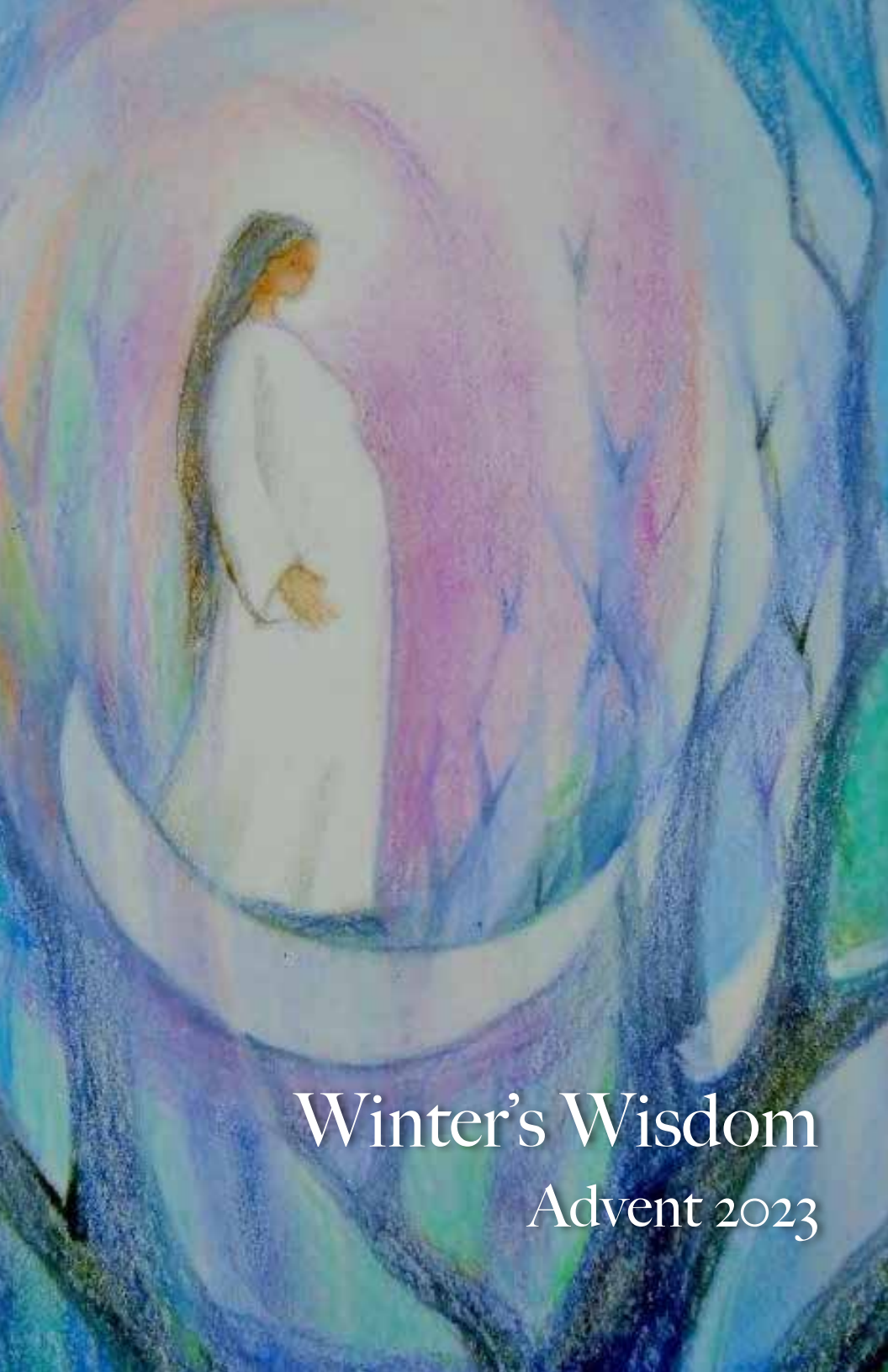

Winter's Wisdom

Advent 2023

INTRODUCTION – ADVENT 2023

HAPPY NEW YEAR!!! It's ADVENT: a new year in the liturgical cycle of seasons, a new year of readings as we hear from the Gospel of Mark, a new year of discovering the many ways God is present in our lives, a new year of anticipating the feast of the Incarnation of Christ. Let the energy of celebration rise up in us as we begin another Advent anew.

Let us put on new lenses of faith. Maybe you have seen the stories on Facebook where someone who is color blind is gifted with glasses that allow them to see color. There is such surprise and joy in the one who sees anew. May we seek to see anew this Advent with the same surprise and joy.

May we see anew the life of Christ in history! I once had a retreatant say to me: "You speak of Christ as if he were real." Indeed, he is real: born in Bethlehem where his birthplace is revered to this very day; other sites are venerated in the Galilee where he preached, taught, and healed; and in Jerusalem where he visited the Temple and died a horrific death by crucifixion. Oh yes, Christ is very real. Maybe this Advent is an opportunity for us to see the reality of the historical Christ anew.

Let us be awakened to see the presence of Christ in our very lives: when we are especially touched by the presence of love or are privileged to view, a loving encounter; when we feel particularly inspired to take action against injustice or to respond to another in need; or maybe when we gather for worship with a believing assembly of faith. When we, ourselves, suffer or are in pain, let us see the Christ who is with us.

We await the second coming of Christ in glory and yearn for a new world order: the one intended by God where there will be peace on earth, when the "wolf will lie down with the lamb," swords will become plowshares, and there will be an end to violence of every sort.

HAPPY NEW YEAR! It's Advent. Let us be awake and attentive to the new ways we might encounter God!

Sallie Latkovich, CSJ
Ft. Myers, FL

Cover Art - Mary Southard, CSJ

SUNDAY - DECEMBER 3

SCRIPTURE

Is 63: 16B-17, 19B; 33-37, 64: 2-7
Ps. 80: 2-3, 15-16, 18,19
1 Cor I: 3-9
Mk 13: 33-37

REFLECTION

"You are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revelation of our Lord, Jesus Christ." Cor. I. 7

It seems most appropriate that two key words from today's readings are WATCH and WAIT. On this first Sunday of Advent, the invitation to watch is a strong reminder to use this busy time before Christmas to look around, to open our eyes, and to be more aware of the light and darkness of winter days.

Yes, we probably cannot avoid watching ads for the Black Friday sales at Target or Amazon. We anxiously watch for the first snowfall, worrying if it will lengthen the commute to work. We watch the nightly news and wonder if the violence and division so prevalent in our country can ever be peacefully resolved.

Maybe this Advent season could be about watching for the wonders of this season as well? Can we watch for a chance to do a random act of kindness? Can we watch for the lights that appear on Christmas trees and skyscrapers and remember that light can and will overcome the darkness?

As we watch, we WAIT. We wait for that graced moment when our hearts are keenly aware of how very blessed we are with so much that we too often take for granted. We wait and pray to be more aware of how all of life is connected and needs our care and concern. We wait and hope for the fulfillment of that time when the justice and peace promised in the Advent readings will come.

Today's readings echo a watch, wait, and wonder refrain. Listen carefully.

PRAYER

Open my eyes to see, my ears to hear, and my heart to be more sensitive to the wonders that surround me as I watch and wait during these Advent days.

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

I will try to practice more patience when I am frustrated, realizing that waiting could be a graced time.

Jean McGrath, CSJ
Chicago, IL

MONDAY - DECEMBER 4

SCRIPTURE

Is 2: 1-5
Ps 122: 1-9
Mt 8: 5-11

REFLECTION

"For the sake of my brethren, and of my neighbors, I spoke peace of thee
Because of this house of the Lord our God,
I have sought good things for thee."
Psalm 122 vs8

What would happen if, instead of the words of anger and frustration that so easily leave my lips, I spoke peace?

The peace of freedom from disturbance.
The peace of restfulness.
The peace of tranquility.
What words would I choose for a friend, a neighbor, my community?

The peace of absence of war or chaos.
The peace of good relationships among people.
The peace of a right relationship with God.
How might my words help me or someone else to find a way
to begin healing where we are now?

In the archaic definition the word, "Peace" was used as an order to remain silent.

Perhaps, in seeking peace and good things for the people of earth, its animals, and all of the wonders nature strives to provide; in this, the house of the Lord our God, we might use the silence first in order to find the way.

PRAYER

Spirit of all the earth, help us to bring forth from the silence of our hearts healing words of peace.

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

Find ways to bring small moments of peace
to those around me every day.

Linda Matonich, CSJ Associate
La Grange, IL

TUESDAY - DECEMBER 5

SCRIPTURE

Is. 10: 1-10
Ps. 72:1-2, 7-8, 12-13, 17
Lk. 10:21-24

REFLECTION

Jesus said:" Blessed are the eyes that see what you see; many a prophet and king did not see…" Lk. 10:24

Many tornadoes, excessive heat waves, floods, raging fires, and devastating winds are happening around the world as I write this early in the record-breaking summer of 2023. We don't have to seek out horror movies to be horrified. We just watch or read the daily news. Mother Nature seems enraged. And we respond to horrors, sometimes by being horrified. Word nerd that I am, I looked up horror, horrified, horrid, and horrible to find the same Latin root, meaning shocking, unbearable, terrible. We wring our hands and weep as we see death and destruction all around us, close at hand.

So where is our/my faith in all of this? Isaiah speaks of Yahweh's wrath, and Psalm 72 sings of God's righteous justice to the poor and needy. Luke quotes Jesus calling the disciples (aka, us) to see with new eyes, to see and act with humility, not controlling power, to see with the eyes of children. Wow, what a call to us who think we are in control of our lives! Seeing with new eyes when whole cities and towns, forests, and homes are destroyed, when the heat index keeps us isolated indoors, means seeing through the horrible to the wonders. New eyes glisten with hope. New hearts reach out in love. Am I willing to see and do something new, humble, miraculous? Now? Unless we become like little children….

PRAYER

Endearing, Ever-Present Love, You never leave us orphaned or abandoned. We are not alone,
no matter what horrors, big or small, befall us. Lead us to find You in the beauty, compassion, humility, and hope in the hearts of those around us. Your healing Presence,
Jesus the Christ, abides in us, in our world. Amen.

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

Is my heart humble and made new every day?
Are my eyes glistening with hope?

Janet Franklin, CSJ
New Roads, LA

WEDNESDAY - DECEMBER 6

SCRIPTURE

Is 25: 6-10a
Ps 23: 1-6
Mt 15:29-37

REFLECTION

"On this mountain the LORD…will provide for all peoples (and)
…will destroy the veil that veils all peoples."
Is 25: 6a, 7a.
"Great crowds came to (Jesus)…And he cured them."
Mt 15:29a ,30

Last night I watched a tear-jerker reel of video clips featuring infants being fitted with tiny hearing aids or glasses, allowing them to hear or see clearly for the first time. A bit of squirming protest, then Wow! …the magic moment of beholding these little ones hearing their mama's and daddy's voices for the first time and cooing love songs in return. Other babies blinked their parents' smiling faces into focus and beamed back with riveted eyes. One infant broke into wild laughter every time the child she knew popped up to her face with "I'm your sister!" as their mother wept for joy.

With children, it seems so easy and natural for us to recognize our common humanity, and how deeply we can cherish and desire wholeness for our own. But with other adults we can be less open or compassionate, allowing the "veil" of separation to stay in place.

Jesus keeps trying to nurture his disciples' desire to truly see each person as God's beloved child and our very sibling. God probably weeps for joy each time that we do.

PRAYER

O God, heal the eyes of my heart that I may see others as you see them. Open my ears so that I may truly hear their voices. Help me to desire the wholeness and healing of everyone.

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

On this feast of St. Nicholas, give the gift of compassionate care to someone who is needy or vulnerable.

Mary Jo Curtsinger, CSJ
Chicago, IL

THURSDAY - DECEMBER 7

SCRIPTURE

Is 26: 1-6
Ps 118: 1 and 8-9, 19-21, 25-27
Mt 7: 21, 24-27

REFLECTION

"Open the gates to let in a nation that is just, one that keeps faith."
Is 26: 2

So often we misunderstand the term "nation" found in scripture and take the word out of context. A "nation" in biblical terms refers to a group of people with commonality, not one merely defined by geographical borders. How amazing it would be if, instead of constantly searching for an elusive unity of culture, customs, language, political beliefs, etc., we focused on bringing about a truly global, multiculturall, and inclusive "nation" in which the principle of justice was embedded in its very existence. While this might seem an impossible task, Isaiah 26 tells us that "He humbles those in high places, and the lofty city he brings down…It is trampled underfoot by the needy, by the footsteps of the poor." So, this nation we build through our actions in the name of justice is not just a possibility, but imperative to enter the gates. We can do this because Isaiah further reminds us to "Trust in the Lord forever!"

PRAYER

Good and gracious God, I trust in you to keep me focused and energized as I go about the work, in tasks both large and small, to build a nation that is steeped in justice.

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

I will focus each day on a task that, even in very small ways, can help further the cause of justice in the world.

Tess Bezouska, CSJ Associate
La Grange, IL

IMMACULATE CONCEPTION
FRIDAY - DECEMBER 8

SCRIPTURE

Gn 3: 9-15, 20
Ps 98: 1-4
Eph 1: 3-6, 11-12
Lk 1: 26-38

REFLECTION

"You have found favor with God."
Luke 1:29

The Immaculate Conception: Mary was born free from original sin. This is a feast not easily understood. The Church spent over 1800 years having theological fights about the concept, finally officially recognizing it as a dogma in 1854. And I ask, how does this belief touch my life?

The angel Gabriel came to the Virgin Mary and said: "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God." And in other words, we could also say: "You are full of grace. God is with you." The same can be said to me and to you. The favor God found in Mary gave her what she needed to say yes. The favor God finds in you gives you all you need to say yes to what you are called to do. Mary's favor gifted her with new life, a nurturing heart, a comforting presence, a willingness to ponder and to suffer. Mary lived faithful to her call, using the gifts God had given her. In Mary we have a mentor, a friend, a support. What are the gifts with which God has favored you, and what is the call for today?

PRAYER

God of love, I believe that you have favored me with the gifts I need to hear your call and live it.
Help me to learn from Mary how to offer to others the gifts you give with joy and courage.

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

Remembering God's love, God's favor toward me, I choose to pass on to someone this day a gift with which God has favored me.

Maria Hill, CSJ
La Grange Park, IL

SATURDAY - DECEMBER 9

SCRIPTURE

Is 30:19-21, 23-26
Ps 147: 1-6
Mt 9:35-10:1, 5a, 6-8

REFLECTION

"His heart was moved with pity for them.
For they were like sheep without a shepherd." MT 9:36-37

The first reading for the Eucharist today comes from Isaiah, assuring the Israelites who had been held in Exile that God would care for them in the ways they needed most. The text from Matthew observes that Jesus held that same compassion of God as he sees the suffering of the crowds. The Gospel is tender in saying: "he was moved with pity for them." What is it to be moved with pity? A certain sadness at another's disease, distress, or status in life. Such pity moves one to action: to offer whatever help or healing we are able to give. We might reflect today on what moves us to pity another or others, without judgment, but like Jesus, with compassion? Let us reflect this Advent on what the world waits for from us. May Jesus indeed be born anew in us! May we hear and respond to the call of the Gospel today as we seek to birth Jesus anew in our world.

The Church celebrates Juan Diego's feast today. Let us also look to his story and understand the ministry that flowed from his devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe.

PRAYER

God of compassion, we beg you to birth your own compassion in our hearts. Help us to see the suffering of others both near and far from us with the same pity that Jesus experienced in those he encountered. And in so doing, guide us to give birth to Jesus anew in our world.

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

On this day I will see with eyes of faith and let my heart be open to be moved with pity, rather than with judgment, on those who may be suffering.

Sallie Latkovich, CSJ
Ft. Myers, FL

SUNDAY - DECEMBER 10

SCRIPTURE

Is 40:1-5, 9-11
Ps 85:9-10-11-12, 13-14
2 Pt 3:8-14
Mk 1:1-8

REFLECTION

"Comfort, give comfort to my people, says your God. Speak tenderly…"
IS 40:1-2
"…we await new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells…"
2 Peter 3:13

This passage from Isaiah has always touched me with its intimacy and compassion. After 39 chapters of narrative about exile and captivity, the language of Isaiah becomes sheer poetry…and my heart responds!

Following the daily news is often an emotional challenge for me these days, and I know that I am not alone. More than half of Americans say the *news* causes them stress, anxiety, and sleep disturbances: yet as Christians, we seek ways to connect with what is happening in the global neighborhood in ways that invite our prayer and service to the dear neighbor. These words of Isaiah remind me that our God is always a God of Love. God's intent is always to comfort… encourage…strengthen…assist. We are reminded that, regardless of the darkness of current division, "we await new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells." God's promise is one of Light and Love, Hope and Wholeness. How comforting is that?

PRAYER

Compassionate God,
Every day my words and actions have the power to create
comfort or conflict, righteousness, or a riot.
Initiate in me the craftiness to connect what is broken and
to celebrate diversity of culture, race, religion, and ideas.
Tenderly cultivate your oneness in me
that I might contribute to build your new-earth kin-dom. Amen.

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

Each evening before going to bed I will take a few minutes to reflect on how I have shared comfort and hope with others throughout the day.

Judith Minear, CSJ
Cleveland, OH

MONDAY - DECEMBER 11

SCRIPTURE

Is. 35: 1-10
Ps. 85: 9-14
Lk. 5: 17-26

REFLECTION

"They went up on the roof and let him down, with his bed, through the tiles."
Luke 5: 19

Let's go together to the place where many people, including Scribes and Pharisees, have gathered to hear Jesus teach. We have brought a friend who so wants to be in Jesus' presence and we can't get anywhere near the door - so we crawl up, make a hole in the ceiling and lower our friend right into Jesus' presence! Can you imagine the reaction!

Isn't this a reminder that sometimes when your back is against the wall you need to get creative, and amazing things will happen. This recounting in Luke of an amazing experience of friends with Jesus the Christ is a reminder of a section of Pope Francis' letter Laudato Si: "Living our vocation to be protectors of God's handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or secondary aspect of our Christian experience." 217

PRAYER

Gracious God, I know that steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;
Righteousness and peace will kiss each other.
Psalm 85: 10

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

Before Christmas I will consciously "protect" one of God's handiworks that is physically present to me – I will cut a hole in some roof…

Carol Crepeau, CSJ
Burr Ridge, IL

TUESDAY - DECEMBER 12

SCRIPTURE

Zec 2: 14-17
or
Rev 11: 19, 12: 1-6, 10
Judith 13: 18-19
Lk 1:26-38
or
Lk 1: 39-47

REFLECTION

"A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head."
Rev 12:1

The Virgin of Guadalupe holds profound reverence in Mexico. She, the Mother of God, shrouded in the brilliant sun, with the moon beneath her feet, brought solace to the indigenous people who had endured immense suffering at the hands of conquistadors. Her choice of Juan Diego, a humble indigenous man, to convey her message of love, revealed a profound truth—divine calling often seeks out the seemingly unworthy. Juan Diego, hailing from a modest background, initially questioned his worthiness, pleading with the Virgin to select a more deserving messenger. Yet, she saw into his heart, deliberately choosing humility to herald a message of hope. How often have you felt apprehensive in the face of a calling? Perhaps you've doubted your capabilities. Remember, just as the Virgin chose Juan Diego, the Universe recognizes your purpose and has equipped you for your unique journey. This Advent season reflect on your worth in the eyes of the divine and understand that you possess the tools to fulfill your cosmic calling.

PRAYER

Divine Virgin of Guadalupe, guide us as you did Juan Diego. In our moments of doubt and unworthiness,
help us see the purpose you've bestowed. Grant us strength to embrace our calling, dispelling fears and imposter shadows. May this Advent reveal our worthiness in your eyes. Amen.

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

Each week, choose an action that pushes your boundaries and confronts your fears head-on, embracing growth and empowerment.

Rosalba "Rose" Hernandez, CSJ Associate
Chicago, IL

WEDNESDAY - DECEMBER 13

SCRIPTURE

Is 40: 25-31
Ps 103: 1-4, 8 and 10
Mt 11: 28-30

REFLECTION

"…Take my yoke upon you…
For my yoke is easy, and my burden light."
Mt 11: 28-30

I wonder how many non-agrarians, like me, see the word "yoke" and immediately visualize an instrument of bondage and forced labor used on animals; I picture poor, tired oxen, mules, water buffalo slogging through fields, bound, burdened, beleaguered. How could Jesus hold up a yoke as something for us to willingly take on?

Turns out of course, and those who sew already know this, a yoke is also the neckline or collar that's part of any ordinary garment. And so, perhaps, Jesus is wholly reimagining the usual farming (and biblical!) understanding of the word yoke. Could he be referring to the type of simple yoke one slips over one's head in the act of merely getting dressed? Going a bit further, what if this "easy" yoke Jesus describes is one that's part of something like, say, a flotation device--a life jacket?

Could it be that the only burden is saying yes to a yoke that will carry us along in the stream of life that holds and reveals the Fullness of Love everywhere?

PRAYER

Christ within Jesus, Christ within the Earthly community, Christ within every bit of creation, you are Paradoxical Mystery that beckons and calls forward but also buoys and stabilizes. Guide our discernment…lead us to wisdom…so that we know when to swim and when to float.

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

Occasionally resist the temptation to resist:
unclench, release the grip, fully let go.
Relax into the divine flow of love and simply glide along.

Barbara Foreman, CSJ Associate
La Grange, IL

THURSDAY - DECEMBER 14

SCRIPTURE

Is 41: 13-20
Ps 145: 1 and 9-13
Mt 11: 11-15

REFLECTION

"That all may see and know, observe and understand that the hand of the Lord has done this, the Holy One of Israel has created it."
Isaiah 41:20

I will plant… I will set…

Cedar – withstands severe changes in weather; spiritual meaning: protection, wisdom, strength, healing, purifying; symbolic of power of nation, flourishing of saints, majesty, strength and glory of Christ.

Acacia – wood of the Dwelling of God (i.e. the Ark and Table…); spiritual significance; regeneration, perseverance, and integrity; immortality of the human spirit; strong and durable; fixes nitrogen and restores fertility; provides shelter and shade; sustainable resource, increases productivity of other cultivations and prevents desertification.

Myrtle – symbol of holistic thinking bringing oneself into balance with God's creation; healing, aromatic, symbol of God's blessings.

Olive – extraordinarily resilient; symbol of peace, fertility, healing/anointing, wisdom, harmony, reconciliation; offers sustenance and economic opportunity, source of light (fuel).

Cypress – symbolic of longevity, endurance, immortality, and resurrection; stabilizes, versatile.

Plane – living embodiment of Mother Earth, symbol of healing, marks sources of water.

Pine – symbol of hope, new life, longevity and endurance; provides protection, shelter, and food; adaptable; associated with spiritual growth and renewal.

PRAYER

You hear and respond to the cries of the afflicted and the needy.
You answer and do not forsake, providing healing and sustenance.
Making known the glorious splendor of Your Kingdom.
In You I rejoice! In You I glory!

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

What will I plant in a desert, add to a wasteland that all may see and know, observe and understand that God's hand is doing and creating?

Pat Warbritton, CSJ
Kalamazoo, MI

FRIDAY - DECEMBER 15

SCRIPTURE

Is 48: 17-19
Ps 1: 1- 4 and 6
Mt 11: 16-19

REFLECTION

To what can I compare this generation?
For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.
Mt. 11: 16-19

Jesus is saying to the people around him: "You rejected John the Baptist because his ascetic lifestyle was too radical. Now you reject me because I am not ascetic enough and I am too kind to those you fear." John and Jesus were not what the world expected, and their messages were too challenging. Has anything changed since Jesus walked the earth? When people are different from what I expect, how do I respond? And, when someone speaks words with which I don't agree? In our Visionary Directions, we commit to walking in mutuality and solidarity with human beings of every culture, race, gender, age, ability, sexual orientation, social class, or legal status. We acknowledge that we need to come to know our own cultures. In addition, it would be wise to come to know our own biases. Biases are often unconscious and need to be made conscious so that we do not continue to act from them.

PRAYER

God, Creator of All, remove the blinders from my eyes so that
I can see others like you see them and treat them as Jesus would.
I desire to be transformed doing my part
to build your dream of One Sacred Community.

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

Bring to consciousness some of your implicit biases by completing assessments at https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html

Ann Letourneau, CSJ
Westchester, IL

SATURDAY - DECEMBER 16

SCRIPTURE

Sir 48: 1-4, 9-11
Ps 80: 2-3, 15-16, 18-19
Mt 17: 9a, 10-13

REFLECTION

"Restore us, O Holy One; let your face shine upon us, teach us to love."
Ps 80: 4

Today, in Matthew's gospel, the image of the disciples coming down from the mountain reminds me that although every day cannot be a mountain top day, every day can hold a mountain top moment! A mountain top moment for me arises when I recognize what the disciples were looking for; the Christ, the promised one, the savior. To become a disciple who more consciously recognizes the Christ, one with us, is the invitation of Advent. The Psalmist speaks it well: "Restore us, O Holy One; let you face shine upon us, teach us to love." In a mountain top moment, I recognize that the one whose birth I am preparing to celebrate dwells in the midst of my activities and relationships. A mountain top moment comes when I open my eyes and receive the presence of God in the love, joy, care, and concern of those around me. Also, when I am attentive to how the presence of Christ is deficient in the lives of those around me and throughout the world living outside acceptance and belonging due to systemic racism and violence in our political, legal, and church systems. This precious Advent season let us eagerly seek a deeper recognition of Emmanuel, God with us, in each day's mountain top moments.

PRAYER

Restore us, O Holy One; let your face shine upon us. This day we desire to become more aware of mountain top moments in our lives. Allow our ears to listen to the cry of Earth, the voices of our sisters and brothers, those who face the harsh reality of climate change. Allow our voices to speak out for justice and ensure that people living in poverty are heard. Allow our feet to take the path less trod, to walk the extra mile, to take your message out to the world. Glory to you Living Word, Indwelling Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

Each evening pause and reflect on the question,
where have I met/avoided a mountain top moment?

Rita Ann Teichman, CSJ
Kalamazoo, MI

SUNDAY - DECEMBER 17

SCRIPTURE

Is 61: 1-2a, 10-11
Lk 1: 46-48, 49-50, 53-54.
1 Thes 5:16-24
Jn 1:6-8, 19-28

REFLECTION

"Do not quench the Spirit."
1Thess 5:19

There is a Greek orthodox church near me. The words "REMEMBER NOT TO STIFLE THE SPIRIT" are emblazoned in stone over its front doors. Whenever I pass that church I say to myself "put those words on your bathroom mirror." The word stifle leaps out at me, a reminder that God's Spirit is readily available unless I get in the way. I've experienced that Spirt in my own prayer, in prayer and conversation with others, and at Congregation Chapters (big time). It saddens me that our Church stifles the Spirt by silencing the voices of some theologians and most women. Gratefully, there are hopeful signs of incremental change in synod preparation. We CSJ, Associates, and so many others strive to heal our planet and grow in unity by recognizing all our brothers and sisters – animal, plant, and human. Every step, every change in lifestyle requires strength and inspiration. Remember not to stifle the Spirit.

PRAYER

Holy Spirit, come, stay with me, enter my heart, teach me your ways. Fill me with your presence for the good of others. Come, Holy Spirit. Come. Enter deep into the hearts of all your people. Amen.

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

Write your own prayer to the Spirt. Memorize it or post it where you will see it often.

Marianne Race, CSJ
Brookfield, IL

MONDAY - DECEMBER 18

SCRIPTURE

Jer 23:5-8
Ps 72: 1-2, 12-13, 18-19
Mt 1:18-25

REFLECTION

"Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid..". Mt. 1: 20

The Christmas story has become so familiar to many of us that we can fail to appreciate the danger and uncertainty that surrounded Jesus' birth. At the time, Mary's mysterious pregnancy would have jeopardized her place in the community (if not her life itself) and possibly Joseph's as well. Joseph's questions and fears are understandable, as fear is a basic human response to circumstances that are outside of our control or beyond our understanding.

And yet, to us as well as to Joseph, the voice of God says, "Do not be afraid!" Although he doesn't see the whole picture, Joseph accepts Mary and trusts God's plan—not with passive resignation, but with active and creative courage. "Joseph's attitude encourages us to accept and welcome others as they are, without exception, and to show special concern for the weak, for God chooses what is weak," writes Pope Francis. Let us remember these words in moments when we ourselves feel weak or fearful.

PRAYER

As members of the "family of Joseph," may we live with the creative courage that allows us to face difficult and fearful circumstances and to accept every neighbor as a child of God. May we have hearts that are trusting and tender, like Joseph, towards all who are vulnerable.

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

What fears get in the way of your loving God and neighbor wholeheartedly? Take time to reflect on this question and listen for the voice of God calling you to take the next step in trust.

Jess Wrobleski, CSJ Associate
Cleveland, OH

TUESDAY - DECEMBER 19

SCRIPTURE

Judges 13:2-7, 24-25a
Ps 71: 3-6, 16-17
1 Thess 3:12-4:2
Lk 1: 5-25

REFLECTION

"Zechariah was troubled by what he saw and fear came upon him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, because your prayer has been heard." Lk. 1: 12-13a

Luke opens his gospel with a vivid picture of the 'anawim," a poor barren remnant, waiting, hoping, praying, listening. We are soon to meet Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph, Anna and Simeon. Their very need creates an empty waiting space breaking open to receive.

God comes in ordinary moments, albeit in extraordinary ways, as here in the appearance of the Archangel Gabriel. Zechariah is struck dumb by such astonishing news, defying all that he has known. This scene in Luke helps me to imagine how unsettling and troubling this must have been for the faithful Zechariah, a man of his culture and Jewish practice.

Yet "Yahweh has remembered," (Zechariah's name) and beyond his doubts, God draws near to Zechariah and to us, seeking to be born. Am I empty enough to conceive? To give birth? What in me impedes the coming of this Child, this Prince of Peace? Only six more days to be ready…

PRAYER

Come Lord Jesus, Flower of Jesse's stem,
Wondrous Child, where life seemed dead.
Come revive my/our life and faith in your miraculous presence.
Make me/us a sign of how we ought to live totally for you.
God Alone Saves!

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

Each evening this week as I reflect, I will focus on what I may have missed because of my pre-conceived ideas
or cultural assumptions /biases.

Cynthia Sabathier, CSJ
Baton Rouge, LA

WEDNESDAY - DECEMBER 20

SCRIPTURE

Is 7: 10-14
Ps 24: 1-6
Lk 1: 26-38

REFLECTION

"May it be done to me according to your word." Lk 1: 38

This year, as I prayed with Mary's call to be the mother of Jesus, I focused on her response. She asks the question "how can this be" and after Gabriel's replies, she immediately responds positively: "May it be done to me according to your word." I am impressed with Mary's ability to recognize Gabriel's invitation as a call from God and with Mary's complete trust in God to respond with such openness. I sometimes get stuck with Mary's visit by the angel Gabriel. What is the likelihood of such a visit? And yet, all of us receive messages from God. We may recognize God's invitation through an inner nudging to reach out to someone in need. Our hearts may be moved to speak up for the migrant at the border after hearing someone's story. We may wake up after a dream and have a new awareness of our interconnection with all creation. However we are invited, may we have confidence to respond to God's loving invitations.

PRAYER

Loving God, may I continue to nurture my relationship with you so I can respond to your invitations with openness. May I always trust that your call will lead to new life.

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

Notice God's invitations to you today and respond knowing that it is the invitation from a loving God.

Marie Hogan, CSJ
Detroit, MI

THURSDAY- DECEMBER 21

SCRIPTURE

Songs 2: 8-14
Zeph 3: 14-18
Ps 33: 2-3, 11-12, 20-21
Lk 1: 39-45

REFLECTION

"Mary set out and traveled to the hill country where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting the infant leaped in her womb."
Lk 1: 39-44

Contemplating Mary and Elizabeth, I marvel at their faith and capacity for grace…a grace that filled them AND a grace that is present for us in the depth of our human experiences and relationships. When we embrace life, all of it, the Spirit creates a spaciousness within us to embrace the whole of who we are and to also embrace the whole of the other. In the story of the Visitation, Mary makes the journey to see her pregnant cousin, Elizabeth. Elizabeth responds with, "How wonderful that you have come to visit me! The moment the sound of your voice reached my ears, the life in my womb leapt for joy!" What a poignant and beautiful scene! The Life and Energy present in one beloved of God encounters the Life and Energy of God in the other and the exchange is pure JOY! It's the same with us. When we receive good news, we are eager to share it, especially with those closest to us! We believe they will want to celebrate our joy! When we share the great things God does for us, we give the other an opportunity to share how God is showing up and acting in their lives. This mutual sharing deepens thanksgiving in both. It's no wonder that Mary wanted to be with Elizabeth! This meeting of hearts compelled her to sing a song of thanksgiving…a song Elizabeth likely recognized and may well have sung along with Mary. We, like Mary and Elizabeth, need the companionship of one another to stay attuned to the stirrings of the Spirit in our lives. In doing so, we will welcome God's visitations in one another and the world.

PRAYER

God of Holy Possibility, our prayer today is to ponder as we remember both Mary and Elizabeth.
Mary, how did you feel when you said "Yes" to the Holy?
A yes that would change your life?
Were you full of fear? Did you have your doubts?
Mary, Mother of God, what strength and courage you had
to trust in the dark and unknown.
Just a simple woman just like me. Mary, teach me the way to give my life to the Holy, to trust in God's love for me. How I long to be all Love asks of me. ks

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

I will be attentive to the stirrings of the Spirit in my life
and in the lives of others this day.
I will give thanks for the great things God has done for me
and invite others to do the same.

Kathy Sherman, CSJ
Westchester, IL

FRIDAY - DECEMBER 22

SCRIPTURE

1 Sam 1: 24-28
1 Sam 1: 1, 4-8
Lk 1: 46-56

REFLECTION

And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Holy One
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for God has been mindful of the humble state of this servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is God's name." Luke 1: 46-49

Remember when you were that young—14, 15 or 16 years old—and imagine going about your ordinary life on an ordinary day and suddenly being accosted by an Angel of God who tells you don't be afraid, God has chosen you to bear God's life into the world. And then you head out to visit your much older, also unexpectedly pregnant cousin, who greets you as Blessed among women. Too young, unmarried, suddenly pregnant (by God no less), and blessed. Can you imagine that your response to your cousin's greeting would be to break into song glorifying God?

Actually, imagine yourself today, whatever your age, having that same experience; being told that you are pregnant with God-life and Blessed among women (or men). Isn't that really what God is trying to tell us, each and every day of our lives—that we are blessed, that we carry God-life within us, in our being and doing, each and every day?

If we truly believed that, knew it from the surface of our skin to the DNA in our cells, how would we not respond like Mary—glorifying the Holy One? Rejoicing and knowing beyond any doubt that it is through the God-life we carry that we are the ones called to do great things: to extend mercy, speak truth to those in power (often the overly proud), lift up the humble, feed the hungry…for Holy is God's action with and presence within us.

PRAYER

My soul glorifies the Holy One today, tomorrow, every day!

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

Take one action today that witnesses to and reflects
God's life within you.

Christine Parks, CSJ
Kalamazoo, MI

SATURDAY - DECEMBER 23

SCRIPTURE

Mal 3: 1-4, 23-24
Ps 25: 4-5. 8-10,14
Lk 1: 57-66

REFLECTION

"Your ways, O Lord, make known to me; teach me your paths.
Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my savior."
Ps 25:4-5

My Junior year high school English teacher began class every day with this prayer: "Direct our actions by your holy inspiration and carry them out by your gracious assistance; that every prayer and work of ours may begin from you, and by you be happily ended. Amen." It has stuck with me for over fifty years, and it came to mind again with this Scripture passage from Psalms today. How often have our prayers to God – whether directed to Creator, Christ, or Spirit – sought guidance, truth, direction, or inspiration? How much clearer does our path become when we seek this wisdom? How is our daily activity informed and carried out with this grace?

Jesus is often referred to and addressed as Teacher, and his time among us fulfills our Psalm prayer to hear the truth and learn the way. Any good teacher speaks the truth to direct and inspire the work of their students, as Jesus did with his followers. And in turn, the student becomes the teacher….as parent, relative, friend, helper, coworker, community member….to continue along the path to peace, justice, and unity.

PRAYER

"Eye has not seen, ear has not heard, what God has ready for those who love God. Spirit of Love, come give us the mind of Jesus. Teach us the wisdom of God." - Marty Haugen

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

Notice the grace of God's wisdom, inspiration, and direction in the decisions you make and the actions you take this day.

Jim Boyd, CSJ Associate
Chicago, IL

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT
DECEMBER 24

SCRIPTURE

2 Sam 7: 1-5, 8-12, 14, 16
Ps 89: 2-5, 27, 29
Rom 16: 25-27
Lk 1: 26-38

REFLECTION

"...for nothing will be impossible for God."
Luke 1:37

I can never read the story of Jesus' unusual conception without reflecting that God's ways are truly not ours. Why, I wonder, would God place Mary in the untenable position of being pregnant outside of marriage? I have since come to treasure this mystery because it upends the power dynamics so prevalent in human societies. Consider Sojourner Truth's 1851 speech: "Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him." In the Women's Bible Commentary, Jewish New Testament scholar Amy Jill Levine observes that Jesus' unconventional birth "indicates the restructuring of the human family: outside of patriarchal models it is not ruled by nor even defined by a male head of household." In the messianic age, "family" would become newly defined for Christians as deriving from God's power to save through Jesus, rather than through any human power. True power comes first from God—through the self-emptying love of Jesus—not from entrenched human power systems.

Christmas is a great time to celebrate Jesus' unpredictable God, who so often confounds our human expectations.

It can be scary. It can also be liberating.

PRAYER

O God, let your Spirit overshadow me, so that like Mary, I too may birth Christ's self-emptying love within your beautiful, beloved universe.

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

How will you witness to Jesus' unpredictable God in a world so deeply in need of transforming grace?

Christine Schenk, CSJ
Cleveland, OH

CHRISTMAS EVE VIGIL
DECEMBER 24

SCRIPTURE

Is 62: 1-5
Ps 89: 4-5, 16-17, 22-25
Acts 13: 16-17, 22-25
Mt 1: 1-25

REFLECTION

All this took place to fulfill what God had said through the prophet: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means "God is with us." Mt. 1:23

On this most holy night the Creator speaks:

I am in a womb I created, in a woman I created to be my mother here on Earth.

Today the journey begins in earnest. The darkness that surrounds me here has an unexpected softness and a quickening expectation of new life.

So much to learn!

The woman – my mother – struggles to give birth – and then there is light, and I am looking at my creation. She breathes – and I breathe – and we are both amazed.

Joseph stands by her, holding her hand and weeping for joy.

So this is love.

So much to learn!

She holds me tenderly and from her I will learn to hold Earth with such tenderness.

So much to learn!

She hugs me tightly and whispers, "I love you so much I would give my life for you."

So much to learn.

PRAYER

Emmanuel, God with us, you know us now in a new way because you share in our humanity. Walk with us. Teach us to love one another and to treasure the beauty of all your creation.

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

I will watch for "God with us" in each person I meet
and in all of creation.

Jeanne Cmolik, CSJ
Cleveland, OH

CHRISTMAS DAY – DECEMBER 25

SCRIPTURE

Is 52: 7-10
Ps 98: 1-6
Heb 1: 1-6
Jn 1: 1-18

REFLECTION

"And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us."
Jn 1:14

In the Gospel according to John for Christmas Day we hear nothing of an infant birth, a manger, or shepherds. After 60 years of REFLECTION and prayer, John proclaims "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." John introduces us to the God of Mystery beyond our ability to comprehend. This God cannot be held in a manger… yet unfathomably, some way is. "And the Word was made flesh and made His dwelling among us."

I think of Christmas as a very human story: the birth of a child, a young couple laying their newborn in a manger, shepherds sung to by angels. It seems familiar, comforting, and relatable. I am drawn into, almost charmed, by the scene. Perhaps, that is the point. God comes to us in such a fully human way that we need not be afraid, overwhelmed, or intimidated. Karl Rahner, a foremost theologian, asserts God comes to us because the Consummate Lover, who is God, longs to be with us. So even if we had never sinned, God would have come to us in such a human way. Christmas calls us to acknowledge the astonishing reality of how close God draws near to us and how intimately we are loved by the Infinite God.

PRAYER

Silent Night, Holy Night.
All is calm. All is bright.
Let us live in heavenly peace.

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

I take time today to thank God for the gift
of drawing so close to me.

Marcella Clancy, CSJ
Detroit, MI

TUESDAY - DECEMBER 26

SCRIPTURE

Acts 6: 8-10, 7, 54-59
Ps 31: 3-4, 6, 8, 16-17
Mt 10: 17-22

REFLECTION

"Be my rock of refuge, a stronghold to give me safety. You are my rock and my fortress; for your name's sake you will lead and guide me."
Ps 31: 3-4

December 26th is the Feast of St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Stephen was one of the first deacons of the Church in Jerusalem. He administered the distribution of food to widows in the community and served as a preacher. His preachings angered members of the synagogues and eventually led to his trial and death by stoning.

We all have opportunities to speak truth to power or prevailing opinions in our day-to-day life. Many times these "smaller moments" happen when we converse with family, neighbors, friends, service providers, etc. It isn't just about "what" we have to say – the message is important! But just the "act" of speaking up, of being present, of offering support to others – is also important. We don't always know how our words, actions, and presence may impact or influence others. But we do make a difference! It is the cumulative effect of these interactions, these moments in time that can change the world!

Speaking out and taking a stand can be challenging and risky. We see examples almost daily of conflict and division in our society. We also see the consequences of inaction and silence as our planet continues to warm.

PRAYER

Loving God, open my heart and give me the strength to speak out and to be present to the cries of our Common Home, to the cries of the poor in spirit and to the needs of our Community.

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

When have I been Christ for someone else today?
What am I doing to tend to the spirit of those
who are troubled and disheartened.
How are my words and actions making a difference?

Bill Stauffer, CSJ Associate
Palos Heights, IL

WEDNESDAY - DECEMBER 27

SCRIPTURE

1 Jn 1: 1- 4
Ps 97: 1-2, 5-6, 11-12
Jn 20: 1-8

REFLECTION

"We are writing this so that our joy may be complete."
1 Jn 1:4

John writes this REFLECTION on Jesus as the Word of Life in the first person plural. This struck me as I wondered on whose behalf he was writing. Who is the "we" and "our" to whom he is referring? Certainly, we have all experienced an event where one person's joy is the joy of the Whole. I was at a Sister's Profession of Final Vows this weekend. Her joy was truly the joy of the gathered congregation. As I reflected more, I saw how this collective joy is a sign of our interconnectedness. No one can be truly joyful by themselves. Christmas can be a very difficult season for those who feel alone with no one to share their life and joy. The source of all our joy is our Loving Creator and that joy was meant to be shared by all. It is only when others are included that "our" joy may be complete.

PRAYER

Good and gracious God, source of all joy, thank you
for all the gifts I have received.
Help me to remember that I find my joy only in what I have
received from you and that my joy may only be complete
when it is shared by all.

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

As I continue the celebration of this joyous season,
I will be a source of joy for those in need.

Pat Murray, CSJ
Charleston, WV

THURSDAY - DECEMBER 28

SCRIPTURE

1 Jn 1: 15-22
Ps 124: 2-5, 7-8
Mt 2: 13-18

REFLECTION

When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." Mt 2:13

Scripture says that an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream. However, it sounds more like a nightmare to me. I would probably be reacting with, "You gotta be kidding me? Am I hearing this right?"

Have you ever had an invitation or a call that seemed almost unbelievable? Have you experienced launching out into the unknown? What trust it takes to move into such a journey! What deep faith in the God described as helper in Psalm 124."

One can see this faith, trust, and desperation in so many of the migrants in our world today. Parents with their children trying to escape drought, famine, violence, war….

It must be so difficult responding to such unimaginable situations! Can you hear God's invitation to welcome the stranger and to hear the cry of the poor?

How are you being invited to stretch into deeper trust in God, to respond with trust in the Love of God accompanying you to evermore challenging places?

PRAYER

Help me to build my trust in you, oh God,
moving through these challenging times.
May I listen deeply to your invitations and respond
with faith to the cries of the poor,
knowing that you accompany me on this journey.

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

Today I will listen deeply to hear God's invitation
in this next phase of the journey.

Rose Ann Hefner, CSJ
Charleston, WV

FRIDAY - DECEMBER 29

SCRIPTURE

1 Jn 2: 3-11
Ps: 96: 1-3,5-6
Lk 2: 22-35

REFLECTION

"This child will be reckoned so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed"
Luke 2:35

Christmas was four days ago … it's over. Or is it? Sure, we sing about the 12 days of Christmas. The liturgical season of Christmas closes with the Baptism of Jesus. However, let's consider the words of Simeon in the Gospel of Luke. "The birth of this child will be reckoned so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed." Perhaps these words of Simeon, who waited years for the birth of Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us, Prince of Peace, will be an invitation to live Christmas, not by the calendar date, but by the reality of time described by St. Paul. Writing to the people of Colossus he says, "… for God's time is not our time." When we place the words of Paul in complementarity to the life of Simeon, we are invited to transcend calendar time and to live in a timely world where Christmas does not ever end. We are invited to be bearers of the reality given to us by the birth of Jesus that God is with us always, walking with us not only during the calendar Christmas season – Merry never ending Christmas!

PRAYER

Sing to our Creator all the earth!
(me included)
Sing to our Creator with unending joy!
Ps. 96: 1 and 2

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

I will take one ornament off the Christmas tree and place it somewhere where I will know by looking at it and touching it that Christmas, God with us, never ends.

Claudia Chastel
Le Puy, France

SATURDAY - DECEMBER 30

SCRIPTURE

1 Jn 2:12-17
Ps 96: 7-10
Lk 2:36-40

REFLECTION

"God rules the people with fairness."
Ps 96:10c
"There was a prophetess, Anna…advanced in years,…She worshiped night and day with fasting and prayer. And coming forward at that very time, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were awaiting the redemption of Jerusalem."
Luke 2:6-38

Mary and Joseph came to the temple in Jerusalem to present the child Jesus to God. They were first greeted by Anna, a woman and prophetess, who recognized Jesus as the Messiah, even before Simeon, and spoke of him to all who awaited his coming. Yet, she is not mentioned in our Sunday Masses, only Simeon's voice, so that most people only hear about Simeon. Women's voices have generally been suppressed in the Church and in society, even to today. But God does not eliminate the feminine voice. Perhaps God is calling all of us to believe that each one of us has been chosen to speak for the voice of God in our own day and time by our words and actions to show that God rules with fairness, lifting up all who are marginalized. There is no limit to God's fairness and should not be to ours.

PRAYER

Loving God, like Anna, help me to hear your voice in all ways that you appear to us today in the marginalized, our friends and enemies, in women and men, children and adults, the environment and all of creation. Let me proclaim your truth by my words, actions, and deeds.

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

May my evening examine include how I have listened to God, knowing that God's Spirit is everywhere and speaks through all things.

Mary Ellen Loch, CSJ
Wichita, KS

HOLY FAMILY SUNDAY
DECEMBER 31

SCRIPTURE

Sir: 3:2-6, 12-14
Ps 128: 1-5
Col 3:12-17
Lk 2: 22-40

REFLECTION

"And regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It's your basic, all-purpose garment."
Col 3:14 (The Message)

What comes to mind when you think of the Holy Family? The ideal for Christian and all families to emulate? European paintings on exhibit in museums? Writing "JMJ" as a header on your looseleaf paper in Catholic school? These days we know that the term "family" has moved beyond the earlier, traditional definition (a father, a mother, and child(ren) in one household) and taken on many different shapes and forms: family of origin, traditional family, single-parent family, blended family, extended family, friends as family, Earth as family etc. Family can be where we find great love and joy and family can also be messy and complicated. We might not use the word "holy" to describe any of our family groupings. Yet today's feast invites us to "wear love" and to celebrate the relationships in our various family groupings even when the "wear love" part is not always so easy to do.

PRAYER

God of All-Inclusive Love, please deepen my awareness to see the beauty and gift in each member of my various families,
not just those most likeable
or those who share my politics and world view.

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

In my morning prayer, or at a touch point during my day
I will identify a family member in need of prayer.

Mary Jo Hazard, CSJ Associate
Naperville, IL

MONDAY - JANUARY 1
SOLEMNITY OF MARY

SCRIPTURE

Nm 6:22-27
Ps. 67: 2-3, 5-6, 8
Gal. 4:4-7
Lk.2:16-21

REFLECTION

"May the Lord look upon you kindly and give you peace!"
Nm.6 :26

Today, we celebrate Mary. From her, a woman, salvation came forth. We also celebrate today the 56th World Day of Peace. I invite us to become aware of how Mary, our Mother, is so intimately united to all of us. She has appeared through the ages in all parts of the world, to all her children, no matter the culture, race, or language. Always with a similar message of love for each us and of hope, peace, and reconciliation among our diversity. Pope Francis reminds us:" God has a Mother and is thus bound forever to our humanity, like a child to its mother, to the point that our humanity is his humanity." (Homily, Jan. 1, 2023). Let us remember our brothers and sisters throughout the world who are victims of war, passing this holiday in darkness and cold, in poverty and fear, immersed in violence and indifference.

PRAYER

Mary, Mother of the Prince of Peace, pray for us!

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

Today, pray and act for peace in solidarity with the neighbors
around you and in the world;
always from a stand of gratitude, for God has done
great things in us and for us.
Look not at what is wrong with the world,
but for what we are grateful.

Ily Fernandez, CSJ
Wheeling, WV

Notes

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Congregation of
St. Joseph

1515 W. Ogden Avenue • La Grange Park, IL, 60526-1721