

2023 Advent and Christmas Reflections

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Advent



Going West, Jackson Pollock, 1935



The First Sunday of Advent

"Therefore, stay awake! For you do not know on which day your Lord will come. Be sure of this: if the master of the house had known the hour of night when the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and not let his house be broken into. So too, you also must be prepared, for at an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come."

Matthew 24:42-43

In Advent, we go within. "Do not go outward," said Saint Augustine. "Return within yourself. In the inward man dwells truth."

This interior move isn't selfish. It isn't navel-gazing or self-absorption. The search for the Truth within us allows us to possess ourselves so that we can give ourselves away. When we accept ourselves, says St. Teresa of Avila, then we can be free to serve others.

The movie *Home Alone* isn't one of the all-time great Christmas movies. It's one of the all-time great *Advent* movies. Think of the premise of the movie. Kevin is alone and has to defend his house from robbers (see the Gospel injunction above). He doesn't sit passively by, he doesn't flee the house, and he doesn't call on outside help. He goes *inside* the house to prepare its defenses. This interior movement leads to the boy's growth, conversion, and greater belonging to his family.

So too, when we focus on our interior lives this season, we will not only beat off the attacks of the enemy to plunder us, we will also reach greater maturity. We will find ourselves belonging even more to the world around us and enjoy the celebration of Christmas all the more.

Prayer: Lord, I choose to silence the world around me and descend to the depths of my soul. Show me what lies within me. Heal me and give me strength. May I accept who I am and be confident in giving myself away to others.



Monday of the First Week of Advent

"A centurion approached Jesus and appealed to him, saying, 'Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, suffering dreadfully.' Jesus said to him, 'I will come and cure him.'"

Matthew 8:5-7

The centurion gives us the perfect model as we begin our Advent journey. Notice he does not make the specific demand on Jesus to cure his servant. He simply states the situation: "my servant is lying at home paralyzed, suffering dreadfully." He leaves it to Jesus to decide what to do. This is different than others who approach Jesus, asking specifically the request: cure my daughter, heal

my blindness, dismiss the hungry crowd. Sometimes it is best to not box Jesus in with our particular claim. Simply state the situation and allow Jesus room to act.

This approach also allows us to really see the situation. In the centurion's case there was something more than the servant being paralyzed. The servant was "suffering dreadfully." There was both an exterior and interior suffering. The centurion recognized this. He might not have been able to truly have compassion on his servant had he simply requested Jesus to heal the paralysis. The centurion's openness allowed him to see more deeply.

In Advent we bring ourselves before the Lord. *Lord, I am suffering dreadfully.* Let Jesus determine what it is exactly you need. We also bring others to the Lord. *Lord, my child or grandchild is suffering dreadfully.* Offer your loved one before the Lord as a gift. Jesus will heal you and your servant in a greater way than you could have initially envisioned.

Prayer: Lord, I present myself to you. I don't know exactly what I need. I just know that I am suffering. I am open to whatever you want to give me. Jesus, I also bring before you an individual in my life (name the person) who is suffering. I entrust them to you. Show me the extent of their pain.



Tuesday of the First Week of Advent

"Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, 'I give you praise, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for although you have hidden these things from the wise and the learned you have revealed them to the childlike.'"

Luke 19:21

I recently placed a large, wrapped present for my five-year-old niece under their family's Christmas tree. The little girl was beyond excited. She was not sure what was in the box, and she began even more looking forward to Christmas day when she could unveil the gift. The tree with wrapped presents filled her with joy and hope.

Only a child can have this experience. My niece does not think she has it all. Hence, she can receive. She can also be enthused with the prospect of a gift. This makes life for her exciting.

For the adult who has everything or knows everything or has the supposed freedom to obtain whatever they want, the gift does not have the same effect. Life isn't as exciting.

The Father has a massive, wrapped present for us. It will only be placed under our tree, however, if we want it. And we can only want it if we have the attitude of a child: being simple, not possessing everything, and longing for more.

We all want gifts, even those who supposedly have it all. We all want more of God. He will give us this gift if we long for it. Longing does not have to be forced upon us. It can be chosen. We can choose to be a child today.

Prayer: Father, I imagine you as a proud adult placing a wrapped gift under the tree. I am the child. I see the gift, I study it, guessing what it could be, and I feel excitement for the joy it will bring me. You are good to me, Father, and I give you praise and glory.



Wednesday of the First Week of Advent

"Jesus summoned his disciples and said, '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

We all have two types of desires: immediate and long-term. Both are good, and both are to be brought before the Lord. But it would serve us well to know that Christ usually addresses and fulfills the *immediate* desire. He does not want to wait to be our Messiah.

The large crowd on the mountainside before Jesus most certainly had a long-term desire. Perhaps it was to see the throne of David restored in Jerusalem. Perhaps a particular family in the crowd had the desire of possessing a nearby vineyard to secure their future. Perhaps a young maiden sitting on the grassy slope hoped to find her soulmate and have children.

All good desires. But the immediate desire, and one that everyone in the crowd shared, was hunger. Not metaphorical hunger. Literal hunger. Jesus gave them bread and fish. No use owning a vineyard or expelling the Romans or getting married if you collapse on the road home from starvation.

While our long-term desires are good, too much focus on them can take us away from the Lord in the present moment. The invitation is to acknowledge the long-term desire briefly, place it on the shelf, and let it go. Entrust it to Mary if that will ease your worry.

Having surrendered the long-term desire, it is for us to tend to our immediate yearning. It will generally be something simple, and one that the Lord can provide for you right now. And, again, don't worry about that long-term desire. One day it will be your immediate one.

Prayer: Lord, these are my long-term desires (name them). I surrender these desires to you. Do with them what you will. Mary, please pray for me to let go. And now, Jesus, here is my desire for this day right now (name it). I open my soul to receive your love.



Thursday of the First Week of Advent

"The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and buffeted the house."
Matthew 7:25

"Never fight the weather," a farmer once said to me. "You will always lose."

I might want 80-degree weather right now, but I live in Chicago and it's December. If I go outside in sandals, shorts, and a tee-shirt, I will die. You might not want to evacuate your Florida home by the beach, but there is a hurricane, and you will drown if you don't.

The weather is humbling. We must submit to it. We surrender our preference, adjust accordingly, and move on with life.

There will always be storms in our life. Christ, at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, did not say, "Here is how you avoid inclement weather so as to always be comfortable." No. He gave the above instruction on how to survive the tempests.

Saint Paul of the Cross, the 18th Century spiritual director and founder of the Passionist Congregation, gave similar advice to a struggling individual:

"When the loving soul becomes aware of fears, any temptation, or upset, do as the gardener when he sees a storm. He flees to his cabin. So should the soul act when it becomes aware that a storm of fears or anything else is rising. It must flee into God and hide itself under his wings."

Let the bad weather come. Don't fight it. It's not your fault. Simply retreat within your house and ground yourself in prayer. And you'll realize the fire inside is actually quite delightful.

Prayer: Lord, part of my soul is basking in beautiful sunshine right now. I embrace that warmth and close my eyes to receive it. But another part of my soul is being pelted with rain, snow, sleet, and a biting wind. I won't resist that pain, nor will I try to figure it out. I simply shelter myself under your wings. I will prayerfully read Daniel 3:52-90 ("Ice and snow, bless the Lord...").



Friday of the First Week of Advent

"And as Jesus passed on from there, two blind men followed him, crying out,
'Son of David, have pity on us!'"
Matthew 9:27

Matthew records two blind men being cured... twice. One is near the beginning of Jesus' ministry - our Gospel today - and one is near the end of Jesus' ministry - Matthew 20. In the latter, the two blind men are sitting outside of Jericho when they *hear* Jesus passing by, and they cry out for help. Jesus comes to them. In the former, the two blind men are somehow able to see Jesus and follow him into the house in Galilee. Perhaps it was a fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy: "While from behind, a voice shall sound in your ears: 'This is the way; walk in it,' when you would turn to the right or to the left" (Isaiah 30:21).

Dogs have a mystical sense of smell. They sniff something we cannot observe. For owls it is sight, deer it is sound, sharks it is taste.

Humans likewise have a sixth sense. It is the sense of the soul. This soul-sense allows us to love God and share that love with others. We all wish we could be better in our bodies: see more clearly, move more rapidly, understand more quickly. We need not be frustrated. Time in prayer - the action of the soul - is where we excel. The more we live out of that area of strength, the happier we will be.

Prayer: Son of David, have pity on me. I am frustrated with my mind and my body. I let it go. Instead, I activate my soul and love you. I am at home with you. Being with you is where I thrive. I thank you for giving me this supernatural gift, and I pray I may help others with it.



Saturday of the First Week of Advent

"At the sight of the crowds, his heart was moved with pity for them because they were troubled and abandoned, like sheep without a shepherd."

Matthew 9:36

Most people we know seem to be fine. They are content with their lives. Sure, they have crosses, but, by and large, they wouldn't qualify as "troubled and abandoned." They have fine homes and fine jobs and fine hobbies, and after a pleasant day of Christmas shopping this Saturday, they will finish with a fine dinner and a fine movie. They are fine.

Those Israelites whom Jesus looked upon would have thought the same thing. They were fine. But Jesus saw differently. They were not fine.

Like sheep without a shepherd. A sheep without a shepherd is out somewhere in the field. For the moment, it is fine. It is grazing. But where is the sheep going? Who will help it if it is attacked?

The role of the shepherd is to lead the sheep somewhere good: either back home to shelter or to a better pasture. It is also to protect the sheep from wolves.

We can enjoy our Christmas shopping and our hobbies and so forth, like the sheep grazing. The shepherd does not want to deprive us of the goods of life. But he does want to lead us gently, day in

and day out, to somewhere better. All this requires is for us to pause occasionally in our grazing and to move a few feet in the direction he is indicating.

This occasional, and ever so brief pause is prayer and the sacraments. It might not be as enjoyable as the grazing, but we will be grateful for it in the end.

Prayer: Christ, you sent the twelve out to the lost sheep. I might not be a lost sheep. I might actually be one of the twelve called to be a shepherd. Please give me the proper grace to help the lost sheep in my life. May I be gentle with them and nudge them in the right direction.



EXTRA: Feast of Saint Andrew, Apostle

"There is no distinction between Jew and Greek;
the same Lord is Lord of all, enriching all who call upon him."
Romans 10:12

Today we celebrate the patron of the other brother.

Andrew lived in the shadows of Peter. He still does. We all know where Peter is buried. There is a monumental basilica built over his tomb. The pope lives there. Millions visit the place every year to venerate his bones.

I stumbled upon Andrew's tomb in the southern Italian town of Amalfi during my seminary years abroad. Like others, I was visiting the famed coast not to see relics, but the idyllic coastline. Similarly on a trip up north to Scotland in the town named after him, I, along with flocks of tourists, paid homage not to the apostle, but to the golf course.

If you, like me, have another brother or sister who was more popular, more athletic, smarter and better looking, and received more attention, then today is your day.

And if you find yourself being called out of the shadows to evangelize your own family, which is the hardest group of all to speak to Christ about, then today is also your feast day. Andrew, a disciple of John the Baptist, introduced the Lamb of God to Peter. He softened his thick-headed brother's hard heart. Andrew will allow you to embrace your life in the shadows and, with Christ, do the work of converting your loved ones.

Prayer: Jesus, part of me wants to be recognized. I want to be held up, appreciated, and considered important. I surrender those wants. Andrew, pray for me to let go of my ego. Pray I embrace the role of the 'other brother/sister.' May I be lost in the shadows. I look not to myself, but to the Lamb of God.



The Second Sunday of Advent

"I have baptized you with water; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Mark 1:8

Trees are up in most homes by now, so let us reflect on the first trees of Genesis. There were many trees in the Garden that bore fruit for Adam and Eve to eat. The tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil were not meant for eating, however. One scholar claims they were not actual trees, but *persons*. The tree of life was Christ and the tree of knowledge of good and evil was the anti-Christ. Adam and Eve were meant to be near both trees, but not touch them. When Adam and Eve disobeyed, first grasping at the apple of the tree of knowledge, they were banished from Eden so they would not grasp at the fruit of the tree of life. Christ's fruit - his Body and Blood - were to be protected. The greatest gifts were not to be taken but were to be given. Jesus would give them at the Last Supper.

John the Baptist was the first arborist. His command was simple. *Go, be near Christ*. The Baptist's disciples, who would become the apostles, who would become priests, would then give the fruit of Christ to us to eat.

We like to gather around the Christmas tree. We eat cookies and drink eggnog beneath it. Well, let us gather around the real Christ-tree. We do this in prayer. When we pray with Jesus and open our hearts to him, he grafts us onto himself, and we become fruitful trees like him. We also do this in Mass. When we receive the Eucharist, we are properly nourished and become fully alive.

Prayer: Jesus, I grasp at many things in my life. Health, money, comfort, food, drink, honor, prestige. I think they will save me, but they won't. You are all I need. You want to come to me. Your priest wants to give you to me. I open my hands and heart to receive.



Monday of the Second Week of Advent

"Love and truth shall meet; justice and peace shall kiss."

Psalms 85:11

The moment two friends embrace or two lovers kiss is timeless. It is a taste of eternity. There is no looking back or forward. There is being and stillness. God kisses our soul when we quiet our minds in prayer.

The psalmist chooses two seemingly similar persons to embrace: love and truth, justice and peace. We often meld the two together making them one. They are indeed one, but only because of

the embrace. The embrace belies differentiation. Love and truth are first contrasted, and only subsequently do they become one. We do not kiss ourselves. We need an other.

Truth and justice are constricting. They are defined and they establish a standard. Love and peace are the right-side of the brain. They are open and flowing and indeterminate. Both sides need each other. Without truth, love runs down the drain and vanishes. Without love, truth is merely theoretical and, similarly, disappears. Without justice, peace is selfish and violent, an imposition of my preference. Without peace, justice is restless, and no order is ever established.

Isaiah speaks of "the splendor of Carmel and Sharon." Carmel was the mountain in the northwest corner of Israel, from which all of the nation and the Mediterranean Sea could be held. It was a place of prayer and absorption of beauty. Sharon was the plain running south of the mountain along the coast. It was a fertile land, producing abundant flowers and meadows for sheep - a place of movement and entrance.

As God unites Carmel and Sharon, love and truth, justice and peace, so too does he seek to unite us to a lover... to himself.

Prayer: I am married, I am consecrated, I am single, yet my heart longs for an even greater love. I want a greater love with my current spouse, with my church, with you, Lord. Just as the friends carried the paralyzed man through the roof to you, Jesus, I let the saints carry me today to the love I seek.



Tuesday of the Second Week of Advent

"Comfort, give comfort to my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her service is at an end, her guilt is expiated."

Isaiah 40:1

I was speaking casually with an individual the other day, and when I asked her if she was looking forward to Christmas, she sighed and said no. She quickly backtracked and said, "Actually I'm looking forward to Christmas being over." Now, I know this person. She is not a complainer and far from a grinch. She simply acknowledged the pressure and busyness of the season and was looking forward to its reprieve. Is there a reason "Christmas break" has to come *after* Christmas?

As we near the half-way mark of Advent, Isaiah speaks directly to those similarly feeling burdened. Pressure is never from God. It is from the world. It is from the enemy. It is from ourselves. We do not have to wait another few weeks to have that weight lifted. We can be en-lightened today. Spending quiet time with God will help us hear those tender words: *your service is at an end*. We can be relaxed.

Ah, *re-lax*. A fascinating word. We see the word 'lax' (lackadaisical) pejoratively: someone who is careless and harmful by their negligence. This isn't what "relax" means however. To "re-lax" is to

return to the original state of "lax," which was the state of openness, creativity, and effusiveness that God possessed when he made the world.

Bottom line: if we want to truly relax, we should be with God. Isaiah told this to Israel. The nation did not need to build structures and compete with nations. It could relax. So too can we.

Prayer: Lord, I am tense and stressed in this season of light. Please give me the comfort Isaiah spoke of. I leave the worries of Christmas for another hour, for another day. In this minute I breathe your relaxation into my soul. I breathe out peace.



Wednesday of the Second Week of Advent

"Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart,
and you will find rest for yourselves."

Matthew 11:29

The meek individual is nondescript, non-imposing, hidden and subtle. The mouse is its icon.

One summer on our annual vacation, my five priest-friends and I were drinking beers, smoking cigars, reminiscing about our high school football days and other accomplishments when a mouse scampered across the living room floor. All of us "tough guys" jumped up, me into the arms of the guy next to me. The Holy Spirit comes in the form of other animals beyond the dove. The meek shall inherit the earth.

All of us have the ability to control and to assert. We can crush others in our authority or intelligence. But this is not the way. Jesus went about his work quietly, in the shadows. "The greatest miracle of all," reflects spiritual writer Eugene Boylan, "is in what our Lord could have done *and did not do.*"

The young man is not typically meek. The older individual, wisened by years and experience, knows the way of meek evangelization far better. This is why the youth, paradoxically, are more tired. "Young men faint and grow weary, and youths stagger and fall," observes Isaiah. The young man thinks he knows everything and is inclined to assert his vision - an exhausting and ineffective path.

Whether we be young or old, may we pray for a meek soul. Yes, the meek are buried and trampled upon. But that is a good thing, for only does the grain of wheat that falls to the ground and die bear fruit.

Prayer: God, I am afraid of being meek, for I fear being trampled upon, losing out, and suffering. I know this is a matter of FAITH. Do I trust that you will provide for me? Do I believe that what is more important is not the flourishing of my own life, but the flourishing of the Kingdom around me? I do believe... help my unbelief!



Thursday of the Second Week of Advent

"The Kingdom of God suffers violence and the violent take it by force."

Matthew 11:12

The Kingdom of God is within you. Yes, the church and the world and even heaven are the kingdom and suffer violence, but so too does your soul.

We know how this seemingly peaceful season can be violent. *Buy this! Go to that party! Put up your tree and lights! Give that bonus! Send out cards!* The world assaults us.

Our Lord's acknowledgment of the existence of violence is a revelation of our heart. Because we are able to be assaulted, we are weak, vulnerable, and sensitive. We are a target.

A target for the enemy, true, but also a target for God. When we are wounded by a loved one, acquaintance, or stranger, do not react with similar violence. Then you are the violent trying to take that person's kingdom by force. No. Turn to prayer and let God strengthen you.

"I will open up rivers on the bare heights," God says through Isaiah. "I will set in the wasteland the cypress, the plane tree, and the pine." The rivers forged on the bare heights of our souls will allow us to escape when we are being assaulted. We can leave the city and sail away. Or, the trees planted in the wasteland of our heart will allow us to construct a defense. We can remain and withstand the barrage.

Indeed, our ability to pray and imitate Christ is what makes us greater than John the Baptist, the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Prayer: Dear Lord, I am upset today (this week) by someone. It was the comment made by a colleague, the omission from my spouse, the impetuosity from my child, [or something else]. I want to retaliate either externally - biting back - or internally - ruminating on anger. I renounce that option. I lower my defenses. Not to the violent enemy. To you. You bind me to yourself and give me your strength to suffer the violence and not collapse. Carrying the cross is the great joy of my life. I thank you for this grace.



Friday of the Second Week of Advent

"The law of the Lord is his joy."

Psalms 1:2

Israel was a people of the law. All the regulations around living and worship were central to their identity. The main religious authorities in Israel were scholars of the law primarily. People were judged on how well they observed the law.

And Israel was a people that was fundamentally unhappy. There was a burden around them. This is why Isaiah preached and prophesied a message of joy and consolation. We don't look forward to being joyful if we're already joyful in the moment. Israel was not joyful.

The very first psalm indicated that law is indeed meant to bring joy. If, that is, the law is lived correctly.

The law cannot cover every situation in life. Hence the law operates in the gray. Those who try to enforce the law in a black-and-white manner will be both confused and unhappy. Jesus pointed this out to the generation. They condemned John and called him a demon for fasting. They condemned Jesus and called him a drunkard for not fasting.

Catholics are indeed people of the law. But we are also people of joy. We are not consigned to be fundamentally miserable, waiting for the future when joy will break through the clouds. If we are like that first century Jew, following all the precepts of the Church (we go to Mass and confession regularly, we pray daily, we avoid serious sin) and yet are unhappy, we might need to recalibrate.

Don't feel bad if you fall into this category. The Church allows for recalibration. It is called the season of Advent.

Prayer: My Savior, I am hard-hearted. I know I am a sinner, but then I go off and judge others. I refuse to exercise mercy. Please, break through my cold heart and allow me to listen. Show me where I am not joyful in my life. Holy Spirit, melt that icy portion of my soul and set me on fire.



Saturday of the Second Week of Advent

"The disciples asked Jesus, 'Why do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?'"

Matthew 17:10

It seems odd that Elijah was chosen as *the* Old Testament character to precede the Messiah. Elijah was an elusive man. Only for fleeting moments was the eclectic prophet in public. Most of the time he was in the wilderness or the forested Mount Carmel. Moses or David would have made more sense. They were stable figures. Moses was forty years with the people in the desert. David forty years as king.

But that was not what God wanted.

Elijah also learned the very significant lesson in how to follow the will of God: listen to the tiny whispering voice. God doesn't often speak in a loud thunderclap like Moses enjoyed or glorious

military victories that David had. We have to be still and attentive. The whisper will come and gently move us in the direction.

Elijah coming before Christ in the form of John the Baptist provided the model for discipleship. Yes, John might have appeared to be a firebrand preacher, but, like his camel-clad mentor, John was a refined listener of the word. Much of his public ministry was spent imprisoned in Herod's palace in the desert. Here he listened to the whispering sound.

We want to serve the Lord and be committed disciples. It's not a manner of forcing our agenda, but sitting atop our "Mount Carmel," as Elijah did, and waiting for the whisper.

There was precedence for Mary's Assumption into Heaven. Enoch was first in the Bible and Elijah was second. Those who are attuned to God will be majestically swept up in him.

Prayer: Lord, I am pulled in many different directions. Many people want a piece of me. I need my "alone time," but the most refreshing "alone time" is time with you. Give me the grace to say no to the many demands and simply be alone with you atop Mount Carmel. I don't need to be strong or famous like Moses or David. I can be flighty and prayerful like Elijah.



EXTRA: The Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception

"Hail, full of grace!"

Luke 1:28

"Is this going to be on the test?" Ah, the classic question from students of every age, from grammar school to seminary. Even the adult asks the question. "Is today a holy day of obligation? Do I need to go to Mass?"

The question shows an attitude that is not interested in true possession of knowledge, but rather only what is needed to advance. *If I don't need to know this for the test, then I won't bother listening. I don't care about this wisdom actually influencing my life.* Adam and Eve had this attitude in the Garden when examined by God.

Our Blessed Mother did not. When first "examined" by Gabriel she did not respond aloud. She "pondered what sort of greeting this might be." Gabriel then offered more information. "Behold, you will conceive in your womb a son..." At this point Mary raised her hand: "How can this be...?"

This is anything but a "is this going to be on the test?"-type question. Mary sought to draw more wisdom from the messenger. "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." Behold the wisdom Mary will let penetrate her entire being and dictate the course of her life.

The Queen of Angels was actually the master. She never faced an exam at the end. Neither will we if we imitate the Immaculate Conception.

Prayer: Jesus, I relinquish any fear that might be present in my heart. Fear of hell, fear of failure, fear of pain. Mary, you taught your son never to be afraid. He taught us likewise: "do not be afraid." O Immaculate Conception, give me the trusting and loving heart that you had.



The Third Sunday of Advent

"The desert and the parched land will exult; the steppe will rejoice and bloom."

Isaiah 35:1

The city of Jerusalem was located in the middle, more or less, of the nation, in an area that was rocky, barren, and arid. Most cities are typically built on a river or near a water source, but Jerusalem was chosen because it was the spot where Abraham was to sacrifice Isaac. The city's one fresh water source, the Spring of Gihon, was not enough and the people of the city, as well as the many pilgrims and the animals, often went thirsty.

Pontius Pilate, of all people, attempted to alleviate this problem. Gathering Roman architects and planners, he determined an aqueduct could be built from the nearest fresh water source, in an elevation higher than Jerusalem, to aid the suffering city of David. The location of the fresh water? Bethlehem. Pilate had the impressive aqueduct built over five miles of undulating terrain, ending in the wall of the temple of Jerusalem. The giant reservoirs under the temple would now be filled and not only the religious practices fulfilled, but also the people and visitors alleviated. Fountains were consequently built throughout the city.

The only problem was that Pilate used the excess funds from temple treasury, known as the *Qorban*, to fund the aqueduct. When the people discovered this, they revolted and refused to drink the fresh water from Bethlehem.

Shame on Pilate for trying to be the Messiah, and shame on the Israelites for not drinking the true fresh water from Bethlehem, Jesus Christ.

Prayer: Jesus, I thirst for you. You said atop the cross, "I thirst." Now I echo those words. May I drink from your pierced side. May I be filled with life.



Monday of the Third Week of Advent

"We fear the crowd, for they all regard John as a prophet."

Matthew 21:26

John was wildly popular. Thousands flocked to see and hear him along the Jordan River. When Herod Antipas imprisoned him there was nearly a revolt. The Romans even liked him and considered ordering John released.

John's appealing message was simple: repent. A homilist today preaching like John, always speaking of sin, would probably soon be called into the bishop's office due to the number of complaints. But the people of ancient Israel appreciated this message because it helped them acknowledge the interior barriers that prevented them from flourishing. Sin is heavy. When we are filled with attachments, angry or envious thoughts, and the like, we are truly imprisoned. We are our own true captors. John gave people the key to freedom.

But what do we do with that freedom? Ex-convicts face an almost equal challenge living in the world than they do in captivity.

The cousin of John provides the answer. "I am the way, the truth, and the life."

Walking entails avoiding pitfalls, yes. But it also entails moving forward. John's way - the acknowledgement of sin - is the first movement. Jesus' - "come to me" - is the second and lasting. Notice when Jesus healed the sick, always first forgiving the individual's sins as part of the miracle, the restored individual would next get up and go.

John's death did not change the nation. Jesus' did. Living in Christ is our true calling.

Prayer: Jesus, I repent of my sins. And when I say "sins," I really mean that place of darkness within me, not just the trite one-line sin I mention in the confessional. I love you, but there is a part of me that refuses to trust, that refuses to hand my entire life over to you. I let down the prison bars of my soul and ask you to help me live in genuine freedom.



Tuesday of the Third Week of Advent

"Jesus said to them, 'Amen, I say to you, tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the Kingdom of God before you'."

Matthew 21:31

"Love best manifests in deeds rather than in words," goes the adage of Saint Ignatius of Loyola in his *Spiritual Exercises*. The Pharisees say they love God. Tax collectors and prostitutes actually love God.

After Christ had cleansed the temple in Jerusalem, the religious authorities asked Jesus by what authority he did this. Was this the will of God or was it Jesus' own decision? Jesus responded with a riddle about his cousin. "Was John's baptism of human or heavenly origin?" The Pharisees, who had rejected John as well, did not answer. Jesus responded in kind, not answering their question about his authority. Instead, he offered them the parable of the two sons: one who says he will work but does not, and the other who initially says he will not work but changes his mind and works.

Our Lord's point is about conversion. It's not how we start. It's how we finish. In the spiritual and moral life, there is always the chance to finish well. It's not about first impressions. It's about last impressions. The Pharisees blew it initially with John the Baptist. But they have a chance with Jesus right now to do the right thing.

You might have "blown it" in the past. You refused to work in the vineyard. Let it go. Christ comes before you right now and gives you an opportunity to make a good and lasting impression.

Prayer: O my God, I love you above all things, with my whole heart and soul, because you are all-good and worthy of all love. I love my neighbor as myself for the love of you. I forgive all who have injured me, and I ask pardon of all whom I have injured.



Wednesday of the Third Week of Advent

"Blessed is the one who takes no offense at me."

Luke 7:23

Beatitudes are scattered throughout the Scriptures in locations other than the Sermon on the Mount. When we come across such an Easter Egg, it is worth meditating upon. This Advent Egg is in response to John the Baptist's inquiry about whether Jesus was indeed the Messiah or if they should wait for another.

The beatitudes imply an inexorable experience. We will mourn, we will be meek, we will be persecuted for the sake of righteousness. Today's beatitude tells us we will be offended by God.

Blasphemous? Not quite. This is not about God's offensive nature, but about our sensitive one. We have thin skin. A comment here and an omission there and we are hurt. This is why Jesus informs us, in another instance, that we will need to forgive seven times seventy-seven times. We are easily offended.

The Baptist was offended by Jesus' inaction. Yes, he was healing the sick, but he was not overturning the political and religious order. Jesus' instruction to his cousin was to pray through this hurt.

It is not sinful to admit we have been offended by God. It is sinful, however, to not pray about this offense. To 'take' offense is to keep the pain back from God; to own and possess it. The beatitude is the invitation to give our wounded heart over to Christ. If we bring our hurt before God in full transparency, he will show us his side of the story. Our relationship to God will have matured. And we will be blessed.

Prayer: Jesus, I want to question, "Why war? Why cancer? Why my child's death? Why my parent's Alzheimers? Why my infertility?" But instead of asking "why," I will simply say, "Here..." "Here is my cancer, my hurt, etc." I know you are delighted to receive me as I am, and that is all I need.



Thursday of the Third Week of Advent

"Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet."

Luke 7:26

Prophets were tough. They got into the hard stuff. They weren't about living comfortably, amassing wealth and adulation, or securing some institution. They were completely disposed to doing the Lord's will, whatever that might mean. If it meant confronting the king and risking his life, leaving his family and forsaking marriage, or eating bugs and sleeping outside, the prophet did it. The word of God must break through to the land and to the people. Any obstruction in the way - the hard-headedness of a king or a man-made religious construction - was the prophet's task to clear out. The prophet, if you will, was the original nutcracker.

Perhaps, thus, it is fitting that the Nutcracker is an Advent icon. Yes, Tchaikovsky's 1892 ballet forever intertwined the object with the season, but well before that John the Baptist was cracking the hard nut of Judaism. That is what people desired to see. Then, in asking his cousin whether or not he was the Messiah, and forcing Jesus to respond that he was because he healed people personally, John cracked the hearts of the disciples. They were able to truly to grasp what a savior does: not fix an institution, but fix a soul.

Whether it's seeing the wooden figurine around your home or reaching for the silver pliers to break open the walnuts after dinner, know that the outer shell of your heart is also looking to be cracked open.

Prayer: "Lord, you brought me up from Sheol, you kept me from going down to the pit" (Psalm 80:4). Lord, I am feeling blessed right now, like the piece, "Waltz of the Flowers." Or, I am feeling low right now, like the piece "Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy." I know I am not called to float forever in the sky or sink forever in the pits. I am called to be on the precipice with you, for there is where you can hold me. I will listen to the "Dance of the Mirlitons."



Friday of the Third Week of Advent

"John was a burning and shining lamp, and for a while you were content to rejoice in his light."
John 5:35

"Do you want to be well?" This is the question Jesus asks in the fifth chapter of the Gospel of John to the sick man sitting for nearly four decades outside the supposed healing waters of the pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem. The man does not directly answer the question but responds lamely, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; while I am on my way someone else gets down there before me." Jesus brushes aside this response, as well as the pool, and simply heals the man. When Jesus is later accused by the authorities for healing on the sabbath his defense is simple: "My Father is at work until now, so I am at work."

This is a busy time of year for certain workers: delivery truck drivers, store employees, parents, Santa's elves, bakers, and so forth. It is a busy time of year for our Lord as well. He is working to make us well. He is working to heal our church and our world.

Just as Santa won't give the gift that's not on the list, Christ won't work for us if we don't answer his questions:

Do you want to be well? Yes, we'll instinctively say. *OK, why do you want to be well?* So we can live in freedom and be at peace, will be our response. *What will you do with your freedom and peace?* Love you more, God.

John the Baptist lit up the room not so we could see the room, but so we could see Jesus inside it. Everything is a means to the end: union with God.

Prayer: Jesus, I want to be well. But really, I want you. My freedom from sin and my magnanimous heart are means to living in quiet union with you. Bring me down to the waters of Bethesda. Lower me into the pool that is the Precious Blood in your heart.



Saturday of the Third Week of Advent

"David became the father of Solomon, whose mother had been the wife of Uriah."
Matthew 1:6

The names of women are scattered throughout the genealogy. First is: "Judah became the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar." Second is: "Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother

was Rahab." Third is: "Boaz became the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth." Fourth is: "Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary."

That leaves us with our above quote. Bathsheba, who was the mother of Solomon, is not mentioned directly by name as the other women are. Those four women were holy. Bathsheba was not. Uriah, her previous husband who was murdered by David, is instead listed. Uriah was the faithful servant of the nation. He was the warrior with integrity, who refused to have relations with his wife, even when pressured by the king, as it would have violated the law and broken solidarity with his troops. "Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness..." Uriah received his reward. He is forever entwined in the lineage of "Jesus who is called the Christ."

Bathsheba's name means "Daughter of the Oath." The oath is God's promise, after Eve's disobedience, to raise a woman who would cut off the serpent's head. It is fulfilled in Mary, the wife of Joseph.

Bathsheba may be a black mark on the genealogy, but she is necessary nonetheless. Without her there is no Uriah and no Virgin Mary.

Prayer: Thank you, God, for my mother. She resembles the Blessed Mother in these ways (list the holy qualities of your mother). She resembles the "wife of Uriah" in these ways (list the weaknesses of your mother). I accept and embrace that I am a child of my mother. I praise her gifts and I forgive her weaknesses. Please make me a good son/daughter.



EXTRA: Our Lady of Guadalupe

"Blessed is the fruit of your womb."

Luke 1:42

In the parish church of Saint Paul of the Cross in Park Ridge, IL there are two obvious statues of our Blessed Mother. One stands at the foot of the cross in the center of the church high above the altar, opposite Saint John. The other stands above one of the side altars, opposite Saint Joseph on the other side altar.

But there is a third "statue" of Mary in the church. It is the tabernacle.

The tabernacle holds Jesus. Jutting from the wall, ensconced in marble with the gold doors, the tabernacle both protects the Lord and allows us to adore him. Mary held Jesus in her womb. She protects the Lord and, because of her, we can adore him. She is the true tabernacle, holding the fruit of life.

"Many nations shall join themselves to the Lord on that day, and they shall be his people, and he will dwell among you," says the prophet Zechariah.

Our Lady of Guadalupe is the tabernacle for North America. Our land is able to receive the Lord and worship him because of his mother. Mexico, where Mary appeared in the 16th Century, might be poor economically, but it is rich spiritually because here is where the tabernacle is firmly planted in the wall of America. The United States might be north, but we truly look up to Mexico to adore the Lord. Guadalupe makes our land truly beautiful.

Prayer: O Blessed Virgin Mary, I come to you poor and simple, like St. Juan Diego. My theological and scriptural knowledge is not exhaustive, I fall asleep when I pray, I struggle with simple sins like patience and kindness. I am a corroded tabernacle. Please polish me and make me shine as you shone on Tepayac Hill.



The Fourth Sunday of Advent

"Descended from David according to the flesh, but established as Son of God in power according to the spirit of holiness through resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord."

Romans 1:3-4

I received a "Christmas card" the other day with the image of an Easter Lily and the word "Alleluia!" on the front. The inside message read, "He is risen!" My immediate thought was an Alzheimer's patient had escaped from the ward and made it to the Post Office. But then I thought again. There was a grace in this card. The resurrection is fundamental to our faith. Whether it's Christmas or the middle of August, we are never out of the shade of the empty tomb. Our entire faith hinges on the resurrection.

"Behold, the virgin shall be with child and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," is the prophecy we hear constantly throughout Advent and again this weekend. It is what the angel told Joseph. Just as angels were present when God created the world in Genesis *ex nihilo*, angels were present outside the tomb when God recreated the world on Easter, when that *ex nihilo* had crept back on Good Friday. And angels are present to Mary and Joseph, the parents of the redeemer. The Annunciation is the overture to Christmas and Easter.

It is tradition to listen to Handel's *Messiah* during the Christmas season. The "Hallelujah Chorus," the most famous piece in the entire symphony, is seen as the ultimate Christmas Carol, if you will. Ironically, in the symphony, the "Hallelujah Chorus" is meant for *Easter*. But like that card I received with the "Christmas Lily," maybe there is some wisdom in our erroneous music selection.

"Hallelujah... he is born!"

Prayer: Jesus, I submit to you. I obey the promptings of the Holy Spirit you have given me and continue to give me. I am a dutiful son/daughter. I renounce the darkness creeping into my heart and choose to live in the light. I choose to be joyful as Christmas nears.



Monday of the Fourth Week of Advent

"As for the son you will conceive and bear, no razor shall touch his head, for this boy is to be consecrated to God from the womb. It is he who will begin the deliverance of Israel from the power of the Philistines."

Judges 13:5

As one grows older and assumes the mantle of their vocation, they find themselves acting not as much for themselves as for their family. They realize the gifts they have been given are meant to build up others. Early in life we need to receive and keep. This is essential to our growth. We are to be nurtured and affirmed and exalted. But once we are old, it is our turn to feed the little ones.

This is where the rich farmer in Christ's parable who builds larger barns so he can "eat, drink, and be merry" goes wrong. He kept the surplus wealth for himself instead of giving it to the family.

God provides for individuals, true, but he really provides for the family. If we receive a particular gift or grace from God, we will only truly benefit if we give it to our family.

The mothers of Samson and John the Baptist are thus our models. They were given the miraculous gift of fertility in old age. While this brought them joy, they did not keep their children back for themselves. For the gift of their sons was not meant for themselves. The boys were for the nation. Samson was to be a judge for the nascent nation; John the Baptist a prophet for the ripe nation. As Gabriel spoke: "He will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God." The mothers were holy because they were able to let go.

Gabriel informed Zechariah that "your prayer has been heard." Zechariah prayed first for the nation of Israel. The nation was saved, and Elizabeth's disgrace was taken away.

Prayer: Lord, I know I hold some things back for myself. I work hard for others, and I am generally a giving person, but I seek to "compensate" myself in little ways: some extra food or drink, mindless time on the phone or TV, something else not terrible but also not great. Please help me accept the cross and realize that you are my reward, and that is enough.



Tuesday of the Fourth Week of Advent

"But Ahaz answered, 'I will not ask! I will not tempt the LORD!'"

Isaiah 7:12

Ahaz feigned piety with his refusal of Isaiah's proposal. It wasn't that Ahaz did not want to tempt the Lord. It was that he did not want to receive a sign from the Lord that would force him to abandon his sinful ways. Ahaz, you see, had allied with the Assyrian nation. He was being attacked by Aram and the northern kingdom of Israel, and so had invoked the Assyrian army for protection. While on his envoy to Assyria, Ahaz became smitten with the various pagan shrines and practices. He had a replica of the pagan altar constructed in Jerusalem. When Isaiah informed Ahaz that God would protect Jerusalem and that he need not rely on this foreign alliance, this was not the news Ahaz wanted to hear. Ahaz wanted to be in relationship to Assyria and have their idolatrous culture part of Jewish life. God ignored Ahaz's intransigence and provided a sign anyway: the Virgin will conceive.

We feign piety all the time. Someone gives us money or a gift. We say it is not necessary, but then we pocket the cash all the same. Someone pays us a compliment. We likewise say it is not necessary, but then we grow resentful later on when someone else does not acknowledge us. We pray for holiness, we spend time in prayer, we partake of the sacraments regularly, and we do not commit any mortal sins, but then we judge our neighbor. We all have a little bit of Ahaz in us.

God is unyielding. He will break through our false exterior. He will show us in some way his mother Mary. She will help us let go of our idolatrous ways.

Prayer: Psalm 24 says the one who is able to climb the mountain of the Lord is "he whose hands are sinless, whose heart is clean, who desires not what is vain." I open my hands to face the heavens, Jesus. I do not grasp at anything of the world. Mary, please strengthen me against temptation and, Holy Spirit, give me the firm desire to only seek God.



Wednesday of the Fourth Week of Advent

"Hark! my lover – here he comes springing across the mountains, leaping across the hills."
Song of Songs 2:8

By now we have heard Mariah Carey's "All I Want for Christmas is You" enough to last us more than a lifetime. But there are still five more days before Christmas, which means we will hear the song at least a dozen more times. Why not make it into a prayer? Why not change the object of the lyrics to Jesus Christ? Then the song actually is quite good.

I don't want a lot for Christmas
There is just one thing I need
I don't care about the presents underneath the Christmas tree...
Make my wish come true
All I want for Christmas is ~~you~~ Jesus
--
I don't need to hang my stocking there upon the fireplace
Santa Claus won't make me happy with a toy on Christmas Day...

--

Santa, won't you bring me the one I really need? (Yeah, oh)
Won't you please bring my baby to me?
All I want for Christmas is ~~you~~ Jesus

Johann Sebastian Bach was a little more explicit in his 1723 masterpiece, "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring." You might listen to this music instead, and close your eyes as you do so, stirring the ember of love in your heart. Acknowledging a burning desire for Jesus these days will make Christmas all the more special. Mary, the true Queen of Christmas, can help us enflame and express this desire.

Directed Prayer: "My dove in the clefts of the rock, in the secret recesses of the cliff, let me see your face, let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely." Jesus, you are all I desire for Christmas, for my entire life. You are so sweet and good, and you make me alive. I am yours forever.



Thursday of the Fourth Week of Advent

"I prayed for this child, and the LORD granted my request. Now I, in turn, give him to the LORD;
as long as he lives, he shall be dedicated to the LORD."

1 Samuel 1:27-28

The childless Hannah begged God for a child only so she could give the child away. Why ask for something if you know you are not going to keep it? It seems an injustice to the giver and a waste. But it is not a waste. The gift is not thrown away. It is given to someone else; given to someone else who needs it more.

The priesthood of ancient Israel, and the practice of religion, was in a desperate state in Hannah's time. The inept Eli with his two scoundrel sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were the only priests ministering at Shiloh. It was Hannah's miraculous son Samuel who eliminated the tyrants and protected the people. God had used Hannah to save Israel.

It is a fine state of holiness to which we are called when we can receive something precious only to give it to someone more in need. God does not bestow it directly on the needy. He gives it to us to give to others. He lets us share in his generosity. We are not thieves of the gift, like Smeagol or Bilbo Baggins in *The Lord of the Rings*. We are worthy conduits, like the Virgin Mary and her predecessor Hannah.

Prayer: Lord, I am thinking about a loved one who is far from the faith, far from you. They are struggling in sin, and they don't practice their faith. I pray that they truly know you. I pray that they love you, for love is the most beautiful and rewarding thing we can possess. I know I love you, God. That love I have for you, Jesus, I give to your mother Mary to give to my loved lost sheep.



Friday of the Fourth Week of Advent

"There is no one among your relatives who has this name."

Luke 1:61

There may have been no *relatives* named John, but there were friends. Jonathan was the great friend of David. The son of Saul, Jonathan was loyal to and supportive of David, even when his own father tried to kill David. They prayed together, fought together, and sang music and poetry together. When Jonathan was killed in battle alongside his father, the battle that would allow David at last to become king, David wept bitterly. These were the words he spoke in mourning (actually, they were more than words, they were chant), "I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother! Most dear have you been to me; more precious have I held love for you than love for women."

The love between genuine friends is on a level even deeper than spousal love. This *amicitia* is not exclusive of spouses, if they are true friends, but it is not a guarantee in marriage. Best friends trust each other. They share and listen. They comfort and challenge. They are always there for each other, even when not physically present. There is nothing to take them away from each other, and no mediation needed to facilitate the relationship. It is purely the desire to be in touch with the soul of the other that brings them together.

John the Baptist became this friend of his cousin. Jesus then had this friendship with John his apostle. He desires it now with us.

Prayer: Jesus, I call to mind one of my best friends. I think of their qualities and how I feel when I am around that person. I think of what they do for me and what I do for them. Thank you for this person. Thank you for this friendship. And now I pray that I see the same level of friendship between us.



Saturday of the Fourth Week of Advent

"Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel; he has come to his people and set them free."

Luke 1:67

Here we are. We have arrived. Advent has come to a close. Our waiting, our desiring, our fasting, our expectation is at an end. The season is over. God has come. We are set free.

It probably doesn't feel glorious. Perhaps this evening at the Vigil Mass or tomorrow morning? If so, only for a few fleeting moments. The journey has ended, but another one is just beginning. To celebrate is not to finish. To celebrate is to savor and then continue. Not to forget the past or the victory. No. We let that remain in us. We let the victory guide us forward.

Zechariah's canticle of victory is not recited at the end of the Gospel, after the Resurrection and Pentecost. It is the commencement. God has been born. His birth has set the race free. It is now for the race to live in that freedom. The dawn is a victory over the night, and the start of the new day.

Is there a tint of melancholy in us? We have awaited the glorious day, building it up in our minds. That hope is what propelled us through Advent. Now that it is here, it doesn't feel so special. Or, rather, we don't feel that special. That is, we don't feel *different*.

Oh, but we are. Saint Paul can guide us with his own, similar experience: "I have competed well; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith. From now on a crown of righteousness awaits me, which the Lord, the just judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me, but to all who have longed for his appearance."

Prayer: King of Kings, I feel the crown of righteousness settling upon my head. It is not arrogance or pride to accept the gift of love you have given me. The crown is actually a ring, and the ring bonds me to you. When you come, Jesus, tomorrow, may I hold you tenderly to my heart and show you off to the world.



EXTRA: Christmas Eve

"Now there were shepherds in that region living in the fields
and keeping the night watch over their flock."

Luke 2:8

I made a retreat at a Trappist monastery in Iowa one summer. Each day I went walking through the cornfields. Not through the actual rows of corn, but on wide paths with knee-high, coarse grass slicing through the fields. I was curious why these paths existed. Surely not for me. Well, one particularly hot day the grass was mowed, and I found myself walking on a bed of green straw. A day later the straw was gone, and I was walking on dirt. My puzzle was solved when I reached the end of the cornfield and saw a large hay bale. This tall, coarse grass, seemingly at first a farmer's oversight in an otherwise ordered and fruitful field, was as significant as the corn.

The area was going through a spell of hot and dry weather that summer - perfect conditions for making hay. Little did I know this hay would be put to use around now: feeding animals that are unable to graze because snow covers the land or the grass is dormant.

The 16th Century English priest and martyr, Robert Southwell, penned "The Nativity of Christ" while in prison awaiting execution. The poem ends with the follow stanza:

Man alter'd was by sin from man to beast;
Beast's food is hay, hay is all mortal flesh;
Now God is flesh, and lies in manger press'd,
As hay the brutest sinner to refresh:

Oh happy field wherein this fodder grew,
Whose taste doth us from beasts to men renew!

It is a curious thing why animals are included in Nativity scenes, along with hay. Maybe it is a message that we are not just to adore the baby, but to feed on him. The Word was made flesh precisely in this wintertime, when the earth by itself does not produce food, so we can live.

Prayer: Christ, I thank you for this Advent season. There were beautiful graces and painful challenges. My heart was on fire at times, icy cold at others. I was near, I was far. I reflected your face to others by my goodness, I turned others away from you by my sin. There is no scorecard. You love me all the same. You came into this world for me. My heart is the empty manger for you.

Christmas



Haystacks-Snow Effect, Claude Monet, 1891



December 25 - The Nativity of the Lord

"You shall be called by a new name pronounced by the mouth of the Lord."
Isaiah 62:2

The figures in a Nativity set can show us what elements are to be present in our religious and spiritual lives. We start with the angels. An angel usually rests on the apex of the creche, not to mention our Christmas trees. An angel is a supernatural, mystical, and transcendent being. They praise God constantly in heaven and serve him by serving us. The mystical is to be part of our lives. We are to reflect on the higher things and be awed by them. We are to praise God and adore him. We are to serve God by serving others.

We move next to the shepherds. If angels are on one end of the spectrum, shepherds would be on the other. Both ends of the spectrum are good and necessary. Shepherds are ordinary, humble, and even ugly. Angels fly, shepherds walk. They don't look directly on the face of God as angels do, but they encounter God in the rolling hills, the starry night sky, and the majestic trees. We aren't called to live in the clouds, but to experience God in our labor and in our nature. We aren't called to be the smartest individuals, but simple and faithful ones.

Sheep, donkeys, camels, and other animals are wonderfully present around the Christ-child. We are to be a people who respects creation. The three magi from the east tell us the "Gentiles" - those outside the standard practice of the faith - are actually inside with us. Joseph is our life of everyday virtue and fidelity. Mary is our life of prayer and interiority. And Jesus is our all.

Prayer: Jesus, my life is so dynamic. I am busy and I am still. I think and I act. I am joyful and melancholic. I want to be with you in silence; I want to serve others. My heart is the Nativity set. You are pleased to make it and I am pleased to have you dwell in it.



December 26 - Saint Stephen

"The witnesses laid down their cloaks at the feet of a young man named Saul."
Acts 7:58

The martyrdom of Stephen was the turning point in Saul's life. Some might say the turning point was the Road to Damascus, but the seeds for that event were planted this day.

Saul was responsible for Stephen's death. He arrested the young Christian, rallied the angry rabble, and brought forth the charges. Stephen before the Sanhedrin proceeded to teach a lesson of salvation history and how Christ was the fulfillment of that history. He was then calm when the

crowd and leaders rejected this teaching and falsely accused him of blasphemy. When the stones hit his body, his focus was on the Father in heaven. He spoke the very words Jesus spoke from the cross: into your hands I commend my spirit.

Saul witnessed Stephen's behavior, and it struck him to the core. Stephen acted in a non-human, supernatural way. This could only be possible if Christ were real.

After Saul's conversion, which followed shortly thereafter, he took Stephen as his model. He would teach similarly the history of salvation when dragged before an angry crowd, he would stay silent and pray when the stones hit him, and he would move on to the next mission and never stop, lest Stephen's death be in vain.

Stephen gave his life as a gift to Paul and to all of us, and this is why we celebrate him the day after Christmas.

Prayer: Jesus, while I am in the joy of Christmas, I am also afflicted with some pains: pains of family members and friends with whom I don't agree, pains of the season being over and returning to work, pains of the looming months of winter ahead. I offer you, Father, my suffering and commend my spirit into your hands.



December 27 - Saint John

"Then the other disciple also went in, the one who had arrived at the tomb first,
and he saw and believed."

John 20:8

Saint John got it. Others have gotten it over the millennia too, but John was the first, and in the most unique way. His love for Jesus illumined his whole being. It gave him an insight into the divine of which subsequent saints have only glimpsed.

John's heart was completely transfixed to the Sacred Heart. His heart pulsed with Jesus'. It suffered, died, and rose with him. It shared a communion with the Trinity. It was oriented outwards to service. John wrote: "What we have seen and heard we proclaim now to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; for our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We are writing this so that our joy may be complete."

Similar words Christ himself spoke at the Last Supper.

When John reclined his head on Jesus' shoulder at the banquet, the heat from Christ's heart radiated into the apostle. That sacred heat never left John. It allowed him to run to the empty tomb and believe, to recognize the risen Christ from the seashore, and to compose his sacred texts in exile.

John is the symbol and reminder to us that the love of Christ is first. We can know all of theology, follow all the rules, and pray every day, but it is all straw without that love.

Prayer: Jesus, I recline my head upon your chest. I rest in that place. I feel the warmth of your heart coursing into my being. I accept that you have called me to this privileged position. We have fellowship together. Please complete my joy.



December 28 - The Holy Innocents

"A voice was heard in Ramah, sobbing and loud lamentation; Rachel weeping for her children, and she would not be consoled, since they were no more."

Matthew 2:18

The closing prayer at the liturgy today reads: "Grant, O Lord, abundant salvation to your faithful as they receive your holy gifts on the feast day of these, your Saints, who, though still unable to profess your Son in speech, were crowned with heavenly grace on account of his birth."

May the faithful indeed receive the gift this day of silent surrender, for that is what the holy innocents exercised. They could not speak. They could not choose. And yet by being killed they witnessed to the truth of the faith. Simply existing is sometimes the course of saintliness.

The Church certainly exalts learning. We have a category of saints known as 'Doctors of the Church.' The Church lauds those who build and create. We think of all the founders of religious communities who have been canonized. And the Church honors those who willingly give their lives in defense of the faith. These are the martyrs.

The Holy Innocents did none of those. They simply were. But there was something deep and holy within their little bodies. Their souls were infused with God's grace and glory, like John the Baptist was in his mother's womb. The eye could not see it, but we know it now. There was something special in these infants in Bethlehem who were killed.

God had chosen these select few. He has chosen us. Deep within our souls is the light of divinity and a love of God. Should our lives too suddenly come to an end, may we become saints.

Prayer: "My heart is not proud, O Lord, nor are my eyes haughty; I do not concern myself with great matters or things too sublime for me. I have stilled and quieted my soul; like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me." (Psalm 131)



December 29 - Saint Thomas Beckett

"Every male that opens the womb shall be consecrated to the Lord."

Luke 2:23

Consecration has a real effect. The blessing changes the person or object. It can be a temporal change, like food blessed; it can be permanent, like a person or church being blessed. But the object is changed. There is a seed of divinity planted deep within the object and it now radiates this glory. As we saw yesterday with the Holy Innocents, these boys who had already been consecrated to the Lord due to the Jewish law were martyrs without even knowing it.

Saint Thomas Beckett was a changed man after he received priestly and episcopal consecration. Once King Henry II's crony as a layman, he was now a servant of the Church. Henry had selected Beckett as the Archbishop of Canterbury, figuring this was a way he could control the Church, having his ally in the most powerful ecclesiastical position. But Henry underestimated the power of grace and consecration. Beckett, while respectful and loyal to the king, served the truth and Jesus Christ first. Henry, enraged at his friend's betrayal, had the archbishop murdered.

Consecrations are powerful and we can unofficially consecrate ourselves anew when we feel called to dedicate everything to God. And just like objects can lose their consecration, we too can be desecrated. Reconsecration is always a possibility and may that be our path this day.

Prayer: O God, I consecrate myself to. I give you everything that I am. My heart and my soul, my mind and my body - they are yours. My career, my reputation, my memories, my relationships. I surrender all to you. Totally free and totally in my raw self, I choose to love and serve you.



The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph

"The angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Rise, take the child and his mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I tell you.'"

Matthew 2:13

Saint Joseph displayed intrepid fathering skills, a balance of openness and planning. Several times Joseph's plans were unexpectedly and drastically changed. First was his plan to marry and have a regular family with Mary. This is upended by the Annunciation. Second was Joseph's plan to assist Mary with the birth of her child in their home. This is upended by the census and the need to travel at the most unideal time, when Mary is nine months pregnant, to Bethlehem. Third was Joseph's plan to raise the young family back home, but this is upended when the angel tells Joseph to travel

down to Egypt, a foreign and pagan land with no family and no timeline as to how long they will stay. Joseph was open to all of it. He was open because he had a fundamental trust in God.

Joseph wasn't completely phlegmatic, however. There was a choleric side to him. Carpenters have this balance naturally. Joseph was able to provide in Egypt for his family like his Old Testament namesake, who demonstrated shrew management skills for Pharaoh. Joseph didn't willy nilly return to Israel, but chose a location where Archelaus was not ruling, for Archelaus was a madman (and would later be removed by the Romans).

Holiness is finding balance. We have to relinquish control and be open to God's will, but we also have to exercise prudence and our other natural skills to help facilitate the unfolding of this will. Joseph taught Jesus this balance and he can teach us too.

Prayer: Saint Joseph, I am a person of routine. Please show me how I can let go, be open, and in some way today be extemporaneous. Give me the trust in God to do so. Saint Joseph, I am an impromptu and free-spirit person. Please show me how I can plan and be intentional today and offer that for another person. Give me the trust in God to do so.



December 31 - Saint Sylvester

"All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be."
John 1:3

The 1927 African-American spiritual, "He's Got the Whole Word in His Hands" can be a good prayer to make when we question the beauty of the world. Everything fits together neatly into God's plan.

Imagine the world like a painting. When one watches a painting unfold, it can appear odd and as if many mistakes are being made. A gray splotch randomly at the top, an erasure of what had been a nice tree, a bleeding of one color into the next: if we have the patience to wait out the artist, we will see a textured sky, a dense forest, a bouquet of flowers. The key for us is to trust the artist.

Trusting in God as he paints the cosmos with every element of the world in his hands, good and evil, beautiful and ugly, becomes the calling. This is what is enjoyable. Watching God paint is life-giving. He is a far superior artist than us and we can take the posture of sitting at his feet while he works.

His painting of the world is not on one canvas. It is not one painting upon which he is constantly working. God has produced as many images of the world as there have been years on this planet. It is a gallery he has created. Every image is unique, and every image is beautiful.

Prayer: Lord, I pause to reflect back on my year, on my life. What kind of image would you paint to describe me? A ship on turbulent waters? A soothing landscape? A self-portrait? Whatever it is, I trust it is beautiful and that you are pleased with the work.



January 1 - Mary, the Mother of God

"When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to ransom those under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons."

Galatians 4:4-5

Circumcision in ancient Israel initiated the male into the nation. Without the male being circumcised, he remained a foreigner. He was in slavery and in darkness, for this is the state into which everyone is born. The slicing off of the excess tissue was the ransom price for being saved. Once paid, the child and the family were now secure in the nation of Israel and secure under its law. The law and its practices was salvation.

Actually, said Saint Paul, everyone in the nation of Israel and under the law was still in darkness, still in slavery. The way to freedom and light is not circumcision but believing in Jesus and being baptized into him.

Today is like a mini-4th of July or Independence Day. We don't recreate our slavery and liberation, but rather celebrate the reality that we are free. Just like the 4th stokes patriotism in us, the 1st can stoke pride in Jesus and love for him. We can look back and see how we took little steps, perhaps, back into slavery or darkness, and allow Christ once again to secure us in the light and freedom.

Mary was present at the Circumcision. She was present at the Annunciation and Nativity. She was present at the Crucifixion. She was present in all of this. She guided her son to this redemption. She was present every day for us last year and will be present for us every day this year. She will guide us to freedom.

Prayer: God, I imagine the baby Jesus being held by Mary, who is lifting him to the temple priest for the circumcision. Regardless of whether the baby is crying or is still, I see Mary's calmness; her deep trust in you. Mary, please pray I may have that similar trust and serenity before the trials of my life.



January 2 - Saints Basil and Gregory

"So they asked him, 'What are you then?'"

John 1:21

Many in society today try to stand out to identify themselves. They recreate themselves so they will be something. They try to be original. They don't trust that who they are is unique enough. And so

they refashion themselves into another image from which they hope others will copy them. In reality, they've just copied someone else.

This is precisely what occurred with Adam in the Garden.

This is not what happened with John the Baptist. John did not need to be someone else - a prophet, Elijah, the Messiah, whatever. He found his identity in God. His purpose was simply to point out the Messiah and encourage people to be in relationship with him. He lived a spirit of receptivity. That is, his identity wasn't to be someone, but to receive someone. He lived like the woman who caused him to leap while in his mother's womb. Mary's "yes" to God at the Annunciation is the model of receptivity. Opening herself up, she is completely filled by God and flourishes. John followed the same.

The path to human flourishing thus is poverty. We have nothing, we are nothing, we desire nothing other than God. This is poverty, and in living it we are in a position to receive God. Poverty leads simultaneously to wealth. "Those who are last shall be first."

To be truly human is to accept the fundamental position of poverty. This is a great blessing, for it means we are meant to be filled by God himself, and God is true wealth.

We need not worry when we fit in with the rest of humanity. We can accept our bodies and our identities as we are. That is the communion of saints.

Prayer: Be it done unto me according to your will. Jesus, I accept who I am. I trust that I am beautiful and significant in this world. I am a son/daughter of God and I see you smiling before me.



January 3 - The Holy Name of Jesus

"A man is coming after me who ranks ahead of me because he existed before me."

John 1:30

The way the casserole dish holds all the ingredients together, allowing them to be one though many parts, so too the name of an individual holds the person together. There are many parts to us. We have our bodies, our personalities, our experiences, our minds, our interests, our histories, and so forth. *Who are you?* is answered not by one of those items above, but simply by your name. Your name captures all of that. It is not semantics.

Who is Jesus? He is God. He is the eternal Word who has always existed coeternal with the Father. He receives his identity from the Father, but the Father cannot exist without him. He reveals the face of the invisible Father to us. In so doing he also heals us, fulfills us, and makes us one with him. We too can share in the Godhead.

The name 'Jesus' means 'God saves.' That is, God doesn't exist just to be by himself. He exists to love us. This love is our salvation. Jesus, we could say, is purely holy. There is no selfishness or egotism in him. He is purely generous. His name is holy.

Prayer: Jesus. (pause) Jesus. I breathe your name in. It fills my lungs, my heart, my mind. You say my name (say your name). I love you and I love myself. We are one.



January 4 - Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton

"John was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he said, 'Behold, the Lamb of God.'"

John 1:35

Andrew and James had been standing with John the Baptist over the last several days, witnessing John's baptism of Jesus, the dialogue with the Pharisees, the first pointing out of the Lamb of God, and then, on the fourth day, the second pointing out of the Lamb of God. Each day the two disciples prayed over the experiences. They finally realized they needed to act. They approached Jesus and began their new relationship.

One of the areas over which they must have prayed was to what were they a disciple of. To be a disciple of the Baptist was more to follow a movement, a theory, a system. John preached a message of repentance and upheaval of the establishment. But he didn't preach himself. He didn't call people to himself. To be a disciple of Jesus was to follow the man, not the theory. Andrew and James realized they were called to be in relationship with this man, to study under him, and to love him. In their discernment their hearts told them this was the higher way.

We need to give ourselves space to pray over the experiences, encounters, and impactful moments we have in our day. What do they mean? Where is the spirit of God in this? What are we called to do?

We also need to make the movement from the discipleship of theory to the discipleship of the person. We can be "Catholic" and believe all the truths, but if we are not in an active, loving relationship with Jesus, then we are not yet true disciples.

Prayer: Lord, I say 'I love you' so many times. It is a habit. When I say it now, I truly mean it. I reach into the depths of my heart, as far as I can go, and I pull out the love that is within. I joyfully give it to you. To love also means to listen and trust, and so I will wait now for you to respond.



January 5 - Saint John Neumann

"Before Philip called you, I saw you under the fig tree."

John 1:48

The funeral Mass for Pope Benedict XVI was held this day in St. Peter's Basilica in 2023. In the days following, many reflected on the man. Joseph Ratzinger was a brilliant mind, a faithful servant, a priest who loved God. His writing already, even before his death, had created a legacy for him. What about his pontificate?

Ratzinger served as Prefect of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith under Pope John Paul II for nearly thirty years. He was, arguably, the Polish pope's most trusted advisor. When the Church experienced its greatest crisis in 2002 in the sexual abuse crisis, with John Paul II infirm from Parkinson's, Ratzinger was the man who stepped up. Jurisdiction to prosecute cases of abuse was transferred from the Congregation of the Clergy to Ratzinger's office. He was the only man who could be trusted; the only man with an uncompromised integrity, a fair sense of a justice, and a pastoral heart, to both victims and priests. He helped navigate the barque of Peter during this very dark time.

Ratzinger was a faithful and holy servant because he knew Jesus saw him sitting under the fig tree. Philip realized the Lord saw his soul. This awareness led him to be a faithful disciple. It did the same for Ratzinger.

Prayer: Jesus, I sit beneath the fig tree. I contemplate my life. Who am I? What have I done? What will be my legacy? Much of it is out of my control. The one thing I can do now is love you entirely, and that is all that matters. I pray my life will help others love you the same.



January 6 - The Feast of the Epiphany

"O God, with your judgment endow the king."

Psalms 72:1

There is a good balance struck between divine intervention and human ingenuity in the case of the three magi. We start with the very fact that these pagan scholars were looking for a star. The Jewish prophet Daniel had spoken about the star while he was in Babylon, and it was referenced in the Hebrew texts (cf. Numbers). God provided the initial clues, but the three magi used their human intellect and openness to other cultures to follow the clues.

The star vanished, so they sought help. They wanted to provide gifts for the Holy Family, so they asked advice on what would be appropriate. The Hebrew Scriptures instructed them to bring gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And when it was time to leave, they listened to the angel to "go another way." The way they had initially come was the fastest and safest way. This new way would be much more difficult, perhaps through the desert or perhaps further west towards Egypt. But they trusted.

Yes, the magi are wonderful models of openness and receptivity. They don't have it all figured out. They seek help and they follow it. Their simplicity was enough to "deceive" the cunning Herod.

If we have faith in God and truly desire him, God will help us to see Christ.

Prayer: At the beginning of Advent, we were instructed to look east, toward the coming of Christ. The magi initially went west. Lord, I set out westward into the unknown. You are calling me to serve you. I'm not exactly sure how, but I trust it will become clear for me. And then I will return home by the eastward route.



January 7 - Saint Raymond of Penafort

"When the wine ran short, the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine'."

John 2:2

I celebrated two weddings on New Years Eve one year and both wedding couples choose today's Gospel reading, the Wedding Feast at Cana, as their wedding Gospel. A fitting choice.

The wine will run out. It is an inevitable reality in marriage, priesthood, family life, the spiritual life, your career, whatever. What once was exciting and joyous becomes flat, boring, and even painful. It is no one's fault the wine runs out. The very fact that Jesus had this situation as his first miracle is testament that honeymoons end naturally.

When the proverbial wine runs out in our vocation the advice is not to go in search of another party or to replace the wine with something else, but to turn to Jesus.

We might not always know the wine has run out. The bridegroom was oblivious to the situation. Spending some time with Mary will help us see the state of our cellar. She will tell us if we are dry, and she will tell us what to do. There is no selfishness in asking the Lord to give us new wine in our vocation. It will benefit the party. And the wine will be better than it was to start.

Prayer: Lord, I have water, but I want wine. The wine has run out in my marriage, in my career, in my city, in my prayer, in my life. You want me to have wine. You want me to have joy. I turn my cup over so you can fill it. I praise you for this gift.



The Baptism of the Lord

"Allow it now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness."

Matthew 3:15

I recall having a mixed reaction when I was told in adolescence that I needed to take a shower. Typically, it occurred in the kitchen around dinnertime, having returned from a sports practice. Part of me was offended at being told I was unpleasant to be around. The other part of me was encouraged, for I knew there was a quick and guaranteed solution to the problem and that it was only something superficial holding me back from being admitted to my family's presence.

Jesus was baptized not to be made clean, as I needed to be after a football practice. Jesus was baptized to establish the quick and easy way to be made clean. He was baptized to make original sin something superficial and easily removed.

We don't like to talk about original sin, and we don't like to imagine an innocent baby having it. But all it takes is a simple pouring of water with a one-sentence formula to remove the thing. The baby is pristine.

The invitation here is not to focus on the sin and its consequences, but rather on the simple means of cleansing and communion. Our Lord made it that easy for us. Original sin could have been the worst calamity for humanity. Now it is the easiest disease cured and something to never be thought about again.

Prayer: Jesus, I think about original sin as a theory, but I never consider it applying to myself. I suppose all my sins are from the root of that original sin. Which means the formula for being cleansed of these sins is just as easy. I'm sorry for what I've done and for the loving person I haven't been able to be for others. Please help me grow this year to be like you: kind, compassionate, humble, and sacrificial.