.

“Don't worry about it,” said the man behind her. “We'll just add it to mine.” The clerk scanned his single item—a frozen pizza—and he slid his own card in the reader. The woman's face melted with relief. She thanked him profusely, to which he simply said, “Glad to do it. You'll pay it forward sometime, I'm sure.”

Little things matter. A lot. Hidden far beyond the dramatic moments of movies and novels, ordinary people show extraordinary love every day. If we open our eyes and our hearts, we will see Christ come alive moment by moment, breath by breath, throughout our lives.

DAILY PRACTICE Recall a small, unexpected favor someone did for you. Say a prayer of gratitude and then identify a way to pay it forward with a small, unexpected favor for someone else today.

ADVENT PRAYER *Thank you for all the small gifts of grace, the momentary miracles that have shown up to help me through the hour or minute.*

The Illogic

WE LET IN

“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 the cult classic film *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*, the crew of the USS Enterprise wrestles with an ethical dilemma—does the good of the many outweigh the good of the few, or even the one? Most of us, in the words of Mr. Spock, would “accept that maxim as logical.”

But God is not bound by the constraints of reason. Love stubbornly disregards logic. We do crazy things like commit our lives in marriage, donate kidneys to coworkers, and buy groceries to stock food pantries.

The Messiah enters the world literally and figuratively among the lost sheep far removed from the population center in Jerusalem or the privilege of the Temple. Why? Because even the very least among us is worth as much to God as all the rest of us. Love is illogical, thank God.

DAILY PRACTICE Reach out with a gift to the lost and lonely today. Perhaps it’s a neighbor who gets no visitors, a homeless person who gets no respect, or a single mom who gets no time to herself.

ADVENT PRAYER *Gracious Good Shepherd, I have been lost many times in my life, searching, seeking, and wandering alone in deserts of doubt and despair. Thank you for never giving up on me!*

Wednesday of the Second Week*(Feast of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary)*

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

The Mystery

WE LET IN

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

LUKE 1:38

The job interview was going along swimmingly, things were clicking, and then the dreaded question came: where do you see yourself in five years? Sahara knew it was coming; it’s standard. But she had no answer. Bravely, she spoke her truth, “Wherever my path leads.”

Cultural convention tells us to take control of our lives, to establish a vision and a plan for our future. Yet, if you ask anyone past the age of eighty to identify life’s most pivotal moments, she’ll never mention anything she had planned. The gift of life has a way of unwrapping itself on its own terms. The question is whether we will embrace the journey with all its twists, turns, joys, and sorrows, or if we’ll resist it and try to run our own show.

Mary’s great “yes” and the Christmas it precipitates show us the wonderment of love made possible when we stop seeing life as our own song and start seeing it as God’s instrument.

DAILY PRACTICE Surrender. Close your eyes, lean against the wall, and let Christ’s warm presence hold you up for a few minutes.

ADVENT PRAYER (silently meditate as you repeat these prayerful words)

May it be done to me (as you breath in)

according to your word. (as you breathe out)

The Reverence

WE LET IN

“From the days of John the Baptist until now, the Kingdom of heaven suffers violence.” MATTHEW 11:12

When working on a public awareness campaign with a domestic abuse center, I asked how they define violence. The answer has stayed with me: “Any words or actions that compromise the dignity of another person are violent.” Whoa. Regrettably, I’ve done that.

Talk about a come-to-Jesus moment! In my ego-drive to raise myself up or in my pettiness to even a score, how often have I said or done things that compromised the dignity of another? How often have my self-critical thoughts, words, and actions done violence to myself or someone else?

The birth of Jesus closes the gap between heaven and earth. Thus, as Jesus says, the kingdom of heaven is at hand. The way Christ enters the world—poor, humble, in a manger among the animals—sends a clear message to humanity: there is no person anywhere who is beneath the sacred dignity of Christ’s own self.

DAILY PRACTICE Think of someone whom you have diminished through your critical thoughts, words, gossip, actions, or inactions. Say a prayer for them.

ADVENT PRAYER

May the breath of my life give joy to all others.

May the beat of my heart give love to all others.

May the action of my hands give kindness to all others.

The Voices WE LET IN

“Wisdom is vindicated by her works.”

MATTHEW 11:19

It took Seth six months to build up the courage to ask Aliza out. They were already good friends and she obviously enjoyed his company, but the fear of rejection was gripping. So he hesitated. And delayed. And waited. Good intentions are often plump grapes that die on the vine.

We are often more present to our self-doubt than we are to our innate giftedness. We may sit for thirty minutes and meditate on affirmations, but then yield the rest of the day to thoughts that leave us frozen. This is not the way of wisdom. Wisdom is present to the positive voice that spurs us to take action and share our gifts with others.

When Mary said “yes,” she was more present to the voice of positivity and possibility than to the voice of doubt and fear. This wise choice, of course, opened the way to earth-redeeming action. What voices hold you back from believing that Christ lives in and works through you?

DAILY PRACTICE Share a piece of yourself you’ve been holding back. Sing out loud, dance in the parking lot, buy a stranger’s coffee, or do something else to show the world what living joy looks like.

ADVENT PRAYER *Lead me, Lord, to a clear mind, free of the negativity and criticisms of the world around me.*

The Reflection

WE LET IN

As they were coming down from the mountain...

MATTHEW 17:9A

After twenty-eight days and 450 miles, Michelle finished her pilgrimage on the Camino de Santiago. We sat together in an outdoor café in the Spanish city of Santiago de Compostela, and Michelle spoke of mixed emotions. While the journey had given her wonderful experiences and insights, she sadly felt unchanged.

The coming weeks, however, would open revelations. Only after she completed and left the Camino was she able to reflect and let it seep in. That's just how life works. We need to come off the mountain to process the journey.

Advent is a time of pondering and reflection. It offers us a deep breath between ordinary time and extraordinary time, space to walk down the mountain of routine and reflect on the past year's journey. How have we grown? Are we wiser? Deeper? More compassionate?

DAILY PRACTICE Write down these questions and answer them: What turned out to be the most challenging journey in your life? How did you grow in wisdom as a result? How did you grow in compassion?

ADVENT PRAYER *Loving Creator, grant me the wisdom to grow in gratitude for the journey you've given me. Help me see how you have been revealed to me, and how you reveal yourself through me with each step I walk.*

The Motivation

WE LET IN

“Teacher, what should we do?” LUKE 3:12

“Well, I guess that’s my prayer now...what am I called to do?” Zeke was responding to my question as we shared beers on the porch. Already in his mid-fifties, he had just lost his job due to the pandemic. The question *What should I do now?* was before him. Being a deeply spiritual man, Zeke had always approached his work as a vocation.

Within our culture, we are often taught to approach decisions about work and career in a way that is self-serving or ego-serving. For many, the ultimate goal is to win the lottery and free ourselves from having to do anything at all. Eventually, of course, we discover that true happiness and fulfillment are found when we invest our time, talent, and energy in living out Christ’s mission.

In the final analysis, Christianity is more of an action than it is an idea. After John the Baptist tells his followers to prepare the way, they respond by asking what they should do. This isn’t a simple matter of praying hard and avoiding sin. Advent calls us to prepare to be active.

DAILY PRACTICE Draw two overlapping circles. Label one “what humanity needs” and label the other “gifts I have.” What lies in the space where the circles overlap? This is where you will find your joy.

ADVENT PRAYER *Push me, Lord, into the wilderness of the world, beyond stained glass boundaries into the streets, backroads, and managers of creation where your surprising presence explodes as pure love.*

The Authority

WE LET IN

“Neither shall I tell you by what authority I do these things.”

MATTHEW 21:27

A dark red car drove up and a short man popped out. “Who gave you permission to be here?” he barked. It was 10:30 on a Friday night and we had set up our StreetLights Outreach post on a corner by Whitney Park, an area of the city that had become run down and a bit rough. He identified himself as the neighborhood’s alderman and asked a second time, “Who said you could be here? The park closes at 10:00.”

“Whose permission do we need?” I asked. “Which office at City Hall grants permits to feed the hungry and visit the lonely?” He responded with silence before driving away. Sometimes we become so swaddled in the false security of human power structures that we forget the only real authority comes from God.

Advent calls us to do what John the Baptist, Mary, Joseph, Jesus, and so many saints did—live as cooperative radicals. This doesn’t involve fighting the system or even ignoring it, but rather choosing to prioritize a different system.

DAILY PRACTICE Break a social rule today.

ADVENT PRAYER *Inspire me, Creator of all! You alone are my God. Seed within me the courage to depart from the easy path, to stand against the tide as Jesus did in loving kindness and deep reverence for all people.*

The Unexpected

WE LET IN

“Amen, I say to you, tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the Kingdom of God before you.” MATTHEW 21:31

In the brilliant 2019 film *The Peanut Butter Falcon*, the main character, Zak (Zack Gottsagen), is a young man with Down syndrome who runs away from an assisted living facility. Along the way, he teams up with a ragamuffin named Tyler (Shia LaBeouf) who lives on the margins with his own demons. Tyler is uniquely able to see the value, capability, and courage in Zak that no one else sees.

As the story unfolds, Tyler’s belief in Zak gives life to both. This stands in stark contrast to the way Zak is regarded by others, including the professional caregivers at the facility where he had been living.

We who live in the mainstream are often blind to the sacred dignity of those on the margins. How often do we unwittingly apply labels, stereotypes, and expectations that diminish those who don’t conform? Advent reminds us to prepare for a messiah who, born in the most unlikely circumstances, defies all of our tidy expectations.

DAILY PRACTICE Meditate on how your journey has wandered outside the lines, how you have not conformed to the expectations others imposed upon you. How good does it feel to be loved anyway?

ADVENT PRAYER

*God, let the world see you in my scars.
Let them know you in my brokenness.
Let them recognize you in my blemishes.*

The Miracles

WE LET IN

“Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed...” LUKE 7:22

When I was fifteen, a neurosurgeon removed a section of my fractured skull and repaired an artery that had been hemorrhaging on my brain for three days. It was the sort of injury that usually results in brain damage or death unless treated within the first few hours.

Some credit science and medicine for the fact that I survived with no brain damage or paralysis. Others credit faith and call it a miracle. But the point of incarnation, the essence of Christmas, makes both true. The material world and the spiritual world unite in loving wholeness. A miracle happens every time a tomato ripens or a child dances.

It’s easy to grow judgmental toward the materialistic expression of Christmas. Fair enough. But it’s also easy to become so ascetic that we judge creation itself. The true Christmas spirit is the ability to see the loving union between heaven and earth.

DAILY PRACTICE Celebrate the holy wonder of creation today. Praise the flowers by giving one away. Praise the trees by adorning one with an ornament. Praise the waters by reducing your usage of single-use plastics.

ADVENT PRAYER *Inspire within me, you who gave birth to all creation, profound reverence for the earth and all its people.*

The Acceptance

WE LET IN

*“What did you go out to the desert to see
—a reed swayed by the wind?”*

LUKE 7:24

Rachel was more than a little frustrated. The kitchen was a mess—more than a mess, a disaster. Jordan, her twelve-year-old son, had been making what he called a Chocolate Soufflé Omelet. Later, when she relayed the story to her husband, he laughed and said, “Well, what did you expect? The boy is twelve.”

As parents, grandparents, spouses, friends, and colleagues, one of the greatest gifts we give one another is the freedom and support to grow fully into the person each is created to be. Likewise, one of the greatest disservices we impose on one another is to expect the other person to be who we think they ought to be.

Can we accept a messiah who does not conform to our expectations? The Jesus born into this world will challenge the boundaries of our notions. He will upset our idea of justice, tell us to serve the least among us, and show us how to love our enemies.

DAILY PRACTICE Celebrate your individual expression today. Draw a picture, take a photo, or write a poem that completes this sentence: I am _____.

ADVENT PRAYER *Thank you, Dear God, for making a one-of-a-kind self-portrait of you. Thank you for the freedom to transcend all other expectations and embrace this earthen image of you.*

The Possibility

WE LET IN

“After the Babylonian exile, Jechoniah became the father of Shealtiel, Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel...” MATTHEW 1:12

If you bring up Jechoniah, Shealtiel, or Zerubbabel during a barbecue with neighbors, you’ll likely find yourself talking to the shrubs. Few people know who they are, and even fewer care. What possible impact do these ancients from 2500 years ago have on our lives today?

Arguably, without their effort and leadership, the Jewish nation would have dissipated or dissolved during or after the Babylonian exile. How would that have impacted the history of humanity? Wow! It’s difficult to even imagine. Remarkably, they had no idea what historical road they were paving. They just faithfully went about their work.

None of us have any clue what ripples we are putting in motion with the stones we toss into humanity’s pond. We don’t know how God’s creation will continue to unfold. Yet, we, too, faithfully go about our work anyway, touching lives and loving neighbors. Sooner or later, that’s how Christmas comes into being.

DAILY PRACTICE Be the flap of a butterfly’s wings today. Simply go about your day in faith that God uses your kindness to move the world.

ADVENT PRAYER

Let me be your presence.

Let me share your smile.

Let me speak your hope.

The Nudge

WE LET IN

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

MATTHEW 1:24

Salvador loved golfing. After he retired, he'd often play five or even six rounds a week. Then one day, he just sort of quit. Now he golfs only one day a week and spends five days volunteering at a local hospital, escorting patients in wheelchairs.

When asked about it, he just smiles and says, "I don't know. I just woke up one day and a little voice inside told me to start doing something more meaningful." Then Sal explains that he used to golf because it brought him happiness, but now he's bringing joy to others. "There's a difference between happiness and joy. I've found joy."

Advent nudges us with a voice that says, "Wake up!" It's pretty tempting to reduce life to a self-satisfying routine. But that's not the Christmas spirit. It's certainly not the Christian spirit. The voice that calls out also whispers in our ear: *Bring JOY to the world!*

DAILY PRACTICE Bring joy to someone outside your own home. Reach out with no other purpose than simply to lift someone up.

ADVENT PRAYER

I am joy, I am hope, I am love.

Open my spirit eyes that I might see it.

Open my spirit heart that I might share it.

DECEMBER 19
Fourth Sunday of Advent

MICAH 5:1-4A • HEBREWS 10:5-10 • LUKE 1:39-45

The Vision

WE LET IN

*“Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken
to you by the Lord would be fulfilled.”*

LUKE 1:45

On the show *Shark Tank*, entrepreneurs present ideas to a panel of investors called “Sharks.” If one of these Sharks believes in the vision and character of the person, he or she will invest their own money on a leap of faith, believing the payback will come later. What if God was on “Shark Tank” and we were panelists? Would we believe in God’s vision enough to invest our lives?

This is what Mary faced. Gabriel, serving as God’s emissary, presented God’s vision—let me come to life within you. Mary said yes and went all in. Do we? Is this not the very same proposal God places before us each day?

Belief in God is not a simple matter of believing that God exists or that God will provide; it’s about buying into God’s vision for creation and investing our lives in it. Are we prepared to do that? Are we prepared for the blessings that come with it?

DAILY PRACTICE As you hear the world around you today, listen and attend with the ear of your heart. What message does the angel whisper to you?

ADVENT PRAYER *Lord, give me a heart that hears and a soul that sees. Awaken me to angels singing in the breeze and dancing across my dreams.*

The Mystery WE LET IN

“Then the angel departed from her.”

LUKE 1:38

The night after my dad’s funeral, I sat in my study at home, admiring the beautiful bookcases he had built for me. The lights installed in the upper sections had stopped working over ten years earlier, so I appealed across the life/death divide, “Dad, you have some extra time on your hands now, perhaps you can fix these lights?”

When I returned an hour later, all three bookcases were lit up brightly. I called to my wife and son to see and celebrate with me. Tears of grief and gladness ran from my eyes. I left the lights on when I went to bed, but by the next morning, they had stopped working, never to come on again.

Mystery flashes and flees. It reveals itself only long enough to illuminate, and then it slips away, leaving us to abide in a deeper faith or retreat into doubt. When the angel left, Mary’s faith remained. Advent calls us to prepare to believe—even after the angel falls silent and the lights go out.

DAILY PRACTICE Sit quietly and recall a time in which God’s mystery was revealed to you in a flash, a moment of insight, awareness, or illumination.

ADVENT PRAYER

*Thanks be to God for mystery.
Thanks be to God for mystic moments
of sun risings and surprising insights.*

The Everyone

WE LET IN

*“...how does this happen to me, that the mother
of my Lord should come to me?”*

LUKE 1:43

Walt had been walking through the parking lot when he spotted a vintage Ford Thunderbird. It brought back memories. Wanting to meet the owner, he asked around, and the path led through a sea of cubicles to Clarisse. “Oh my gosh, Mr. Jackson, sir. I can’t believe... what did I...” Clarisse exclaimed.

“Call me Walt,” he said while handing her a cup of coffee. He noticed a buzzing murmur among Clarisse’s coworkers. It made him uncomfortable. In this corporate culture, top executives did not take time for small talk in the trenches. “I love your car and I was hoping you might tell me about it.”

Clarisse went home that night inspired that the CEO engaged her not as a low-ranking employee but as a friend and peer. Advent calls us to prepare for a Christ who does the same, a Christ who doesn’t lord it over us, but goes out of his way to sit down with us.

DAILY PRACTICE God will surely come to you today, as God does every day, in the smile of a stranger, the words of a book, the outreach from a friend. How will you respond?

ADVENT PRAYER *Sit down with me, my dear friend, Jesus. Let us be present in one another. Teach me to love as you do.*

The Depth

WE LET IN

*“He has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.”*

LUKE 1:53

Maggie drew on her morning coffee as she looked out her patio door at the lone crab apple tree in full bloom. A single room, a single window, a single tree, a single moment. Simplicity. She felt peace. Serenity. The very presence of God.

Her life was so different than it had been for, well, most of her life. She and her husband, Jack, had toiled to provide a nice home and a big yard for their kids, to take exciting vacations, and to drive nice cars. When Alzheimer’s claimed Jack six years earlier, Maggie felt empty, alone, but also relieved. Now, she was discovering true depth. A single window. A single tree. A single moment.

Advent cautions us to prepare to let go so we can let in. Let go of expectations so we can let in possibility. Let go of anxiety so we can let in tranquility. Let go of notions so we can let in truth. Let go of breadth so we can let in depth. Let go of fear so we can let in love.

DAILY PRACTICE Sit and look at a tree, even a dormant one. Ponder the mystery and be one with Creator and creation.

ADVENT PRAYER

*Glory to God in the highest!
And peace to God’s people on earth!*

The Miracle

WE LET IN

“What, then, will this child be?”

LUKE 1:66

Oscar held his daughter for the first time and whispered the words of every parent, “She’s a miracle.” Indeed. Every new life defies the odds. It’s easy to see in the moment, but more challenging when the toddler scribbles on the wall in permanent marker.

Children test our willingness to *let go and let God*. We are so tempted to prune and direct their growth into miniature images of ourselves. But such trees have shallow roots and are fragile. Miracles require faith, and faith asks us to trust that each human person travels a God-given journey and we, even as parents, are merely supportive companions who provide loving encouragement.

Like Zechariah and Elizabeth, Joseph and Mary provided their son with rich, nourishing soil into which he could be rooted, and then trusted God to guide his growth and self-discovery. Shouldn’t we give the same gift to one another?

DAILY PRACTICE Imagine or visit a place where you can see teenagers as they awkwardly experiment in self-discovery, trying to figure out who they are. Smile as you say a short prayer for them.

ADVENT PRAYER

*Bless all who are searching and seeking,
we who are unsure, unfinished, and insecure.
Bless us with awe and amazement as we discover
You in the world around, between, and within.*

The Love WE LET IN

*“In the tender compassion of our God the dawn
from on high shall break upon us”*

LUKE 1:78

Maria was never called to the podium to deliver a press conference. She was never quoted in the news, and never had her name engraved on a plaque. No glistening trophies sat on her shelf; no fancy diplomas hung on her wall. She was a mom. Simply, gloriously, a mom.

With tender compassion, she tucked her children into bed each night, and with smiling encouragement she welcomed them into each new morning. With patience, she showed them how to be strong, kind, joyful, and hope-filled. This is how God comes to life—not by some thunderous decree, not in neon lights, but by each seemingly silent whisper of love.

O silent night, O holy night. As we prepare to enter into a new dawn of peace and goodwill, let us wrap ourselves in the warm quilt of the mother’s love, the father’s love, Christ’s love, our God who is love.

DAILY PRACTICE Draw a line down the middle of a sheet of paper. Title the left side “What Matters” and title the right side “What Doesn’t Matter.” In the left column, write “Love” and in the right column write “everything else.” Hang it on your bathroom mirror from now until New Year’s.

ADVENT PRAYER *Peace on earth, goodwill toward all.*

DECEMBER 25

The Nativity of the Lord, Christmas Day

VIGIL: ISAIAH 62:1–5 • ACTS 13:16–17, 22–25 • MATTHEW 1:1–25 or 1:18–25

The Exuberant Joy WE LET IN

“While they were there, the time came for her to have her child.”

LUKE 2:6

I wasn't ready for Christmas morning. The 10:00 p.m. Christmas Eve Mass had been wonderful, and the hospitality joyful, but it was well into the wee hours when I finally got to bed. At 7:00 AM, I wasn't ready for three boys to explode through the bedroom door, pounce on our bed, and demand we wake up and come downstairs. I just wasn't ready.

But Christmas doesn't wait for us to be ready, thanks be to God. Christmas does not wait for us to wipe the sleep from our eyes, or to brush our teeth, or to make the coffee. Christmas doesn't wait for us to be perfect, sinless, showered, or coiffed. Ready or not, Christmas blows through the door, bounces on the bed, and shines its bright face upon us wherever we are, as we are.

What a gift!

DAILY PRACTICE Channel your inner child today. Laugh, sing, dance, and devour a cookie with enough gusto to get frosting on your face.

ADVENT PRAYER

Joy to the world!

Thank you, God, for not waiting until I was deserving.

Thank you, God, for not waiting until I would understand.

Thank you, God, for not waiting until I was ready.

Joy to the world!



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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