

Waiting with Hope

Introduction

If you are a young adult who has been looking for a way to prepare spiritually for Christmas, this book is for you. These reflections have been written by people in their twenties and thirties. These young adults have taken the readings for the Advent season and used them as a springboard for their own prayerful thought and reflection. Now they invite you to do the same.

If you set aside time each day during this Advent for prayer and meditation on scripture, you will grow in a richer appreciation of the treasures the Advent season holds. This introduction is an overview of the Advent season and includes concrete suggestions for using the readings and reflections in this book.

Advent: A Season of Hope

Advent is a season of joyful and spiritual expectation. It highlights the virtues of hope and patience. Biblical hope is not a naive optimism. It is confidence in God's action on behalf of human beings. Hope is grounded in faith. This faith leads Christian people to recognize the creative and healing hand of God guiding them through daily life. While the readings from the prophets focus on the hope that God would eventually fulfill the promises made throughout history, the gospel readings present Jesus and the coming of the Reign of God as the foundation of all hope.

The hope that comes through the Advent readings is needed by so many people today. In the midst of the global problems that face the world or the personal problems that believing Christians encounter each day, hope is a reminder that God is in charge and that God is faithful.

As you begin this journey through the Advent readings, open your heart and mind to the message of this season. Take courage from the faithfulness of God's promises. Believe that God's power will overcome all evil in the world as well as any obstacle you may face. This is the meaning of the Reign of God. This is the foundation of Advent hope.

The Advent Cycle of Readings

The season of Advent lasts from three to four weeks, depending on the day of the week on which Christmas falls. The scripture readings and prayers during Advent offer a "double theme." The most obvious theme is that Advent is a time of preparation for Christmas. The other theme focuses on Advent as a time of anticipation and waiting for Christ's second coming at the end of time. While both of these themes are interwoven throughout the season of Advent, the beginning of the season emphasizes our preparation for Christ's return in glory. The last eight days of Advent highlight the immediate preparation to celebrate the birth of Jesus.

The readings for the Sundays of Advent follow a three-year cycle (like all the Sundays of the year). Even though the readings on a given Sunday will differ within the three-year cycle, a common focus appears each year. For example, each year on the first Sunday of Advent the gospel speaks of the Lord's return and urges watchfulness. The gospels on the second and third Sundays of Advent spotlight John the Baptist. The gospels on the fourth Sunday of Advent are part of the immediate preparation to celebrate the birth of Jesus and feature important figures like Joseph, Mary, Gabriel and Elizabeth.

The daily readings for the weekdays of Advent are the same every year. These readings follow a pattern. For the first nine weekdays of Advent, the first reading is chosen from the

prophet Isaiah. On these days the gospel passages are chosen to fit with the message of Isaiah. Beginning on Thursday of the second week of Advent, a series of gospels focus on John the Baptist (similar to the Sunday readings), while the first readings either continue the Book of Isaiah or come from a text related to the day's gospel.

The eight days prior to Christmas (December 17-24) are designated as a special time of preparation. The readings assigned for these days are more directly oriented to the Lord's birth. The gospel passages are taken from the first chapters of Matthew and Luke. These passages describe the events leading up to the birth of the Messiah. The first readings are from various Old Testament books. They have important prophecies about the expected Messiah. This series of readings always begins on December 17. When Advent is shorter, the rest of the readings for the third week of Advent are not used.

How to Use This Book

You can use the readings of Advent and the reflections contained in this book many ways. If you only have a few minutes each morning, read the scripture readings and meditate for a few moments on the reflection offered for that day. Keep the questions for reflection in mind as you go about your daily routine. Perhaps you can return to those questions again in the evening.

If you would like to devote more time to prayer and reflection during Advent, consider the following format. It presumes about 15-30 minutes a day. Adapt it to best fit your needs.

1. Pick a Time

Not everyone prays at the same time. Prayer can happen early in the morning, late at night, or at many other conducive times. When can you find 15-30 minutes in your day for prayer and reflection? First thing in the morning? During lunch hour or some other break in your day? When you get home from school or work? Just before you go to bed? The key is to make a commitment to keeping whatever time you choose. After a couple of days, if you find that the time you have picked isn't working, re-negotiate a new time with yourself.

2. Create a Space

Pray anywhere you like. Find a place that is conducive for you. You may like to go to a chapel or nearby church. You may pray best in your bedroom or living room or while on a walk in the woods or a park. If need be, you can pray at work or school as long as you can find some quiet space. Finding a regular place and time for prayer will help you remain faithful to your commitment.

A little atmosphere can help. Light the candles of an Advent wreath or some other candle as an indication that this is prayer time. Arrange a "prayer corner" in your room or home with a few simple things such as a Bible, candles, plants, and some items that have personal meaning. Try playing quiet music; a walkman can help make any place a bit more reflective. A list of suggested music is included at the end of this introduction.

3. Focus on the Scripture Readings

The scripture readings for daily Mass during Advent serve as the basis for the daily reflections. The scripture readings are cited at the top of each page. Locate them in your Bible, but before you read them, pause and open your heart to God's Word. Put aside any other concerns or distractions and ask God to let the message of these readings touch your heart and mind.

Begin with the first reading. Pause and ask yourself what it is saying. Take time to reread portions that are unclear. Let your mind and heart take you wherever the Spirit leads. After a while, read the gospel. Follow the same procedure just described. After spending some quiet

reflection time, ask yourself what God might be saying to you through these readings. Do they have some immediate relevance to your experience?

4. Read the Reflection for the Day

Read the reflection that the book offers for that day. How is the reflection of that young adult similar to or different from your own? What does it challenge or inspire you to think and pray about?

Each entry concludes with questions for reflection. Spend time considering your response to each of the questions.

5. Journal Time

You may find journaling a useful and effective way to pray. To journal is to write down your prayers and thoughts. Use the space provided after the reflections in this book, or journals or blank books are available in stores. You can also create your own.

Because prayer is conversation with God, in your journal you might write what you want to say to God or the things that you want to remember from your conversation with God. Consider journaling your responses to the questions proposed for each day.

6. Say Thanks

Conclude by thanking God for the time you have spent in prayer with God. Thank God for the insights you have received, the challenges you have heard, and the feelings that were raised. Tell God in your own words how grateful you are.

A Key for Finding the Assigned Advent Readings

Sundays

- Follow a three-year cycle
- This book lists all three years on the top of the pages for Sundays
- Advent 2001 is Year A
- Advent 2002 is Year B
- Advent 2003 is Year C, and so on. . .

Weekdays

- Same every year
- December 8 (Feast of Immaculate Conception) supersedes whatever weekday it falls on
- Beginning with December 17, use the readings that begin on page 29 for the rest of Advent

Suggestions for Reflective Music

Many people find quiet, reflective music a help for entering into prayer. Instrumental music provides background during time for reading and reflection. Music with words that highlight the Advent themes serve as a complement to the readings and prayers.

There are many sources for such music. Some are available at the usual music outlets. Others can be found at religious goods stores or by ordering them from the publisher. The following suggestions indicate a few offerings that are readily available.

Instrumental Music

- Kenny G, *Miracles: The Holiday Album*. (especially “Greensleeves” and “Miracles”)

- Windham Hill Artists, *A Winter's Solstice II*. (especially "17th Century Canon," "Salve Regina," "Simple Psalm," "Abide the Winter," and Flute Sonata in Em)
- Windham Hill Artists, *A Winter's Solstice III*. (especially "Hopeful," "Veni Emmanuel," "Of the Father's Love Begotten," "Sleepers Awake," and "Earth Abides")
- Windham Hill Artists, *A Winter's Solstice IV*. (especially "Winter Bourne," "Dona Nobis Pacem," "Sheep May Safely Graze," "Trumpet Tune," and "The Rain")
- Windham Hill Artists, *A Winter's Solstice V*. (especially "The Simple Birth," "Light and Song," "My Heart Is Always Moving," "Snow in the Prairies," and "Doo'itt'saa'da")
- Carey Landry and Carol Jean Kinghorn, *Gentle Sounds*, available from Oregon Catholic Press* (old favorites like "Isaiah 49" and "Hail Mary, Gentle Woman")
- Carey Landry and Carol Jean Kinghorn, *Gentle Sounds Volume 2*, available from Oregon Catholic Press* (including "Like a Seal on Your Heart" and "Companions on the Journey")
- Carey Landry and Carol Jean Kinghorn, *Gentle Sounds Volume 3*, available from Oregon Catholic Press* (newer songs, all instrumental)
- Terry Robb, *Bethlehem Star: Christmas Guitar Instrumentals*, available from Oregon Catholic Press* (your favorite carols performed on acoustic guitar)
- Paul Inwood, *Eternity*, available from Oregon Catholic Press* (piano meditations on some familiar and newer songs)

Music with Words

- Grayson Warren Brown, *Have Your Heard the Goods News*, available from Oregon Catholic Press* (note in particular "When He Comes" and "O Come O Come Emmanuel")
- St. Louis Jesuits, *Gentle Night*, available from Oregon Catholic Press* (an "oldie-but-goodie;" especially good for Advent are: "Emmanuel," "Gentle Night," "Patience People," "A Time Will Come for Singing," and "Winter Cold Night")
- Tom Kendzia, *Light from Light*, available from Oregon Catholic Press* (especially "Advent Meditation" and "O Come O Come Emmanuel")
- Jim Hansen, *The Advent of Our God*, available from Oregon Catholic Press* (an Advent service of readings and music on tape)

* Tapes and compact disks of the music published by Oregon Catholic Press are available through a local religious goods store or by contacting OCP directly: 1-800-LITURGY (548-8749).

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Year A	Year B	Year C
Isaiah 2:1-5	Isaiah 63:16-17, 19:64:2-7	Jeremiah 33:14-16
Romans 13:11-14	1 Corinthians 1:3-9	1 Thessalonians 3:12- 4:2
Matthew 24:37-44	Mark 13:33-37	Luke 21:25-28, 34-36

“Be Ready... Be on your guard... Stay awake...”

Are you a person who loves surprises or someone who likes to plan everything? What happens when someone catches you by surprise? The Scripture readings tell us that God might catch us by surprise if we do not stay alert.

Contemporary culture encourages us to live for the day. *“Carpe diem!* You are young! You are healthy! Seize the moment!” Often we give little thought to the future or to preparing for it. Yet we are told, “The Son of God will come at a time we least expect.”

What would I do if I knew Christ was going to arrive in the next month and ask for an accounting of my life? Would I be proud of it? Would I be happy with the plans I have made? Would I change the way I was going to spend this month, this week, this day?

FIRST MONDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 4:2-6 • Matthew 8:5-11

“I am not worthy to have you under my roof.”

Advent is a time of preparation to welcome Christ more deeply into our lives. Are any of us worthy to welcome Christ into our lives, into our homes, into our workplaces? Yet Christ desires to become more present in those places. Many of us are moving out on our own: going away to school, getting our own apartments, even building our houses and starting our families. Will Christ find a place of welcome in the home we set up or at the job we find?

In what ways have I welcomed Christ into my heart? into my home? into my workplace? What can I do today to prepare for his arrival?

FIRST TUESDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 11:1-10 • Luke 10:21-24

“Blest are the eyes that see what you see.”

The closer we get to Christmas the busier we seem to be. We have much to do: cards to write, books to read, parties to plan, gifts to buy and wrap. In this time of hustle and bustle, with all the tinsel and glitter, sometimes it is hard to see what is really important. Some things that are not so important often masquerade as such.

What do I wish I had time to see, to experience? Can I see through the haze of activity and business to a vision of what is really important? In the midst of so many other demands, can I see Christ in my activities today? The disciples in today's gospel heard and saw Christ. Will I try to see Christ in the friends I will meet today, the challenges I will face, the people who will come to me and all the events of this day?

FIRST WEDNESDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 25:6-10 • Matthew 15:29-37

“I do not wish to send them away hungry...”

The holiday season puts many demands on us with things to do and places to go. There are demands on our money, so many good causes asking for help, and demands on our time. Our families need us, friends want to get together, the boss needs us to work late. It is easy to feel overwhelmed.

Jesus felt the demands of people in today's gospel. He did not lose the focus of his mission. People needed him and he rose to the occasion. With the crowds around him, it was clear what needed to be done: feed the hungry.

What in my life is God asking me to do? What do I believe needs to be done at this moment? Who are the hungry in my life and how can I feed them?

FIRST THURSDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 26:1-6 • Matthew 7:21, 24-27

“Doing the will of my Father in heaven”

How many times we pray in the Lord’s Prayer “Thy will be done.” Sometimes knowing God’s will can be a tremendous challenge; other times it is so simple to see. “Does God really want me to go drinking with my friends tonight? Is it really important that I call my mother? Is this job what I should be doing with my life?” Lots of questions and no quick answers.

The Lord is that solid foundation on which I need to build my life. Doing the Lord’s will in all things provides a strong foundation for Christian living.

What does God want me to do when I face the many decisions that will come my way today?

FIRST FRIDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 11:1-10 • Luke 10:21-24

“Because of your faith it shall be done to you.”

There were days in college when Armando thought that he was losing his faith. He had been taught such a childlike, simple faith in his family. Then new ideas and many questions were causing him to doubt things he had taken for granted. He talked to friends, sought advice from a priest, but most of all, he prayed for the gift of faith. Armando eventually felt stronger in his faith. He still had questions and he knew that he could not return to the simple faith of his childhood. But what Armando was certain of was that Jesus would help him see the way he should go.

How strong is my faith? What do I do when I experience questions and doubts? Am I confident that Jesus is always there with me, even when I feel far away from him?

FIRST SATURDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 30:19-21, 23-26 • Matthew 9:35 - 10:1, 6-8

“The gift you have received, give as a gift.”

A young woman named Cynthia had a real gift for music. She played several instruments. She could hear a song and sit down at the piano and play it. One day she stopped playing. Why did she stop? She did not think she was as good as many of the other students at her music school. She had lost confidence in her ability. Although many of her friends disagreed and tried to help her appreciate her gift again, she never returned to music. She could not see her gift.

What is my special gift? Am I good at academics, sports, crafts, computers, music, organizing? Am I a good listener? Do I have a sense of humor? Am I compassionate, empathetic, patient, articulate, tolerant, impartial? Do I accept my gifts? Am I jealous of the gifts of others? These gifts that I have received, do I give them as a gift to others?

DECEMBER 8

Feast of the Immaculate Conception

Genesis 3:9-15, 20 • Ephesians 1:3-6, 11-12 • Luke 1:26-38

“Do not fear, Mary. You have found favor with God.”

“No Fear!” So proclaims the logo on a popular line of clothing. Some people appear to be afraid of nothing. Some people fear violence on the streets, the economic insecurity that comes with finding and keeping a job, uncertainty about the future, the new responsibilities that come with starting a family. Most people fear the unknown. Mary, the mother-to-be of Jesus, was “deeply troubled” by the words of Gabriel. She was frightened by the strange circumstances of the message and wondered what the message meant. But her faith had prepared her to accept the reassurance that God’s messenger brought. Despite her initial fear and questions, she trusted that the Lord’s words would be fulfilled. “Let it be done to me as you say.”

What am I afraid of? What are the insecurities and uncertainties that bother me? How can I learn to trust like Mary?

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Year A

Isaiah 11:1-10

Romans 15:4-9

Matthew 3:1-12

Year B

Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11

2 Peter 3:8-14

Mark 1:1-8

Year C

Baruch 5:1-9

Philippians 1:4-6, 8-11

Luke 3:1-6

“Make ready the way of the Lord.”

John the Baptist lived radically. He stripped away the comforts of life to focus on the task at hand: to prepare people to receive the Lord. His words were bold. He challenged people to reform their lives. He urged them to admit their sins and change their ways. He prepared them to receive Jesus, who was to come. In a world where so many things pull us in different directions, we need to take John's message to heart.

How radical do I need to become in following Christ? Have I bought into the cultural message that tells me what things I need to be successful? Do my lifestyle and values reflect my commitment to Christ? Do my choices at work and the friends I choose reflect this commitment? What do I need to change in my life? Have I admitted my sins and sought forgiveness?

SECOND MONDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 35:1-10 • Luke 5:17-26

“My friend, your sins are forgiven you.”

What good friends the paralyzed man had! They were not concerned with being inconvenienced or embarrassed. All they cared about was getting their friend to Jesus.

I can relate to the sick man because I've been blessed with a friend who is there for me in difficult times in life. My freshman year at the university was tough. I was homesick at first, but I overcame that and became a “party animal.” I started doing things that clashed with my real values as a Christian. I felt “paralyzed” by sin, but I was too proud to ask for God's forgiveness. Then one of my close friends reintroduced me to Jesus by encouraging me to go on a student retreat. The experience opened me to the healing power of Christ's love and forgiveness. I left that retreat glorifying God for healing my spiritual sickness. And I knew that I was blessed with a special friend.

In what areas of my life do I need healing? For what sins do I need to ask forgiveness of the Lord?

SECOND TUESDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 40:1-11 • Matthew 18:12-14

“Like a shepherd he feeds his flock; in his arms he carries the lambs.”

I never appreciated the image of the Good Shepherd until recently. With several of my friends from college I went to a Benedictine monastery for a few quiet days of retreat. The monks there raise sheep and guests were invited to help with the chores. I saw how the Brother in charge of the sheep stayed up all night because it was “lambing time.” My friends and I helped search through the woods for a lost lamb that we could hear calling out to his mother. It was caught in some brambles. We were so happy when we found it. As we watched Brother James hoist the lamb on his shoulders, I immediately appreciated what it means to say that God carries us like lambs in his arms. How awesome to realize that God rejoices in our return!

When have I felt lost? Do I ever experience God carrying me? Have I heard the comforting words of God addressed personally to me?

SECOND WEDNESDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 40:25-31 • Matthew 11:11-15

“Your souls will find rest, for my yoke is easy and my burden light.”

The Lord is speaking directly to me! It is finals week and I have two papers due, an exam to study for, plus work and my kids to care for. My poor husband has forgotten what I look like! I am feeling very burdened. At these periods of intense labor I *must* take time to pray. Prayer is when I come to Jesus and hand over my burdens to his loving care. It may only be for fifteen minutes, while I am driving between work and class, but it is precious to me. I truly feel the difference. Making a commitment to prayer is the most pleasant “burden” in my hectic life.

Have I experienced the Lord lifting my burdens recently? Have I brought them to him? What commitment have I made to prayer?

SECOND THURSDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 41:13-20 • Matthew 11:11-15

“You shall rejoice in the Lord... the Holy One of Israel.”

There are some days I just do not feel like rejoicing. Like when my car breaks down on the way to an important job interview. Or when my girl friend tells me she wants to break up. Or when the boss tells me that we will have to work overtime this weekend. Or when my father is rushed to the hospital in critical condition. “The afflicted and the needy seek water in vain.” In other words, to look for help anywhere but the Lord is useless. Isaiah tells us how God reverses the way things are: the desert will flow with water and produce fruit, the wasteland will spring to life. “The hand of the Lord has done this.”

Sometimes when my life feels arid and it seems like I am all alone, I need to be reminded that God can make good come out of any situation.

Do I trust enough in God’s abiding presence in my life? Do I believe God can reverse my misfortunes and bring good out of them?

SECOND FRIDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 48:17-19 • Matthew 11:16-19

“Yet time will prove where wisdom lies.”

Jesus was often misunderstood. A lot of times I feel misunderstood. It seems like people, especially my parents, misjudge me. My parents accuse me of being lazy and apathetic because I don't get “hyped” about stuff the way they do. Just because I don't dress up for Sunday Mass or say the rosary every night, they think I don't give a darn. But they are wrong! I love God, and I care about the Church and the world. I just show it in my own way. Today's gospel reading helps me appreciate that Jesus was misunderstood too.

Have I been misunderstood recently? By whom? Have I ever been misunderstood concerning my faith? Can I find some hope in the experience of Jesus?

SECOND SATURDAY OF ADVENT

Sirach 48:1-4, 9-11 • Matthew 17:10-13

“Elijah is indeed coming, and he will restore everything.”

When Elijah returns it will be a glorious time because things will be made right again. We are told that one of the indications of Elijah's return will be turning back the hearts of parents toward their children.

Tron looks forward to a day when he and his parents will get along again. They are from Viet Nam and he finds their ways too traditional. He tells them that he has become “more American” and his ways reflect the values of young men in America today. Their differences result in many quarrels. He knows he needs to be more understanding of their views, and he wants them to understand his world, too. That would be wonderful!

In what ways have I worked out differences with my parents? Am I open to their views? How have I helped them understand mine? Are our conversations marked by mutual respect?

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Year A

Isaiah 35:1-6, 10

James 5:7-10

Matthew 11:2-11

Year B

Isaiah 61:1-2, 10-11

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

John 1:6-8, 19-28

Year C

Zephaniah 3:14-18

Philippians 4:4-7

Luke 3:10-18

“A voice crying out in the desert.”

Sometimes Litoyia feels like she is a voice crying out and that no one hears her. She works for a company that has some highly unethical business practices. When she brings them up at department meetings, she is told that she is young and naive. “This is how business is done.” Likewise, she is experiencing the frustration of trying to improve the quality of the neighborhood in which she lives through a block club, but people are very apathetic. She knows that many biblical prophets, including Elijah, John the Baptist, and Jesus himself, experienced frustration and even rejection. Now she is experiencing it first hand. Yet the prophets and Jesus accepted the challenge and drew strength from God, confident that they were doing God’s will.

How am I called to be a prophet in my environments (at home, at work, in my neighborhood)? Have I experienced the rejection that prophets often feel? How have I been able to draw strength from God in those challenging times?

THIRD MONDAY OF ADVENT

Numbers 24:2-7, 15-17 • Matthew 21:23-27

“On what authority are you doing these things?”

Jesus knew what it was liked to be challenged, to have his credentials questioned. Jaime experienced it, too. He was constantly being told that he was too young, that he did not have enough experience, that he needed more training. He received this feedback at work, in community organizations, even at his local parish. But he had this burning desire to achieve something, to be successful at something that mattered. He was not going to be put off. He believed God had given him certain gifts and he was sure that God intended him to use those gifts in some way for the betterment of others. His persistence paid off. Doors began to open for him, especially at his parish where the parish utilized his financial planning skills to prepare its first budget.

When have my abilities or authority been questioned? How did I handle it? Am I able to draw strength from the example of Jesus?

THIRD TUESDAY OF ADVENT

Zephaniah 3:1-2, 9-13 • Matthew 21:28-32

“Which of the two did what the father wanted?”

I can relate to this gospel reading, especially because it involves a father and his sons. Ever since I moved out of my parents' house, I have tried to prove that I can make it on my own. I have resisted any suggestions or advice that my father gives me. I have even avoided going over to my parents' house. My dad recently asked me to come and help him paint the house. I found some lame excuse to give him, but later felt guilty. I called back and told him I would be there. It was great. We had a great time working together and had a very nice talk. I guess I am learning that doing what my father wants is not such a bad thing. He has a lot of wisdom and I need to be open to it.

God is a parent who wants the best for us. God has a lot of wisdom to share with us. In my need to be independent I need to learn to not shut out others, especially my parents and God.

Do I usually try to do what God wants of me? Do I sometimes resist the direction God gives me?

THIRD WEDNESDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 45:6-8, 18, 21-25 • Luke 7:18-23

“Go and report what you have seen and heard.”

The two disciples of John the Baptist in today's gospel came to know Jesus' identity by the marvelous things he was doing. Jesus told them to go and be witnesses to John and others of what Jesus was able to do. I think that I am called to be a witness, too. When I stop to reflect on it, I can see the wonderful things Jesus is doing in my life. He has touched my life in many ways and I need to let others know about him. I recently had an opportunity to do that. I gathered with a group of young adults for an evening of prayer. I was able to share with my peers some of the ways Jesus has touched my life and renewed my spirit. I was frightened at first. I wondered if they would think I was some kind of religious fanatic. But their reaction was very positive and affirming. Maybe this being a witness is not so bad after all!

To whom am I called to witness to my faith (family, friends, co-workers)? Have I missed some opportunities lately? What keeps me from sharing my faith with others?

THIRD THURSDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 54:1-10 • Luke 7:24-30

“ . . . with great tenderness I will take you back. ”

Frank was new with the company, his first “real job,” just out of graduate school. A couple of co-workers quickly befriended him. In no time at all he felt quite at ease. One of these co-workers invited him to join the rest of the gang for a drink after work. He had no idea they were going to a very seedy bar with strippers. He had a few drinks and before he knew it he was in bed with a prostitute. His “friends” were congratulating him and making off color jokes about it. Even though he was a little drunk, Frank felt very bad. He had violated an important value and he felt guilty. For weeks he did not go to church or pray at all. He had turned his back on God. One day he confided in one of his friends from church. His friend helped him realize that nothing is so bad that God will not forgive. This friend was a channel of God’s forgiving grace. Frank was once again able to accept the merciful love that Jesus came to bring.

Are there things that I have done that I do not believe God will forgive? Am I able to accept God’s unconditional love? Am I willing to extend that same forgiveness to others?

THIRD FRIDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 56:1-3, 6-8 • John 5:33-36

“For my house will be called a house of prayer for all peoples.”

Concetta is engaged to be married to Carlos. As they prepare for their life together, the marriage preparation process that the parish offers is posing many thought-provoking questions. The one that really stimulates a lot of discussion between them is “How will you share your faith with your children?” Their faith is very important to them, but they have never given much thought to how they will pass it on. So while they are discussing many ways in which they can be a family of faith, to Concetta the most important is that they build a house of prayer, a home where prayer together as a family is a priority.

How important is prayer in my life? Will I build (or have I built) a home where prayer is a real priority? How can I make prayer a more important part of my home and my relationships?

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Year A

Isaiah 7:10-14

Romans 1:1-7

Matthew 1:18-24

Year B

2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8-11, 16

Romans 16:25-27

Luke 1:26-38

Year C

Micah 5:1-4

Hebrews 10:5-10

Luke 1:39-45

*“The virgin shall be with child and give birth to a son,
and they shall call him Emmanuel.”*

I remember singing that ancient hymn when I was a child: “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” Now that I am figuring out the meaning of life on my own and the challenges of living my faith every day, I appreciate what it means to say that we believe in Emmanuel, God is with us. Our God chose to become one of us, to enter life as a tiny baby. To me this means that God is revealed to us in many ordinary and beautiful ways. I can see God present in my life through the person with whom I think I want to spend my life. I can experience God’s guiding presence when I struggle with a tough decision at work. I can feel God’s presence in the quiet of a star lit night on a camping trip with friends. And I know God is present when we celebrate the Eucharist as his Son Jesus becomes present again.

What are some of the many signs of God’s presence in my life recently? How can I deepen my awareness of God’s presence on a daily basis? Do I take time to appreciate and give thanks for the presence of Emmanuel, God-with-us?

DECEMBER 17

Genesis 49:2, 8-10 • Matthew 1:1-17

“A family record of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham.”

John’s cousin Mark bought a computer program that sorts out family genealogy. With help from older family members, the two of them loaded all the information they could find about their ancestors. It became quite a family project. They came across strange names they never knew were a part of their family. They heard a lot of stories about people they never met. They heard about wonderful people as well as a few “black sheep.” It was a pretty typical family, but John and Mark finished this project with a new appreciation of their heritage.

Jesus has a genealogy, too. We hear a long list of names in this gospel passage, going all the way back to Abraham. It was a family he could be proud of. They had carried on a tradition a faithfulness that was passed on to Joseph and Mary, the parents of Jesus.

Who are my ancestors? Do I know stories about their faithfulness? How has the faith been passed on to me through the many people who came before me?

DECEMBER 18

Jeremiah 23:5-8 • Matthew 1:19-24

“The Lord our justice.”

The Lord whose coming we are preparing to celebrate is known by many names. Jeremiah calls him “our justice.” The psalm we use as our response today also proclaims: “Justice shall flourish in his time, and fullness of peace forever.” Jesus is justice and peace incarnate. And we seek to live like him. Are justice and peace just a Christmas dream? Christmas carols sing about it. Christmas cards show the idyllic scenes of lions and lambs together. “Peace on earth, good will to all.”

Are these values evident in my life? Do I live a just life, treating co-workers fairly, respecting the rights of all? Do I live a peaceful life? Have I learned to deal with conflict in a constructive way? Do I promote peace and justice by what I say and do?

DECEMBER 19

Judges 13:2-7, 24-25 • Luke 1:5-25

“Do not be frightened, your prayer has been heard.”

Sometimes God answers our prayers in strange ways. Most of us will never have an angel appear to us to tell us our prayer has been answered, but we can still remain confident that God will answer our prayers. We hope we do not have to wait as long as Elizabeth and Zechariah did! Elizabeth and Zechariah had thought God had passed them by. They were childless and old, thought to be sterile. In fact, Zechariah was even incredulous after his encounter with the angel Gabriel. It took a lot to convince him that God answers every prayer.

In what strange ways has God answered my prayers? Has there been some event or circumstance that I can say was an answer to prayer: the resolution of a problem at work? a new job opportunity? a special person who has come into my life? a move that turned out to be very rewarding? a crisis that proved to have some benefits in the long run?

DECEMBER 20

Isaiah 7:10-14 • Luke 1:26-38

“Must you also weary my God?”

When I stop to think about them, I must admit that lots of my prayers sound the same, my laundry list for God to attend to, preferably on my timetable: more patience with my co-workers; a permanent, passionate relationship; more time to do things, less things to do; and blessings on the poor, the hungry, the homeless. You know the stuff. Not much has changed since my childhood night prayer: “God bless Grandma and help me on my spelling test tomorrow...” I suspect God could get rather weary of it all. As I mature in my faith, this might be a good time to explore how my prayer life could grow.

Do I always begin my prayers by asking for things? Am I asking for the right things? Do I ever simply thank God? or praise God? or adore God? or tell God I am sorry? Can my prayer become more like a conversation with a good friend?

DECEMBER 21

Song of Songs 2:8-14 • Luke 1:39-45

“Blessed are you among women. . .”

Mary is a woman of deep faith. This faith enabled her to be the instrument through which God gave us Jesus Christ. As I reflect on Mary, the God-bearer, I want to offer a prayer of thanksgiving for all those holy women who have born Christ to me, those women of faith in my own life who stand out as models of Christian witness. It might be a family member or a close friend, someone in my neighborhood, my apartment complex, my dormitory, my parish. It might be someone who is no longer a daily part of my life. Perhaps she has gone home to God. I want to bring each of these women to mind again.

What was it about her that touched me? How was she able to show me Jesus? How can I continue to seek the wisdom and strength to follow her example?

DECEMBER 22

1 Samuel 1:24-28 • Luke 1:46-56

*“God has deposed the mighty from their thrones
and raised the lowly to high places.”*

Our God is a God of surprises. God confounds the wise and clever, turning expected outcomes upside down. Mary acknowledges this in her Magnificat, the song of praise in today's gospel passage. God deposes the mighty and raises up the lowly, gives the hungry what they need and sends away the rich. I think I have experienced that in my life, too. I am a person who never thought I was worth much. I couldn't do the kinds of things other people did. I was just average in school. And yet, as I moved into a new job, new challenges and opportunities were constantly put before me. As I accepted each, I recognized that God was there beside me. As I became active in a new parish in a new city, more opportunities and challenges were offered. Again I saw God at work, taking a quite lowly person like me and enabling me to accomplish great things as a part of God's plan.

Do I always see the ways God wants to use me? Despite my lowliness, am I open to being used by God? In what ways do I express thanks and praise to God for raising me up to new possibilities?

DECEMBER 23

Malachi 3:1-4, 23-24 • Luke 1:57-66

“His name is John.”

What’s in a name? Names are very important. Many names mean something. Usually they are given to us by the people who love us and brought us into this world. In Hebrew, the name John means “God is gracious.” The name Jesus means “Yahweh saves.” Each of these names tells us something about the person. Do I know what my name means? Was I named after someone? Does my name carry on a tradition or have a special significance? What are some names that I have given to others: my recently born children, nicknames for a spouse or friend, even a pet?

When we name someone or something, we take on a special responsibility for it. To be able to call someone by a name that we have given to that person is a special sign of intimacy. God calls each of us by name.

Am I grateful for the care God shows toward me? Do I recognize the intimate relationship God wants to have with me?

DECEMBER 24

2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8-11, 16 • Luke 1:67-79

*“As God promised through the mouths of the holy ones,
the prophets of ancient times.”*

As we move into our celebration of the birth of Christ, we hear the song of praise attributed to Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. He blesses God for all the marvelous things God has done, especially for the fulfillment of the promises God made for generations. As he looks at his newborn son, the one who would announce the coming of Jesus, the Christ, he is filled with gratitude. He thanks God for the gift of this child. He thanks God for all his ancestors. He thanks God for being so faithful.

How have God's promises been fulfilled in my life? In the midst of the successes and struggles of my work, can I see God's faithfulness? As I think of my parents, grandparents, and the generations preceding them, can I see how God has been present in our family history? Can I look hopefully to the future because I know God will be faithful?

DECEMBER 25

Christmas Day

Mass at Midnight

Isaiah 9:1-6 • Titus 2:11-14 • Luke 2:1-14

Mass at Dawn

Isaiah 62:11-12 • Titus 3:4-7 • Luke 2:15-20

Mass during the Day

Isaiah 52:7-10 • Hebrews 1:1-6 • John 1:1-18

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”

God has made his dwelling among us; literally, “ he pitched his tent.” God wants to be a part of our lives, to dwell in us. What we need to do this Christmas is let Christ enter our lives, even and especially the moments of struggle and pain.

Let the Lord enter! The responsibilities to family and friends.

Let the Lord enter! The struggles to balance faith and work.

Let the Lord enter! The pain of ending a relationship.

Let the Lord enter! The anxiety that comes with taking a risk.

Let the Lord enter! The hesitancy to ask someone to forgive me.

Let the Lord enter! The need to always be right.

Let the Lord enter! The thirst for power and control.

Let the Lord enter! The disappointment of being let down.

Let the Lord enter! The acceptance of a different point of view.

Let the Lord enter! The hurt that seems bigger than healing.