

DAILY REFLECTIONS FOR ADVENT 2023

JOURNEYING TOGETHER THROUGH ADVENT



ANN NAFFZIGER

Recent and upcoming church initiatives are a good reminder that we are called to *journey together*. Faith is not something we do alone but a community experience. We worship together, learn from each other, accompany one another, and serve those who are in need. Together, we are the Body of Christ. Together, we are the Church.

Pope Francis put a worldwide, three-year **Synod on Synodality** into motion. The word synod is from the Greek *synodos*, meaning to “walk together.” The process began in October 2021 and included a listening stage in which Catholics across the world shared their perspectives on the Church today. The first session of the synodal assembly—a gathering of bishops, religious, and lay people in Rome to discuss all the feedback—took place in October 2023. You can learn more at <http://synod.va>.

Simultaneously, a three-year **Eucharistic Revival** will help Catholics in the United States deepen the connection between the Body of Christ we receive at Mass and our call to be the Body of Christ in the world. This movement is meant to rekindle in us an appreciation for Eucharist and the Mass, and why they genuinely make a difference in our world. Next summer we will see a Eucharistic pilgrimage leading to a national Eucharistic Congress in Indianapolis. See EucharisticRevival.org to learn more.

This year, we are invited to see Advent and Christmas through a different lens, one in which we do not journey to Bethlehem and the Christ child alone but together with our worldwide faith community. Let us journey faithfully together!

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Hurry Up and Rest!

Ahh, Advent. Just as the outer world revs up for a commercial holiday season, we Christians have a great excuse for slowing down. Although we don't get to bury our heads in the sand and pretend this isn't a busy season, we can use Advent as a time to re-evaluate what our priorities are. Build in a few minutes each day in these next few weeks for some quiet prayer time, either individually or with those you live with. It will help you get clearer on whether it's important for you to go to that party or not, bake for the cookie exchange or not, buy gifts for all of the second cousins or not, or decorate your house and yard like the rest of the neighbors or not.

In my first year in graduate school, I hiked with a group of classmates most Saturday mornings, even though every Friday night I thought I couldn't afford to give up that many hours. I was happy to discover that after taking time off I was more focused and productive than if I hadn't taken that time away for renewal.

It can be the same in Advent. Just when we are busiest (or maybe sad and lonely because we *aren't* busy this holiday season) is when we most need to give ourselves the gift of pulling away from the buzz each day. Get an Advent wreath to sit by in the dark before bed each night. Failing that, light a candle, any candle. If you're a morning person, get up a few minutes early for some time with yourself and God. Go for a walk at lunchtime and invite Jesus to go along with you. If you're the one driving the basketball carpool, take a spiritual book or a journal with you and arrive at the gym for pick-up a few minutes early, making your minivan a monastery as you wait for the sweaty kids. Jesus is searching for a place to be born this season and he'll take lodging wherever you have it. Where can you make space available for him?

FOR PRAYER: God of stillness, help me to make time and space to be with you, listen to you, and look for you this Advent season.

The Synod and the Eucharist

This Advent, the wider church is in the midst of reflections on synodality and the Eucharist. Pope Francis has asked church leaders to listen closely to how the Holy Spirit is speaking through the thoughts and experiences of *all* Catholics. Topics broached in the recent gathering in Rome include the possibility of women becoming deacons, married men entering the priesthood, and a genuine welcome to those sometimes on the margins of the Church (including the divorced and remarried, migrants and refugees, the materially poor, and LGBTQ+ Catholics). As Pope Francis emphasized recently, the Church is for “everyone, everyone, everyone!” Synod participants will meet again in 2024. The Holy Spirit isn’t done with us yet.

At the same time, we reflect together on the Eucharistic banquet. Christ has invited all of us—regardless of our differences—to receive his Body and Blood at one table. In that spirit, this Advent booklet explores ways that God feeds us, is among us when we share food with one another (Jesus loved to do that!), and asks us to feed others.

There is often a lot of feasting in December before Christmas Day. As we move into this season, can we be more conscious of the people who don’t have loved ones to feast with, or those who don’t have an extra cent for a feast? You may or may not know some of the millions of people in these two categories, but they are out there. Jesus didn’t come to make people feel guilty for enjoying what they have, but he did call us to be grateful for everything we have and to share generously with others who don’t have enough. If we do this, we can more authentically claim to be a eucharistic church, walking together toward more justice and equality.

FOR ACTION: Consider what you might do to share more than a token with those less fortunate than you every time you spend money for food, drink, or gifts this Advent season. What can you/your family commit to?

Widen our Tents

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them... They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain. —Isaiah 11:6,9

“Widen our tents!” Pope Francis has urged the church as part of the synodal process. Just as Isaiah imagined a place where all would be welcomed and safe—even nature’s enemies—shouldn’t we be able to imagine a church with space for everyone? If God’s kingdom is a place for wolves and lambs to peacefully co-exist, can’t we widen our church’s tent to make space for folks who like to go to Mass in Latin wearing head coverings as well as teens with purple hair, piercings, and some doubts about their faith?

Jesus showed us how to do this. He showed us how to look past a person’s physical appearance, their job, their religion, and their place in society to see their hearts. He never told someone they weren’t welcome because of their gender or their marital status. He didn’t exclude people because they weren’t his religion (e.g. Samaritans, Greeks, or ‘nones’), because they worked for the “wrong” company (e.g. tax collectors or members of the military), or because they were the “wrong” ethnicity (e.g. Romans). Instead, he made it a point to seek such people out, engage with them, eat with them, and listen to their burdens. If Jesus was so at ease and interested in being with people who weren’t like him, how could we ever claim that we have a right to exclude certain segments of the population from Jesus’ church? Jesus walked with people of all stripes, so Pope Francis wants us to walk together as a church made up of people of all stripes.

We may not like the wolves, and we may not approve of how the lions live, but we are still called to share the church with them. God invited us all here and we don’t get to choose who we share the holy mountain with.

FOR PRAYER: Who do you most have difficulty “sharing” the church with (individuals or groups)? Ask God to help you drop your judgments about them and to soften your heart so that you might grow in understanding and compassion for them.

Rich Food and Well-Aged Wines!

“And all of them ate and were filled; and they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full.” —Matthew 15:37

Have you ever noticed that the God of the Bible isn't a bare-minimum kind of God? In the first reading today, Isaiah promises that God “will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear” (Isa 25:6). Maybe because Jesus grew up hearing the stories of this lavish God, he gave with that kind of abundance too. When he turned water into wine at a wedding, it amounted to somewhere between 120-180 gallons of wine. When he fed people, he didn't pass around just enough to take the edge off their hunger pangs, he provided so much that they had all they wanted and still had leftovers. (And mostly likely some in the crowds were poor enough that they didn't always have enough to feel full.)

The story of Jesus feeding the 4,000 here is one of the touchstone stories of the Eucharist. It's where we get the language that Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to others (without checking a list of their sinful offenses first). If we want to live into a true eucharistic revival and be people of the Eucharist, are we practicing giving generously with no strings attached? Are we inviting everyone to our table/our church, or are we turning some away—for any reason?

FOR REFLECTION: Do you have any experience with your church being stingy with things that others need? Who is God inviting you/your church to feed with the same generosity and non-judgment that Jesus did?

In the Dark

If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night," even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you. —Psalm 139:11-12

Years ago I visited a friend one December night, soon after she and her husband separated, and the day after she first met with a divorce lawyer. She was still reeling from that meeting when we took her two young boys for a walk to look at the Christmas lights in their neighborhood. We were noticing with them that it was easier to see the lights on darkened streets where there wasn't so much light pollution from other houses than it was in the downtown area. All of a sudden my friend recognized the metaphor. It can sound trite, but if it wasn't for the darkness, we wouldn't be able to see light.

In a society that is obsessed with wanting to feel good all the time and protecting our children from any discomfort possible, Advent comes around every year with its invitation to settle into the darkness and feel whatever discomfort that might bring. Are we lonely? Grief-stricken? Hurting for a loved one who is in pain? Disturbed by local, national, or world events? Angry at a betrayal? Then let Advent be a time to sit with those feelings. Feelings can't kill you, even though you worry they might. Although the secular culture tries to banish all darkness with cheery jingles and bright lights at this time of year, you don't have to fake it with God. You can be honest about the darkness you experience, allow it, and beg God to show you where true light is.

FOR PRAYER: God of light and God of darkness, help me to know your presence with me in my darkness and to see your light, even if it only appears like a tiny flame in the far distance.

She Decided to Cooperate

Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her. —Luke 1:38

When homilists preach on the Annunciation scene, they usually make references to Mary saying “yes” and agreeing to carry God’s son. They usually give the assurance that God wouldn’t force Mary to do something against her will, so they suggest that God asked her permission to be the Mother of God. Yet if we read the Annunciation story carefully and in its entirety (Luke 1:26-38), there isn’t anything that suggests that the angel Gabriel offered Mary a choice. Instead, he responds to her perplexity by saying “And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus... The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.” Read it for yourself. Gabriel told her it was going to happen. Mary didn’t get to say yes or no.

As theology professor Kelly Colwell, Ph.D, points out, what Mary *did* get to choose was whether to resist or not resist this news, to push back, or to cooperate with this shocking turn of events. What was coming was coming, and Mary chose to cooperate with God as it happened.

What is coming will come for us, too. Pandemics come. Illness comes. Job losses, break-ups, accidents, and deaths come. We don’t have control over these things, but we have a choice in how we respond. With resistance and denial, or with acceptance and openness to how God wants to be with us? We may not have asked for what has happened to us and we may not like it, but God is in it with us too, and if, like Mary, we let God help us, it will go easier with us.

FOR REFLECTION: Read the full text of the Annunciation story today, Luke 1:26-38. What most strikes you about how Mary responds to Gabriel’s visit? What are you being confronted with now that you may not have chosen? How is God inviting you to respond?

Advent as an Antidote

Years ago my husband and I learned about the Advent Conspiracy (AdventConspiracy.org). It changed Advent for us so that even though there is some extra bustle at this time of year, it's only bustle if we agree to it. It's given us the courage to set limits on our gift-giving—and no, our children aren't disappointed that they only get one or two presents from us each Christmas. It's cleared up my resentment about having to make or buy gifts for six siblings and seven sets of cousins because we've all agreed that there are other people and better causes we can give our money to than each other. It's relieved me of any sense of duty to put up Christmas lights because, frankly, I would rather do other things with my time than that. The Advent Conspiracy has given me a reason to turn down invitations to more parties than I'd like to go to (“Thanks for the invitation, but we're practicing saying ‘no’ to extra busyness this season.”)

The Advent Conspiracy embraces four tenets: Worship Fully, Spend Less, Give More, and Love All. Because of the encouragement to “worship fully,” we spend time with the lights out before bedtime in front of the Advent wreath, and it has become one of our favorite periods of family time in the year. “Spend less” has been freeing for us in more ways than I can count. “Give more” has meant giving relational gifts, or “activity gifts” as we call them, instead of things that will end up in a landfill. One year that meant our 8-year-old chose a family day at the beach for her Christmas gift—redeemed in the summer, not on December 25. “Give more” also led to the idea of doing our end-of-the-year charitable giving with the kids and letting them help decide what organizations we donate to. “Love all” led us to the tradition of taking a hot meal, Christmas cookies, a coffee shop gift card, socks, and toiletries to Kevin, a homeless man we know, right after we open our presents on Christmas Day. Talk about giving the kids some perspective! If they have any self-pity about how few gifts there are under the tree, that is wiped out after we visit Kevin.

FOR REFLECTION: If you're struggling with unrealistic demands this month, check out AdventConspiracy.org. What traditions or expectations of this season aren't life-giving to you? What can you do to change that?

He Ate Bugs for Lunch

Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. —Mark 1:6

Our friend Bryan Sirchio recorded a song titled “Bugs for Lunch.” From the time our girls were two or three years old, they knew that “John the Baptist ate bugs for lunch/Yuck! Yuck! Yuck!” and they would never forget the name of that wild guy in the desert who prepared Jesus’ way.

I’ve always been intrigued by what it was about John the Baptist that made so many people flock to him. (“And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins” Mark 1:5). Maybe it was simple curiosity when word first got around about a guy dressed like him and eating wild foods. Soon, though, people were moved by him to the point that they underwent a strange new ritual (baptism—somewhat different from the typical Jewish purification rituals) as they confessed their sins. Most people wouldn’t let a random, strangely-clad person dunk their head underwater, so something about him was trustworthy and sparked a movement in their hearts.

Pope Francis is asking that during this synodal process church leaders listen to Catholics of *all* appearances when they speak their truth. It doesn’t matter what the speaker looks like: whether it’s a gay couple bringing their children to Mass, a divorced and re-married mother who still hungers for Communion, or a little girl who wonders why she doesn’t see any women priests on the altar. While such folks may seem foreign or perhaps even intimidating to some church leaders or old-timers in the pew, so did John the Baptist look different than how the Jewish authorities of his day imagined the Messiah’s messenger might appear. The crowds of people could see beyond his appearance to his heart, though. May it be the same for all of us during this synod.

FOR REFLECTION: What have you learned from listening to or getting to know someone whose outward appearance is very different from yours?

Who Needs You Now?

Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, “Be strong, do not fear!” —Isaiah 35:3-4

Think of the difference we could make if we made Isaiah’s words the focus of Advent instead of shopping, partying, and gift-giving. What if we intentionally looked around us for those who are physically weak, struggling in any way, or despairing, and shifted our Advent energies toward supporting them? What if, instead of buying gifts for friends and family who already have enough, we wean ourselves from the circular gift-giving and go out of our way to give to those who are lonely and forgotten? For my family, that means that besides making cookies for people we know and like, we also take them to the 84-year-old neighborhood grouch who trails negativity wherever he goes. The first time we did this, he told us we were the only ones who gave him a Christmas present. A girl in my daughter’s class (who isn’t Christian) made homemade cupcakes before Christmas, swallowed her instincts, and took them to her *least* favorite teacher—which sounds to me like something Jesus would do. Lee, a woman in my RCIA group one year, said she couldn’t think of anyone lonely whom she could spend time with during Advent. Then she came back the following week and said she had a revelation. Her sister, who Lee lives with, was lonely and struggling with depression, but Lee had initially overlooked her because she is housed, well-clothed, and well-fed.

The Pope describes becoming a “synodal Church” as an opportunity to become a Church of “closeness, compassion, and tender love” which reflects the “style of God” (October 9, 2021). How can we be such a church in our communities, whether we mention our faith as the reason we do things or not?

FOR ACTION: Who could use the gift of your time, attention, money, or possessions today? Find a way to share them with someone.

Our Lady of Guadalupe

When I joined the Jesuit Volunteer Corps after college and moved to a rural area of Oregon with a large Mexican population, I knew nothing about Our Lady of Guadalupe except for a vague sense that she had appeared in Mexico long ago. I also knew very little about the Mary of the Gospels, for that matter, except the bare bones of the Annunciation and Nativity stories. I had only ever been presented with images of Mary as docile, almost mute, passive, white-skinned, and blue-eyed. That image didn't spark my interest or imagination.

Once I began learning about the Mexican understanding and love for this Mary who looked like their native people, dressed like them, and wouldn't take 'no' for an answer, I took note of her. Then I met more and more strong women—sometimes women who were raising strong-willed children themselves—who looked to Mary for guidance and wisdom in doing what seemed like impossible things.

Add onto that my learning about how Mary appears in the Gospels not as quiet and submissive, but unabashedly prophetic (she sounds just like some of the Old Testament prophets in her Magnificat). She was radical, praising God for upending the status quo by choosing an unmarried, poor teenager to mother Jesus rather than a literate, wealthy woman in a palace somewhere. And that girl/woman probably had callouses on her hands and strong calf muscles from hiking up and down the hills of Galilee hauling water and gathering firewood, not to mention traveling on foot to visit her pregnant relative Elizabeth. She would have been emotionally strong too, living in an occupied state (Galilee) under a violent ruler (Herod), backed by a brutal military (Roman), and eventually watching the state execute her son. It is no wonder to me now why Mary is revered, whether as Our Lady of Guadalupe or in any other form.

FOR PRAYER: The Hail Mary draws some of its lines from Luke's Gospel (Lk 1:28, 42). Pray it slowly and thoughtfully today. Ask God to help you get to know Mary better. If you don't have one, search for an image of Mary that speaks to you, and put it in your prayer space.

Relieving Burdens

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” —Matthew 11:28-30

When he spoke these words, we’re told Jesus was addressing a crowd that presumably was burdened by the rigorous religious requirements of the Jewish Law. His quarrel wasn’t with the Law itself, but with its interpretation which had become “excessively demanding and restrictive” as biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann writes. (The 613 Jewish laws of the Hebrew Scriptures/Old Testament were metaphorically called a yoke.) “The burden of discipleship to Jesus is easy, contrasted to the more rigorous teaching of some of his contemporaries. Indeed, they had made the Torah, in his time, exhausting, specializing in trivialities while disregarding the neighborly accents of justice, mercy and faithfulness,” Brueggemann continues.

So what is Jesus’ invitation? To come to him for rest and to exchange stringent religious requirements for his lighter yoke. He doesn’t impose demands on people in order to approach him. They don’t have to change who they are or be better versions of themselves before they come. He invites them to come, in whatever state they find themselves.

What might these words of Jesus teach us in the period of a Eucharistic revival in the United States? If nothing else, it should remind us that we—as individuals or a church—don’t have the right to restrict other people’s access to Jesus. We are invited to be like him, gentle and humble, inviting others to find rest rather than rigidity in our faith.

FOR REFLECTION: Who might you know who has been told, explicitly or not, that they aren’t permitted to approach Jesus? Is there something you can do or say to assure them they are welcome?

Winter Mindset

Jesus spoke to them, saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” —John 8:12

I know someone who has dinner by candlelight each night of the week leading up to the winter solstice. It’s her way to acknowledge the darkness all around her even while she does what she can to create light, both literally and metaphorically. She reminds me of Norwegians who are said to have a “winter mindset” that helps them through the dark, cold season without suffering from significant seasonal affective disorder. The key, they say, is to focus on coziness, warmth, and light.

Rather than trying to banish the darkness of this season or trying to deny all of the evil and suffering happening in the world, can we adopt an Advent mindset? Instead of forcing cheerfulness, over-consuming, or exposing ourselves to a dizzying array of flashing Christmas lights, what if we let ourselves slow down, quiet down, and look to Jesus for our light?

Where do we see examples of people offering genuine light to the world? Where do we notice true warmth between people? What can we do to create more light in our world’s darkness? Maybe it’s as simple as lighting candles in our home at night and remembering that Jesus is the true light of the world.

FOR REFLECTION: Where have you experienced a sense of light or warmth in recent days that goes beneath the superficiality of the secular holiday season?

Tamales for Everyone

The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ —Matthew 11:19

If the church is looking for a Eucharistic revival, we would do well to remember the many other stories of Jesus eating and drinking with friends and strangers besides just his somber Last Supper. Jesus enjoyed a good meal and party so much that his detractors criticized him for partying too much (this after criticizing John the Baptist for fasting too much). Yet Jesus seemed to love having a good time around good food and drink. He made friends when eating together (Zaccheus), used mealtimes to teach by example (why not let the outcasts in for the food and company too?), offered healing and forgiveness by accepting loving service at dinner (the sinful woman of Luke 7), and on and on. Luke’s Gospel alone tells stories of Jesus at 19 meals. Can we see how sharing his Eucharistic mindset can bring connection, joy, and love to our holiday meals?

My next-door neighbor, a Mexican-American woman who was raised Catholic, throws a huge tamale party with her husband every Christmas Eve. There is no invitation list because everyone who knows Pat knows they are invited and that their friends and family are invited. One year as I left the party, I saw a man standing on the sidewalk in front of their house glancing at his phone and then up at their address. “I was told there was a party here?” he said to me quizzically. It turns out he was a friend of a friend of a friend of Pat’s who was told to come on by. That sounds just like something Jesus would do—tell others to tell others that everyone is invited. Pat may no longer consider herself Catholic, but if her hospitality and desire to feed people and offer them a place for connection aren’t in line with Jesus, I don’t know who is.

FOR ACTION: What concrete action can you take this week to be inclusive or hospitable to someone or some group with whom you don’t normally socialize? Pay attention to what they might have to teach you.

Looking Back

As we wrap up the second week of Advent, how are you feeling about this season so far? Even if it has entailed extra commitments and busyness, can you identify any times when you have been able to slow down and have some moments of quiet, peace, or rest? While society clamors for more spending and buying this month, have you found yourself giving more intentional thought to why and for whom you are buying or doing things? Have the Advent themes of waiting, anticipation, darkness, light, hospitality, and inclusivity put your day-to-day activities in greater perspective? Has the season felt different this year with a clearer mindset of journeying together with fellow believers? If you answered yes to any of the above questions, wonderful! Even if the season has felt more hectic or frenzied than you wished, take some time today to acknowledge, revisit, or savor these gifts that you have received.

If, on the other hand, this has been a blue season of loneliness, emptiness, or grief, take heart, knowing that you are in solidarity with many spiritual ancestors who keenly felt the darkness of this season. They couldn't make the sun and the warmth return any sooner, nor could they make the Messiah appear. Ask God for help finding even the smallest glimmer of light now to get you through this period.

FOR PRAYER: Revisit any moments of grace from these last two weeks and let yourself appreciate and savor them, thanking God for these gifts.

Joy Before Christmas

Rejoice always. —1 Thessalonians 5:16

We light the pink candle on the Advent wreath today as we celebrate “Gaudete” Sunday, Latin for “rejoice.” The first two readings and the Psalm response all speak of rejoicing, even though it is not Christmas Day yet. Unfortunately, sometimes Christians can be lacking in joyfulness, despite the many places in Scripture where we are encouraged in that direction. Of course, joy is different from happiness. I can rejoice and feel joy about my friendship with Randall, yet also be sad that he is dying and won’t be on earth much longer.

There are so many stories of saints who had the emotional breadth to experience joy even while being tortured or working with people who suffered terribly. (St. Paul is said to have sung joyfully while being lowered into a cistern prison.) We have stories, photos, and even some videos of contemporary saints (some canonized and some not) like Mother Teresa, Dorothy Day, and Oscar Romero expressing joy and love despite the hardships of their lives. We’re told that Jesus knew how to rejoice when he experienced people’s faith (the woman with the hemorrhage), generosity (Zacchaeus), and remorse (the woman who washed his feet with her tears). If these people, who knew great suffering, could still find ways to rejoice, can we?

FOR ACTION: No matter your life circumstances today, what can you do to invite a little more (or a lot) of joy and rejoicing today? You don’t have to wait for Christmas.

Still Waiting (Im)patiently

Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. —James 5:7-8

My grandparents were corn and soybean farmers, and although they were patient people, I know they were constantly thinking and worrying about the weather until the fields were harvested. If you are a farmer or a gardener, you may have the experience of *trying* (and sometimes failing) to be patient as you worry about if and when and how much it will rain before your crop is ready to harvest. You, like so many of James' contemporaries, know what it's like to anticipate, watch, and wait for something when it is out of your control.

That's all of us in this world as we anticipate Christmas next week and wait for Jesus' second coming when he will make all things new. We can't make those days come any faster, and we may not always be patient in the waiting, but the waiting can strengthen our hearts. Our culture of instant gratification has atrophied our waiting muscles, so Advent gives us a good workout. Although some Christmas parties and gift-giving may have happened already or be on the calendar in the next week, how can you stay present to this time of anticipation and waiting until December 25, rather than giving in to the holiday fervor that tends to preempt Advent?

FOR REFLECTION: Is there something you're tempted to indulge in before Christmas that might be even sweeter if you practice waiting for it until then? How might you "strengthen your heart" this week as you wait to enjoy it?

Light in the Darkness?

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

—John 1:5

I always think of my *compadre*, Randall, my daughter's godfather, when I hear this verse. When he and his wife lived in Central America, they adopted a malnourished Honduran girl who only weighed 25 pounds as a four-year-old. When Sarita was still very young, Randall began reciting this verse to her in Spanish every night as he tucked her into bed, and he continued the blessing ritual throughout her childhood. When Sarita died at age 20 from suicide, Randall kept reciting it to himself because he needed the reminder that even the immense darkness and grief of suicide don't overcome God's light.

We can remind ourselves of this verse even when we're not in a time of great darkness so that when darkness envelops us (as it most certainly will at some point) we can hold onto this promise. This time of year is perfect practice, especially since we are just a couple days away from the longest night of the year. Besides the encroaching darkness outside our windows, the darkness of world events can make anyone despair. So let's light our Advent wreaths (or even a single candle if you don't have a wreath) in the darkness tonight and focus on its light.

FOR PRAYER: Look back to your last day or several days, and thank God for the points of light present. Offer to let God use you as a light for someone else experiencing a time of darkness now.

Go Ahead and Ask!

Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, “Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.” But Ahaz said, “I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test.” —Isaiah 7:10-12

While teaching a class on methods of prayer, I led a discussion on petitionary/intercessory prayer which we do communally at Mass when we pray for the needs of the world, our church, the sick and dying, etc. That particular day, though, we talked about prayers for what we want or need for ourselves and those we love. One person in the class proudly announced that she *never* asked for anything for herself and she *only* prayed for others. I had the impression she thought it was selfish to pray for herself. Somehow, she had missed the places in Scripture where we are encouraged to pray for ourselves as well as others. After all, Jesus taught the disciples to pray for their daily bread without the slightest suggestion that it was selfish to ask. Likewise, in the reading from Isaiah today, God invites a very fearful Ahaz, the King of Judah, to ask for a sign that he and his people will be rescued from the enemies preparing to attack them. Somehow, Ahaz thinks that asking something of God is inappropriate, even though God encouraged him to do just that!

We know we don't always get what we ask for in prayer, or our prayers are answered in a different way than we expect or imagine, or they are answered, but not as soon as we would like. But God still invites us to ask, just like good parents want their children to ask for what they need or we want a loved one to ask us for what they want or need. Asking is a sign of trust in a relationship, so why not approach God in trust, rather than deciding for ourselves, as Ahaz did, that we can do without God's help?

FOR REFLECTION: Do you feel conflicted about praying for your own wants and needs? Does it help to remember that Jesus taught us to do so, and that he did that himself in the Garden of Gethsemane when he asked God to rescue him from his imminent death?

The Dog Wants a Blessing Too

For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, says the Lord. —Isaiah 54:10

When our daughters were toddlers, my husband and I started a ritual of blessing them as we tucked them into bed each night. For a while we made it up as we went along, speaking a few words over them as we kissed and hugged them. At some point, we fell into the habit of naming people who love them as we rested a hand on them (“Mommy, Daddy, Grandma, Grandpa, Nana, Papa... God, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph love you.”) Then, a little later, I added the line “We’re all with you in spirit, and you’ll never be alone.” I remember thinking that I couldn’t always be with them physically and I couldn’t promise to always keep them safe or that nothing bad will ever happen to them. Yet I wanted to embed in their hearts that no matter what happens to them in life (“though the mountains may fall and the hills turn to dust” as the song goes) God’s love will always be with them.

That blessing has stuck until this day, even though we often have to bless them, teenagers now, before they go to bed because they stay up later than us. (We’ve also added a dog to the household now, and she recognizes the start of the blessing ritual each night. She’ll curl up in her dog bed next to the girls’ bunk bed, thump her tail, and look up at us expectantly for her own blessing—which we give her, too.) We hope that when our girls grow up and move away the memories of this ritual and this blessing verse will go with them.

FOR REFLECTION: When have you experienced a crisis or trauma but still known God’s love was present with you?

Generational Blessing

And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.” —Luke 1:46-50

Research now shows that trauma inflicted on individuals can affect their children and grandchildren genetically. For example, the children and grandchildren of pregnant women who survive a famine are more likely to have a whole range of health problems compared to those whose mothers aren't famished while gestating. Trauma, it seems, isn't confined to one generation.

It seems grace can't be confined to one generation either. Who knows what Jesus' mother Mary had been through by the time Jesus was born? Historians think she was poor and illiterate while living under King Herod's violent leadership in an occupied country where women were viewed as property. As Quinn Caldwell points out, though, she sang these words while she was pregnant, determined to pass on God's grace as an antidote to the trauma that gets passed on too.

God looks with favor on the lowliness of all his servants. His mercy is here for us and was there for our parents, grandparents, and ancestors who suffered in any way. Although we may pass on our wounds, God's mercy will be with our children and grandchildren too.

In fact, as Catholics, we recognize that we are journeying together with the communion of saints—not just the church of today, but believers reaching back to past generations, all of whom were recipients of God's grace.

FOR PRAYER: Ask God today to help you see signs of how God was present to your ancestors even in times of suffering or pain.

Law vs. Conscience

Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. —Matthew 1:19-20

The very first story in Matthew’s Gospel is of Joseph weighing his conscience against a religious law. Any Jew of the time would have known that Deuteronomy 22:20-22 stated, “If a new husband cannot find evidence of the young woman’s virginity, they shall bring the young woman to the entrance of her father’s house and there the men of her town shall stone her to death because she committed a shameful crime in Israel by prostituting herself in her father’s house. Thus shall you purge the evil from your midst.”

It’s not a far stretch of the imagination that Joseph had witnessed public execution during his lifetime, maybe many times, since he lived in a place and time in history where violent executions were religiously and state-sanctioned. He very well may have seen other regular physical violence done to women who were viewed as legal property then, not as full human beings (first belonging to their fathers, then to their husbands). Here he decided that if he could help it, he wouldn’t allow that to happen to one more woman. As Molleen Dupree-Dominguez writes, “It seems that when he checked the Law against his conscience, they did not match. He needed to ignore it and submit to the inklings of his conscience.” Not only did the angel confirm his decision to follow his conscience, but it encouraged him to go further, instead of pushing Mary away, to bring her in.

FOR REFLECTION: When have you been led to ignore a law and follow your conscience for the love, health, and safety of yourself or someone else? Did you have an experience of some “angel” or advocate confirming your choice?

Long, Loving Looks

Last year, our church re-told the story of Jesus' birth during the Christmas Eve service with first-time parents Kathleen and Jonathan playing the part of Mary and Joseph and their three-month-old, Catalina, as baby Jesus. That holy family was on the altar from the time Jesus was "born," (fussy, right on cue) through when Catalina fell asleep in her mother's arms during "Silent Night," and until the final strains of the closing song. I don't remember a word of the homily because I couldn't take my eyes off Kathleen and Jonathan who couldn't take their eyes off Catalina. I felt teary the whole service because I got a glimpse of how Mary and Joseph must have looked at Jesus during that first day, week, month, and year of his life.

If prayer is "a long, loving look a the real" like Walter Burghardt, SJ, said, that Christmas Eve service was true prayer. It was beyond words. James Martin, SJ, wrote about this type of prayer: "When you truly look at something, you don't analyze it; you gaze upon it. It is an open stance in which you quietly rest before something, allowing what you perceive to enter your being." I knew from experience that Kathleen and Jonathan were busy all day long feeding, changing, and soothing their baby, and I would guess they would say they didn't have much time for prayer when in actuality they were praying every waking hour of their day as they gazed at her.

FOR PRAYER: Ask God today to help you slow down and savor some long, loving looks at the real in these next few days as you celebrate Christmas, whether your days will be hectic and full of people or quiet and lonesome.

Ann Naffziger is a writer and spiritual director who has worked in a variety of parish roles, as well as serving as a hospital chaplain, scripture instructor, and lecturer at the Jesuit School of Theology at Santa Clara University. She has her MDiv from the Jesuit School of Theology and MA in Biblical Languages from the Graduate Theological Union. Ann is also the author of The Catholic Way: Sessions & Handouts for Praying, Learning, and Living the Faith. She is the mother of two teenage daughters, and is also a Master Gardener and girls' softball coach.

